

Country Living

An overbearing oak tree stands in front of our home, standing guard and at attention, holding our lives in its hand. Larger and stronger than our tiny wooden house, it has its own agenda, especially during the winter. Even before the lighting and thundering start in, the tree begins to sway back and forth, warning that it might just fall right on top of us. So it takes only the thought of an approaching storm for Ma to gather all her children and run to a neighbor's more securely built home. Once we arrive at the neighbor's, Ma establishes a mood of sheer terror. As the rain beats on the tin roof, she and the older girls form a circle around the babies in the corner of the main room, praying to survive the unpredictable storm. When Dad arrives home from work on a rainy day, he has to look for his family.

But Johnnie and I are never afraid.

City blacks living in southern Alabama in the 1950s had it worse than the rural blacks, who could at least grow and harvest their own food. In Troy, Alabama, we weren't rural, but it wasn't a steaming metropolis either. We were functional poor—no running water, electricity, or indoor toilet, and we sometimes ran out of food. The only true white person seen in the neighborhood was the insurance man, who showed up once a month.

But my father, John Owens, did support his family, working at a mill from sun up to sun down. Eventually he earned a dollar an hour, which was a good salary, especially for black folks. Every Friday when he got paid, Uncle Pike his sister's husband, took him shopping for groceries at the store owned by the mill owner. Dad gave Ma all the money he had left, and she'd give him fifty cents for a haircut. To supplement his income, Dad dug graves and hunted for possum, squirrels, and other live game.

Dad was born on a farm in Troy, the eldest child of a large family. He grew up to be a very dark, handsome man with eyes that confessed the depth of his soul. When he reached beyond his boundaries and fell unconditionally in love with Ma, his life was no longer his own. His life was Ma.

Hazel, as she was named, had razor-blade blue eyes, with medium-brown olive skin and a stature that could not be reckoned with. Ma was a city girl, the eldest of six children. From what I've been told, Grandpa was paralyzed after falling into a well he was digging. So after Ma graduated from the eleventh grade, she went to work to help support her family instead of pursuing her dream of nursing or teaching school. She worked for a while as a housekeeper for whites, but she couldn't manage being a maid and started eagerly pursuing a mate who would cater to her every whim. She met my dad at a church gathering. They held hands and were soon married.

Then came us kids. Ma always appeared to be satisfied with making babies, which she did like she was making biscuits: whenever they were baked, her job was complete. That is where my sister Sarah's chorus begins: cooking, cleaning, washing, and babysitting.

Sarah was the oldest. There were seven of us: Sarah—who we called Honey Gal—Johnnie, Catherine—nicknamed Bush—Betty, Jab, Sammy, and Ann. And Ma was known to beat Johnnie and me down. I never remember Ma hitting Sarah or Bush or my younger siblings. Sarah was so timid; if Ma said "Come here" to her, she'd immediately start to cry. And Bush was saved from

beating by a constant nosebleed from some unknown disease. But if me or Johnnie so much as hesitated when she asked us to do something—sweep the leaves in yard or fetch something—there was a beat down. She'd say, "Come here!" and we'd take off running like we were trying to outrun a bullet. She'd send long-legged Honey Gal to catch us, and she always did; either we got tired and stopped running or she caught us and brought us to Ma. Then Ma would send another child to get a switch off the tree. It didn't matter what we'd done; the whipping was always the same. She'd put our head under an old church chair, with only our naked butt sticking out, and she'd sit on the chair and beat us until she got tired.

Ma worked fast, though. After she got your head and butt properly situated under the chair and got herself sitting in it, the beating lasted for less than two minutes—just like wringing the neck of a chicken you were going to eat for dinner. Chicken or child, you do not tarry. As she beat us, she'd tell us why. Then she would remind us of other things we had done that she did not like. Lying with your head under the chair was like being in a choke hold, and you could have easily passed out. Her licks were hard, with a stick or a broom handle, and after a couple of licks, you couldn't even cry or scream.

Even Dad was cautious of Ma. When he came home after drinking, he'd open the screen door slowly and throw his hat inside onto the floor to determine what type of mood she was in. If Ma didn't say anything, he knew she was in a good mood and felt it was safe to enter. Otherwise, he sat on the porch until he thought she had cooled off. If she started fussing he knew that he was not going to have a good time: Ma would be after him about drinking, talk about how his family was crazy, he was a not good man, he should not be gambling because we needed the money—anything to make him feel less than a man.

So I don't know how Johnnie and I had the nerve to rebel against Ma, but we did. Johnnie always sassed Ma on the run, or under her breath. Like she'd say, "When Dad's get home I'm gonna ask him where I get my color from!" Ma would hear the mumbling, and that was all she'd need for a beat down. But I admired that dare Johnnie had in her, and I was an instigator for her. She was not afraid of anything, not even the dead.

Johnnie's nickname growing up was "Mama." Aunt Juanita gave her this nickname and it stuck because Johnnie was the one who helped Ma talk to white folks whenever she had to go to town to take care of business, and it was Johnnie who helped Auntie with ways to do business in a common-sense way. "Mama, I need you to go with me to the courts to pay a bill," Auntie would say. Then all the details of the transaction had to be discussed, because Johnnie wanted things to go as planned.

She was like a stage actor practicing a scene, even with ordinary things like scheduling the day. Auntie'd say, "Mama, first we're going over my brother Marvin's house to pick up the milk and butter, then we going to pick the berries next." Johnnie would interrupt, "Auntie, why are you going to drive to Uncle Marvin's house first and drive out of your way so we can pick the berries? We should pick berries first, and on our way back, since we got to come that way, we can stop at Uncle Marvin's house to pick up the milk and butter."

"Mama, you have so much sense. You're going to make something of yourself one day."

We were fortunate that our neighbor, Mrs. Johnnie Mae Warren, worked in a school cafeteria and brought the leftover food home for us every day. Her husband, Mr. Ed, had my complexion,

and Mrs. Johnnie Mae looked white. Not light-skinned or high yellow, but white. They had a beautiful gated corner home with electric lights, an inside bathroom, and a kitchen with running water. They had a television and a car. We had two rooms and a kitchen, with a wood stove, a well, and an outhouse out back.

But we had the marbles, and their boy, Eddie B. Warren, was not allowed to crawl on his knees. Still, sometimes when we were in the middle of a game he would come over and demand that we start over so he could play. I never understood how someone could come into your yard and give you orders.

Eddie B.'s baby sister, Elaine, had pink cheeks with dimples and golden Shirley Temple curls. And she was treasured like gold. Elaine used to stand by the fence, calling us names and telling her brother to come home.

Before I was nine years old, I had to have surgery to remove a tissue growing in my eye. I was scared to death. During the surgery, Ma held my hand, telling me that everything was going to be all right and not to cry. She stroked my nappy hair and rubbed my shoulder. My Uncle Marvin drove us home from the hospital, and Ma had him to stop at the store so she could buy me a cookie for being such a good girl. She held my head in her chest and rubbed my arm. It was a comfort.

When I was a small child, mostly my mothering came from Honey Gal, who always treated me as if I was her baby doll. Every morning before school, she heated water on the wooden stove and washed me up and dressed me. Afterwards, she would carry me to the kitchen and force me to eat grits or bread, even though I would raise holy hell and try to keep my mouth shut. When she finished with me, I'm sure she was eager to go to school. Then me and Honey Gal, Ma and Johnnie, Bush, Jab, Sammy and Ann would go to Grandma's house, which was near the school. Walking was something a baby doll did not do, so Honey Gal had to carry me, along with her books. During her walk, I allowed her to put me down only to rest for a few seconds.

When Ma was not with us, we would take a shortcut to Grandma's house—maneuvering through the field and around the stream and the cows. Sometimes the stream overflowed and we'd have to find another place to cross safely. After crossing we entered a thicketed area, draped with long branches and silent leaves.

The quiet lasted only a moment, because the second we lifted our heads out the top of the embankment, the neighbor kids bombarded us with anything they could pick up and throw. Instead of ignoring these children and running, Johnnie would talk back to belittle them for attacking us: "You don't go to school; your clothes is too ragged!" "Your sister is pregnant and not married!" or "You got a big head!" With those kids at least, Johnnie was selling wolf tickets, and I was still afraid to fight. But I didn't have any problem screaming when the going got rough for Johnnie. Usually if we screamed loud enough some adult would come out to see what was going on.

After surviving that encounter, we'd have to pass the witch's house in front of Cousin Fred's. That property looked abandoned; even the house had weeds growing out of it! The witch always wore black, and if she saw any kids walking on the road in front of her house, she ran out her front door with an ax, a hoe, or a butcher knife, yelling obscenities from her porch. So we'd pass her house swiftly and soundlessly, for fear of annoying her.

Finally, we were at Grandma's. Ma felt better over at her ma's house because Auntie Juanita, who lived nearby, took over our care. She'd take all the kids who were not in school, and we'd spend our days with her and her kids—exploring the surroundings, playing house, fighting, searching for gold in a ditch, pretending we were Tarzan, playing marbles. Auntie's house was a child's paradise. She was a hoarder—her house was so full of stuff there was no walking place—and we were allowed to play freely there. Or she would have something planned. She'd pile us all into her old automobile and take us somewhere—like to her brother's farm, where we got milk, cheese, and vegetables. Or we would pick berries or look for chalk on the side of the road, and sometimes we'd go fishing. Auntie was the first entrepreneur I knew; she sold chalk, and she sold bootleg whiskey. She never took her children to church, and she and her husband partied every weekend like a rock stars.

After school, Honey Gal and Johnnie came to Grandmother's house to help Ma carry us home. Once home, Johnnie would fetch wood for the stove; Honey Gal got the kids settled; and Ma started dinner. Bush always sat on the porch with a rag stuffed up her nose to stop the bleeding. I waited for Johnnie to finish her chores so we could play marbles, or when dusk came, play hide-and-seek or look for lightning bugs.

One highlight of our pilgrimages to Grandma's house was going to Cousin Fred's house for our weekly ghost story. Cousin Fred was an undertaker, and we believed every word he said.

A lean, muscular man with flawless skin, Cousin Fred brushed a piece of lint from his meticulous black tuxedo as he looked in the mirror. The face in the mirror had the shine of a hand-polished hardwood floor, with not a line visible, just like the palms of his hands. His eyebrows extended across his forehead, with upper and lower lips equally composed. After gently polishing his ears with white powder, he put on long, black gloves with black chicken feathers sticking from the fingers. He bowed as he put on his black wizard's top hat. His boots were hard knobs, with soles so thick they seemed part of the boot.

Charming, kindhearted, and serene, like an unruffled karamu, and the whole formation wrapped with contentment, Cousin Fred opened his door and in walked five children. Honey Gal: chunky, with long, substantial legs and wearing a nurse's hat; Johnnie: daring, bold, unafraid, tomboy of the group, entering with a rush; Bush: alert, frightened, uneasy, dressed in blouse, pants, dress, sweater, coat, scarf with no shoes, looking nervously over her shoulder; Betty: cared-for-younger child, puny as chicken feet; Alto Jr, lanky and awkward, like his dad.

Cousin Fred walked away from the front door, the cape on his shoulder swishing back and forth, to sit, daunting, on the stool before the children, amused by their reaction. Tree branches slammed against the tin roof of the house, and the wind sang a sinister melody. It was spine chilling. The children, petrified, sat in a circle in front of the fireplace. Cousin Fred gave each of them one of his famous homemade chocolate chip cookies. Then he started telling his weekly ghost story. "Once upon a time, there was an old man who lived in a house with his wife." Cousin Fred paused to scrutinize their attentiveness.

"Fearing that his beautiful wife would abandon him, he forbade her to leave the house. So she sat in front of the mirror all day, alone, talking to herself. Every day after work, the old man stopped at the neighborhood hardware store and bought a piece of glass to build a glass house for his wife so she could see the beautiful landscape. But before the glass house was completed, his wife died."

We moved about nervously and Cousin Fred paused before continuing. "After that, the old man always slept on his packed suitcase so he'd be ready to join his wife when the time came. Then one night, while he was trying to sleep, he heard a scratching sound on the glass." We too heard the noise ... squeak squeaksqueak ... and we saw terror and alarming evil in Cousin Fred's eyes.

"After the old man heard the noise," Cousin Fred continued, "he sat up on his suitcase, wondering if the noise came from those damn neighborhood kids. Then he lay back down and eventually fell asleep."

Suddenly Cousin Fred rushed out of the room. When he came back, just a moment later, a creepy grin spread over his face and a stench filled the room. Then we heard someone banging on the front door, as if trying to break in. Cookies flew everywhere. Yelling and screaming incoherently, the children reached for their blankets to cover their heads.

Cousin Fred walked curiously but unhurriedly to the front door, and as he opened it stillness filled the room. "No one is at the door," he said.

He continued. "For years, the old man slept on his packed suitcase and waited to be united with his wife. One night, he sleepwalked, and he woke up the next day inside a casket at my funeral home. I asked the old man, 'What are you doing here?' The old man said, 'I don't know. I fell asleep in my house, but how did I end up here?' 'Well, I don't know,' I said. 'I didn't bring you here. If you're ready for your funeral I can accommodate you. But first I must check my schedule.'"

"As I turned to get my calendar, the old man yelled loudly from the casket, 'Wait, wait! Since I'm here, can you bring my wife back?' I told the old man that yes, I could wake the dead. The old man said, 'I'm not dead, but can you please bring my wife back?' I told him that when he died I would bring him and his wife back at the same time."

"I closed that old man's casket five years ago," Uncle Fred said in a matter-of-fact manner. "So tonight, I've invited him and his wife here to introduce them to you all."

As the front door and the windows slammed open and shut, the children heard two people enter from the back door of Cousin Fred's house.

Desperately, chaotically, wildly, everyone crashed out the front door.

"Ma! Ma! Ma!" Screaming hysterically, Honey Gal runs into Grandmother's house. "Johnnie is hurt!" Hazel calmly places the baby on the blanket as she rises from the floor. Aunt Juanita yells, "What happened?" She and Hazel follow Honey Gal outside into the moonless night to the bottom of hill, where Johnnie lies in a pool of blood, telling Ma she is sorry for hurting herself. Aunt Juanita and her son, Alto Jr., help carry Johnnie into the house. "Ma, I'm sorry. I told Johnnie not to ride fast on the bike while driving downhill," says Honey Gal. "I didn't know she was going to fall and hurt herself."

"Betty, shut up," says my cousin Pee Ann. "Why are you crying and screaming? Nothing is wrong with you." But I scream louder. Johnnie is my heart. My neck is hurting because they are having to hold a rag around her neck to stop the bleeding, and I think Johnnie is going to die. Aunt Juanita and Uncle Alto drive Ma and Johnnie to the doctor. I cry myself to sleep while Sarah comforts her back, sore from Ma's fist bruise.

Waking up the next morning and seeing Johnnie lying on a pallet next to me brings peace to my heart. I roll closer to investigate the large bandage around her neck. "Johnnie, can I get you something?" I ask. "You can move further away before you hurt my neck!" Then Honey Gal walks in, holding the baby, our sister Ann, and tells us to get up. We are going home.

Migrant Worker

A huge, rumbling trailer truck, larger than our three-room house, is parked right up on our porch. It is barely dawn and the lights on the truck illuminate our path as we stumble out of bed, carrying our belongings inside pillowcases. The back of the truck is full of people. The grass is wet.

In 1956, the mill where my Dad worked burned down. The owner had no insurance and no money to have it rebuilt, so we became migrant workers, traveling according to the harvest seasons from Florida and Alabama up to New York. I was nine years old. Sarah was eighteen; Johnnie Mae, fifteen; Bush, thirteen; Melvin, seven; Sammy, five, and Ann, still in diapers. Now suddenly we all had to work to help support the family; my sister Bush and both my brothers quit elementary school so they could work.

It was our neighbor, Mrs. Johnnie Mae, who hooked Ma and Dad up with a migrant contractor. Mrs. Johnnie Mae was paid a fee for everyone she recruited. Later, when she noticed we had moved permanently from Troy, she also bought our house.

Early one morning we were loaded into an enclosed transfer truck, like cattle. We were the last to get on, and we had to scramble to find any room at all. There were probably eighteen adults and between seventy-five and ninety children. Each family had some eight to ten children; only families with a lot of kids were recruited. Everyone was sitting cross-legged because there was no room to stretch out, not even for the small children.

Throughout the long journey that ensued, every time I tried to stretch out and sleep, someone would stick what felt like a pin into me to keep me out of their space. Whenever I looked around to see who the culprit was, I never observed any guilty person. The children around me always had their heads down or pretended they were sleep. There was just no getting comfortable.

We were in the very rear of the truck, and there was nothing to hold us in. I was afraid we were going to fall out, especially when going up a steep hill. Whenever we crossed a bridge I was afraid we would fall into the water. And we were hungry the whole time. Ma was supposed to have been saving money for our trip, but now we found out there was no money, not even for food. We had to watch the people around us eating, and to entertain ourselves with the hungry sounds of our stomachs.

That journey turned our lives upside down. We had not traveled out of the city of Troy except for the one time when I had to have eye surgery. Every time we crossed a bridge it was like being hung in the air with nothing to catch us if we fell; that's how it seemed the rest of my life was going to be. It was like something had taken control. We had no power over what happened to us, just like we had no power over the sun sunning, or the moon setting.

After about four days, we finally reached Utica, New York. Then we traveled about fifty miles into the country, where we were unloaded at a kind of plantation. When the truck stopped, everyone tried to jump out at once, shuffling, yelling, shouting, pushing, and swearing. Several people were hurt, including elderly persons and parents who had to jump from the truck with their babies in their arms.

What we saw first was a huge two-story house, which looked abandoned; it looked like our witch's house except it had two levels instead of one. It was surrounded by dozens of two-room log cabins, joined together into several rows. The cabins shared a kitchen, an outhouse, a card room, and a kind of club house. This is where we would live.

Starting the next day, every child over six years old and all adults went to work picking beans. At nine years old I may have been the oldest person left in the camp. Overnight I went from being a cared-for child to being the babysitter of my three young siblings and a neighbor's infant.

The children were with me every day, from the time I got them up and dressed in the morning until the others came home at sundown. They came with me wherever I went, and I made sure they were clean and safe and fed. Our baby, Ann, and the neighbor's baby were still in diapers and had to be bottle fed. I also did the laundry and cleaned the cabin.

We children did have some time to play with each other. One migrant family we were friendly with was the Clims. They had traveled with us from Troy to Utica, and they had eight or nine children. Their boys were about my age, too young to work. So they were also around the camp during the day, and we'd go exploring together—travel through the swamp in back, run through the vacant building. Playing with them was just like playing with Aunt Juanita's boys, and Johnnie and Bush were friends with their older daughters. Mr. Clim's father, Roy Miles, was the seasonal contractor.

The endless swamp that extended in the back of the camp as far as anyone could see was one of our favorite haunts. Often, we and the Clim boys and any other children around would travel into the forest. It was part of our daily routine on those days when we were in camp alone for at least ten hours with nothing to do. Until one day we walked into a huge black bear walking upright, eating leaves from the trees. I experienced the exact type of fear that I'd experienced while fleeing Cousin Fred's house after listening to one of his ghost stories.

Soon enough, I figured out a way to make things more interesting; on weekends I became an entrepreneur to help put food on the table. This was my idea. First I staged dance contests as entertainment for the families. The young children would dance on a makeshift stage while the men in the audience threw pennies, nickels, and dimes at the children they thought should win.

After I got a little older, I started playing cards with the adults—mostly a game called pitty pat. The card club shack was closed to children, but I would press my ear against the door to hear what they were playing, and then I'd glide into the smoke-filled room as if I were one of the adults. Oddly enough, the men would welcome me into the game. Some older boys who had gotten the gambling bug would be there throwing away the little money their family had given them for their week's work, but I was always the only female child.

There was a woman there who served drinks. Four people at most could play the game. My turn always seemed to come when most of the players had gone home, broke and sad, like drunken sailors. I would be at the table with a few men with large families, who should have been ashamed to risk their weekly earnings. Each game was short: lasting from one minute to less than three minutes at most.

And I won—a lot. Most nights I left with so much cash I was too nervous to count it. I'd run to our cabin, looking back to make sure I wasn't robbed. I was at the peak of my game in self-defense, though, and would have raised holy hell if anybody had grabbed me. I'd rush into the house and give Ma my takings.

She never asked where I got the money, and she probably wouldn't have cared even if I had prostituted myself. Her motto was "Ask not what I can do for you. It's what you can do for me." So the thing was to just give it to her. Myself, I was just after the touch I received from her as she took the money out of my hands. Just that touch—so I could feel human, so I could know that this life was real.

Instead of going back to Alabama when the bean season was over, we followed the contractor, Mr. Miles, and moved to Belle Glade, Florida, a small farming community forty miles west of West Palm Beach, just outside the Everglades on the southern tip of Lake Okeechobee. About half of the sugarcane in the nation is grown in the mucklands there, and it is still home to a large population of Haitian, Jamaican, and American Black people. I did a lot of my growing up there.

After our first season in Belle Glade, Ma and most of us children went back to Utica, New York, to pick beans again. Honey Gal went to New York to stay with Dad's sister, and Dad stayed in Florida; he had found a year-around job stacking sod, and he was not interested in traveling up and down the road doing seasonal work.

Back in Utica, the Clims' children started giving us problems because they found out Ma was seeing their father, and they did not like their father cheating on their mother. It became war. "If you come out of that door, I'm going to beat your black ass, and pull all that nappy hair out of your head!" one of the Clim boys would yell. "Go to hell!" I'd scream. "And take your little stinking ass brother with you. Go and take a bath, because you stink!"

I couldn't beat up Mr. Clim's boys, but I knew how to get even with them. One day I would do something to them, and the next day they would do something to us. Once I covered the colored clothing hanging on their clothesline with a concoction of Clorox, ketchup, and mustard. They would usually just hit us with sticks; we'd run into our cabin and the Clim kids would stand outside, calling us names and daring us to come out.

Some days I was afraid to leave the cabin for fear of getting beaten up. I would awaken to the sounds of bricks being thrown against the door. I'd peek out the crack in the door. One of the Clim boys would be standing there, peeking on our door step, daring us to come out. But I came out only when the adults returned from work.

Dad came to visit us in New York when he heard Ma was having an affair with Mr. Clim. Then, when the season was over in Utica, we all returned to Belle Glade. We were all living together there when Ma left Dad. It took some time. "Hazel, I know you are not going to the movie every time," Dad would say patiently. "Son!" she'd say. "I went to the movie. I've my ticket stub. Do you want to see it?" The room would quiet down and I'd go back to sleep. I heard that conversation many times before Ma decided to leave Dad.

Ma separated from Dad when she found out she was pregnant with Mr. Clim's child. She waited for Dad to leave for work one morning, and then she loaded us all in the car and we followed Mr.

Clim back to Quincy, where he had already settled his family on a tobacco farm. All us children went with Ma except Johnnie, who stayed with Dad. He remained a broken man the rest of his life, a weekend alcoholic. Even as a child, I saw the pain in Dad's face and in his movement. When we were together, I tried to convince him that my new baby sister, Cookie, was his daughter and not Mr. Clim's. I knew it took a baby nine months inside the mother, but I didn't know how it got there; I thought you just had to live together. So over and over I would count the months and say to Dad, "Ma was here with you. The baby is yours." I was trying to make him feel better.

As for Mr. Clim, he visited our home often. During his weekend visits, he always fell asleep, probably after having too much to drink. He slept with his mouth open. One weekend, I made a sour concoction and poured it down his mouth. Of course, I got beat down. Ma never had to look far to find the culprit, and she didn't this time either. After he vomited up red, blue, and white stuff, complaining and coughing, she didn't have to look far. "Who put that stuff in Clim's mouth?" I heard her yell from the living room, as I locked myself inside the bedroom. "Who put that stuff in Clim's mouth?" I leaned my ear against the bedroom door, and the next thing I knew, I was being dragged by Bush to the living room by my legs, as Ma proceed to beat me with a stick. It hurt, but it wasn't surprising. Even if I denied doing something, my siblings never felt the need to defend me. They'd squeal on me in a second. And now that Johnnie wasn't there, Ma only had me to beat.

When Honey Gal returned from New York, she was responsible for us when Ma left the house. She had spent two years in Mobile, Alabama, living with my mother's brother, who sent her to business college to become a secretary. She then lived briefly in New York with our dad's sister Aunt Susie Mae before returning to live with us in Quincy, getting married, and moving back to Mobile. Talking about beautiful, that girl was tall! Yes, six feet tall: slim, built like a coca cola bottle. She had curves in all the right places, and long braids relaxed on her shoulder. I would stare at her because I couldn't believe how beautiful she was and that she was my sister. I had two beautiful people to brag about, Ma and Honey Gal.

Now Honey Gal would tell Ma whenever we didn't listen to her and if we did something she felt we shouldn't have. Now once she had told me that Ma hadn't wanted us sucking from a bottle after we were a year old. And there was Cookie, our sister by Mr. Clim, still walking around with a bottle, only days away from three years old! So one day when Ma left, I took the milk out of Cookie's bottle and put water in it. When Ma found out who did it, she beat me mercilessly. Sometimes Honey Gal would beg Ma to stop beating me and beat her instead.

Now like I said, Ma had a way of beating the life out of you. It was more than abuse; it was torture. I think I could have with stood waterboarding better than the pain she inflicted upon me. Finally at some point during a beating, I'd feel no pain: my body had exhausted all the signals it could send to my brain to register the feeling. But Ma did not stop. Sometimes I wanted to run away after a beating. I'd go into the corn field and stay there all day. My heart yearned for someone to come and look for me. No one came. I'd lay on the dirt between the corn rows until I got tired, and then I'd get up and go home.

I was always looking for a way out, even if it was only a temporary escape. Once I attended a week-long revival meeting of a Pentecostal traveling ministry. I participated in the rituals, even going as far as sitting on the morning bench and waiting for the spirit of the Lord. It was the fifth day of the meeting—the ministry was scheduled to move on the next day—and still I was not feeling

anything. So I stood up and pretended to move uncontrollably so they'd think I had received the Spirit. It didn't work. Or maybe it did—after that I did at least find pleasure.

Several months after we moved to Quincy, Johnnie came to visit us. She had a suitcase full of brand new clothing, a necklace, and a birthstone ring. The clothing didn't impress me at all, but I was excited to see that there was such a thing as a birthstone ring. I wanted one of them rings because it would represent me. So when summer was over, I went with Johnnie back to Belle Glade to stay with Dad. This was in 1958. He said he would send tickets to any of us children who wanted to stay with him.

Johnnie had always been my hero. Earlier, when we lived in Troy, she used her presence to state herself, to claim her rights, and I had admired that in her. But when we became migrant workers, her personality completely changed. I didn't notice it, but I guess it was because we were moved out of our element. In Alabama our world had been familiar: our place, Grandma's house, Auntie's house, school, church. Now we were always in different places, always surrounded by strangers.

When we got on that first truck in Troy, headed for Utica, we may have been the only family who had experienced a stable life. We were kind, docile people, while the others may have been living from hand to mouth all their lives. They were hardened and prepared for what lay ahead. I'm thinking of that kid next to me on the truck, sticking me with a pin for leaning on him while I was asleep. I had no way to respond to that.

Anyway, I never noticed the change, in Johnnie or in myself; I was too busy trying to deal with my new life. So I copied Johnnie's old way of walking, her fierce eye—staking my claim like a rooster in a hen house. I learned to love swearing, to use my mouth as a weapon with real power. I knew that if you could organize the words that had the most stabbing effect—"son of a bitch," "mother fucker"—then you had more power than those with physical ability.

At one point Dad allowed his co-worker Shorty to stay with us because he had no place to live. He didn't last long.

Early one quiet winter morning, I was sleeping on my back when a cool breeze on my shoulder gradually moved down to my waist and wakened me from sleep. I slitted my eyes open and saw Shorty, butt naked and muscular, slowly pulling the cover off me as he straddled my legs. I saw that with every breath I took, he was cautiously pulling the cover further and further. I nearly exploded with fear and absolute contempt. But I was onto him; I became stronger and more brave with each breath. As he pulled the covers, I would inhale, getting ready for what I would do. By the time he was ready to try to bear down on my chest, I threw my sturdy arms up against him and struck his balls with my right foot, pushing his muscular body off me. He was on the floor and I was sprinting to a neighbor's room, just two doors down the hall.

I told my Dad when he came home from work, and he told Shorty to move. "Shorty," he said, "Betty told me you got in the bed with her with no clothing on!"

"I ... I ..."

"Never mind answering. I want you to get all your things and get moved right now. You cannot stay here."

“Mr. Owens, I don’t have no money and no place to stay!”

“Well! I helped you by allowing you to stay here, but you are not welcome in my home anymore.”

And that was that.

When Johnnie was sixteen and in the eleventh grade, she got pregnant and dropped out of high school. There was a rumor that Johnnie and Dad were having sex. Much later, she confided in me that she may have had touched Dad inappropriately, and he told her, “Johnnie, I’m your Dad.” I just listened and did not say a word. Out of the blue she just said it one day when we were in the car together. I never told anyone. But the rumor had been there. I also heard that it was Ma who started that rumor because she was jealous and angry because when she took all of us with her when she moved to Quincy, Johnnie refused to go. Either way, there it was. Johnnie was leaving.

Johnnie married her baby’s daddy, Elijah, and they moved back with his family on a farm in his hometown in Mississippi. Elijah was abusive, and Johnnie found life horrible. While pregnant with her second child, she set herself on fire. Johnnie said to me, “Betty, I had not intended to kill myself. It was just a scream for help.” She explained what happened. “One night, Elijah had gone out on his regularly weekend outing. I put kerosene on my skirt. The flame exploded over my dress; I couldn’t put it out and I started screaming for help; Elijah’s sister and mother threw a bucket of water to put the fire out.”

She had severe burns on her thigh, hand, and stomach. Because she did not receive proper care for her wounds, she had obvious scars. The first thing that you’d notice about Johnnie was the scar on her hand. It looked like it had been half cooked in scorching oil. Skin was grafted from her thigh to replace the skin on her wrist, but since she did not receive proper care of the injury, it healed with layers of scar tissue.

But this was all later. At the time of her departure, I knew nothing of the rumors. I didn’t know why she was leaving. All I knew was that I was already lonely without her. My heart felt empty. Like a young child, I didn’t know how to express hurt and pain. All I knew was how to show anger. So when Johnnie told me she was getting married and leaving, I threw all her clothing from the balcony of the building.

Years later, when I expressed to Johnnie how hurt I had been when she left me and moved out of state, she said, “Betty, I thought you hated me. If I had known you didn’t want me to leave I wouldn’t have left.” If only I had known that. I had always been jealous of Elijah for her. Even before Johnnie got pregnant, when she was dating him, I tied her to the bed to prevent her from going out with him. “Elijah,” I’d say, “why are you here?”

“I came to take Johnnie to the movies.”

“She can’t go to the movies,” I’d say sternly.

“Well! I have three dollars I can give you to buy something from the second-hand store or go to the movies.” And of course, I’d have to take the money. But I wasn’t happy about her and Elijah. And when she was gone, I was devastated.

Even my Dad noticed something was wrong with me. We had gotten close living together, and I tried to help him with his own sorrow. While sitting on the porch late at night, I’d see my dad straggling home with only the shadows of his feet leading him back to our building. As he used the handrail to pull his body forward, he’d murmured to me, “Bebe, Hazel is a dirty woman.”

“I understand, Dad.” I’d say. “Let me take your hand and walk you to the door.”

“No! Don’t hold my hand. I’ll walk myself.”

“Okay, Dad. Good night.”

Then Dad would either lie in front of the door or sometimes he would go inside or go to bed; it all depended upon the weather and his asthma condition. He was the walking wounded. Even as a child, my dad taught me how a broken heart looked. I’m sure that many nights he laid awake thinking that if they had never left Troy, he would still have his wife.

Although Dad was dealing with his own broken heart, he was aware of the pain I felt when Johnnie left me. I’m sure that was why he suggested that I go and live with Ma and my siblings. So the summer before the sixth grade, when I was twelve, I stayed with them in Quincy, where Ma had followed Mr. Clim and his family to work in tobacco fields. I rode eight hours on a hot Greyhound bus to get there. Although I stared out the window constantly so I would not miss my stop, I missed it by two miles. So I had to walk that distance.

As I got closer to Ma’s cabin, the smell of fried fish came to meet me. I felt better and began to walk faster. I saw my nappy-haired brother Jab, obedient Sammy, and nurse Ann playing in the front yard with straw sticks. They looked at me, burdened down with two suitcases, and they continued to play.

Once inside the house, I threw my bags on the floor and grabbed a plate of food. Ma was having a fish party. Several men were there, including Mr. Clim. As I sat in a chair chowing down on the hot fish, I noticed a young man with soft brown eyes, about seventeen years old, staring at me. Before I could understand his attention, my sister Bush, who was around fourteen, came over, took me by the hand, and whispered that this was Jake, and that he had a girlfriend, who lived in the next cabin.

Jake was still staring at me when the girlfriend, Mary Bell, arrived at the party. I didn’t know then that she was the girlfriend, but I sure found out the next day. Walking home from the store, I unknowingly passed by Mary Bell’s house. She ran out into the road, her red skin blazing from pure violence. Hideous as a street thug, she said, “Jake is my boyfriend, and you better not talk to him.” Before I could register her comments and put her back in her place, she pulled out a butcher knife and stabbed me in the chest, near my heart. In less than a second, before the knife was removed from my chest, I started running home like an injured dog, hit by a car. I ran like a terrified deer as she sprinted behind me, like a tiger who has not eaten in several days. Once in arm’s length of

catching me, she reached forward and stabbed me in my left shoulder, branding it for life. If I had not run she probably would have killed me.

I ran home screaming loud, scared to death and hoping my family would come to my rescue. Bush waved down a car headed to town and told the driver to tell the police to come to our house. When the cops arrived, I was sitting in the house with a rag over my chest and shoulder to stop the bleeding. Instead of taking me to the doctor's office, the police officer took both Mary Beth—the red, blue-eyed girl with long straight hair—and me—dark brown, nappy haired, large lipped, and wide-nosed Betty—to the police department. I couldn't believe it. I told the police I was hurt and I did not start the fight. The cop said, "You shut up." He threatened to lock both of us up if we got into any more trouble. Think about the "scared straight" programs they use to deter troubled youth from committing crimes. Well, it worked for me.

At that point, I thought I was through with romance. I continued to go to the store for Ma every day during my stay, but I always anxiously scoped my surroundings and walked swiftly, especially while passing Mary Bell's house. When Jake heard what happened, he came to my mother's cabin and told me he was sorry. He said, "Mary Bell and I are not girlfriend and boyfriend anymore." I said, "I don't care. I'm not interested in dating."

But every night after work Jake came to our house. We sat on the porch and talked. He held my hand, touched my ears and forehead, and tried to kiss me on the lips. He had yielding lips and silky, flawless skin. With each touch, my entire body exploded in ecstasy. But I forced my mind to force my hands to push him back. It was always "No! I have a handsome boyfriend who loves me." But all the time I was thinking, "Do you really want me? Why?"

After sitting on the porch for months, Jake and I started walking every evening down the red dirt road in front of our cabin. Many nights we walked that road, talking and holding hands. Whenever we turned to go home, before I knew what had happened, Jake had me pinned against the wall of the red clay dirt road, trying to force his penis between my legs. But all of us siblings inherited physical strength from both sides of the family. Even Bush, who had a blood problem, was as strong as a horse. When I was in my middle teens I could pick up a large tub of water. So even though Jake made several of these attempts to force himself on me, he was not successful. Then the tobacco season was over and we all moved back to Belle Glade.

Later, Jake and several of his friends moved to Belle Glade to work in the fields: packing corn or celery, picking beans, stacking sod. He continued to pursue me, and although he was irresistible, I never felt the need to allow him to have sex with me. I felt brave around him because he was never forceful and I knew he never could get inside me, regardless of how hard he tried. I didn't worry about him because after probably twenty tries he could never do it. And he never hit me.

Then on one occasion, we were lying on his floor in his room playing around. I had started giving him permission to rub his body against mine. I thought this night would be like any other night, but before I realized it, his penis was inside of me. I flew out of his room like a jet taking off a runway and ran home. The insertion frightened me, and after that incident, I never went to his room again, even though he tried to persuade me to continue seeing him. It scared me to death. We stopped seeing each other after that incident.

*Your touch jolts my mind
and I can feel it does the same to your spine.
But what I want is to know
what you see in me.
My thick nappy hair, the nose that covers my face
the large lips that won't stay closed?
Your brown skin, sparkling eyes
your body, carved in gold—
Who wouldn't want this priceless statue?
But what I want is to know
what you see in me*

In Quincy we had a swing on the porch, and I liked to sit on the swing, even though there was nothing to see but wide opened space and cornfields as far as you could see. Usually my only form of entertainment while sitting on the porch was daydreaming and thinking. But that summer I was truly entertained when the chain gang workers began working on the dirt road in front of our cabin. I didn't feel afraid because several guards with weapons supervised them as they worked. The prisoners made the time pass by singing and making unusual sounds.

One day while sitting on the porch, I went inside the cabin and found a paper and pencil. While looking and listening to prisoners, I wrote the lyrics to a song: "That's the sound of the men working on the chain gang." In the back of True Story magazine I had read an advertisement from Motown/Barry Gordy, soliciting lyrics. So I sent my chain gang lyrics, along with several other songs I had written. Motown responded, saying that I had to pay money, I think twenty-five dollars, to have my song set to music. Our entire family was probably living off that amount for the entire month. But I continued to send lyrics and received encouraging letters to continue.

Years later I found out that the song "Chain Gang," which I recognized as my own, was supposed to have been written by Sam Cooke and released in 1960, four years after we became migrant workers. He said it was inspired by a chance meeting with a chain gang on a highway. I think this is a lie, because I first heard that song on the radio only a short time after I wrote it and sent it in.

Even with Jake, I wasn't happy in Quincy. Every day I complained about everything. Especially the food. I had been spoiled living with Dad, where I could go to the corner store where he had credit and select anything I wanted to eat. But in Quincy there was a corn field in back of our log cabin, so Ma cooked creamy corn and rice every day. I fussed about eating neck bones every day, too. We always had Kool Aid to drink with our dinner, but I demanded and got a soda to drink. I worked in the tobacco field and felt that for my hard work I should at least have a soda. My siblings never complained about anything.

The tobacco work was piece work: you were paid according to how much work you did. After the tobacco leaves were harvested, they were individually hand-strung in pairs onto a stick to hang in the barn. The poles, each with about a hundred leaves, were placed in the curing house at different levels. I was one of the trusted workers who counted and bundled the sticks to give to the workers to sew.

When the tobacco season was over, Bush and I worked picking cotton. We traveled to the cotton field before dawn on the back of a truck. Ma prepared food for us to take with us—usually a sandwich. Bush was always hungry, and I had to motivate her to keep working.

“Betty, when are we going to stop and eat lunch?”

“As soon as you fill that cotton bag, we can stop to eat, but until then, you will not get anything to eat.”

I kept the lunch. Most days, Bush put forth her best effort, but she never acquired the stamina needed for field work. I worked really hard because the harder you worked, the more cotton you picked, and the more cotton you picked, the more money you earned. And I wanted to please Ma by showing my worth, and I knew we needed the money.

The work made me miss half the school days, and each night I prayed I would be promoted. I guess I was. But I don’t remember school, either in Troy or in Quincy. I know I attended school in Troy until we migrated to Utica, and then I attended off and on in Quincy. And I know that when I started school in Troy, I already knew how to read and write because my older sisters had taught me.

My only specific memory about school at this time is being in a classroom and getting beat down on my hand with a ruler for talking out of turn and yelling out an answer when the teacher had asked another student the question. The classes at that school were taught all together, like a one-room schoolhouse. It was boring, so I was a rebel talking, which distracted the teacher from what she was doing. It may have even made her have to start the assignment over, and she did not like that. So she hit me. The licks were painful and my eyes watered, but not a tear rolled down my cheeks. Still, I think the beating destroyed my memory.

From Quincy we moved back to Belle Glade, where we stayed with Ma in an apartment building that rented rooms. (You see, migrant workers who followed the seasons had to give up their apartments each time they left for a new job, find a new residence in the new place, and repeat this process every season.) We shared one and a half rooms. The Clims moved back there, too. Our building, James Oliver’s apartment building, had a second-hand store on the ground floor, and six apartments like ours on the second floor, three on each side of a central hallway. There was a front entrance and a back exit from the second floor. Everyone shared one bathroom near the exit of the building. Johnnie and her husband had moved back too, and she lived in an apartment across the hall from us. Dad was living up the street.

There was a time when every Saturday morning Dad would stand outside our apartment, in the middle of the street, calling Ma names before any of the neighbors were even up. His favorite thing to say was, “Hazel, you’re a dirty woman.” It was like Stanley yelling to Stella. Then he’d call his children down and give us our weekly allowance. Ma didn’t mind that, but she did not want her business in the street. When the rant lasted longer than Ma could tolerate, she’d threaten to call the police on him; then he went home. This all lay like a cut on my heart.

One night while sound asleep, I was awakened by a noise coming from the back room where Ma slept, which doubled as the kitchen. It was Ma and Mr. Clim moaning and crooning while they were

having sex. I started to cry, and Ma heard me. Ma said, “You cannot run my life. You get out of here and go and stay with your dad.” I was kicked out of the room.

Crying hysterically, I tried to take shelter with Johnnie, across the hall. But Ma followed me and forced me out of the room. I went and sat on the top of the exit steps. Ma kicked me in my back as I went down all twenty steps, weeping soundlessly because I was too embarrassed for anyone to see I was being kicked and thrown out of the house. I was not feeling rejected; that I was used to. But I was overcome with confusion and shame, afraid that I would wake the neighbors. I finally stood up and walked to my dad’s apartment. My dad took me in.

After Ma kicked me out of her house, I ceased to feel anything toward her. Those kicks gave me a wooden heart and started me on a journey of feeling only pain and pleasure, happy or sad—that’s it. No in-between. No love. No hate. No contentment. No just feeling good. Just pain, and pleasure.

Only skilled laborers—like those who stack celery or corn, sugarcane cutters, packing house workers, drivers, or sod workers—had a steady job during the season. Everyone else was day labor. My Dad, for instance, was a sod worker on a sow ranch, and it was a steady job. The scorching Florida sunshine and the muck he worked in, which he was allergic to, had burned his black skin to a crispy dark black-gray, the same color as black gold, which was what they called the rich soil in the Everglades. His skin looked like alligator skin, like he had fish scales. Dad also had severe asthma. During most of his attacks, he lay on the cement floor in front of his room, and sometimes he lay on the cement floor on the other side of the balcony. During his episodes, I wondered what would happen to me if he died.

But at least he had work. It was piecework, which means he was paid according to how many pallets he stacked. With precision and accuracy, like an artist, he would stack pieces of grass, sixteen by sixteen, four feet wide and six feet high. The work was harsh, with constant stooping and reaching and twisting to stack the sod in scorching, blazing heat, which in the summer often exceeded 100 degrees.

If you were a day laborer, like most people, things were harder because finding work was a constant task. But I didn’t mind. Once I moved in with Dad, I started focusing more on getting what I wanted, which at the time was spending money. So I picked beans every weekend to supplement the two dollars in weekly allowance I received from my dad.

If you wanted to work, you appeared at the loading ramp between four and five am. About the size of a city block, the loading ramp was where the trucks or buses backed up, waiting for workers. Each contractor would place down a sample of the work that would be done, and then they would perform like salesmen, advertising their products by telling workers how much they could earn. All the workers moved swiftly but meticulously from truck to truck, deciding which contractor they would work for.

Once you decided on the product you wanted to work, you lined up in front of the right truck or bus, ready to go. You tensed up. It was like the running of the bull that happens in Spain every year. When the horn blew at six o’clock, any line that had formed became obsolete, and if you didn’t move fast enough, you could be trampled. Most of the time, the trucks or buses became full so fast that in a few minutes those who didn’t find a spot would be running around in circles, trying to find spare space on any of the work transports. Imagine a Black Friday shopping spree and triple it—

that's what it was like at the loading ramp for day workers when the whistle blew to get on the transport.

The work day was long and drudging. On most days we returned back to Belle Glade barely before dark. I usually earned about eight or ten dollars per day picking beans and spent about half of that on lunch food before I left the field. I spent the rest of the money on used clothing for school and for movies on the weekends. There was only one theater in town, and it played the same movie for weeks at a time. I lived for those weekend movies, and spending time with my friends Shirley and Barbara.

I knew we were poor; we were all poor. But I tried to find ways to inch up the ladder. For instance, I tried to get people to think that I was an only child. I wanted people to think that at least I had that going for me. Pretending to be an only child made me feel special, like it elevated me from being poor. Plus I felt better off than most people because my dad had steady work, and I could go to the corner store where he had credit and select anything I wanted to eat. But then one day, the school gave us a survey to complete, with questions like, do you share the bathroom with anyone other than your family? How many people live in your home? Do you share your bed with anyone else or how many people live in your room?

Those questions made me come to terms with how poor we were. They belittled me. I'd been able to shell our condition, but those questions made me realize that people living like us were destitute. The survey slapped me right in the face. In other words, it awakened me to my condition and made me realize that people were not supposed to live in those types of conditions. Up until then I thought I was better than the rest of the people. The survey showed me that I was just like them.

I did have the luck of the draw in ways that other people didn't, though. Take my neighbor and friend Christina, who lived in the two-room apartment adjoining ours. Christina was a couple years younger than me, but I enjoyed her company. One thing we had in common was that we both lived with our dads. When she moved in with her dad, she was around eleven or twelve and pregnant with a child.

When she had the baby girl, she named her after me and the baby's daddy: Betty Joe. I felt so honored. I often kept Betty Joe at night while Christina went out, until Dad stopped me from babysitting.

Later Christina moved out of her dad's apartment into her own room. On weekends, I would visit her and watch her dress up like an adult whore. Christina knew how to advertise her assets. She was about five feet tall and weighed about ninety pounds, maybe even less. She was bow-legged, which made her look even more appealing, and she was light skinned, and so there was no color she couldn't wear. She loved beautiful, silky, glittering outfits, and she was an expert at selecting the right clothing, makeup, and wigs, like short dresses or skirts to show off those carved bow legs and belts to show off her tiny waist and accent her small hips and butt. She wore long colorful wigs, and she put on makeup like an expert. She dressed like she was going to perform in a cabaret. Sometimes, she would fix me up with a wig and makeup. I admired the glamour, but I took the makeup off before I went back home.

One day Christina confided in me that one of the city council members took her and several other young teens to the Jamaica camp. This was a barracks near Belle Glade that housed “guest workers” who were brought in from the Caribbean to cut sugar cane. Christina and the others were brought there to have sex with the men, who would line up in front of the doorway to take their turn. She may have received two to three dollars per sex partner, after the pimp got his share.

I feel fortunate that none of my acquaintances ever invited me to participate in that underworld, or draw me into doing anything illegal or becoming promiscuous. Usually they kept it a secret. And I had no desire to prostitute myself for the things I didn’t have. I didn’t want things; I wanted out.

Back after Johnnie got married and left Belle Glade, Dad and I had moved in with Ms. Easter. Ms. Easter was my Dad’s sometimes sane housemate. She had been a professional housekeeper and cook, and she called my dad “Mr. Owens” and kept a superb house. She ironed the sheets for our beds and even ironed Dad’s underwear. Basically, anything that could be washed and cleaned, she ironed.

I disliked everything about her. I showed this by removing the nicely pressed, white, clean-smelling sheets from my bed and sleeping on the mattress. Other times, I’d sleep on the floor. When she prepared a school lunch for me, I would refuse to take it. Anything she did to make herself feel worthy, I undid to make her feel bad. And my dad seemed to understand. He was patient with both of us.

“Mr. Owens, tell Betty to take the lunch I fixed her for school.”

“Easter, don’t worry. Just let Betty get something from the store. I’ve given her money for lunch.”

“I don’t see why you allow her to go to the store or give her money for lunch when she can take lunch with her!”

“Okay, Easter. It’s okay.”

Once Ma had kicked me out and I had returned to living with Dad, I had to contend with Ms. Easter again. Although my dad always showed me love by unconditionally taking care of me, providing food, clothing, and shelter, I took him for granted and did very little to help out. I figured I wasn’t going to become a maid or a professional dishwasher, so why learn how to do household chores?

Plus, there was Ms. Easter to do everything. When Dad came home from work, she always had his crisply ironed clothing laid out for him on the bed, including underwear and tee shirt. He came home covered in the muck that he was allergic to, so the minute he arrived home he took a shower in our shared bathroom, which was also used by six other families in the apartment building. Then he could enjoy the balanced, eloquently prepared dinner that Ms. Easter had prepared on our two-eye hot plate. She placed the dinner on the kitchen table with what passed for decorum: with napkin, fork, spoon, and a glass of buttermilk. After dinner, depending on the weather, Dad would either sit on the porch in front of our front room or relax in his chair in the front room, which doubled as his and Ms. Easter’s bedroom. My room doubled as the kitchen; with the hot plate, refrigerator, kitchen table with two chairs, a small wooden pantry, and my regular side bed.

Eventually my sister Ann, my dad's baby girl, moved in with us. She was about six years old at the time, she became the child Ms. Easter never had. Ms. Easter spent the allowance that Dad gave her on Ann.

When she first arrived, Ann was a mess. She had not been attending school on a regular basis because she had no one to take her. Ann's hair was matty because no one had been taking care of it. Her skin was covered in layers of dirt. So Ms. Easter scrubbed Ann's body daily, and every week Ann was sent to the beauty shop. Within a week, that girl's color changed: it became smooth and silky. Her hair shined like new money. I can't remember feeling any jealousy toward Ann; I didn't have to compete with her for Ms. Easter's attention because no attention was given or available to me. And since I did not particularly care about Ms. Easter, it didn't matter what she did for Ann.

Ms. Easter saw to it that Ann did her homework every day, and before she was put to bed at night, I would read her a bedtime story. With only a few books available, I started going to the back door of the public library to try and check out books. I was not allowed a library card, because black people were not supposed to use the library. But the librarian made arrangements for me to check out one book at a time and return it at the end of the week. When I returned the book, I would receive another book. Soon Ann was making straight As in school. My brothers and sisters started calling her "Tops."

After a few months of daily bedtime stories, she would not go to sleep unless I read her a story, and story time with Ann really interfered with my movie schedule. So I took her to the movies with me until Ms. Easter and Dad stopped me. Then Ann started sneaking out of the back door and walking to the corner of Fifth Street looking for me to come home from the movie and read her a story. Before that became a problem, Ma had Ann move back home with her to be a companion for Cookie, our younger sister by Mr. Clim.

Ms. Easter became so depressed when Ann left that she had a nervous breakdown and had to be hospitalized. After that, Dad and I started looking for the various abnormal activities that were typical for her before he called the mental institution to have her committed: she would start sitting on the porch half naked, with her private parts exposed; she'd start to walk the streets, talking to herself; she'd start using the wrong ingredients to cook a dish, like using cornmeal to make biscuits instead of flour. She'd mix the food in with various inedible concoctions, like I had fixed to put in Mr. Clim's mouth when he was drunk.

Usually Dad would allow Ms. Easter to stay home even with the unusual antics until the neighbors started to complain, and then he would have the hospital come and get her. And she would not leave without a fight. It was not easy getting a 300-pound woman down ten to twelve steps into an ambulance without the use of medication. The paramedics had trouble putting restraining equipment on her. She fought every step of the way, yelling incoherent obscenities throughout the ordeal.

Whenever she became ill, Ms. Easter openly showed her dislike for me, claiming that I was ill-mannered and disrespectful to her. Although I never talked back or showed any obvious contempt toward her, she knew that I didn't like her to be with my dad because I wanted him all to myself.

Sometimes I woke up at night to find Ms. Easter standing over me with a cast-iron skillet, threatening to hit me with it. I'd yell out loud, "Dad, Ms. Easter is standing over me with the cast-iron in a raised position like she's going to smash me with it!" Dad would say, "Easter, come out of that room and leave Betty alone." She'd leave my room and return to their bedroom and go to bed. Usually, I went back to sleep, but I made sure I slept next to the wall, where it was difficult for her to reach me without waking me up. Being next to the wall, I had to contend with huge flying roaches that shared the room with me and came out at night looking for food. When I tried to attack them, they just flew to a different part of the room. Anyway, that skillet was the limit, and the next day my Dad called the hospital for them to come and get Ms. Easter.

In the evenings I would sit on the side porch, watching life go by. The view was like a canvas that showed the life of our neighborhood, with pictures and my imagination to entertain me. Occasionally, a neighborhood friend would sit with me and give me the current updates on who's dating who and who's pregnant and by whom.

Everything became a part of my terrain while sitting those lonesome nights on the porch. As the darkness came on, I'd hear laughter, and cries, music from a neighbor's apartment or the nearest junk joint, shouts of triumph. On wintry nights when the wind blew, the fragrance of smoke from someone's outside barbecue pit business calmed my hunger.

Few people pass as I sit here. The man who lives next to us arrives home from work, his footsteps coming up the concrete steps and his lunch pail sliding on the rail as he limps to his front door. The music plays in the junk joint downstairs. A slender young man—balding, with holey black pants and a blue shirt with a white collar—darts into the alley, carrying something in a paper bag. Peeking from behind the building, he unzips his pants and begins to urinate against the wall. As he zips his pants, a middle-aged man with a wide-brimmed hat and studs on his shoes walks up to him. They hug and walk to the next corner, where they disappear.

For a moment, I leave this scene and conjure a scene the precise opposite. I don't know enough to dream up a nice neighborhood or a white picket fence; I just dream of freedom, being out of Belle Glade, anywhere but here.

But soon, all too soon, the unmistakable, dusty odor of muck returns. I am trapped.

