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My Kind of Music: Two New Orleans Stories

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MY KIND OF MUSIC: TWO NEW ORLEANS STORIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

by

Mary-Louise Ruth

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ABSTRACT

My Kind of Music: Two New Orleans Stories is written in two parts, a fictional story about Mickey, an eleven year old white girl, growing up in New Orleans in 1954 and a non-fictional story of my experience as a teenager in New Orleans in 1959. Part I is Mickey's personal coming of age story influenced by the forbidden music of rhythm and blues. Since Mickey's story is set in the same year of the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, it is also a coming of age story of a new social consciousness. Part II is a non-fiction recounting of an integration incident from my own teen years which serves as a fictional element later in Mickey's story when she is a teenager.

MY KIND OF MUSIC: TWO NEW ORLEANS STORIES

Bordeaux Street, New Orleans, 1954

I used to play my radio real low so the grown-ups wouldn't hear. Mama didn't like my music at all; Papa and Uncle Biggy didn't like it either. Sometimes, when Mama wasn't home, I'd get to turn up the music loud, like the day she took Gramma to the doctor. I was trying to figure out the words to Big Joe Turner's new hit "Shake, Rattle and Roll" when I heard Uncle Biggy opening the back door. Uncle Biggy had been coming over to visit more. Mama thought he was worried about Gramma, but I knew he came over to watch Josie who lived next door. I

wondered if he knew Josie and I liked to listen to the same kind of music.

Uncle Biggy was slamming things around in the kitchen like he was trying to drown out Big Joe Turner singing about an old cat in a seafood store.

"Turn off that goddamned nigger music," he yelled.

When I lowered the music I heard him cursing and swearing he was going to tell on me. Uncle Biggy was a grown man but sometimes he acted like a little kid. He was 35, fat, and still not married. Papa said nobody wanted to marry such a pain in the ass. Mama was always taking up for him because he didn't have a family of his own. Sometimes, Gramma didn't seem to remember him at all.

"Goddamn it, Mickey, where's your maw?" Suddenly, Uncle Biggy was wedged in the doorway between the kitchen and my room.

"She took Gramma to the doctor."

"How come you're not in school?"

"I'm sick," I said, throwing the covers over my head and scrunching down in bed.

Uncle Biggy walked over and turned off my radio.

"Hey, I'm listening to that," I shouted, tossing off the covers and sitting up again.

"Yeah, well you got no business listening to trashy nigger music. And I'm gonna tell your maw what you been doing under them covers, too."

I didn't understand the threat in his voice, but I was fed up with him always saying he was going to tell on me.

"What do you know?" I tried to sound mad. "Josie likes it too." Josie was the only grown-up who liked my music.

Uncle Biggy's cheeks puffed up and his eyes squinched, like he was going to strangle.

"What do YOU know, kid?"

"I know. I know about you and Josie." But I didn't know much, just the way he looked at her.

"You don't know nothing. You just got a smart mouth. Who you think you're talking to anyway?"

I sat there knowing I'd better shut up. Uncle Biggy went back to the kitchen and soon I smelled him burning the coffee. I was glad he'd have to drink burnt left-over coffee instead of Mama's fresh dripped brew.

I remember the first time I heard the steady beat of rhythm and blues thumping from Josie's room on the other side of the thin wall dividing our shotgun double house. It was just a few

months ago, right after the Thibodeaux's moved next door; we'd been living at 532 Bordeaux Street since I was a baby. Each side of the house had five rooms, if you counted the bathroom, lined up one behind the other. Even though I'd never been inside their house, I knew it was laid out just like ours. We had a living room and then a dining room that Mama and Papa turned into their bedroom. An archway divided the two front rooms instead of a door. The only real door we had in our house was to the bathroom which opened off the little hall between Mama and Papa's room and the room where Gramma and I slept. I liked to think of it as my room though Gramma slept in the other twin bed. My baby brother Tyler slept in a crib at the foot of Mama's and Papa's bed. I wondered where he was going to sleep when he got too big for that crib. Everybody had to walk through my room to get to the kitchen which was at the back of the house, right next to my room. When I was a really little kid I liked to fall asleep listening to Mama and Gramma talking in the kitchen while they cleaned up the dishes, the soft kitchen light making a pathway through the door into my room.

We could hear lots of stuff going on in the Thibodeaux's half of the house. When Miss Theresa, Josie's ma, got mad, she

hollered in French so we wouldn't know what she was mad about. Mama said Miss Theresa was a boogalee from Bayou Baratavia where all the poor white Cajuns lived who couldn't talk English. In our neighborhood only white people lived on our block and nobody else talked French; the colored people lived around the corner. I'd never met a boogalee before.

To me, Josie was a grown-up; she was probably about eighteen or nineteen. I knew she'd finished school and had a job, and that she'd been listening to rhythm and blues for a long, long time. Josie's room was right next to mine. My bed was by the wall; I'd jam myself against the wallpaper so I could listen to the music on her radio. Sometimes I listened in the daytime, but nighttime was the best; both sides of the house were quiet then. The music was softer at night, it seeped through the walls real easy and seemed to ooze right into my body.

One night, real late, the music was switching around and when the sound settled down I heard a man's voice say "WBZQ--sending night sounds to YOU." I held my breath and turned on the radio by my bed, spinning the dial carefully, worried I'd wake up Gramma who was snoring away. When I found

the same music dimly coming through the wall, it was like finding my own secret place.

I wanted to be just like Josie when I grew-up. Everything about her was curvy and soft-- her dark wavy hair tumbling to her shoulders, her droopy-lidded dark eyes weighted down by extravagant lashes, her full swooping lips lazily smiling all the time, even her creamy skin curved slinkily over her high cheekbones and deep down into her low-cut blouses or tight, fuzzy sweaters. Once I'd overheard Uncle Biggy say Josie was really fine but couldn't figure out what he meant. Mama said the delicate figure atop the lid of her vanity bowl was a fine piece of China, but it didn't look like Josie. Josie seemed unrestrained by the fine manners Mama was always preaching to me. I longed for a life like Josie's, open and free, yet sensed I needed Josie's soft curves to be such an unconfined woman. My skinny, freckled body offered little promise, for me.

I watched how Josie laughed at Uncle Biggy when she caught him looking at her. Not that she was mean to him. She didn't even pay attention to the smiles and jokes of Sal, the good looking butcher at the grocery store, who made all the ladies laugh, or the handsome soldier in the Ford who took her places.

One time I saw Josie slam the soldier's car door and laugh over her shoulder at him. He leaned across the front seat to watch her run up the steps to her house.

Josie was like the women Big Joe Turner sang about in his deep down voice, the kind of women who wore "those dresses the sun came shining through." But sometimes I didn't understand Joe Turner's songs even when I tried hard to learn the words. When Uncle Biggy came in I'd been listening to "Shake, Rattle and Roll", trying hard to figure out about the cat in the seafood store.

It was fun to sing along with the radio but most of all I liked to dance. My Papa said I was a good dancer. I'd caught on quick when I was little and used to stand on his feet to follow the steps. Soon I was dancing without counting or thinking about it. I could even follow Mr. Willis who swirled me around the dance floor at Eddie's wedding. We had lots of cousins in our family, so we had lots of weddings. Papa was proud of me when I learned the two-step and then the fox trot, but he couldn't dance to my new kind of music; he got pretty mad when he heard it.

A porch ran across the front of our double house with a

short iron fence right down the middle. One day Josie was sitting on her porch curling her hair and listening to the radio playing pretty loud in her living room. Papa grumbled at the noise but he couldn't tell Josie to turn off her music so he slammed our front door shut.

I stuck around listening to the radio and watching the way she moved. In the sunlight, the metal curlers glinted and sparkled as she rolled her thick dark hair with quick flicks of her wrist, stroking each clump of hair with sugar water from a cracked cup. Then she'd twist the curler into place and clip it with a sharp clicking sound.

Mama never curled her hair. If I hadn't seen Josie rolling her hair, I would've thought her thick curls were a gift from God. How could a stringy haired girl like me ever hope to become a woman like Josie? But I was learning that there were secrets; ways to make things more than they were. I wanted her to show me more secrets. I wanted to ask her questions.

Another day Josie was having a smoke on her porch, slowly dragging on the cigarette, the smoke barely curling from her lips, most of it staying in her lungs, warmly swirling around inside her. She sat on the steps, slouched against the banister

and looked over my way. Then she smiled, finally blowing out a thick plume of smoke.

"Hi, Mickey."

Her voice was deep, like the music I heard coming from her room.

"Hello." What could I say? My bare toes squiggled into the damp strip of earth between us, digging up doodle bugs and chunks of mud.

"Are you going to plant those toes?" She laughed, but I knew it wasn't at me, so I laughed too and felt better about inching over to her front steps. I could hear Poppa Stoppa's Hit Parade Show blasting out The Spider's new song "I Didn't Want to Do It."

"What's your favorite?" I asked Josie, trying to start a grown-up conversation.

"I mostly like blues," Josie answered.

"How come? You don't seem sad to me."

Josie really laughed at this.

"Blues isn't just about sadness. It's about all the different ways you can feel," she said.

"I like rhythm and blues better. It's happy music, makes me want to dance." I tried to stretch out my smile like her when I said it.

Josie seemed surprised and leaned closer. "How old are you?"

"Eleven," I answered.

"What's a kid like you doing listening to that kind of music?"

"It's my kind of music, too," I didn't like the way she made it sound as if I had no right to listen to rhythm and blues. "and my favorite song is 'Shake, Rattle, and Roll'."

"Joe Turner, huh? Yeah, he's good. I like Smiley Lewis, too."

Now we were having a real conversation.

"Does your ma know you listen to this kind of music?" She nodded at her radio rasping out the husky voiced Smiley Lewis's latest hit "Blue Monday".

I looked straight at Josie and answered quietly.

"No, she don't."

"Well now, isn't that something."

She leaned back onto the banister, looking at me in a

way that showed we had a secret, then started singing along with the radio. Smiley Lewis's song was about working hard all week till Saturday night rolled around. I knew Josie worked downtown at Woolworth's and had to stand on her feet all day. While she sang I could see her getting all dressed up to go out and have a good time no matter how tired she felt after work.

From then on, I'd sit on Josie's front steps whenever I could; sometimes she'd come out and talk to me. Mama didn't know about these talks because she was always busy with Gramma or my baby brother Tyler. I learned a lot from Josie when we talked, like the time she explained about boogalees.

"Where did you hear that?" she asked in a quick, hard voice.

"Mama says your ma's a boogalee from Bayou Barataria and that's why she talks French."

"There's no such thing as a boogalee. Just a word ignorant people use who don't know anything about Cajuns. Almost everybody from Bayou Barataria speaks French. My ma's no boogalee, she's Cajun."

I didn't want her mad at me so I sort of switched the subject.

"Can you talk French like your ma?"

"Who me?" Josie laughed a little. "No, cher. Not me."

"How come your ma talks French to you?"

"Oh I know what she's saying but I don't speak it. She and my old man used to speak French all the time when I was little, before he left."

"Where'd he go?"

Josie took awhile before she answered.

"He said he was going back to the bayous to get a job. Maybe on the oil rigs. I don't remember, it was so long ago. We just never heard from him no more."

"Are you Cajun, too?" I asked.

"Me? Listen Mickey, I'm just me, Josie Thibodeaux."

She stretched her legs out on the steps, her arms way over her head like she was showing all of herself to the world the way she really was.

"Will I get to be as pretty as you when I grow up?" I'd been wanting to ask this question for a long time.

"Sure, honey. I can tell because you're real pretty for a kid."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't like my freckles. They're all over me. Sometimes I spit on my fingers and try to rub them off."

"Hell, honey, freckles are beauty marks. The more you have, the prettier you're going to be."

"How did you get rid of yours?" I asked because Josie's creamy pale skin was perfectly clear and she was clearly beautiful.

"I never had them," she laughed. "It's your Irish skin. Cajuns don't get freckles."

Her answer confused me so I had to ask again.

"Will I get to be as pretty as you even though I'm not Cajun?"

"Sure, Mickey. Everybody's got their own beauty."

When I heard Mama and Gramma come in the kitchen door, I switched off my radio real quick.

"I smell something burned." Gramma grumbled. "Who made all this mess?" Gramma couldn't remember much, but she still

had a sharp nose.

"Biggy must've been here," Mama said. "Mickey, was Uncle Biggy here?"

"Yes, ma'am," I didn't want to say anymore.

"Well, you should've made him a fresh cup of coffee. Don't tell me you're that sick you had to stay in bed all day."

"No, m'am." Mama didn't like laziness or rudeness.

"Come in here and see what I've got for you."

"Yes m'am, I'm coming."

I could hear her clattering around cleaning up the coffee cups and getting ready to make a fresh pot before Papa got home. It made me feel bad she'd have to scrub so hard to get rid of the burnt stuff Uncle Biggy left behind.

When I got to the kitchen Mama was unfolding a fuchsia leotard with a pink puffy skirt. The sequins glittered in the sunlight slanting through the venetian blinds. "This is a perfect Carnival costume for you," Mama said. "You love to dance so I thought you'd really like this one."

I looked closer and could see sequins dangling on loose

threads in the net skirt and dark stains under the arms. It was one of my cousin Marsha's cast-off outfits from one of her dance recitals.

Mama looked really happy about it. Gramma started picking some of the sequins off of the skirt, so I snatched it up before she took all the sparkle out of it.

"Don't do that," Mama fussed at Gramma.

At times Mama had to talk to Gramma as if she were a little kid. Then Mama smiled at me, glad to see I was holding the costume as if I'd chosen it for myself rather than just grabbed it from Gramma. Gramma smiled too when she saw me with the costume; her eyes twinkled like the blue spangles scattered on the pink fluff. I couldn't turn it down now. I lifted the leotard to my shoulders and saw how it sagged on my skinny frame. Marsha was two years older than me, with breasts. How was I going to look in this thing? I didn't want to be a ballerina; I'd probably wind up looking like a clown.

Mama noticed how big it was, too.

"Don't worry, I'll take a tuck in the back and we can stuff some toilet paper in front. You'll look fine."

CHAPTER 2: OLD FASHIONED GIRLS

I wasn't happy about the ballet costume. Last Mardi Gras, I was a cowboy; what would all the kids think of me wearing a tutu? I'd rather be a tap dancer or wear Marsha's long dancing dress from her last recital; I'd look great in her swishy turquoise dress. I bet none of the guys would laugh at me in that outfit, but a tutu, oh man.

My favorite Carnival costume of all time was the one Gramma made for me when I was eight, before she got sick. It was an old-fashioned dress with a hoop skirt; we had a lot of fun sticking the wire through the hem of the petticoat to make the skirt stand out. Gramma spent days at her sewing machine pushing yards of fabric, pale blue with tiny pink rosebuds, under the speeding needle. At night, I'd fall asleep listening to her machine whirring away in the kitchen. She added pink ruffles to the neckline, sleeves, hem and lots of ruffles to the stiff, white petticoat. I complained about standing still so long w

hile she carefully fitted and pinned the dress; the ruffles took a really long time to tack in place, but I looked great on Mardi Gras day. She even made me a wide-brimmed hat with a ribbon so I could wear it draped down my back. She knew I wouldn't want a big hat on my head to interfere with catching lots of beads at the parades.

I sure wished I had my own costume to wear this Mardi Gras instead of Marsha's old hand-me-down tutu. My old-fashioned-girl outfit was the last costume Gramma made for me; I wore it for a long time afterwards.

When we were little, my best friend Bitsy and I used to play make-believe in old clothes and Carnival costumes. My old-fashioned girl dress was our favorite, even after the hoop skirt collapsed. Bitsy had a way of twirling around, as she walked, that made the skirt swirl into a circle anyway, without the hoop. Then she'd slowly settle down onto the ground with the skirt all around her, just like the princesses in the fairy tales we read together. We'd pretend we were waiting for the prince to find us. We knew he'd choose the one in the long dress, so we took turns wearing it, promising each other not to go live in the castle with him unless he took both of us.

"Instead of a castle, I'd like to live in a house like Mrs. Goldman's down the street," Bitsy said. "Miss Sarah used to work for Mrs. Goldman and says they've got some really big rooms with lots of sunlight coming in windows that go from the ceiling to the floor."

"I used to play with Howard Goldman when he'd come visit his grandmother, but I never went in the house. I remember looking in those big windows though."

The Goldman's house took up almost half of the block across the street; a regal looking wrought-iron fence blocked it off from the banquette, almost like a moat. There were shrubs growing all along the inside of the fence but you could still see through to the columned porch with polished wooden floors glistening in the sun. Around the corner from the Goldman's on that side of the street was where all the rich people lived.

"There was a little house in the backyard where we could play. Howard had a bunch of toys and games in that back house." I told Bitsy.

"If I had two houses, I'd live in the little one and let Miss Sarah live in the big one," she answered. Bitsy lived with her grandmother, Miss Sarah, who was raising her.

"I'd like that too. It'd be nice not to have to sleep with Gramma and hear her snoring all the time."

"Miss Sarah snores, too," Bitsy laughed. "No way to get away from her snoring in our tiny house."

"At my house, I can hear music coming from Josie's room next door."

"No kidding. What kind of music?"

"Mostly rhythm & blues. Late at night she listens to the Jack the Cat Show."

"Does your mama let you listen to that?"

"No, siree. But I know where to find it on my radio. Mama gets real mad if she hears me listening to it."

"Miss Sarah wouldn't ever let me listen to music like that. She says only low class people listen to that kind of stuff. Miss Sarah thinks the Thibodeaux's are white trash anyway."

"Mama says that, too. But it's not true."

"How come?"

"Josie's real nice to me and she shows me stuff. I like her music."

Bitsy thought this was funny.

"Mickey, you make me laugh. That's the kind of music they play in juke joints. You better not go to any of those places when you grow up."

"Why not?"

"Miss Sarah says that's where women get mixed up with all the wrong kind of men. She don't want me having anything to do with that kind."

I wondered if Josie's soldier was that kind of guy.

"I'm going to marry a man like my daddy," I told Bitsy.

"I'm never going to get married," Bitsy said spreading the skirts of the costume all around her.

"Not even if the prince asks you?"

"Mickey, you know no prince is going to come. You really make me laugh."

Bitsy looked pretty special encircled by the rosebud-strewn skirt puffed up around her. Like it was her throne. Like she didn't need a prince to make her a queen. I never could sit so straight and tall as Bitsy, even when Mama nagged me to pull my shoulders back. I knew the prince would never choose me.

Bitsy and I almost wore that dress out until one day Uncle Biggy came down the alley while we were playing our game. We

both giggled, he sure didn't look like a prince in his overalls with 'Dixie Beer' in big letters on the back of his shirt. His delivery truck was parked outside. Sometimes he stopped by to see Mama and get a cup of coffee when he was working his route.

"Hey, Uncle Biggy."

He just looked at us, then kept walking. Bitsy was sitting with the skirt all around her.

"Hello, Mr. Biggy," she said.

He didn't say anything until he went inside and slammed the kitchen door shut, but we could hear his loud, angry voice through the opened kitchen window. "Elise, what's wrong with you?" he shouted at Mama.

"What are you talking about...?"

"How come you're letting Mickey play with that nigger kid?"

"Oh, Biggy," Mama laughed a little, "don't make such a scene. Bitsy lives around the corner. Miss Sarah's girl."

"She's a goddamned filthy nigger and she's wearing Mickey's dress. After all that work Maw did..."

"Biggy, shush. They'll hear you."

"Don't give a good goddamn. Mickey should know better. You should know better."

Then the window slammed shut. Bitsy heard it all though, because she jumped up and started to run down the alley until the full skirt caught on the vines crawling over the fence and gate, the long claw-like tendrils clinging to some ruffles. She grabbed the back of the dress and pulled it over her head without unbuttoning it, then tossed the dress on the ground. She glanced back, just for a moment, long enough so I could see her eyes looking straight through me. She stood there in her plain white school blouse and navy pleated skirt, yet when she turned to leave the hoop skirt still seemed to gracefully sway around her.

Later Mama told me I had to throw my old-fashioned dress away.

"Mama, you can wash it."

"That's not the point, Mickey. Biggy's right. You've got to start learning the way things are," she answered.

"Bitsy and I always play together. She's the only kid in the neighborhood to play with."

Mama was sorting out dried red beans into a big pot in her lap. She kept carefully checking the small mound of beans in her hand, instead of looking at me. The beans plinked one by

one into the pot until she spotted a rotten one that she'd toss aside. "That's why we've got to move. There's nobody for you to play with around here."

"There's Bitsy."

"She's colored. You need white kids to play with. You're getting too big to play with colored kids."

"Bitsy's been my friend since we were little. We like to play the same games."

Mama sighed and spilled a whole handful of beans into the pot without taking out the bad ones. The red beans clanged like stones in the silence. "Mickey, look at me." But I already was looking at her, watching to see how far I could go with my resistance. Her eyes grabbed onto me like an angry hand shaking my shoulder.

"There's no colored kids in your school. You need to play with white kids now."

I felt her hold on me tighten, trying to stifle any more objections.

"You didn't mind when we were little."

Mama banged the pot of beans on the table and stood up, turning away from me, fidgeting with something on the stove.

"It's not just me or Uncle Biggy. It's the way it is. Colored kids and white kids don't go to school together. They don't mix. I don't want you playing with Bitsy anymore. Now that's the end of it, Mickey."

Her back was a wall shutting out any more words from me. I knew Bitsy and I would never play our make-believe games again or read library books together. I didn't know anybody else who liked to read as much as Bitsy.

"Then don't throw away my old-fashioned dress." I couldn't stand to lose both of them.

Mama grabbed the pot from the table and took it to the sink to wash the beans.

"I already gave it to the colored family around the corner with all those other clothes I was getting rid of."

Hand-me-downs were part of life in our family. Marsha's dresses and costumes were passed on to me and finally to Miss Hattie's kids, who lived in a ramshackle house with a big overgrown yard in the same block as Bitsy and Miss Sarah. Marsha's

leotard and tutu would probably end up there, too, after Mardi Gras this year.

Miss Hattie's yard was a big blank space of stamped down mud, great for playing dodge-the-ball or tossing a basketball into the crooked, rusty ring nailed up over the shed door. A great big chinaberry tree drooped over the whole yard, making lots of shade even in the hot summer afternoons.

Mama always made me take a nap after lunch when the sun usually beat down on our side alley. I'd never sleep, though; mostly I laid in bed thinking about stuff. Mama didn't want me reading library books when I was supposed to be sleeping, but she couldn't keep my mind from wandering. Sometimes I'd imagine all the kids smacking each other with the dodge-ball, laughing and having a good time falling down in the dirt, wrestling each other for the ball. Bitsy didn't like Miss Hattie's kids---she thought they played too rough, but it looked like fun to me.

Our backyard was too small for fun. Mama's clotheslines filled up the small open space and the rest of the yard was taken up by a shed with her wringer washer machine and two big old concrete wash tubs in it. The only place to play was the narrow alley going down the side of the house. The alley had a

cracked walkway connecting the back yard to the front banquette and a ribbon of dark earth running alongside the wooden fence that divided our house from the Delachaise's big house next door. Gramma had planted some vines and flowers trying to make a garden, but it was mostly withered now that Gramma couldn't take care of her garden.

But there were always flowers of some kind growing wild. My favorite were four-o'clock bushes with tiny purple, red, and blue flowers whose petals opened in the late afternoon like little horns bursting with color instead of music. Bitsy and I'd string the sturdy buds to wear as necklaces or crowns. Or pinch the tiny stamens from the center to suck the sweetness, just like the bees who buzzed continuously around the bushes waiting for the blossoms to open.

Tufts of monkey grass crowded the end of the alley where the deep shadows of the fence, the front gate, and the oleander bushes kept the corner moist and cool all the time. The clumps of long dark green, almost black, strands arced up like fountains instead of short stubby blades poking from the dirt. It was the furthest spot from Mama's eyes when she was washing clothes in the back yard.

The great looming pecan tree in the Delachaise's weed-choked yard next door shaded the rest of our alley in the late mornings, making it a comfortable place to play no matter how hot it was. The thick, rough wood fence soaked up the morning dew, holding the dampness so that the breezes passing through our alley felt moist and cool, but after lunch the sun beat down hot and dry. Mama closed the blinds to shut out the sun blaring into my bedroom, darkening the room but also blocking out any breeze; it made naptime too warm for comfort.

The front porch was a better place to be in the afternoon in its own shade and cooled by the rustling bushes and trees around the Delachaise's house. After Tyler was born, Mama took naps with him in the big bed in her room, so I could slip out of my bed, tiptoe through her room and softly, softly open the front screen door, and then escape to the front porch. That's when I first started talking to Josie. Her off days were in the middle of the week so sometimes she'd be out on her porch, too, listening to the Poppa Stoppa show.

All the double houses lined up on our block were the same. Each carved wooden front door had glass panes in the top half with narrow glass doors on either side that opened to let in

more breeze. Mama kept our side doors locked and covered with curtains that let in the light but screened any prying eyes from the street. When it was hot, Miss Theresa's side doors were wide open, even at night; she said it kept the house much cooler. Mama thought it was low class to let the neighbors see inside your house. "Not to mention," she'd complain, "the bugs and dirt that get in." All the windows and doors had screens to keep out the bugs but maybe she was right about the dirt and everybody looking inside; still, Josie and Miss Theresa didn't mind. Even when Josie wasn't outside I could hear the music from her radio drifting through those narrow opened doors. If I waited long enough, sometimes Josie'd come out and talk to me.

"How come you don't have any friends to play with?" she asked one time.

"I used to."

"Moved away, huh?" She shook out a cigarette from her pack. "Folks are always leaving."

"Bitsy's still here," I said. "She lives around the corner."

Josie fumbled in the back pocket of her shorts for a match. It was summer and her long tanned legs stretched clear across

the steps as she leaned back into the banister. In the afternoon shade the concrete steps were a cool place to sit.

"You two have a fight?" she asked striking the match on the step.

"Mama says I can't play with her cause she's colored."

The flame burned down the match, almost to her fingers, before Josie blew it out.

"You mean Miss Sarah's kid? Yeah, I've seen her. I thought her name was Elizabeth."

"It is but Miss Sarah's called her Bitsy since she was a tiny baby. Bitsy doesn't let everybody call her that, but it was okay if I did."

"Sounds like you two were good friends."

I watched her light up her cigarette then said, "We still are. I just can't play with her."

It had been two years since Bitsy pulled off that costume and left. I'd see her every now and then at Miss Sarah's grocery store when I'd sneak around to buy candy for Gramma and me or sometimes I'd see her sitting on her front steps when I walked home from school. We'd always say hi and talk for awhile

but it wasn't the same. I knew she'd had to leave me, too, after hearing what Uncle Biggy said.

"Too bad we can't just have the friends we want," Josie replied. Then she took some deep puffs on her cigarette and blew the smoke into the cellophane wrapping around the pack. When she pumped the pack up and down inside the wrapping, smoke circles came out of the bottom where she'd pricked a tiny hole. Josie knew lots of tricks to make me laugh.

CHAPTER 3: BURNING HEARTS

It was almost Mardi Gras. The night parades had started but we couldn't go because Papa was working a second job and Mama had too much to do with Gramma and Tyler. I loved the night parades uptown, the long, thick branches of the big oak trees stretched over the floats rumbling through the dark streets faintly lit by lampposts and flaming flambeaux, long sticks of fiery sparks carried by white-robed colored men dancing alongside the floats. When I was really little, before Tyler was born, I used to watch the parades on Papa's shoulders. One time, at the Proteus parade, I was so excited perched on Papa's shoulders; colorful beads were falling all around us and I was trying to grab as many as I could. I yelled myself hoarse and waved my hands wildly at the maskers on the floats who were tossing trinkets and necklaces to the crowd. "Throw me something, mister!"

The flambeau carrier in front of us, his sweaty black face brightly lit by the flames, danced alongside the float, swaying and swooping for the nickels and dimes people threw at him. His white robe and the fiery white sparkles from the flambeau blurred together as he twirled the stick of flames. Suddenly sparks burned my outstretched hand. Everything spun away as Papa swept me down into his arms. Mama's worried face blocked out the maskers as the float lurched away; all I could see were the dark tree branches spreading overhead like protective arms.

Some salve from the corner drugstore soothed the pain but my burned hand still throbbed as we returned to the street to watch the last float wobble out of view.

"Don't worry, Mickey, your hand will heal before you get married." Mama tried to comfort me, but I knew she was trying to make Papa feel better even more than take away my hurt. Usually Papa made fun of Mama's concerns, this time he seemed to feel worse than she did.

"Elise, do you think she'll have a scar?" he asked as if I weren't there, held close in his arms.

"Oh, Henry, don't worry. No one will ever notice it," she'd answered.

I told Josie the story while I sat on her porch steps watching her paint her nails, her glossy bottles of nail polish lined up in a row.

"Did it hurt a lot?" she asked while smoothing on a ribbon of red, red polish.

"Uh-uh. It didn't bleed or nothing."

Josie spread out her fingers, carefully checking her nails curved like tiny crimson shells that made her fingers look even longer. I wished my stubby nails were like hers. Mama was always nagging me because I bit my nails down to the quick but I didn't remember to stop until it hurt. I stuck my torn fingers in my pocket.

"Let me see your hand," Josie said as she screwed the cap back on the polish labeled 'Heartbreak Red.' "Did it leave a scar?"

"Uh-uh. It's okay." I really didn't want her to see my raggedy nails.

"Let me see." This time she was telling me, not asking.

I held out the palm of my hand so she wouldn't see my nails.

"You've got a nasty scar."

Josie traced the ugly blotch very gently and kept holding my hand even though I tried to pull it away.

"Bet your daddy felt bad about it." I didn't know why Josie, just like Mama, was so worried about Papa's feelings. I was the one with the scar. "Daddies don't like their little girls to get hurt."

I tried again to pull away but it was too late; she'd turned over my hand and was studying my finger nails.

"Looks like you need a manicure," Josie smiled.

I could hardly believe my luck as she started looking for the right color for me. I knew Mama would be real mad when she saw my painted nails but I didn't care. I was so happy Josie didn't tell me how ugly my nails were; she was going to make them beautiful, like hers.

"You're lucky to have a daddy who takes care of you," Josie told me as she filed the rough edges; then she opened a pale pink polish called 'Baby's Breath.' I wanted her to use the grown-up red she'd painted on her own nails, but didn't say a thing as she smoothed on the pearly color.

Poppa Stoppa was on the radio, the winter day was warm enough to sit outside, and Josie was making me pretty like her. Everything was perfect. I hoped my nails stayed sparkly until

Mardi Gras, still a few days away. Maybe the weather would stay warm too.

"I wish my old man was around," Josie said as the brush wiggled, smearing a glob of pink.

"My Papa's not around much anymore, either."

I couldn't tell Papa or Mama how I felt and Gramma didn't pay much attention to me anymore. I missed my Papa now that he was working a second job at night.

"Mickey, what are you complaining about?" Josie yanked my other hand into place. "Your old man works hard for you and your ma. Be glad he takes care of you."

"Papa loves us. He has to take care of us."

Josie dropped my hand and started laughing.

"Kid, do you have a lot to learn." She nodded at the radio playing 'Money Honey,' the Drifters new hit. "Listen to those words."

I heard the steady beat better than the words as the Drifters sang about the landlord ringing the front doorbell.

"Landlords want the rent, Mickey. Somebody's got to pay. You're lucky your old man does."

I listened but didn't understand what it had to do with Papa.

Josie gently put my hand back on the kleenex on her knee and dipped the brush in the pink polish again.

"You listen to the music but you don't know anything about the words."

She explained the words as she brushed glistening color on the rest of my nails.

"Yeah, those guys sing the blues because they're unlucky in love, but they don't really want the kind of love that women want. We end up singing the blues when they're gone. Most guys don't want to stick around. Not like your old man. He's willing to stay around."

I wanted to ask about her daddy who'd left to get another job on the oil rigs and never came back. Would my Papa leave, too, if there wasn't enough money?

"What does money have to do with love?"

"Everything," she laughed, but didn't explain any more. Then she showed me how to blow on my nails to dry them.

"Shake your hands around too. Keeps the air circulating."

We both stuck our shiny, painted nails out, shaking our

hands in time to the music. I tested my little finger too soon and smeared the polish, but the rest looked slick. Mama called me before I could help Josie put everything away.

"Go on in," Josie said putting all the bottles back in her plastic case.

"Thanks, Josie."

"Sure kid. See you later."

The kitchen was hot even with the back door wide open. Tyler had crawled up against the screen door and was whining to go outside. Gramma must have been feeling bad because she wasn't in the kitchen.

"Where've you been, Mickey? You know I need your help around supper time."

Mama was too busy to be real mad at me but I could tell by the way her shoulders hunched up she was at the end of her rope. I picked up Tyler and Mama's shoulders relaxed as soon as he stopped wailing.

"C'mon, Tyler, let's go play in the backyard."

"No, no. Not outside, he'll get too dirty. Just keep him quiet while you set the table. Papa's going to eat with us before he goes to work."

Most evenings Papa went straight to his night shift after his day job but every now and then he came home for dinner. I slung Tyler on my hip as I pulled out the dishes to set the table. If I put him down on the floor he'd start crying again and get in Mama's way.

The garlic and onions frying in the pan popped and sizzled, then Mama dropped in the pork chops and all the smells came together to make me and Tyler really hungry. When he started to whine again I broke off the toe of the french bread for him. He quieted down, so I stuck him in his high-chair. I was getting out the ice trays when Papa came in. He patted Mama on the behind and rubbed her back as he took a whiff of her cooking.

"Sure smells good." He smiled at me and Tyler. "You kids ready to eat?"

Tyler was happy to see Papa and forgot all about his bread. Papa picked him up and mussed my hair as I dropped some ice into his glass.

"Well, well. Look at those pretty nails," he said.

I held my sparkling nails up to the light so he could get a better view.

"Where'd you get your nails done?" he asked as Mama turned from the stove to get a good look, too.

"Mary Katharine, who painted your nails?"

Mama just stood there holding the sizzling frying pan and waiting for me to answer. I didn't want to tell her Josie.

"Mickey," Papa said in a soft, firm voice, "answer your mother."

"Josie," I answered even softer.

Mama plopped the pan on the kitchen table so hard I thought she'd crack the black and white enamel top.

"I told you never to talk to that...that..."

"Elise," Papa interrupted. "Don't get so upset. Mickey didn't mean any harm."

Mama still looked mad---and something else, too.

"I don't want you having anything to do with that no good hussy next door," Mama shouted at me, then pleaded with Papa, "Henry, I told you we have to keep an eye on her. This wouldn't happen if you were home more."

"Elise, you know we need the money."

It was beginning to sound like the same old argument about money, and on the one night Papa got to be home.

"Mama, Josie's not like that. She's real nice to me and shows me a lot of stuff..."

"I don't want you learning anything from her. Look at you, look at those nails. You look like a hussy, too."

"Elise, stop it, you hear." Papa was trying to keep Tyler quiet and quiet Mama down too.

"Don't you take up for her kind, Henry." She sat down with the pot holder still in her hand then threw it on the table as she said, "You men are all alike."

"Mama, that's not true. Josie says Papa's not like other men."

"What does she know about a good man? Running around with that no good soldier..."

"Elise, that's enough." Papa rolled his eyes at the thin wall dividing our houses.

"Doesn't Josie's soldier love her?" I tried to ask very quietly so Josie couldn't hear me next door.

"Hah!" Mama answered in a harsh whisper, "She's going to end up like her maw. All alone with a kid to raise."

The chops in the pan were cold and the peas on the stove were burned. Papa put Tyler in his chair but didn't sit down again.

"Henry I don't want Mickey hanging around her. Tell her to stop. Make Mickey stop talking to her."

"Elise, Josie and her mother are our neighbors. How can I tell Mickey not to talk to our neighbors?"

"Neighbors? That's the trouble. We have to get away from this neighborhood before it's too late."

Papa seemed to sag and look tired again.

"Elise, please, I'm doing all I can. You have to be patient."

Mama knew this was always the way the argument ended.

"Henry, sit down and eat your supper," she said.

Papa bent down and kissed me and Tyler good-bye, then answered,

"It's too late. I have to go to work. Save some for later tonight."

He left without kissing Mama good-bye.

That night I lay in bed thinking for a long time. Gramma was snoring, her dried up plate of dinner on the bedside table. Sometimes Gramma wouldn't leave her room for days and Mama had to bring all of her meals to her. I wished I'd missed supper, too.

I rubbed my pink nails feeling the ridges where the polish was already starting to chip from washing the supper dishes. My

shiny manicure would be all worn off by Mardi Gras. Even though Gramma was fast asleep, I didn't feel like listening to my radio. There was too much to think about.

CHAPTER 4: Under Pain of Mortal Sin

The library was a good place to think. I went there almost every day after school, it was right across the street from St. Jude's where I was in the fifth grade. The neutral ground dividing Napoleon Avenue made the school seem far away, like a boundary between St. Jude's and the library. School was okay, but I learned a whole lot more reading library books.

Sometimes, the lady who worked in the library, Mrs. Kaplan, let me look at the books on the grown-ups' shelves, but my favorite writer was Janet Lambert; she wrote about girls who traveled all over the place with their families and lived in big brick houses on army bases. They had problems, but things always worked out; nothing ever got too bad if you lived in a big house with trees and a lawn. Nobody in those books ever argued about money or worried about paying tuition like I'd heard Mama and Papa discussing this morning. Last night's

argument was still going on because Papa wanted me to go to public school. "Just for awhile, Elise, until we get back on our feet."

Mama wouldn't hear of it. "You know we have to send our children to Catholic schools."

"But it's too expensive right now. If you want to move..."

"I won't let Mickey go to school with a bunch of low class delinquents," Mama insisted.

Papa didn't like it when Mama got on her high horse about being better than other people. "Don't start that again..."

"Henry, you know we have to give our children a Catholic education," she sternly reminded him, "under pain of mortal sin."

That ended the argument about changing schools. I guess Papa couldn't find a good enough reason to risk burning in hell.

I couldn't imagine going to the public school even though a bunch of kids from the playground went to one, McDonough 25. After Mama made me stop playing with Bitsy, she had to give in and let me start going to the playground a few blocks from our house. Mama didn't like the kids at the playground either, but Papa said I needed some friends, so Mama agreed, since only white kids could go there.

Mama was right about some of the kids at the playground, especially the boys who cursed a lot and liked to tell dirty jokes, but Buster wasn't like that, even though he went to public school. His folks made him go to catechism class after school which sounded like a drag to me. I thought it'd be the worst thing about public school.

Bitsy went to a Catholic school for colored kids. Mama wondered how Miss Sarah paid the tuition; Bitsy told me her grandmother wanted a good education for her, no matter how much it cost. Miss Sarah, who ran the colored store around the corner from our house, had raised Bitsy from a baby. Everybody called her Miss Sarah, even Bitsy.

Miss Sarah's store didn't have much in it except lots of candy for kids. Mama didn't like me going to the colored store, but Gramma would give me pennies and nickels to get sweet stuff that we'd eat at night in our beds, so Mama wouldn't find out. Mama didn't like me going most places in our neighborhood.

She didn't mind me going to the library though; Mama said a good class of people read books and went to libraries. She used to take me there when I was little. We'd carry home armfuls of books to read. Back then Mama had time to read before Tyler was born and Gramma came to live with us. She used to browse

through the grown-up section while I sat at the children's table looking at the pictures in the big, thin books for little kids. I couldn't wait to be able to read thick books like Mama's, filled with just words.

Mama taught me to read before I went to kindergarten. We'd sit at the kitchen table after Papa left for work and read the newspaper together. I learned all the letters and could sound out the big words in the headlines. My teacher in the first grade didn't believe me when I said I read the newspaper every day.

Bitsy also liked to read, but the colored library was too far away. Even before we knew how to read, I'd show her my books from the Napoleon Avenue library and we'd spend hours making up stories for the pictures. We'd have a good time sitting out in the cool alley at my house imagining all the places you could go in books.

In the fourth grade, I went to the library almost every day after school. There was a jungle gym in the small park outside the library; after I'd checked out my books, I'd climb up to the very top to read. Leafy branches screened out the traffic noise from the busy corner and made me feel like I was in my own private tree house. Up there, it was much quieter than at home.

One day, when I was reading up in the jungle gym, I spied Bitsy walking down Napoleon Avenue and called to her. We hadn't talked for a long time and I wanted to show her my special perch. No matter how loud I shouted, she just kept on walking. By the time I'd climbed down and caught up with her, she was already at the corner.

"Bitsy, wait up." I grabbed her arm before the light changed to cross the street. "Didn't you hear me calling you?"

She looked over her shoulder at me with her quiet, dark eyes and said, "You know colored kids can't go there."

I'd felt hurt because Bitsy ignored me, now I felt ashamed. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

She shrugged away from me and kept on walking across the street.

I never noticed if people at the library really were better than other people, like Mama said, but Mrs. Kaplan was sure smarter than anybody I'd ever known, even my teachers. She knew everything in all those books in the library and always helped people find what they needed to know. She knew exactly the kind of books I liked to read and would tell me when a new one came in. I asked her once why Bitsy couldn't come to the library

with me and it was the first time I ever heard her say, "I don't know."

CHAPTER 5: THROW ME SOMETHING, MISTER

Finally Mardi Gras morning arrived---too cold and rainy, to go downtown to watch Rex, the big parade. Besides, Gramma would get confused in all the crowds, so we stayed in the neighborhood to watch the marching clubs. Uncle Biggy belonged to the Uptown Strutters; he marched every year wearing a gaudy, colorful, satin costume and carried a cane with big, floppy crepe paper flowers twisted around it. At the end of the parade, each marcher gave his cane to a girlfriend or wife or someone special. Last year Uncle Biggy gave his to Mama; I'd tap dance around my room with it, practicing 'shuffle-off-to-buffalo' or some other steps I'd learned from Marsha. I loved strutting with that cane and knew I'd look great dancing with the band, but girls couldn't march in the parade.

Uncle Biggy didn't know how to strut, but the club did other things, too, usually at JJ's barroom around the corner. JJ's was the main meeting place for all the marching clubs on Mardi Gras day and most evenings throughout the year. We were

going to JJ's to watch the parade. The grownups would wait in the bar, but if the rain let up, I wanted to watch the parade with my friends at the playground across the street.

"Well, look at my little dancing girl," Papa laughed. "You sure look pretty."

I frowned. "I'd rather be a tap dancer than a ballerina." I could complain to Papa, he didn't mind.

Papa laughed. "You sure look like a hip-shaking mama.

"Henry!" Mama snapped. "That's no way to talk to a child."

Papa winked at me. "She looks pretty grownup with all that rouge and lipstick."

Mama gave him a nudge and they both laughed. I went in the bathroom to check my lipstick in the mirror on the medicine cabinet. My lips were bright red; Mama had gently smeared the same color on my cheeks, then puffed powder all over my face. I could see a line of caked powder across my nose that I rubbed off just the way I'd seen her do it. Mardi Gras was my favorite time of year because you could dress up and be whatever you wanted.

I looked pretty grown up, until I noticed the puckered folds of the leotard collapsed across my flat chest. Marsha's breasts were supposed to fill it out. Lipstick alone didn't do

the trick. Then I remembered Mama saying I could stuff the front with toilet paper and grabbed a handful. I had to push and pull until I got each side even; I wanted to look just right from the side view. Suddenly, I saw Gramma's face in the mirror, she was watching me, laughing away. "You sure have grown up, child."

I wanted to give her a hug but didn't want to crush the two bulges on my chest. "Do I look okay, Gramma?"

"You sure do. You look just like me when I was young," she giggled. "I used to help myself with my mama's rolled up stockings."

It was like old times laughing with Gramma. Lately she didn't remember much and didn't laugh much either.

"Your ma said to come on," she told me. "We're going to watch the parade."

The barroom was crowded and filled up with the smell of beer. Gramma sat very quiet at a table off to the side, sort of lost in the loud mix of noise from the juke box and all the talking. I fidgeted in my chair until my Coke spilled; finally Mama told me to go outside and play.

I squirmed through the crowd and out the door, happy to be in the damp, chilly fresh air now that it had stopped raining. I saw a bunch of kids in the playground and was sure Tommy, Buster, and Charlie were the cowboys racing up the poles. Usually Buster won unless I was in the contest, too. Most of the time I could beat the boys.

The swing set seemed as tall as the roof of the playground shelter house where Miss Irma kept all the sports equipment. The heavy, wooden swings dangled down on long chains. I loved to pump my swing higher than the rooftop until the slack in the chain popped and swung me back to earth.

The most fun was to climb way up, grab one of the other poles, unwind my legs, and then drop to the ground in a flash. Most of the other kids were too scared to try it but the funny feeling in my stomach when I dropped down so fast was worth the hard work getting to the top.

I squished and splashed across the muddy baseball field to join everybody on the swings.

"Hey, Buster," I shouted up to the kid in the Hopalong Cassidy suit hanging almost from the top of the poles. Buster grinned, let go and dropped straight down to the soggy ground in front of me.

"Hey Mickey, where you been?"

"Over at the bar."

I felt shy when I remembered the ballet costume I had on. Last year I'd made a big fuss and Mama let me be a cowboy but this year I had to wear a girl's costume.

Charlie laughed and tugged at my tutu but Buster told him to quit it. Tommy had already grabbed a pole and was swinging around it like a monkey getting ready to climb. Then I had an idea I knew would make them forget my silly costume.

"Hey, let's climb to the very top when the marching club comes by. Bet they'll throw us lots of beads when they see us hollering from up so high."

The fun of Mardi Gras parades was catching lots of glittering necklaces. Everybody yelled, "Throw me something, mister!" The trick was to catch the guy's eye so he'd aim the beads right at you. That was a real catch. Kids made all kinds of things to get more loot. One year we nailed cigar boxes on sticks and caught lots of stuff. We'd sure get their attention by yelling from the top of the swing set; we'd be higher than the chain link fence surrounding the playground. The marchers liked to see who could throw highest and farthest.

"Hey, good idea," agreed Charlie.

"Sounds okay," said Buster, "but can we hang on to the pole with only one hand and still catch stuff with our other hand?"

Now we had a challenge. What could be better? We had time to figure it out before the parade came.

Tommy already had a pole to climb; I grabbed one too. Buster and Charlie went to the other side to shinny up. Since I was the tallest, I grabbed onto my pole as high as I could, to get a head start, then wrapped my legs around to push me up to the top. Hand over hand, I inched my way up as my thighs hugged the pole, rubbing over the cold, moist metal slicked by the rain. My arms were strong, I could easily drag myself up, but my real strength was my strong, long legs which pushed me up faster than the boys. Pull, push, pull, push. I could feel the cold, wet metal through my thin tights and knew Mama would be mad when she saw how I'd messed up Marsha's dance outfit. It didn't matter, as long as I got to the top first.

Charlie was way below me. I dropped my head back to spy Buster climbing up the pole on the other end, higher up than Charlie but not as high as me. Buster and I laughed as we pushed and pressed and pulled our way up the poles. I was ahead when I heard my tights rip and felt the drops of rain soaking

into my skin and costume. My bare skin rubbing up the pole sent shivers and prickles into my thighs and stomach. I was almost to the top where I could grab hold of the other bar, but instead of dangling down, my plan was to swing one leg over the crossbar and pull myself up so I could straddle the top of the swing set to watch the parade and yell at Uncle Biggy to throw me something. I giggled as the whole plan came clear to me and wondered if Buster had figured out a way to do it.

I squeezed tighter to the rain slicked pole to get a better grip with my legs and felt the wetness streaking my costume as my whole body pushed up the pole. My arms were tiring, but I knew I could count on my legs to hold out. Suddenly the shivery feeling in my thighs and stomach spread out into my hips; my insides felt warm and wet and shaky. I tried to ignore it and pushed harder, but the more I pushed the shivery feeling got stronger and my hold on the pole got weaker. I was near enough to the top to grab the other pole but not close enough to swing my leg over the crossbar. My arms were shaky too, so I had to grab the other pole before I slipped down. I unwound my legs, and let myself fall to the soft, wet grass.

Buster was just grabbing for his other pole while I was dropping down, but I didn't feel good about winning the race.

I'd wanted to get to the top and stay there, instead I was a soggy heap on the ground. The shivery feeling started to go away and then I felt tears stinging the corners of my eyes. I wiped my face quickly, streaking it with mud and smearing my makeup.

"Boy, you look a mess," Charlie said, plopping on the ground next to me.

I wanted to tell him to shut-up but was afraid to say a word until I'd swallowed the lump in my throat.

Buster landed and was walking over to us. "Guess we can't catch anything from the top of the swings," he announced, his hands and face as muddy as mine. "Let's just climb the fence and yell at them from up there." He hadn't even thought of my idea, but I didn't feel like telling him now.

The music coming around the corner warned us the parade was coming. The big tuba made me forget all about falling down and the steady, marching drum made me jump to my feet and get in step with the rhythm. The whole band swung into a shuffling beat that got us all dancing around. Two steps up and one step back, swaying side to side with each step. Buster snapped his fingers right in time, loud and clear. Charlie's legs shook like rubber and bent so low his behind dragged on the ground

until he tripped over his cowboy holster hanging down. My soggy tutu sprayed waterdrops everywhere as I shook my hips in time with the trumpet leading the second line of marchers down the street.

Tommy had already scrambled to the top of the chain link fence, waving and yelling at the marchers to throw him something. We all climbed the fence to grab some beads; this time I swung my leg over the top of the fence and sat there with both hands free so I could catch as many beads as possible.

Sal, the grocery man, was out front strutting like a king; his purple and gold satin suit shimmered straight and tall while his gold painted shoes tapped down the street. His feet kept up with every beat, but his stiff torso seemed to keep the music inside him.

I caught Mr. Sal's eye, he winked, and tossed me a bunch of colored beads that Charlie tried to snatch away, but I yanked them free. Mr. Sal laughed and threw another bunch right at me. It was raining down beads all around us. I even heard some of them clinking on the swing poles in back of us. A glittering gold necklace went sailing over my head, way out of reach, and twisted around the crossbar of the swings.

Some of the marchers were already drunk, stumbling in sloppy circles, their sequined capes swirling in a blur of color. Uncle Biggy was behind the band; I could see him rounding the corner with the stragglers who were walking instead of dancing. I hoped he'd saved me some good beads.

"Uncle Biggy, Uncle Biggy," I yelled. "Over here. Throw me something." Finally he heard me and reached into his shiny, satin bag and scooped out a tangle of colored beads too heavy to throw so he ran to the fence and handed it all up to me. His face was red from laughing so much.

"Hey, Mickey. You sure got the best spot to watch the parade," he chuckled. Then he plucked a yellow paper rose from the bunch wrapped around his cane and tossed it up to me---oh man, only big girls got crepe paper flowers.

Thanks, Uncle Biggy." I smiled as I stuck the rose into my pile of beads. Maybe he was being nice for yelling at me so much. He had to run to catch up with the parade that was starting to break up as the marchers reached the crowds of family and friends waiting outside the bar. From my perch I could see some of the marchers grabbing women and older girls from the crowd and dancing in the street with them. It seemed very special to get chosen like that in front of everybody.

"Hey Mickey, how are you going to get down with all those beads?" Charlie yelled from the ground. "Toss 'em down to me. I'll hold 'em for you."

"No, sirree," I shouted back. "You're not getting any of my beads."

I stuck the yellow rose between my teeth and stuffed the whole armful of beads down the front of my leotard which easily stretched to carry the load as I climbed down the fence. On the ground I started to pull out my beads so we could see who caught the most stuff, but I'd forgotten the toilet paper wads stuck in the front of my costume. One of them slipped out in a tangle of beads and fell to the ground like a crumpled white flower.

Buster spied it before I could mash it with my shoe. "Hey, what's that?" he asked, because he really didn't know.

Charlie had older sisters, though, and he knew. "Man, look at this. Mickey's got paper tits."

Even Buster started laughing when he caught on. "Paper tits," they all chanted.

I was too mad to cry and wanted to yell at them but something deep inside kept me still. Somehow I knew the best way to make them stop was to be quiet.

"Lopsided," Charlie taunted. "Mickey's got lopsided tits." Tommy laughed so hard he fell down and pulled Charlie with him. "Goddamn paper tits," Tommy gasped as they rolled around with laughter. Buster jumped on top of them shouting, too.

I stayed silent until they quit laughing and then I just walked away as slow as I could even though my cheeks were trembling. I was half way across the baseball field before I heard Buster say,

"Aw, c'mon back, Mickey. It was just a joke."

But I kept on walking away, with that stillness inside me.

CHAPTER 6: Dance With Me

I climbed up the wooden bleachers around the baseball diamond to get a better look at everybody laughing and dancing outside the barroom. The parade had broken up, but the band was still playing and having a good time. I pulled out the last of the toilet paper from my leotard to rub my eyes and blow my nose. Even though the band was spread out down in the street right in front of me, it was like the volume was turned down so low I hardly heard it.

When my eyes cleared up, I tried to find Uncle Biggy in the crowd. I wanted to see who he was going to give his flowered cane to. I hoped it might be Josie. If Josie and Uncle Biggy got to be friends, then Mama would have to be nicer to her, and it'd be easier for us to be friends.

Uncle Biggy was hard to find with all of the marchers mingled in the crowd, but I caught a glimpse of Josie swinging around to talk to somebody in back of her. Her long, dark hair swirled around like the sequined satin capes of the dancing

marchers. She was dressed like a harem girl in a gold top, her breasts poking out into sharp points. Thin, gauzy, green sleeves puffed out from shoulder to wrist, just like her ballooning, see-through green pants that seemed to be slipping off her hips. Gold bangles looped and circled her waist, shimmering as she walked.

Then I saw Uncle Biggy standing in front of the faded Dixie Beer sign painted on the outside wall of JJ's barroom. He saw Josie, too. He watched her weaving through the crowd like she was dancing across a stage. He still had his cane and looked like he might be waiting to give it to her.

Just then Josie jerked out of my view into the arms of the soldier I'd seen her with in the Ford. Sometimes they'd stay in his car for a long time until Josie'd finally come out laughing and run up the steps to her house. I figured they were kissing in his car even though I couldn't see what was going on, but I was sure surprised to see him kissing her in front of all these people. It was a long kiss, and I watched his hand move down her bare back to the bend in her waist where he pulled her closer to him. I thought she'd push away; instead, she leaned into him, then unwound her arms from his neck and leaned back, snapping her fingers in time to the music. His hand at her

waist pulled her tighter while his other hand grabbed her behind, then slipped down and pulled her leg across his thigh. They were both leaning back laughing, held together at the hips as they rocked back and forth to the beat of the music. I'd never seen this kind of dancing before, but I'd felt something like it when I listened to the radio late at night in my bed, sort of like the feeling I'd gotten climbing up the pole before I had to let go and drop down to the ground.

He ran his hand all up the side of her body, clear up one of her outstretched arms, until he had her hand in his, then they started to sway to the music so that it looked more like dancing. Their torsos moved in a slow circle until he folded their outstretched arms behind Josie's back and held her even closer, her body arched to dip and sway easily with every move he made as her legs straddled his thigh. The band slowed down the beat as the trumpeter dragged each note from his horn. People clapped to the music, circling all around Josie and her soldier. Both of them started to laugh when they realized they weren't just dancing for each other, but they didn't pull apart. He still held her close as she barely moved up and down his thigh, only now she leaned further back, slowly brushing her

breasts back and forth across his chest. Up and down, back and forth just like the beat inside the music.

I remembered Uncle Biggy standing all alone. He was still there, his flowered cane drooping down, watching Josie and her soldier dance. I felt sorry for him until I saw the way he was looking at Josie, like he had a right to be mad about what she was doing. I knew Josie wouldn't like his look; she'd laugh at him in that way she had. Mama wouldn't like the way she was dancing either, but I liked it. I wished I could dance like that in front of a big crowd of people, knowing how good I looked and having such a good time. Even though I was a good dancer, I didn't think I could do it in front of so many people, especially with Uncle Biggy or Mama there. Maybe it wouldn't matter so much when I got older, maybe then I'd be able to laugh it off like Josie.

The music was winding down when I looked back at the dancers and saw the soldier swoop Josie down real low and hold her there until the music stopped. Josie kicked one leg straight up, past his shoulder, then together they swished back up, silky smooth as the see-through costume Josie wore. The soldier loosened his hold on her waist and gave her a hug, then touched her laughing face. Everybody around them was laughing

and clapping so much, they looked a little shy. Then they all headed back to the bar while the band members started packing up their instruments. Josie went right past Uncle Biggy; she didn't even see him there.

CHAPTER 7: ASH WEDNESDAY BLUES

"I saw you dancing with your soldier on Mardi Gras," I told Josie. We were sitting on her porch swing because it was raining. Ash Wednesday was always gloomy.

"Oh yeah---what makes you think he's mine?"

I didn't know if she was teasing or mad.

"He seemed to like you a lot."

"Sure, sure. They all do till they get what they want."

"What does your soldier want?"

Josie started laughing so hard it got caught in her throat and she choked before she answered.

"The same as every guy..." then she stopped. I guess she remembered she was talking to a little kid.

"Oh, Mickey, you don't need to know about stuff like that."

But I did need to know. I wanted to know but didn't know how to find out. I wasn't even sure what question to ask.

"What kind of stuff?"

"Stuff between men and women. You're just a little girl. You don't want to know about stuff like that. You'll learn soon enough."

Her dark hair swung down like a curtain between us, shielding her face from me. Her hair seemed limp, lifeless, as if she hadn't curled it in a while.

"What do you do with your soldier in the car?"

Her hair swung back as she quickly faced me.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, you and him stay in the car for a long time when he brings you home."

Josie slumped down on the step, her hair straggling across her face again.

"Oh, Mickey, you don't know anything," she sighed.

But I wanted to tell her I'd seen her running from his car Mardi Gras night and it looked like she was crying. I wanted to make her feel better.

"Did he make you cry?"

"Oh Mickey, you don't want to know." Somehow, even though I couldn't see her face behind her hair, I could tell she was crying.

I crept closer and touched her hand.

"Sometimes Papa makes Mama cry and she talks to me about it."

"Oh, Mickey, what can a little kid like you do about it?" She patted my hand, stuck her hair behind her ear, and wiped her eyes. I was glad I'd got her to stop crying.

"What were you doing spying on me last night? Are you getting to be like your Uncle Biggy?"

I figured she was teasing about Uncle Biggy but knew I had to tell her what I saw.

We were all real tired Mardi Gras night and went to bed early. The next morning was Ash Wednesday and I had to go to Mass before school to get ashes. I didn't like having those itchy dark ashes on my forehead all day.

I didn't tell Josie I stayed awake waiting for her to come home with her soldier. They were still at the bar when we left last night but by that time Josie didn't look like she was having such a good time. Uncle Biggy had tried to dance with her but her soldier pushed him away. He fell on the floor 'cause he'd had too much to drink. Josie tried to help Uncle Biggy get up but her soldier grabbed her and pulled her off the dance floor. They sat at a table in the corner the rest of the time 'til we left. I didn't talk to her the whole time we were at JJ's bar but I was still wondering about her when we got home.

I lay in bed real quiet waiting to hear the music from her room when she finally got home. It was pretty late

when I heard some loud voices outside and snuck out of bed to see what was happening. I peeked out the front window and saw the soldier's car parked outside. The headlight's were still on like spotlights in the empty street. I couldn't tell what they were saying but the loud voices were coming from the car. It was real dark inside the car. I knew Josie was inside and I didn't like the angry sound of the voices.

"It sounded like you were having an argument," I said to Josie. "Then, after a while the car door opened and you tried to get out but he pulled you back. I heard him call you a name like "slut", then you yanked away and went running up your steps. It looked like you were crying."

I didn't tell her I'd heard her crying for a long time through the bedroom wall.

Josie didn't say much but she held my hand and listened. She didn't look mad at me but she was quiet a long time. Finally, she said,

"Mickey, I'd sure like to have a kid like you."

I wished she'd tell me what happened instead of reminding me what a little kid I was.

"Did you tell your ma he made you cry?"

Josie laughed in that hard way she had and answered,

"My ma knows. I don't have to tell her anything, she knows. Men are just like that."

She slipped her hand out of mine and lifted my chin to look at me close. For a second I thought she was going to tell me everything. Instead she just said, "I see you got ashes today. Me too." Then I saw the smudge of dark soot on her forehead. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," she said.

I twisted away from her stare but knew the subject was already changed. I angrily rubbed the dirty spot from my forehead.

Josie laughed again.

"Look what you've done. It's worse than before and ashes are all over your fingers, too."

My cracked fingernail polish and dirty fingers looked awful. I spit on my palm trying to wash the dirt away but it only made a bigger smear.

"Mickey, you're a mess," Josie said as she cleaned off my hands with the hem of her slip. "Now, no one will notice. Just go inside and wash your hands real good before supper." She smiled as she smoothed her skirt back over her soiled slip. And then she gave me a hug.

CHAPTER 8: KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL

I started hanging-out more with Gaynell and some other girls at the playground. I wasn't mad at Buster, Charlie, and Tommy anymore; I just felt more comfortable with the girls. Miss Irma was trying to get a girls' softball team started. All the neighborhood playgrounds had softball teams. "All we need to do is practice a lot," she said, trying to encourage as many girls as possible to sign-up. Right after Mardi Gras we began practicing three times a week after school. Miss Irma figured that would give us enough time to be a winning team by the time the league started in May, except she wasn't a very coach; she knew the rules but she sure didn't know how to play softball.

Miss Irma was paid by the city to take care of the playground and organize activities for kids. Her main job was taking care of stuff in the shelter house, a building open on all sides with square brick pillars holding up the dark green slate roof. In the center of the shelter house was an enclosed area where Miss Irma had an office and

stored all the board games and sports equipment. There was a smelly bathroom, too, but I never used it because boys would sneak in to spy on the girls and sometimes write dirty words on the walls. Miss Irma didn't like kids cursing in the playground but a lot of stuff went on that she didn't know about, especially in the girl's bathroom. One time, Gaynell bragged about Tommy kissing her in the bathroom then started crying when a girl said she'd seen Tommy stick his hand in Gaynell's pants. I didn't want anybody talking about me like that, so I stayed out of there.

Our softball team was lousy. Gaynell, a year older than me, was the pitcher and was pretty good, but unless she struck out everybody on the other team, we'd never win a game. Nobody could catch the ball. The other teams wouldn't even have to run around the bases, we dropped the ball so much. Miss Irma yelled at us a lot, but that didn't help.

We'd only been practising about a week, when one day Buster and Charlie showed up, I think they were trying to make up with me. "C'mon, Mickey. We'll show you how to throw," Buster said smacking a soft ball into his glove. The boys' team had a real coach and last season they even won some games. Their team used small, hard balls, instead

of the slightly bigger softballs we used in the girls' league.

"Man, I don't know how you throw these things," Charlie complained as he caught the softball Buster tossed to him. I watched his arm swing back, then zoom the ball back into Buster's glove.

"How'd you catch that with one hand?" I asked.

"Lots of practice," Buster said. "You gotta throw it back and forth a whole lot. C'mon let's try it."

The ball whizzed over to me but I still had to use my arms like a basket to catch it. Charlie laughed at me, but handed me his glove.

Buster told me, "You and Gaynell should practice together. You might be a good catcher." Gaynell was the only one who had a regular position on our team, the rest of us took turns playing the bases, and outfield. It made me feel good that Buster thought I might be good enough to play a position, too.

Mr. Dominick was sitting in the bleachers watching us. He lived across the street from the playground. His house wasn't like all the other wooden houses in the neighborhood. It was a brick two-storied house right next to the brick fire house on the corner. Together they looked like a fortress guarding the wide open space of the

playground which took up the entire city block. Usually Mr. Dominick sat on his porch on the second floor over the garage and watched everything going on at the playground. Sometimes during practice, I'd see him up on his porch, sitting in his metal glider, his starched shirt stiff and white against his dark Sicilian skin.

Miss Irma said his family came from Italy and used to have a vegetable farm on the piece of land right where the baseball diamond and bleachers were. His family used to sell their fruit and vegetables.

"That man can still grow juicy tomatoes and his fruit trees are something to see," Miss Irma told me one time after practice. "You should see the plum trees he's got in his backyard. His family had to sell their farm to the city to build the playground, but he didn't let that stop him from growing things."

It was hard to imagine a farm in our neighborhood, still I felt sorry he'd lost his land. Maybe that was why he always kept an eye on the playground.

Sometimes he'd come over to the shelter house and visit with Miss Irma while she was on the job. One day he came over to talk to her while I was climbing up the swing poles. Tommy was tossing an empty swing really hard and high, trying to get it wrapped around the crossbar.

"Tommy Schroeder, stop that right now. Your old man won't like coming over here to untangle those swings when you get through."

Tommy gave it one more shove and then quit. I slid down the pole before she yelled at me, too. I heard her telling Mr. Dominick I was Elise's girl.

"Looks just like her grandma, though," he told Miss Irma looking straight at me.

After that we'd talk every now and then but I never asked him how he knew Gramma.

I tossed the ball back to Buster, then waved at Mr. Dominick sitting in the bleachers.

"You oughta learn to pitch that ball underhand," he shouted back at me. "Show her how, Buster."

"Aw, that's the way girls play." Buster pitched the ball overhand to Charlie instead of me.

Mr. Dominick started climbing down the bleachers.

"Mickey's a girl, ain't she?"

Charlie threw the ball back to Buster.

"Yeah, and we don't play with girls," Charlie said. "C'mon, Buster."

"Okay hotshot, throw that ball over here." Mr. Dominick hitched up his pants and slightly bent his knees, ready to catch the ball. Buster laughed and threw it to

him real fast and hard. He caught the ball with one hand, just like Buster, even without a glove. "Leave those gloves, too," he told Charlie and Buster, "so I can show Mickey how to toss that ball."

I wanted Buster to show me but he and Charlie had lost interest, so I told Mr. Dominick okay. He walked out onto the dusty field in his shiny patent leather shoes tossing the softball back and forth, trying to get the heft of it.

"Underhand is easier for girls," he told me. "Especially for pitchers."

"Gaynell's the pitcher. Not me."

"Well, every softball player needs to know how to pitch. Best way to get the feel of the ball."

He held the softball lightly in both hands, then suddenly snapped his right arm back, past his hip, and zipped the ball towards me on the return. The softball thudded right into the glove I was using.

"Hey, that's good Mr. Dominick."

"I used to be a pitcher in the old days. Played on the first baseball team at this playground. Had a mean fast ball. You'll get the hang of it. Okay, throw it back."

I tried to wind up the way he'd done, but dropped the ball. Charlie and Buster laughed. Mr. Dominick made them

take turns catching the ball while he showed me how to do the wind-up right. He didn't yell at me when I made mistakes and wouldn't let Charlie and Buster laugh at me either.

"You're getting it," he told me as my pitch wobbled into Buster's hands. "That was a pretty good wind up. You kept your arm steady all the way through the release. Now you gotta pay attention to your stance."

He showed me how to step forward with my left leg as I swung my right arm back for the toss, using my left arm to balance my pitch. As my right arm forward motion released the ball, my left arm swung back. "Keep your eye on the ball," he told me. It was harder than learning to dance the two-step, but I felt that I was getting it.

"Not bad for a girl," Charlie said. He and Buster were waiting for their gloves.

"Sure wore me out," Mr. Dominick laughed. "You catch on fast, Mickey, just keep practicing."

"Can you show me more stuff," I asked him. I was already planning to show the rest of the girls what I'd learned.

"Sure, but next time I'll wear my cleats." Mr. Dominick's shoes were dull and dirty from the dust. He told us all goodbye then walked over to the bleachers, took

out a starched white handkerchief and cleaned his shoes before going across the street to his house.

The next day at practice I tried to show the girls how to wind up and throw underhanded; Gaynell said I was showing off. Miss Irma was impressed, though.

"Where'd you learn that?" she asked.

"Mr. Dominick showed me. He's going to give me more lessons, too."

"I'll be damned," she said, not even excusing herself for letting a curse word slip. "I sure didn't know Dominick could play softball."

"Don't worry," I told Gaynell. "I'll never pitch as good as you. Mr. Dominick says everybody needs to learn to throw a softball underhanded so it goes straight. That way we can tag more outs on the bases."

"Your pitch looks pretty good."

"You think so? Buster said I'd make a good catcher. Said you and I should practice throwing together."

"Yeah. I need a good catcher."

I was glad Gaynell liked the idea; she hadn't liked me at first. She was older and told dirty jokes that made all the kids laugh, I was the only one who didn't laugh. She thought I was stuck-up but I was also the only one who didn't laugh at her when the girls teased her about Tommy's

hand in her pants. After that, she'd talk to me a little and now she was willing to practice with me. Maybe I'd get a regular position on the team after all.

I told Mama how I was learning to pitch and might be the catcher on the softball team but I didn't tell her Mr. Dominick was teaching me. I remembered how mad she'd been Mardi Gras night at JJ's when he'd tried to talk to Gramma. I did tell her what Miss Irma said about Mr. Dominick's farm in the old days.

"What farm?" Mama huffed. "Dominick Caruso didn't own any farm. His family owned the property. The city gave them a good price for that land, during the Depression, too. Dominick worked out on the docks all his life. Didn't save a dime his whole life. Never owned a house until his brother died and left him the place their folks built before the war. His other brother, Tony, moved into a big house in Lakeview. Don't pay any attention to Irma's stories. She's still got her eye on him, I bet."

I wondered about old people liking each other the way Mama meant. Miss Irma sure did like talking to him but she was too old for a boyfriend. I asked Josie about it later.

"Mr. Dominick must be at least 50 or 60 years old," I told her.

"At least," Josie answered.

"No telling how old Miss Irma is, she must be almost as old as Gramma." Miss Irma was retired; she used to work in an office downtown. She said the little job at the playground helped her make ends meet.

"Mr. Dominick's still a looker, though." Josie winked at me. "And Miss Irma isn't so bad herself. Hope I look as good as her when I'm her age. Must be all the exercise she gets chasing you kids around."

"She just yells at us. The only time she stops yelling is when Mr. Dominick's around, but she's not fooling anybody, he can hear her yelling all the way over at his house."

That made Josie laugh. "Yeah, I've seen him sitting out on his porch, must be keeping an eye on her."

It wasn't often Josie agreed with Mama.

"He likes to come over and talk with us kids, too." I didn't think Mr. Dominick wanted to be anybody's boyfriend. "He's showing me how to pitch."

"Sounds like he's got his eye on you."

Josie really laughed hard when I gave her a big shove. I didn't like being teased; I was so mad I tried to push her off the front steps where we were sitting in the evening darkness.

CHAPTER 9: CROSSING OVER

A few days later, Mama caught me talking to Josie. I was supposed to be at softball practice but she said I had to mind Tyler. Although he was starting to walk, he'd stay in the playpen as long as it was on the porch but I had to keep an eye on him so he wouldn't climb out and get hurt. I really wanted to go to the playground; instead, I was stuck with Tyler. He was going round and round, hanging onto the playpen with one hand, trying to get up his nerve to scoot across to the other side.

"C'mon, Tyler," I coaxed. "C'mere."

Suddenly he gave a big grin and let go. He wobbled a bit, took off towards me but tripped over his teddy bear and crashed into the railing of the playpen. Then he started wailing.

"Mickey, pick him up," Mama shouted from back in the kitchen. "Don't make him cry."

Before I could get to him I heard Josie's screen door slam shut. She was standing by the little fence between our porches. "I'll hold him, Mickey. Hand him over."

I grabbed Tyler's chubby body, hauled him out of the playpen and into Josie's arms.

"What a cutie you are," Josie gushed. Everybody got taken in by Tyler's big black eyes that seemed to make people want to touch and hold him. Tyler grabbed Josie's nose as she nuzzled his neck.

"Watch out," I warned her. "He'll poke you in the eye."

He quieted down as soon as Josie sat in her porch swing. I worried he might wet her but figured Josie probably knew enough about babies to be careful.

"He likes you."

"Think so? I'm not used to babies. You probably know more about them than me."

It felt good to know more than Josie about something. I climbed over the fence to sit with them, Tyler laughed and tried to grab me but Josie kept her hold on him.

"He looks like your old man."

"Yeah. Everybody says that, except Gramma. She thinks we both look like her side of the family but I don't think babies look at all like grownups."

"People like to find bits and pieces of themselves in babies," Josie explained. "Even now, I don't like it when some of my old man's people say I look like him."

"Do you see them much?"

"Hardly ever. But my aunt and uncle from the country stopped in one time at Woolsworth's. Ma must've told them where I worked. They were looking for me. Said they knew I was Francis's girl soon as they saw me. Never heard anybody ever call my old man anything but Frank. Said I had his hair and eyes, even the way I moved. My aunt, Frank's sister, recognized me from the back just by the way I walked and leaned over the counter."

I always thought grownups made this stuff up.

"You look a little like your ma," Josie told me, "but mostly you sound and act like your old man."

"Some people say I look like Gramma when she was little."

Josie took her eyes off Tyler and looked closer at me.

"I can't see it," she said which made me feel better. I loved Gramma but I didn't want to look like a wrinkled old lady.

"Do you ever want to have your own kids?"

Josie looked back at Tyler before answering.

"Someday I'd love to have a little girl just like you, Mickey."

I moved a little closer to watch Tyler's long, dark lashes sink lower and lower onto his cheeks.

Maybe Tyler had been too quiet for too long. Maybe that's what made Mama come out to check on him.

"Mary Katharine, what are you doing over there? You know I don't want you over there."

Mama stood in our doorway wiping her hands on her apron, looking at me real hard.

"Oh Miss Elise, your Tyler is so cute."

But Mama wouldn't look at Josie, not even when Tyler started crying again in Josie's arms.

"You come home, right now."

The little wrought iron fence made me feel separate from Mama but I knew I had to listen. Josie calmed Tyler's startled cries as I climbed off the swing; she wouldn't put him back in my arms, though. She stood up and held him until Mama had to come to the fence to get him. Even then Mama tried not to look at her.

Tyler was really yelling when we got back in the house. He didn't like the way Mama acted either.

"I've told you over and over I don't want you at that woman's house."

Usually Mama tried not to let her anger get the best of her but I could feel it in her voice. She didn't yell like Miss Theresa but in her own quiet way she could get really mad.

"Now look what you've done, you've got Tyler all upset."

"He was okay on the swing," I told her.

Mama put Tyler in his bed before she turned and slapped me hard across my face.

"Don't you talk back to me."

My mouth hurt so much I couldn't say a thing. I wanted to get out of there before I started crying.

"Mary Katharine. Where are you going?"

I slammed the back door instead of answering and ran down our damp, narrow alley that suddenly felt so hemmed in. I unlatched the front gate and swung it wide open.

I tripped over the gnarled roots of the big oak tree next door that pushed up all the bricks out of the Delachaise's front banquette and kept on running around the corner to Miss Sarah's store.

The candy store was closed so I plopped down in the soft monkey grass growing all along the side of the

Delachaise's big house on the corner. Dr. Delachaise lived there with his old sister, Miss Dee. Doctors were supposed to be rich but Mama said he wasn't one of those kind. He was another kind that taught at college, or used to. He didn't do much anymore and nobody ever saw either of them very often. They had enough money to live in a big stucco single house, though. Not like the shotgun doubles on the rest of the block or the rowhouses with just a stoop in front where the coloreds lived.

The long strands of monkey grass were slippery and damp but I didn't care if I got wet. It didn't matter how much madder Mama got at me. I scrunched down in the mounds of grass and leaned into the pecan tree growing through the Delachaise's dilapidated fence. Their house was always cool and dark from all the trees and bushes they had growing all over, like the giant bush of pink oleanders that Gramma warned were poisoned. Nobody ever came to cut the Delachaise's bushes or clean up the leaves all over the place.

I wished I could talk to Bitsy. I didn't know who to talk to; I couldn't talk to Josie about Mama, and Papa would have to take up for her. I decided to wait and see if Bitsy would come outside. The dampness from the ground started seeping into my pants. Maybe it was the cold

dampness that made me realize I could walk across the street and knock on Bitsy's front door if I wanted to talk to her. I didn't have to listen to Mama all the time.

When I stood up, Bitsy's front door seemed closer than before; I brushed off the moist leaves and dirt and crossed the street. Her front door was almost in the middle of the eight stoops lined up in a row, on the side of each faded dark grey door was a single window. Bitsy's window was dark which made it easier to knock, maybe no one was home. The old colored man next door peeked out to see who was there before I heard Miss Sarah rattle the knob and open the door. She didn't say a word, just looked down at me.

"Hello, Miss Sarah. Is Bitsy home?"

Before she could tell me no, I heard Bitsy's voice from the other room,

"Who's that?"

"Miss Elise's girl."

"Mickey?" Bitsy squeezed in front of Miss Sarah and looked right at me.

"Hey, Bitsy."

I could tell Miss Sarah didn't like me coming over there but Bitsy didn't seem to mind.

"Miss Sarah, can I talk to Mickey?"

Her grandmother didn't say a word just turned away and left us alone. Bitsy closed the front door softly and we both sat down on her front steps.

"What're you doing here?" Bitsy sounded like she didn't like me being there either.

"Just wanted to talk."

"What's your ma going to say?"

"I don't care. That's what I wanted to tell you. I don't care what she says anymore."

Bitsy stared hard at the crumbling stucco side of the Delachaise house across the street.

"Miss Sarah also says we shouldn't play together anymore," Bitsy finally said.

"How come?"

"She says the same thing as your ma, colored kids don't need to be around white kids."

Her words settled down between us like the little wrought iron fence on my front porch. It was true---I knew it was true when I heard Bitsy say colored kids and white kids couldn't be friends.

"Why can't we be different?"

"We just can't. I've got to listen to Miss Sarah, she's all I've got."

"Well, I'm not going to listen to Mama anymore."

"What are you talking about? You're lucky your mother takes care of you."

"All she does is tell me what to do. I'm sick of it."

"I wish my Mama was here to take care of me."

I'd never even wondered about Bitsy's mother, she'd never mentioned her and Miss Sarah seemed to be all any kid needed.

"What happened to her? Did she die?"

"I don't think so. I think she lives in Chicago."

"Chicago?" I knew that was a big city at the other end of the Mississippi. "Why?"

"I don't know, Miss Sarah won't talk about her. But I know she left when I was a little baby because there's only me and Miss Sarah in all my baby pictures. I did find some pictures of my mother, though. There's one with her and Miss Sarah together, smiling like they're real happy. All Miss Sarah would say was times were different back then."

"She won't tell you why your mother left?"

"Won't say a word. Guess it's too hard to tell a kid that her own mother doesn't want her."

"Bitsy, don't say that. There must be another reason." I couldn't imagine a mother not wanting her kid, especially a kid like Bitsy. "Maybe she did die. Maybe Miss Sarah's too sad to talk about it."

"No. I found an envelope with the pictures. The letter was gone, but the return address was to Lena Carter in Chicago. The name Lena was written on the back of the photo with Miss Sarah. She even had the same last name as us. I'm smart enough to figure that one out." Bitsy looked at me as if I weren't so smart. "Miss Sarah just doesn't want to talk about it, I can tell the difference. She'll never tell me what happened."

Then I had an idea that would show Bitsy how smart I was.

"You can write to her. Find out for yourself. Send a letter to that address in Chicago."

"I did that already. My letter came back. Miss Sarah got it from the mailman. She tore it up right in front of me then wouldn't talk to me for a week."

I couldn't imagine Miss Sarah being so mean without a good reason.

"I'm sorry Bitsy."

We sat there for a while without talking until Miss Sarah opened the door,

"Time for supper, Bitsy."

Peppery thick smells came out the door. I wondered what Mama was cooking for supper tonight. Bitsy waited

until I was on the banquette before going inside. I waved but she was already gone, just Miss Sarah was waiting.

"I'll watch you cross the street," she told me. "You know your Mama don't want you crossing the street by yourself. You stay on your side of the street, you hear."

I didn't try to explain that Mama let me walk to school all by myself; I knew she wasn't really talking about me crossing the street alone.

CHAPTER 10: A HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

After my blow-up with Mama, neither one of us apologized, we just acted like it hadn't happened. Mama didn't ask where I ran off to and I didn't tell her. Recently, there'd been lots of arguments at our house, usually about money. Even though Papa worked two jobs, there still wasn't enough, and Mama really wanted to buy a house. Uncle Cecil and Aunt Reenie were looking to buy a house in one of those new subdivisions in Lake Vista; Papa said we'd never be able to afford to live out by the lake.

Last week, I'd noticed Papa looking at the new car ads in the Sunday paper and Mama saw him, too, but didn't say a word. Then last night he drove up with a new car, a sleek, four-door green Pontiac with the proud head of an Indian Chief on the hood. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it parked right in front of our house. We all ran out on the porch to get a look; Gramma and Tyler were excited too, but not Mama.

"Henry what are you thinking? We can't afford a new car."

"Oh yes we can," Papa laughed. "The man at the bank said we sure can."

Tyler almost jumped out of Mama's arms trying to grab Papa who scooped him up with one arm and with the other started untying Mama's apron.

"C'mon, we're going for a ride."

Gramma was ready and so was I but Mama pushed Papa away.

"Not me."

Papa pulled the front door shut behind Mama and held up the keys,

"Guess you'll have to sit out on the porch till we get back." The house key and new car key rattled loudly on his chain. "But I sure wish you'd come along."

Gramma nudged Mama, "C'mon. Mosquitoes will eat you alive."

I took Mama's hand, hoping she'd come with us. I sure didn't want to wait with her on the porch. She let me lead her down the steps. Tyler laughed and laughed as Papa ran ahead of us to open the passenger door for Mama. She hesitated only a moment then released my hand and slid into

the front seat. Papa got Gramma and me into the back seat and put Tyler in Gramma's lap. He winked at me and said,

"This'll be our maiden voyage. Where to?"

"Let's go to the lake." Pontchartrain lakefront was a long way from our house; you couldn't get there on the bus.

"Too far," Mama interrupted. "I've got dinner ready."

"Can't let dinner get cold," Papa said winking at me again. "We'll take a short ride to Audubon Park and drive out to the lake tomorrow night."

As soon as Papa got into the driver's seat Mama started up again. "How can you take tomorrow night off after spending all this money on a car?"

"C'mon Elise. Enjoy it. We can afford \$98.00 a month now that I'm working two jobs."

Mama stiffened deeper into the seat and turned her face away from Papa. "I was willing to put up with you working nights to save money for a house, not a car."

When Papa turned on the motor the humming vibration seemed to settle the argument. "Elise we'll get that house. Buying a car's easier. We can enjoy it while we wait for our house."

He quickly pulled away but couldn't cut Mama off. "We'll wait forever to pay off a car loan. The bank owns this car, Henry, not us."

"Damn, why do you have to spoil everything?"

There was just enough fading daylight for me to catch Mama's reflection in the window. I was sure she was crying.

Papa didn't say much till we were on St. Charles Avenue heading for the park.

"Gramma, how do you like the car?"

"I like it fine, Henry." Gramma had her window rolled down, the wind blowing her hair all over the place. She leaned towards the front seat and patted Mama's shoulder. "You'll like it, too, Elise. Just wait and see."

Mama's anger couldn't dampen Papa's happiness as he sat behind the steering wheel, the glowing Indian Chief leading us through the dark.

The next day Mama was still mad. "I'm not driving all the way out to the lakefront tonight," she complained. "Wasting all that gas, just to show off." I got out of the house fast before she decided to make me stay home, too. I raced down to the street corner to wait for Papa; before long I spied the brightly lit Indian Chief turning onto Bordeaux St. Papa honked when he saw me on the curb and slowed down so I could run along as the car pulled in front of our house.

When the headlights switched off I saw Josie's cigarette blinking back and forth as she sat in her porch swing.

"Hey, Josie. How you like our new car?"

"Man, oh man. Sure looks fine." I heard the surprise in her voice. "You must be doing okay, Mr. Henry."

"Oh, we're doing okay, I guess." Papa seemed embarrassed and pleased at the same time. Then I heard our front door slam shut and realized Mama had been standing on the porch waiting for us. Mama shrugged away when Papa tried to give her a kiss but he acted like he didn't mind.

"Evening Gramma. Ready for a ride?" She was sitting at the kitchen table with her pocket book.

"I'm ready," she said. "Let's stop for ice cream or cokes. My treat."

Mama surprised us all when she announced, "No eating and drinking in the car. I don't want it all messed up."

Gramma humphed but I was quick to answer,

"We'll take good care of it Mama, you'll see." I knew this was the beginning of a truce, Mama was giving in to the new car. Papa sensed it too.

"Tell you what Elise, let's drive out to see some of those new houses in Lake Vista." I didn't think looking at houses she couldn't buy would make Mama feel better. "And

we can stop and see that underground man at the drive-in by the lake."

The last time Gramma went for a ride with Uncle Cecil, she'd complained he wouldn't stop to see the man living underground at the Rockery Inn Drive-In restaurant. Uncle Cecil said it was just a cheap advertising trick.

"We have to eat dinner first," Mama insisted, letting us all know she was coming along, too.

After dinner, we all piled into the same seats in the car, our places already seemed like a habit.

"Don't let your brother put his feet on the seat," Mama told me, watching us through the rearview mirror like she had eyes in the back of her head. Tyler gave me a kick with his hard walking shoes when I tried to shove his feet off the seat. Gramma gave me a smack too.

"Let him alone," she grumped, holding him tighter on her lap. Gramma didn't want her looking out the window to be interrupted by Tyler squirming around. I stuck my head out the window and let the wind tangle my hair; I wanted everybody to see me riding in our brand new Pontiac. I loved the shiny green bulk of it and the gold-flecked vinyl seats, even though my sweaty legs stuck to the plastic. I hoped Buster or Gaynell would see me as we drove by the

playground, but it was empty. Maybe Mr. Dominick would spot me from his front porch.

Once we left our neighborhood, I slumped back into my seat to watch the big houses on St. Charles Avenue glide by like scenes in a movie. It was hard to imagine only one family needing all those rooms in each house. Maybe rich people needed big houses because of all the servants they had. Miss Sarah worked in one of these St. Charles mansions. Bitsy said she made a whole lot more money than when she worked for the Blanchards across the street from us.

St. Charles Avenue curved into Carrollton Avenue where the houses were big but not so fancy. I'd rather live in one of the houses on Carrollton Avenue where I could imagine sitting out on a porch swing listening to the streetcars clang by. Sometimes we took the St. Charles streetcar around the belt, the loop the trolley made from Canal Street up St. Charles to Carrollton to Tulane to Canal Street and then back again, to visit Papa's relatives that lived in mid-city. The big houses disappeared on the other side of Claiborne Avenue, instead, lots of small businesses lined the wide boulevard until we drove past the brightly lit Pelican Stadium and heard the blaring crowds at the baseball game.

"We can listen to the game," Papa said proudly as he flicked on the radio. "Forgot all about the radio. No extra charge," he assured Mama.

I didn't want to listen to all the static and droning on about the Pelican's home game, but I sure couldn't ask Papa to switch to WBZQ. Finally Mama asked him to change to another station, so we drove along listening to Teresa Brewer and Frankie Laine which didn't sound much better than the ballgame. At least the music lulled me into my own thoughts and I began to dream about driving behind the wheel blasting Poppa Stoppa's hit parade all over town.

Carrollton Avenue continued out to City Park, Bayou St. John, and eventually the lakefront. New brick and glass horizontal houses sprawled out along the lake. Mama thought these modern houses looked cold, "I like the older houses on St. Charles better." Papa said we'd never afford any of them which must have reminded Mama about their savings spent on the Pontiac, but she didn't say anything. I wondered how Papa could forget her feelings so quickly.

The roadway curved along the edge of the lake, the expensive modern homes on one side, the dark expanse of the lake on the other. Except for a very few lights from boats and buoys the lake seemed empty of all but darkness. Papa parked the car so we could stretch our legs along the

seawall ringing the lakefront. Tyler raced out of the car, tripping and falling in the grass a bunch of times before he reached the concrete steps going down into the water. I carried him down closer to the water to watch the crabs scrambling over the slimy, slippery bottom steps splashed by gentle waves.

"Don't slip," Mama warned. She and Papa sat on the top step watching us. Gramma had plopped down on a bench next to the seawall. "Close enough for me," she said.

Tyler squealed as a wave lapped over my feet, soaking my sandals.

"Shhh, Mama'll make us move."

He clapped both of his hands over his mouth to keep his laugh quiet. We were in this together. I bent down to show him the crab scurrying across the fuzzy green stuff coating the last step.

"Cwab." he repeated. He'd only seen small blue-backed crabs poking their cooked claws out of gumbo, never bustling around in their real home. I heard a splash and then another one and turned to see a man tossing out his crab nets. He squatted on the seawall to smoke his cigarette while waiting for the crabs to climb into his net. Crabbing seemed easier than fishing.

Pretty soon Gramma started smacking mosquitoes on her arms and legs.

"Time to go," Papa said, even though the mosquitoes weren't bothering us near the water. "Gramma wants to see the man underground."

"And get a coke," Gramma reminded us.

The promise of a soft drink was all that Tyler needed to coax him to climb quickly up the steps by himself and race back to the car, this time without falling down.

On the way to Rockery Inn we drove past some of the houses in Lake Vista Uncle Cecil and Aunt Reenie told us about. Lake Vista was a new development, although the homes weren't as modern or expensive as the ones on the Lakefront which had air conditioning and swimming pools. Uncle Cecil wanted a new brick house. "Looks more prosperous," he said. Most of the houses were still empty with For Sale signs on the lawns. Papa stopped in front of a two-storey red-brick house on the corner and Mama leaned out her window to get a better view.

"Cecil says that one's got three bedrooms upstairs," Papa said, leaning over to Mama's side to get a closer look. "Must be pretty small, if you ask me."

I'd be happy with the tiniest room of my own and tried to imagine looking out of one of the second-floor windows lined up on the side of the house. What would it be like to look out over the treetops? Was it possible to see the lake? If I had a room on the second floor I wouldn't put up any curtains and I'd keep the window opened all the time so the sun and the birds could come in anytime.

Mama startled me when she asked, "How'd you like to have your own room, Mickey?"

"I'd love it."

"Kids don't need a separate room," Gramma replied, even though Mama hadn't asked her. "Marsha's spoiled. Cecil gives her anything she wants. I have to sleep on the coach when I stay at their house."

"Maybe you'll have your own room at their new house," Papa said. "Three bedrooms are more than they need with only one kid."

I wondered if Papa was hoping Gramma would move in with Uncle Cecil and Aunt Reenie.

"Why'd I want to live with that stuck-up wife of his?" Gramma objected.

"You've always got a home with us," Mama told her and Papa too.

"We'll get you your own room when we buy our house," Papa replied, but I could tell Gramma didn't believe that any more than Mama did.

"I'll be dead before you get a new house," she bluntly told him.

Mama gasped and Papa laughed.

"Let's go get a coke," she said.

I watched the brick house out the rear window as we drove away. Maybe I'd get to see the view over the treetops if Marsha moved into one of those bedrooms. Mama told Papa to drive slowly past some of the other houses for sale in the neighborhood. A Catholic school was around the corner.

"Look Henry, if we lived here Mickey wouldn't have to walk far to school."

"If we lived here, she'd have to go to public school. You know we can't afford Catholic school and a new house."

The same old argument, as if Mama wanted too much.

"I like my school," I said to both of them. Even though I wanted a room of my own I didn't want anything else to change.

Gramma was impatient for her coke and Tyler was cranky.

"Okay. Next stop the drive-in. What are you going to get Elise?"

Mama always ordered a lemon coke because it settled her stomach. Gramma liked an icy cold bottle of coke with a straw. Tyler played with the ice in Mama's glass most of the time. I wasn't sure what I'd get. Papa usually got a Jax beer even though Uncle Biggy worked for Dixie Brewery.

The car crunched over the oyster shells covering the parking lot when we pulled into Rockery Inn. We had to drive through twice before we found an empty parking space.

"Pretty busy tonight," said Papa as he angled our green Pontiac between a Ford sedan on one side and a dented old Chrysler on the other. Both cars had metal trays perched on each rolled down window on the driver's side. The Ford's tray was piled high with orders of French fries and poor-boys. Fried shrimp smells drifted over to our car. Soft music was coming from the banged up Chrysler, along with some other quiet sounds.

Mama was already outside the car.

"Remember. No food or drinks in the car," she reminded us, opening the back door to take Tyler from Gramma's lap. Papa scrambled around to help Gramma out of the car.

"You all walk over and see the man underground. I'll go in and get the drinks." Besides keeping the car clean, Papa wanted to avoid tipping the carhop. He walked with us to the lit up area in front of the restaurant then went inside for our drinks. We followed the walkway leading to a concrete platform with four bright lampposts about twenty feet from the front entrance. Between the platform and Canal Boulevard were two giant searchlights, their beams crisscrossing the night sky. People all over the city could see the reflections and knew that X marked the spot where you'd find the man living underground.

I'd heard Gramma talk about him for so long I felt like I knew just what to expect but was surprised to find a line of people waiting to take a peek. Luckily Tyler was sound asleep in Mama's arms or else he'd be running all over the place. The bright lights didn't bother him at all, although I knew he'd get a kick out of the searchlights if he was awake. As we moved up the line, I saw a long glass window embedded in the concrete.

"How does he breathe?" I asked Mama but Gramma knew all the answers. She pointed to a couple of pipes sticking up from the platform.

"Fresh air comes in one of them and the other one's the toilet vent."

How did he go to the bathroom under glass? Gramma guessed what I was thinking. "He's got a toilet in the back, out of view of the public, but there's no place to bathe."

"Pee-hew!" I gagged.

"Yeah," she told me, "he's been down there three weeks already."

"What is the point?" Mama asked.

"Look at all the people coming to see him," Gramma answered, like she understood the mysteries of making money. "Great for business."

I couldn't imagine ordering anything to eat after seeing a man who hadn't bathed in three weeks.

"Who on earth would do such a thing?" Mama found the whole thing hard to believe.

"A smart businessman," Gramma told her. "He gets a cut of all the business while he's underground."

"How's he keep score," I wanted to know, "so they don't cheat him?" Gramma was pleased with my question.

"Shows you got a good head for business," she told me. Gramma always complained that nobody in our family knew how to make money except Uncle Cecil who'd do a whole lot better if Aunt Reenie didn't spend so much.

Gramma said the man underground probably had a manager who took care of his financial interests, after all, a really good businessman never had to handle his own money. When I got close enough to look down into the glass case all I saw was a thin man in an undershirt sitting at a very small table smoking a cigarette. He looked like he was trapped deep down in a tunnel, a tunnel that didn't go anywhere. He was playing cards with himself and didn't look up at us the whole time we were there. I wondered how he could ignore all the people and the bright lights but maybe that was the trick. If he paid too much attention to all of us above ground it'd make it harder for him to stay where he was.

When I took a closer look he seemed pretty contented, as if he was living a normal life in his narrow space. I noticed a shelf with a radio and put my ear to the glass but couldn't hear any sounds. I wondered what he listened to. Radio shows like "Fibber McGee & Molly" or "The Shadow Knows"? Music stations that played Patti Paige and Frank Sinatra or maybe country western music? Probably not Poppa Stoppa or Jack the Cat.

His long, bony fingers flipped the cards quickly and every now and then he flicked cigarette ash on the floor, a few planks lined up over the dirt. As we moved alongside

the glass case, I saw an army cot extending down the rest of the narrow tunnel that began to remind me more of a grave. He had very little space to move, but then where would he go? How could he sleep with everyone spying on him? I figured he probably slept after everyone left and all the lights were turned off. I wanted to stay and see if he snuck above ground after everyone went home.

Papa showed up with our drinks while I was still staring into the man's brightly lit hole. He handed me a Barq's root beer, pieces of ice sliding down the wet sides of the bottle. It reminded me how hot the man must be down there.

"How can he stand the heat?" I asked Papa.

"Oh they got big fans sucking all the stale air out of there," he told me. "Still it's gotta be baking in there during the day. Sure wouldn't want his job."

Tyler was sleeping in Papa's arms now. Mama had walked away to finish her coke off to the side. Gramma stood eyeing the man underground while she sipped her coke through a straw. Seemed like somebody ought to offer him a cold drink, but nobody did.

Mama and I put our empty drinks on the window ledge at the entrance. Papa and Gramma were still standing next to the platform getting a last look at the man underground.

Mama took my hand and we started to walk back to the car. The parking lot seemed pitch dark with the bright lights behind us and every now and then I stubbed my toe on a sharp oyster shell.

"You ask me, it's not right," Mama told me. "Letting a man live underground like that. Everybody deserves a place of their own. Some privacy."

"But Gramma says he's making a lot of money," I reminded her.

"That man's not making anything but a wage. He doesn't get any of the business profit. It's not even a steady job."

"Is Uncle Cecil a business man?"

"No," Mama replied. "But he makes a salary, a good one, working for a company."

"Does Papa make a good salary?"

Mama stopped, looked down at me and said, "Papa makes a wage, not a salary. You make more money when you get a salary."

"Can we buy a house when Papa gets a salary?" I asked.

She put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer. "Maybe. It's pretty hard to buy a house on just wages, even with two jobs. But maybe Uncle Cecil can get him a better job."

As we got closer to our car, I heard the slinky voice of Jack the Cat coming from the banged up Chrysler. I couldn't hear what he was saying but heard the guitar strum into the first notes of "Work With Me Annie", the Midnighters new song. Mama's arm slipped from my shoulder as I leaned closer to hear "Ohh, ohh, ohhh wooie," drifting out the open window and then, "let's get it while the gettin' is good." The driver was twisted around in his seat pushed up close to the girl next to him, her hand rubbing up and down the back of his neck. Mama grabbed my shoulder again and yanked me away.

"You don't need to be seeing and hearing all that," she told me as she opened the car door. I climbed into the back seat and peeked again at the couple in the car next to us. At least I wanted to hear the rest of the song but Mama rolled up both of our windows and we had to sit there sweltering in the car until Papa and Gramma finally arrived.

Papa gently placed Tyler in Gramma's lap and gave him a pat. "Let's all go home for the Mattress Ball," he smiled. "This little guy's already there."

Papa always joked about the Mattress Ball when it was time to go to bed. It made me think about the man underground sleeping on that narrow cot; I wondered how he

did it. Maybe the rich people in those mansions on St. Charles wondered how all of us lived in our shotgun house with only two bedrooms. Or maybe people were so used to how they lived that they never thought of any other way. I couldn't imagine living underground, not paying any attention to what's going on above ground, but maybe some people liked to live that way, shut off from the rest of the world. And then I realized that a lot of people were just like the man we'd watched underground, trapped where they were. Did Mama feel trapped in our neighborhood?

CHAPTER 11: SAINTS AND SINNERS

The next Saturday morning Uncle Biggy came over early and woke Papa to tell him all about the White Citizen's Council. I'd never seen Uncle Biggy so excited. He wasn't the kind that ever wanted to join anything. He'd only joined the Uptown Strutters Carnival Club because his friends from JJ's belonged, they talked him into it. Gramma thought he'd make some business contacts but Papa said the only contact Uncle Biggy'd make would be his butt on the bar stool. Papa liked to sleep late on Saturday after working the night shift all week, so he was pretty cranky when Mama told him to get up and have some coffee with Uncle Biggy. He gave me a kiss when he passed through my room on his way to the kitchen.

"Morning, Mickey. You're up early." He looked pretty sleepy in his ruffled pajama bottoms and undershirt. Mama handed him his robe but he said it was too hot. "Bad enough Biggy's dragging me out of bed."

I plopped down on my bed with my library book, if their conversation got interesting I could listen in. Ever since I was a little kid I've always liked listening to the grownups' conversations. Lately I'd been hearing a lot about Uncle Cecil and Aunt Reenie's new house in Lakeshore. Marsha even called me up to brag about her new bedroom. It was the only time she ever called me without Aunt Reenie nagging her. This time she wanted to rub it in about how big her new room was going to be. She really made me mad.

Mama felt pretty bad about Aunt Reenie getting a new house, but she tried not to show it around Papa. Once Papa got the new car Mama seemed to give up. At least she wasn't getting mad all the time, although I liked it better when she had more pep. I tried not to upset her and make her feel worse.

Gramma was sitting out on the front porch keeping an eye on Tyler in the playpen, so I had the room to myself. It wasn't often I got some peace and quiet to read. I didn't pay much attention until I heard Uncle Biggy's voice get louder,

"Henry, I'm telling you it's just what we need to put those niggers in their place. Before you know it they'll be trying to drink with us at JJ's."

"Get drunk with you all? Now who'd want to do that?" Papa thought it was funny.

"It ain't a joke. I'm telling you those niggers are getting ready to take over. They wanna go to school with our kids. Pretty soon, they're gonna be taking our jobs."

"Look Biggy, I don't see anything wrong with any man trying to better himself."

Mama looked startled. "Henry, you don't want Mickey and Tyler going to school with them, do you?" Her voice sounded sharper than I'd heard it in a while.

"Now calm down, Elise. That's not going to happen," Papa replied.

"It sure is." Uncle Biggy started to get riled. "You heard what the archbishop said about integrating the Catholic schools. They want to set an example like they did in St. Louis and let them niggers come to our schools anytime they want."

"It's true, Henry," Mama said. "You won't come to mass on Sunday, but the priest's read some letters from the pulpit about following Christ's example and loving our neighbors. They're talking about letting colored kids come to our schools even before the public schools are forced to let them in."

"Nobody's gonna put up with that crap," Uncle Biggy interrupted. "People don't want no changes. And we're gonna do something about it."

"What are you talking about?" Papa asked.

"Ever hear about Leander Perez and Elizabeth Brewster? They don't want nigger kids mixing with our kids at school, either. It's unnatural, they say. They told the archbishop too. Now the archbishop threatens to excommunicate them from the church."

"You don't mean those cranks carrying signs in front of the archdiocese?" Papa seemed really surprised.

"You better watch what you say, Henry. Perez is protecting our way of life."

"I don't see any good in keeping anybody down." Papa told Uncle Biggy.

"Henry, it's all well and good to talk about people's rights," Mama was getting mad. "But what if they come after your job?"

"Elise, don't be ridiculous. You know that won't happen."

"I tell you one thing that's gonna happen." Uncle Biggy shouted. "Some nigger kid's gonna wind up sitting next to Mickey in her classroom if we don't stop 'em now."

"Biggy, you don't know what you're talking about."

Papa sounded disgusted.

"Oh yeah? Well lemme tell you, you don't know everything." I'd never heard Uncle Biggy talk to Papa like that before. "I know a whole damn lot more than you about this. I know that Leander Perez got a new group started up. The White Citizen's Council. They're not gonna let anybody, not the archbishop or even the goddamn president tell us what to do. They're not gonna let them damn niggers push us around."

I heard a chair scrape across the kitchen floor.

"Sit down, Biggy," Papa said quietly, trying to calm him down. "No need to get so excited. Sit back down and finish your coffee."

"Excited? You damn right I'm excited. It's about time we showed them niggers who's boss. I've already joined up. That's why I came over. To tell you about it. Figured you'd join up, too."

"Biggy, you're not going to get in any trouble, are you?" Mama sounded worried now.

"Trouble? I'm sure as hell gonna make as much trouble as I goddamned can for any smart assed nigger who thinks he's gonna tell me what to do. Or any goddamned nigger-lover, for that matter. And you? Henry, what're you gonna

do? You gonna let Mickey go to school with some goddamn black coons?"

I heard a chair tip over. It must've been Papa standing up to tell Uncle Biggy, "That's enough. I don't want to hear that in my house. Whatever you do is your business. But I don't want to hear you talking like that in my house ever again."

"Henry, he didn't mean anything by it. Biggy's just excited..."

"You damn right I am, Elise," Uncle Biggy said. "And disappointed, too. Disappointed in Henry. Talk some sense into him, Elise. Make him join up."

Mama didn't say a word. Papa didn't either. The next thing I heard was the back door slam shut and Uncle Biggy going out the alley. I opened my book real quick so I'd look like I'd been reading but Mama and Papa didn't even notice me as they hurried through my room.

"I'm going back to bed, Elise. Keep the kids quiet for a while."

Mama followed Papa into their bedroom but I gave up trying to listen. Even though their voices were low it sounded like an argument.

I started hearing a lot of people talking about this new White Citizens Council. I even saw a picture of Leander Perez in the newspaper. He looked like any business man except for his eyes that blazed off the page at you and his messy white hair, as if he'd just taken off his hat. He and Mrs. Elizabeth Brewster were sure causing a ruckus with the church. Mr. Dominick and Miss Irma were talking about it at the playground.

"I used to know her, when I worked for the city," Miss Irma said. "She worked for some lawyers in the same building. Not too friendly, if you know what I mean, but hard working. She worked her way up from receptionist to assistant to the head lawyer."

"Maybe one of them lawyers put her up to it," replied Mr. Dominick.

"You know, I never thought of that. Maybe so. Can you make money suing the Church?"

"Lawyers always know how to make money," he answered. "Isn't Perez a lawyer?"

"Yeah, you're right. He owns most of Ascension Parish, too, and controls all the parish politics. My cousin lives in Grand Coupe, the biggest town in the parish, he says Perez runs everything. You can't get a job without his okay."

Mr. Dominick shook his head. "Maybe he pushes people around in his neck of the woods but he sure can't get away with that stuff in the city. The Archdiocese of New Orleans includes his little half-assed town, you know. He's going to have to buckle under to the archbishop, just wait and see."

I'd seen some news photos of people blocking the great circular drive up to the Archbishop's residence at Notre Dame Seminary. Mrs. Brewster, wearing a funny little hat with a veil, a dark flowered dress with a broach, and white gloves, clutched a picket sign that read "The Archbishop Breaks God's Law". I didn't understand how these people could criticize the head of the Church. In school we were taught that even grownups had to obey the priests, God's representatives. Somehow priests knew what God wanted, maybe because they prayed so much. It was a sin if you didn't do what the priests told you to do, but when you went to confession the priest forgave you. Just asking God for forgiveness wouldn't work, you had to tell your sins to the priest then he'd give you absolution and penance.

In the second grade Sister Sabina taught us all about sin along with addition, subtraction and penmanship. I knew the names of all the sins and all the answers in the Catechism. Pulling back the heavy curtain and stepping

into the carved wooden confessional box felt like entering into a secret place where only whispers were allowed. The hardest part of confession was coming up with enough sins, but I always felt better after the priest mumbled absolution and rattled off the number of 'Hail Marys' and 'Our Fathers' I had to say. Once the priest slid the panel shut, the spell was broken and I had to return to the real world to say my penance.

All during second grade we prepared to make our first confessions and receive communion. I remember deciding to be a saint when I made my First Communion. I'd go to mass and communion every day, that seemed like a good way to improve my chances for sainthood. Getting up early for mass was a big penance for me, I hated dragging myself from my warm, snuggly bed into the early morning darkness but doing without breakfast didn't bother me. I couldn't break my fast until after receiving Communion.

Mama thought going without breakfast was a terrible idea. "You need food that sticks to your ribs until lunchtime," she'd fuss.

I didn't mind waiting until after mass to have breakfast at the bakery where I'd buy glazed donuts and a cold coke from the machine. Licking the sugar stickiness from my fingers tasted divine. Mama didn't like me eating

too much sugar, but she didn't want to interfere with my desire to be a saint. So I kept going to mass almost every day until fourth grade.

I'm not sure exactly when I stopped but I remember beginning to wonder if God was listening to my prayers. I started to make deals with God, asking for small miracles, something to show He heard my prayers. The vast, high arches of St. Stephen's Church curved overhead supported by tall, thick columns banded in faded colors of rose and light brown. On each column a small fan swiveled back and forth cooling the parishioners kneeling in the pews, the breeze gently lifting the scalloped edges of circular veils or scarves draped over women's heads.

The fans were only turned on in hot weather. A few times, during the winter, I'd asked God for a sign. I'd kneel, my eyes fixed on the fan, waiting to see the blades turn by themselves. It would only have taken one or two turns to convince me God was listening, but it never happened.

Finally, I figured God had more important things to do than pay attention to a little kid's prayers, so I decided to ask His mother, The Blessed Virgin Mary, to talk to God for me. That way I could stay in bed later in the morning instead of going to mass to talk to God in person. Sister

Sabina had told us the saints would intervene for us, but I'd wanted to have a more direct connection with God. After waiting in vain for the fans to spin, I decided being a saint might not be necessary, besides God would probably listen more to his own Blessed Mother. And being a mother I knew it'd be okay with her if I prayed from my own bed and ate a hot breakfast at home, although I did miss the sweet tastes and smells at the bakery every morning after mass.

Even though I'd given up on being a saint I still obeyed the Church and I worried about Papa who didn't go to Mass on Sunday. "But Papa, it's a mortal sin to miss mass," I pleaded with him many times. He always answered that God wouldn't hold it against a tired working man who worked two jobs and had to get up early five days a week. His argument made sense but I still prayed extra for his soul, just in case.

Sometimes Gramma came to Mass with Mama and me, but lately she'd been staying home because she didn't feel well. It wasn't a mortal sin to miss Mass because of sickness. One time Gramma almost fainted in church when the priest came down the aisle swinging holy smoke from a silver container; it made me cough, too. The scary part was when we got outside, Gramma didn't know where she was.

She started asking for her mother, like she was lost or something. She hadn't been back to church since then, but this Sunday she insisted on coming to Mass with Mama and me, said she wanted to hear about that letter from the archbishop.

Mama always took me to the children's mass on Sunday. I'd line up with the rest of my class in the school yard and we'd file into church together. My fifth grade sat in the center of the church, girls on one side of the aisle, boys on the other. The little kids sat in front near the altar and the eighth graders filled up the back pews. I twisted around and found Mama and Gramma sitting in a side pew near my class. Gramma winked at me. I think Uncle Biggy must have told her about the White Citizen's Council.

After Uncle Biggy and Papa had their blow-up, Gramma told me Mr. Perez was a saint. "Biggy's right. If it was God's will for black and white to live together He'd of made us all the same color. Mr. Perez knows what he's doing, he's sticking to God's plan. I wouldn't mind carrying some of them picket signs."

Gramma'd never taken a geography class so she didn't know about people looking different in all the different places in the world. It seemed like that must've been part of God's plan, too. Bitsy said the colored people never

asked to come here. She said she'd rather be in Africa instead of listening to ignorant white people like Mr. Perez. I didn't blame her for feeling that way. I told Bitsy what Papa said to Uncle Biggy.

"Your daddy means well," Bitsy replied. "But white people want to keep us down. Miss Sarah says that's just the way it is. She says it'll always be like that."

"Not me. I don't want to keep you down, Bitsy."

"There isn't anything you can do about it, Mickey. You or your daddy."

When I was a little girl I thought my Papa was always right, even when he argued with Mama, as I got older I realized he made mistakes, but I wanted him to be right this time. I didn't think it was right to keep people down, either. Bitsy and I were talking outside the candy store; Gramma had given me a quarter to buy some Tootsie Rolls and Hershey bars. I couldn't imagine Gramma really wanting to keep Bitsy or Miss Sarah down. "I think some people just don't want us mixing," I told Bitsy. "They don't really want to keep you down."

Bitsy laughed hard at that one. "Don't you see that's exactly what keeps us down? Not mixing means I can't read the same books you do because I can't go to your library or your school or your movie house or do any of things you do

everyday." She pulled the rickety glass door open but didn't go inside right away, she stood in the doorway while the bell tacked to the door jingled overhead. "You don't understand because you're white." Then she slammed the door shut. Standing outside on the banquette, I could still hear the bell's racket as it banged back and forth. I wished I hadn't said all that stuff to make her mad. The only times we ever got to talk was when I came to the candy store. I'd never thought about how easy it was for me to come to Aunt Sarah's store to talk to Bitsy even though we weren't supposed to play together anymore, but how impossible it was for Bitsy to walk around the corner to my house.

Bitsy couldn't come to St. Stephen's for mass, either, unless she sat in the back of church. I wondered what God thought about me and Bitsy having to go to different churches.

When I heard the priest talking about the archbishop's letter, I turned around to make sure Gramma was listening. Sometimes she fell asleep in church, but her eyes were wide awake, she was even leaning forward so she could hear better. I couldn't follow most of what the priest was saying but I knew I'd hear all about it from Mama and Gramma.

Uncle Cecil came to pick us up after church. He was taking Gramma for a ride and Sunday dinner at his house. His two-toned Buick was parked at the curb. Mama thought the red and white colors were flashy but I thought it looked great gleaming in the sun. I just wished he'd parked in the shade so it wouldn't be so hot in the back seat. Soon as the car pulled away, I rolled down my window to cool-off. [flower smells, time of year?, spring?]

Right away Gramma started telling Uncle Cecil all about the archbishop's letter. "He's trying to tell us our kids have to go to school with coloreds. Can you imagine that?"

"Well, it won't happen. Perez is going to put a stop to it." Uncle Cecil sounded like he knew all about it. He looked in the rearview mirror to talk to Mama, sitting in the back seat with me. "Biggy told me he tried to talk to Henry. He needs to join the Council, Elise. Talk to him. Lots of important people are joining up."

Mama twisted the strap of her handbag propped on her lap. She looked out the window rather than at Uncle Cecil's eyes in the mirror. "It won't do much good. Henry doesn't listen to me."

I knew that wasn't true, except about the car.

Uncle Cecil switched back to watching the road but kept on talking to Mama. "My boss has joined up. Offered me a supervisor's job after he saw me at the last meeting. Bet there'd be some opportunities for Henry."

"Cecil's right," Gramma chimed in. "He'd make some good business contacts."

Uncle Cecil looked back in the mirror and winked at Mama. "You never know."

This time Mama looked directly into the reflection of Uncle Cecil's eyes. "You talk to him, Cecil. Maybe he'll listen to you."

I couldn't see his eyes in the mirror anymore when he answered, "I'll talk to Irene. Maybe you all can come over for dinner next week. I'll try to talk to him then."

I rolled my window back up when we got out of the car at our house and then ran around to Gramma's side to give her a kiss before she drove off with Uncle Cecil.

Papa agreed to go see Uncle Cecil's and Aunt Reenie's new house the following Sunday and picked us up after church. Mama looked very pretty in a frilly blouse and straight skirt. Papa whistled as she got into the car. Tyler was bouncing all around in his car seat, he wanted to sit in Mama's lap but she didn't want to get mussed up.

Papa lifted him over the front seat to Gramma, "C'mon, Tyler. I don't have to worry about looking pretty. Too old for all that." He grabbed my scarf and pulled it off my head. Gramma yanked him back into her lap while I distracted him with a game of peek-a-boo behind my scarf. He was asleep by the time we got to their new house.

It was the one on the corner that we'd looked at that night in our new car. It looked different in the daylight, or maybe it was the scrawny azalea bushes Uncle Cecil has planted.

"I'm going to put in a lawn next week," he told us. "Bermuda grass. The best. Got a new power mower, too."

"You're sure going to need it," Papa said looking down the side of the house and into the big backyard. There was a garage with a driveway off the side street and a carport it and the house. I saw Marsha sitting in a lawn chair on the carport.

"Hey Mickey. Come back here and get a coke."

I left the grown-ups talking about landscaping and plopped down on a chair next to Marsha.

"You can go in the garage and get a coke," she told me.

"The garage?"

She laughed at me. "Sure. Mother put our old refrigerator out here to keep soft drinks in and Daddy's beer."

Even though my throat was parched, I didn't want any of her old cokes, so I just sat there until she stopped laughing.

"This is where I'm gonna have my party," she continued. "In May, when I graduate from eighth grade. Don't you think this'll be a great place for a party?"

"Sure." Marsha was going to force me to have a conversation with her.

"I'm going to decorate the carport in school colors. Isn't this a great floor for dancing?" She jumped up and slid across the slick cement floor. "We'll put the food and drinks in the garage, and if it rains we can dance in there. Let's go up to my room," Marsha said pulling me out of my chair. "I want to show you my new stereo."

Marsha tried to rush me up the stairs but first we had to tell all the grown-up hello and give them kisses. Everybody was in the big kitchen, Aunt Reenie had the door opened to the biggest refrigerator I'd ever seen. It overflowed with food, cold air came rolling out of it like waves.

"Don't let all the cold air out," warned Uncle Cecil. "You're making Public Service rich." Marsha and I snuck away while they all laughed. The hallway and stairs were carpeted. No one could hear us running up to Marsha's room.

Marsha didn't like it that I wasn't interested in her stereo. The first thing I wanted to see was the view from her window, but she had the blinds closed. Without asking I pulled the blinds open but was disappointed that I could only see as far as the house across the street which was a two-story exactly like theirs.

"Hey, shut those blinds," Marsha shouted at me. "I don't want those nosy neighbors minding my business." The blinds slid back into place as Marsha turned up the music and I heard the Fontane Sisters singing "Hearts of Stone" all over the room.

"Stereo. Two speakers." Marsha shouted even louder over the music booming off the pink stucco walls of her bedroom. Thankfully Aunt Reenie yelled at her to lower it. I wished she'd told Marsha to turn it off. I couldn't stand the Fontane Sisters singing this song.

"Don't you just love it?" Marsha gushed.

"Not really." I loved putting Marsha's music down. "Have you heard The Charms sing that song?"

Marsha was starting to sulk already. "The Charms? Never heard of them."

"Don't you ever listen to the Poppa Stoppa show? He plays "Hearts of Stone" by the Charms all the time. It's much better than this one." I decided to make her feel better by saying something about her stereo. "The bass on the Charms's song would sound great in stereo. Maybe I'll bring it over the next time I come." I didn't own any records but maybe Josie could get me one from Woolsworth's. I didn't know where I'd get the money to buy it, then I remembered something I could give Marsha for free.

"Where's your radio?"

"I'd rather listen to my stereo." Marsha got very snotty when she was mad. "Yeah. Well, you can't listen to the Charms on your stereo. C'mon, I'll show you how to get Poppa Stoppa on your radio."

"Poppa Stoppa? That's a colored station, isn't it?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. I knew she was worried Aunt Reenie would catch us.

"Don't worry. We'll play the radio real low. They won't hear us." I was already spinning the dial trying to find WBQZ. Marsha turned off her stereo, then sat next to me on her bed. I found the station but there was gospel music rather than rhythm and blues playing.

"Heck, I forgot. Poppa Stoppa isn't on the radio Sundays. But this is the place, right here on your dial."

"Daddy'll kill me if he catches me listening to colored music." For a split second Marsha looked scared, then she switched back to her stuck-up ways. "Besides I don't like all that hollering and shouting"

"Rhythm and blues isn't like gospel music," I tried to explain to her, "but it's got some of that rhythm. It's the rhythm that matters. Real dancing music."

"I heard some of the kids at school talking about rhythm and blues," Marsha was looking at me a little differently now. "The kids who listen to that kind of music are pretty fast. I don't know if it's a good idea."

I knew I'd gone up in her estimation by knowing so much about something she'd only heard about. "Tell you what, I'll show you where Jack the Cat's station is and you can listen to his show late tonight when everybody's sleeping. I listen every night." Man, did that surprise Marsha. I switched the dial to the station for Jack the Cat then turned the radio off.

"Okay, girls," Aunt Reenie called up the stairs, "dinner's ready."

I'd never seen Marsha so speechless. I answered that we'd be right down. She followed me down the stairs as if

I was the one who knew my way around the house. I just followed the voices and led her into the dining room. Every body was seated around a table that seemed too large for the room. Papa's end of the table jutted into the living room. Mama was on one side of him and I sat in the empty chair on the other side of him. I couldn't help thinking that at our house Mama and Papa slept in the dining room. It seemed a little wasteful to have a whole room you only used once in a while for big meals. Mama looked uncomfortable, maybe because Gramma was talking so loud to Uncle Cecil about the White Citizen's Council. She interrupted Gramma, "Let's not discuss politics at the table. It's not polite."

"Don't worry Elise. We're all family. We understand each other." Uncle Cecil was slicing the roast, not looking at Mama, when he replied.

Aunt Reenie gave Mama a quick look that I couldn't figure out. Did she want Mama to keep quiet or was she encouraging her? I knew Aunt Reenie hated discussions of any kind at the table, she liked conversations. I waited for Papa to say something, he usually made a joke to get every body back in a good mood, but he was silent. Mama stopped talking, too, so Aunt Reenie had to change the subject, "I hope this roast is tasty. I got it at the new

supermarket on Canal Boulevard." She got the whole table talking about food while we served ourselves mashed potatoes and green peas with tiny onions mixed in. Uncle Cecil piled roast on everyone's plate.

"Ummm, this gravy smells delicious," said Mama, passing the gravy boat to Gramma.

"I'm so glad you like it," Aunt Reenie smiled gratefully at Mama. "It's so easy. You just open a can..."

Mama never opened a can. She made her gravies from a roux---she'd scrape the burnt stuff in the pan, add some flour until it browned and then add dribs and drabs of water until the gravy looked just right. She didn't even like to use canned vegetables and when she did she added flavors so you'd never get that taste from the can. I put a little gravy on the side of my plate after I heard it came from a can.

Papa was being very quiet. He must have known Uncle Cecil wanted to talk to him about something. I wondered if he knew it was the White Citizen's Council. When Uncle Cecil had heard enough talk about food and had enough to eat, he took another swallow of wine, then started to talk to Papa.

You know Henry, I'm moving up in the company."

Papa nodded. "Good news, Cecil. Congratulations."

"Makes more room for new employees. You know I'd recommend you if you wanted to transfer over to my company."

"That's very kind of you, Cecil."

"It's a great place to work. Good salary, lots of chances for advancement. Hell, we even get health benefits. And you know how high doctors' bills can be." Uncle Cecil didn't leave much space for Papa to say anything. He went on and on talking about his job and how much his boss liked him. Finally, he said, "You should join up. It'd be a smart move."

Papa gave Mama a knowing look, then answered. "I've been thinking about it Cecil. It's probably time to make a change." Mama quickly looked up at Papa and smiled. "Elise and I've been talking," he went on, "and I know she'd like me to get a better paying job. If you think this is a good time, I'd like to apply for one of those jobs. How do I get an application?"

Uncle Cecil leaned across the table and smiled broadly at Papa, "Henry you don't need an application. Just sign up, then I'll introduce you to my boss at one of the meetings. We can work something out then."

Papa was puzzled. "Meeting?"

"Sure. Come with me and Biggy to the next Council meeting. I'll introduce you to my boss and see what we can work out."

Papa looked at Mama then back to Uncle Cecil. "You mean the White Citizen's Council?"

"Sure. Come on and join up. Lot's of good business contacts in the Council. How do you think I got my promotion?"

"Cecil, I don't give a damn how you got promoted. That's your business. But I don't want to have anything to do with the White Citizens Council. That's the kind of business I want to stay clear of."

Uncle Cecil sat back in his chair, surprised. Mama grabbed Papa's arm, "Henry you don't mean that. Apologize to Cecil."

"Elise, I do mean it. There's nothing to apologize about." Papa answered sternly.

Aunt Reenie was clearing her throat and glancing back and forth between Uncle Cecil and Papa. Uncle Cecil tossed his crumpled napkin into his dirty plate, and in a tight voice said to Papa, "Henry I think you do owe me an apology. Insulting me like that in my own home after I just offered you a job."

"Cecil, let's get this straight. You don't have a job to offer. You're telling me to kiss ass with your boss and maybe I'll get a job. No thanks." Papa pushed his plate back and turned to Aunt Reenie, "Thank you for another delicious meal, Irene. I think it's time for us to go." Then he turned to Mama, "Elise it's time to leave."

Mama's fingers had been smoothing out the table cloth over and over but now she clenched her fist tightly. "Henry. You can't do this. You can't pass up an opportunity like this to meet some quality people. We might not get another chance like this."

"Elise, this isn't an opportunity, it's a bad gamble. We make out okay on my salary."

Mama banged her fist on the table. "We don't. No, we don't. How will we ever buy a new house. . .?" She turned to Uncle Cecil. "Talk to him. Make him understand."

Uncle Cecil looked disgusted as he stood up to answer Mama, "Elise. Henry doesn't want to better himself. He must like living in that neighborhood with all the niggers."

Aunt Reenie gasped, she knew things were getting out of hand. Gramma had been shocked into silence but found her voice to add, "Niggers and white trash. That's all

we've got in our neighborhood. Henry, you should be ashamed of yourself."

Papa stood up, too. "Cecil I appreciate your concern but I'll take care of my family and decide where we'll live. Now, Elise, Gramma, and Mickey it's time to go home."

Tyler had slept all through dinner and was now wide awake and hungry. I grabbed a dinner roll to keep him quiet in the car and tried not to look at Marsha as we filed out of their dining room. By the time we got to the car Mama was sobbing and she kept it up all the way home.

CHAPTER 12: BLOOD OF THE LAMB

The night it all happened was hot. The big window fan thunked away in the kitchen sucking in a little breeze that puffed up the curtains and drifted over the edge of my bed. I was kicking off the tangled, sweaty sheet and rolling over to the coolness when I heard the phone ring. Mama fumbled with the phone in the hallway between our rooms. Maybe it was Papa. Maybe there was trouble. Her voice was muffled and then silent as she listened to the voice on the other end.

"But I can't drive. Henry's working tonight. How can I take you to the hospital?"

Papa left our new car at home on the nights when he got a ride with a man from work. He'd been after Mama to get her driver's license but she was too nervous to try, said she was too old to learn. I wished I could drive our brand new green Pontiac, it felt big and safe to me. I was so proud riding in it.

I listened closer to Mama on the phone when I heard Miss Theresa's name. "All right, Miss Theresa, all right. I'll call Biggy."

Why did she have to go to the hospital? What was wrong? I listened to Mama dialing a number.

"Biggy? It's Elise. Yes, yes I know it's late. . . No, no, nothing's wrong here. It's Josie. She's hemorrhaging. She needs to go to the hospital. Can you come over?"

Josie was hurt. I sat up and pressed my ear to the wall, trying to hear what was happening on Josie's side. I thought I heard soft crying or maybe it was breathing or maybe it was nothing at all. I did hear the phone ring on their side and heard my Mama tell Miss Theresa to cover Josie up real good and that Uncle Biggy would drive them to the hospital.

What was happening to Josie? Mama hadn't noticed I was awake so I crept to her doorway and watched her quickly put on a house dress and shoes. She saw me in the shadows,

"Mickey, you need to take care of Gramma and Tyler while I'm gone. Do you hear?"

She seemed glad I was there instead of mad that I was up in the middle of the night.

"What's wrong, Mama?"

"Josie's real sick. We have to take her to the hospital."

"But what's wrong?"

"Stop asking questions. Just do what I say."

She opened the front door as soon as she heard Uncle Biggy's delivery truck pull up. He looked scared standing in the yellow spot of the porch light Mama always kept burning on the nights Papa worked.

"Here's the keys. Take our car to drive her to the hospital."

Uncle Biggy didn't answer, just took the keys and stood there. Mama kind of pushed him back out the door and said,

"Go next door. She probably needs to be carried to the car."

The screen door slammed as Mama followed Uncle Biggy, so I pushed it open again to see what was happening. Uncle Biggy was climbing over the little fence between our porches. Miss Theresa stood in her doorway; I could see she was crying.

"Biggy'll put her in the car," Mama told Miss Theresa, taking charge of things. "Wrap her up in lots of blankets." Then Mama climbed over the fence too and stood in their doorway telling Uncle Biggy what to do. "Be careful picking her up."

I heard a moan, a painful moan, from inside Josie's house. I could tell it was Josie. I was climbing over the fence when Mama saw me.

"Mickey, you stay on our side," she warned me. "I don't want you over here."

I slid back down onto our porch but stayed there to watch a bundle of blankets come through the door. Uncle Biggy was carrying Josie inside all the covers. His eyes were more scared than before.

"Elise, there's so much blood..."

"Put her in the back seat," Mama told him. "Go get some towels and the covers off my bed," she told me.

I grabbed towels and bunched up all the covers. By the time I got back to the porch they were all by the car. I dragged my bundle down the steps and to the car as fast as I could. Mama opened the back door and started laying the towels and sheets all over the back seat. I saw Josie's face, white as the sheets wrapped all around her; it was all I could see of her in Uncle Biggy's arms but I saw the blood when he lifted her into the car. I saw the blood seeping from the bundle and dripping onto his arms. All I could think of was the blood all over Mama's clean back seat. Then I started crying.

"Josie. Josie."

My arms were empty of all the covers. I just stood there watching Miss Theresa climb into the back seat so she could cradle Josie's head as Uncle Biggy put her in the car. Mama was shoving the last towel up under the bundle of Josie while Uncle Biggy tried to close the back door. He pulled the car keys from his pocket. "You gotta come, Elise. I don't know what to do."

Mama got in the front seat while Uncle Biggy ran to the driver's side. She rolled down the window and told me very quietly, "Go back inside and take care of Gramma and Tyler. I'll call Papa to come home soon."

Mama was crying too.

I sat in the big chair in the front room waiting for Papa. Gramma and Tyler were still sleeping. The house was so quiet. Finally I heard a car stop out front and Papa's footsteps coming up the steps. I wanted him to tell me what was happening.

He stood in the doorway and explained,

"Josie's in the hospital now. They'll take care of her. Mama's coming home soon."

"Is Josie still bleeding?"

"I. . .I don't know."

"She was bleeding Papa. Who hurt her? Did her soldier hurt her?"

Papa closed his eyes like he didn't want to see the blood.

"I don't know. I just don't know."

It was daylight when Mama and Uncle Biggy came home. They tiptoed through my room to the kitchen; I let them think I was asleep. Papa already had some coffee made.

"You okay, Elise?" he asked, but I couldn't hear her reply.

"What happened?"

Uncle Biggy said the hospital was too bright with too many people.

"Everybody running around and me just standing there holding her not even knowing if she was still breathing. They put her on a cart and wheeled her away asking me so many questions I had to run to keep up with them.

I told them I didn't know nothing, they had to talk to her maw. When I went to get Miss Theresa she was just standing there, just like I left her. Elise was answering all the questions at the desk, telling them Josie's name, where she lived, all of that stuff.

Then a doctor I guess, a guy in a white coat, came over to talk to Miss Theresa. I heard him ask about a abortion. . ."

"I heard it too," Mama interrupted. "I didn't want any trouble. I didn't want to get mixed up in all that, but she told him before I could say a word."

"An abortion?" Papa asked. "She told him Josie had an abortion?"

"She had to," Uncle Biggy answered. "She had to tell the truth, Josie was bleeding to death."

"What if it's in the papers?" Mama asked, worried and scared.

"Did you give your name, Elise?"

"No, no. I kept quiet after that."

"They might have my name," Uncle Biggy admitted. "Miss Theresa told the doctor I didn't have nothing to do with it, that I just drove them to the hospital. I heard her say to the doctor, 'Biggy just helped us out.'"

"No last name, though?" Papa asked.

"I. . . I don't think so."

"Was there a police report?"

"We don't know," Mama said. "We left before any police came. I hated leaving Miss Theresa there alone but she understood. She was thankful we took her."

"If this gets in the papers, there'll be trouble." It wasn't often Papa sounded worried, he let Mama do all the worrying. "Do you think they got our license number?"

"Oh god, I didn't think about that." Mama was crying now. "There's blood all over the back seat," she sobbed. "Henry I'm sorry, so sorry."

"It's okay. You did what needed to be done."

Uncle Biggy's voice sounded worried too. "What else could we do? She had to get to the hospital. Henry, I couldn't take my truck. We had to take your car."

"I know. It's okay, Biggy. I just hope the police don't trace us. We can't afford to get involved. The D.A.'s cracking

down on this abortion racket. I read the other day a couple of midwives were arrested after some girl died at Charity hospital."

Mama started crying again. "Where else could we take her, Henry?"

"I know. I know. That's the trouble. It's the only place to go when they've botched the job. The doctor's have to report it, especially when there's a death."

"You don't think Josie's gonna die?" Biggy asked. "Elise, she's not gonna die, is she?"

"How do I know?" Mama was beginning to sound more mad than sad. "You saw all the blood. What was Miss Theresa thinking, letting her get an abortion? What the hell was she thinking?"

"Maybe she didn't know," Biggy answered.

"She had to know. Where else would Josie get the money?"

A strange silence filled up the kitchen.

"Biggy, what do you know about this? Answer me."

"She needed help, Elise. She needed some money. I thought I could help her."

I felt Mama's hand slam down on the enamel tabletop as if she'd smacked my mattress.

"No. Biggy don't tell me you were part of this."

"I only gave her some money, Elise. She needed help."

"Oh my god. Oh my god. Henry what are we going to do?"

We were all waiting to hear what Papa had to say.

"Biggy you better tell us what happened. Take your time but tell us exactly what happened."

I inched down to the foot of my bed, closer to the door, so I'd hear every word. I wasn't surprised that Uncle Biggy wanted to help Josie but it was hard to believe that she'd let him. She must've been in a lot of trouble. Uncle Biggy cleared his throat a couple of times before starting to tell his story.

"I saw Josie at JJ's a couple weeks ago, at the far end of the bar. I'd never seen her there alone. I watched her a while to make sure her guy wasn't around. She laughed when I sat down, but it was bitter. I asked about her boyfriend; she said she didn't know where he was and didn't care.

"Last time I'd seen the two of them no light was coming between them. You saw how they were carrying on Mardi Gras at JJ's. Josie sure didn't have no shame when she was with that guy. I knew he wasn't going to stick around. Thought Josie was smart enough to know that, too. She said they'd had a fight.

"I ordered a couple of beers but Josie wanted a Jack Daniels. JJ gave me the eye when I ordered; he was worried about adding it to my tab, but I'd just cashed my check and had enough on me. I put a five on the bar and told him to make it two Black Labels. Josie looked bad. She had dark circles under

her eyes and her hair pulled back in a rubber band. She looked like somebody'd skinned the life out of her.

"After her first swallow, she told me, 'You're okay, Biggy.' I didn't want her mocking me, but she was just looking at me the way anybody does when they want to talk. I asked her if it was really all over between the two of them and she said it sure was. She told me he was like all the rest, that men don't stick around. I told her I'd stick around. It must have been the whiskey. I never drink whiskey. Only Dixie beer. I don't know why else I told her that. When she turned away, I barely heard her say that I was too nice. 'You mean too fat,' I told her. I wanted to make her laugh, to make her forget what I'd said. But she looked right at me and said she really meant it. Then she turned bitter again and said she was in trouble. 'A woman in trouble is too much trouble for any man,' she told me. I asked her what kind of trouble, but I knew before she told me. Women like Josie are bound to get in trouble. She said she was pregnant and all alone, just like her maw."

Mama butted-in at that point and said, "I told you Henry. I always knew Josie was no good."

"Elise, let Biggy finish," Papa answered. "How about another cup of coffee, Biggy?"

I heard Uncle Biggy stir some sugar in his coffee then he went on telling them what happened.

"Josie finished her whiskey and I motioned for another round. I knew I had to go easy with that second shot, but Josie really needed it. I warned her not to get too drunk but she wanted to get drunk, maybe then she could get rid of it. She said she had to get rid of it.

"I didn't want to hear no more. I told her she was crazy to talk like that; but she said no, she was crazy to get into this mess, now she had to get out of it. She said all it took was some money, liquor wouldn't do it, but money would.

"She was really serious and it scared the shit out of me. I remembered that girl in the papers who died from a bad abortion. I didn't want nothing bad to happen to Josie. Then she said she'd be better off dead than alone with a kid to raise."

Uncle Biggy stopped talking for a moment. I was sure they'd heard my heart beating, and knew I was listening. But, Uncle Biggy was drinking his coffee before it got cold. His cup clinked when he put it back in the saucer, and then he went on talking.

"Josie was pretty drunk. I tried to help her off the stool, but she yanked away and said she'd do it herself. She managed to walk a straight line to the door and was standing out on the banquette when I got there. She was still talking crazy, saying she could do it herself.

"I steered her over to my truck and into the passenger side. She grabbed my arm as I got into the driver's seat and begged me to buy her a bottle of Jack Daniels. She said she could do it herself if she was drunk enough. I pushed her away and revved up the motor. She seemed crazy enough to do it. I didn't know what to say. 'You want to kill yourself?' I shouted at her. 'Tell your boyfriend to give you the money.'

"She crouched up against the door and said she didn't need anything from him, she'd do it herself. She grabbed the handle and tried to bang the door open. I reached over and pulled her back into the truck and told her I was taking her home. She looked like she was crumpled up in pain.

"I didn't want her hurt. What else could I do? I knew she was determined to get rid of it. So I told her I'd give her the money. At first she thought I'd buy her the Jack Daniels but I told her I'd give her the money for a doctor. She said I didn't have that kind of money, but I pulled out the wad of bills I'd gotten when I cashed my paycheck to show her I had plenty of money on me.

"I kept asking her 'How much?' but she just kept staring at the money in my hand. Finally, she said two hundred dollars. 'Shit, that's more than a month's wages,' I told her. She told me she couldn't take my money, besides she'd saved about seventy-five dollars. I shoved the money at her but she

wouldn't touch it, so I dumped it in her lap where it stayed till I drove her home. Before she got out, she picked up the bills and looked at me for a while and then she put the money in her pocket. She promised to pay me back and leaned over and gave me a kiss, like I was in her family or something. I waited until she went inside and that's the last time I saw her until tonight when I carried her to the hospital."

Everybody in the kitchen was so quiet I was afraid they'd hear me crying and find out I hadn't been sleeping all this time. I didn't want them to know I'd heard Uncle Biggy's story. I almost wished I hadn't heard it. Then I realized Mama was crying too, deep, deep sobs that drowned out any tears of mine.

I finally fell asleep. When I woke up the blinds were shut tight to block-out the bright mid-day sun, but the heat still streamed in. My pillow was sopping wet from sweat or tears. Gramma's bed was already neatly made, the chenille spread tucked taut beneath the pile of pillows she slept with to cut down on her snoring. Last night Gramma snored through all the excitement, never woke up once. The clock on my radio showed it was 12:30. I'd never slept so late in my life but when I rolled out of bed I still felt groggy.

Uncle Biggy's story came back like a dream but when I passed the telephone on my way to the bathroom I remembered it

clearly. I expected my face in the mirror to be different, maybe older, but I looked the same, even younger with tear streaks on my cheeks, my sweaty hair plastered flat on my head. I stuck my whole head under the faucet to cool off and wash it all away.

"What you doing, child?"

Gramma never knocked when she had to use the bathroom. She stood in the open doorway as if I'd barged in on her.

"Trying to cool off, Gramma."

"Should have gotten up earlier. Too hot to be sleeping so late," she scolded.

"I was up late," I tried to sound grownup and important, after all she'd slept through the commotion last night, not me.

All she said was "Hmmmph!" as she handed me a towel to dry my hair.

"Didn't you hear about Josie going to the hospital last night?" I asked her.

"I don't know nothing and don't want to know." She left before I could say another word; she knew I had a lot of questions. I wondered how I was going to ask Mama about Josie without letting on that I knew as much as I did.

I rubbed my head real hard with the towel then looked at myself in the mirror again. My freckles still drifted all over my face, my blue eyes, rinsed clean by tears and sleep, looked clear as ever, my hair snarled around my face was the one part

of me I could change. I found some bobby pins in the cabinet and started rolling strands of curls the way I'd watched Josie do it. Mama liked my hair straight with bangs but I wanted to make my damp, dark hair curl up all over my head.

"What'd you do to your hair?" Mama almost laughed when I walked into the kitchen.

"Too hot for hair hanging in my face," I answered.

"Next time use some toilet paper to hold in all the ends," she said snugly tucking in the stray ends of a few pincurls.

"Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Breakfast or lunch?"

We both laughed.

"I don't care, just lots of it."

The morning paper was on the table, I could see Mama had it folded back to the police reports. I slipped into her chair and scanned the page for the word "abortion" while she cracked some eggs to scramble. Maybe Josie's name would be in the paper. I didn't see anything but an accident report and a shooting.

Mama handed me a plate of scrambled eggs and grits then poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down with me.

"I was real proud of the way you took care of things last night, Mickey."

"Nothing to do. Gramma and Tyler just slept through it all." I wanted to tell her what a good job she'd done taking care of Josie but didn't know how to say it. Mama really knew how to take care of people.

"Is Josie going to be ok?"

Mama sighed and swirled the milk around in her coffee before answering,

"I think so. Miss Theresa called while you were sleeping and said Josie was out of the operating room."

"An operation? Mama, what happened to Josie?"

"Mickey, you're still a little girl. . ." I thought Mama wasn't going to tell me but she sighed again and went on, "but after all you saw last night I have to try to explain. I just don't know what to say. I wish you didn't have to know this."

I wanted to tell her I knew about Biggy and the money but waited to hear more, hoping I'd understand.

"Josie had an abortion that made her bleed, almost bled to death. She's lucky we got her to the hospital on time. The doctors had to operate to stop the bleeding. Miss Theresa thinks she's going to be okay."

"What's an abortion?" I had to ask even though I knew Mama hoped I wouldn't.

"A mistake. Josie made a big mistake. She's lucky to be alive."

I wondered if a mistake was the same as a sin. The nuns told us we had to pay for our sins, that's why the priests gave us penance along with absolution. Was the operation Josie's penance?

Later I read the evening paper after Papa finished it but couldn't find out anything about abortion until I asked Gramma that night when we were going to bed.

"What you have to know about abortion for?"

"It's what made Josie so sick."

Gramma was quiet so long I thought she'd never tell me. Then she rolled over to face me in the other twin bed.

"Child, maybe it's better you know now. Maybe you'll stay out of trouble."

"How did she get it? How did she get sick?"

"She got it from a man. From that no good soldier."

I didn't understand.

"It happens between men and women when they're not careful. The woman gets pregnant and sometimes it means a lot of trouble for the woman."

I knew a little about having babies. Mama told me some stuff before Tyler was born. "You mean Josie's going to have a baby?"

"Not no more," said Gramma. "Abortion is when a woman has to get rid of the baby inside her."

"Get rid of the baby?" I only knew about babies growing inside. Mama had told me someday a baby would grow inside me when I was a grown woman. "How could Josie get rid of the baby?"

"She needed a doctor to do it but it's hard to find one. You need a lot of money to have it done right. That's why she got so sick. She didn't have enough money to get it done right."

I remembered Josie telling me about love and money that day we were listening to the Poppa Stoppa show. She never really explained what money had to do with love. I didn't know anybody who had enough money to do things right. Even though we had a new car we couldn't get a new house like Mama wanted. Papa said only rich folks can get what they want.

PART II: NON-FICTION

CHAPTER 13: A LOST VOCATION

At fifteen, I thought my father was going to die so I vowed to become a nun. It seemed a fair exchange to me, a good Catholic girl in 1950's New Orleans. Daddy did pull through, but believed the miraculous benefits of extreme unction had done it. Father Putnam had given him the last rites and also happened to be recruiting for the sodality, a church group for teenaged girls, so my father insisted I had to be a founding member. Daddy's way of thanking Father Putnam for saving his life was by sacrificing what was left of mine.

At first, we'd thought my father had the flu; his fever raged and chills wracked his body. I remember my mother piling coats on top of all the blankets in the house, to keep him warm, still he shivered. It was so frightening to see him shuddering uncontrollably, I stretched out on top of the mound of coats, to add my

warmth and keep the pile from trembling to the floor. It was all I could do.

Jinx, his favorite nephew, rushed Daddy to the hospital. My mother stayed with him day and night. As it turned out, he had blood poisoning, not the flu. Daddy's mother arrived to take care of my four brothers, my sister, and me—though I ended up taking care of the little kids during his long recovery. I spent the entire summer of 1956 washing dirty diapers and wondering if I'd ever have any fun before entering the convent after high school.

The second day of my father's hospitalization, I'd overheard my mother sob that the doctors had given up hope. I felt a chill as my grandmother talked about Daddy in the past tense. "He was a good man," she said. How could she give up on her son's life like that? For her, a very old woman who had already lost a husband and a daughter, death was probably more familiar. Even my mother seemed too wearied to resist. For me, life was the only option. That's when I made my vow.

I didn't want to hear any more of what my mother and grandmother had to say. Softly, I closed the door to the bedroom I shared with my little sister and collapsed on my twin bed. I crept into the corner, closed my eyes tight, and tried to pray. Instead, I found myself negotiating

with God. If He'd spare my father's life, I promised to become a nun and spend my life doing His good works. But first, I wanted to finish high school and have a little fun. When I opened my eyes, the afternoon sun illuminating my room lightened my heart and I felt God had heard my prayers.

A week later the doctors announced that powerful new drugs saved my father's life. However, due to complications, he'd have to spend a much longer time in the hospital. Luckily, he'd been transferred from an expensive private hospital to Charity Hospital, one of Huey Long's lasting gifts to the people of Louisiana. According to Daddy, "If it hadn't been for Charity Hospital I'd never be able to pay the bills. They'd have to take me out in a coffin."

Daddy was grateful for the good and free medical care, but he refused to eat the hospital food. Every day for three months I had to take the bus to bring him a home-cooked midday meal which my mother prepared in the morning after spending all night with him at the hospital. She'd try to nap during the day, then cook supper for the rest of us and pack up an evening meal for him. What an ordeal this must have been for her, though I don't think it worried my father much. He was more concerned about paying

the bills while he was laid up. My mother worried about the bills, too, but her other, more trying job was to distract my father from his worries and act as if she had none, in order to speed his recovery. Jinx kept the business going in my father's small shop.

Father Putnam visited my father all during his long recovery; that's when they plotted to make me join the sodality. They'd talk after Father Putnam's early morning rounds in the hospital wards distributing communion to patients. Though I hadn't met Father Putnam, I had sure heard a lot about him. Daddy told me over and over again how Father Putnam wanted to get more young people involved in the church. I didn't want to get stuck with a bunch of goody-goodies in a boring church group. I planned to keep my deal with God, but I wanted to have as much fun as possible before I had to give it all up to become a nun. I'd much rather go to the dances on Sunday nights.

One afternoon, about a month after Daddy was hospitalized, I was unwrapping his tepid lunch when he started up again. "Father Putnam wants you to join," Daddy told me. Though my silence bordered on rebelliousness, I risked it. "I'd like it, too," he continued, confusing me with his entreaty tone. Maybe the fear of death had mellowed him.

"Why?" I asked, stalling for time.

He was startled but replied, "Well, it sounds like a good idea. Father Putnam is a smart guy. I've learned a lot from him. He saved my life."

I shoved aside all the medicine bottles on his bedside table and set down his plate of food, wondering what he thought of the medical miracles the doctors had pulled off. A columnist had written about my father's remarkable recovery, including vivid details of his skin blistering and peeling away in reaction to the new medicines that had saved his life. What about my prayers? My vow? Didn't any of that count? Why should Father Putnam and the doctors get all the credit?

It wasn't the time to tell my father about my deal with God; he'd simply use it to prove his point. "I can't go to Sunday night sodality meetings," I told him. "School's the next day." I was hoping the aroma of my mother's black-eyed peas with pickled meat would distract him but he just let the plate of beans sit there getting cold.

"You didn't worry about school when you begged to go to those Sunday night dances," he replied, certain he'd settled the argument.

"Yeah, well, you said I couldn't go because of school the next day."

"This is different," he grumbled as I handed him the clean utensils mother had packed with his food. The salad was soggy but still smelled pungent. I nibbled some of the limp, peppery lettuce from the edge of his plate.

"I want you to do this for me," he said.

"Why?"

"We owe it to Father Putnam." He knew that wasn't a very convincing reason and I knew he was warming up to order me to do it.

"Daddy, if it's okay to go to sodality meetings on Sunday night, can I go to the dance sometimes?" I amazed myself that I was pushing this negotiation; running out of time for fun was making me pretty bold. Besides, I didn't think he'd yell at me in the middle of the hospital ward.

His grey-blue eyes lit up and he really, truly looked at me, surprised at what he saw. "It's a deal. When I get out of this hospital you can go to the Sunday night dances after the sodality meeting."

I couldn't believe I'd just struck another deal, this time for my own liberty. Some of my friends had started going to the Sunday night dances at St. Andrew's Hall. All they talked about was the live band "The Sparks" and the

public high school boys they'd met. Linda already had a boyfriend she met every Sunday at the dance, although they spent most of their time making out instead of dancing.

Not many white bands played rhythm and blues, but Linda told me "The Sparks" knew all of the latest hits, even the songs of Fats Domino and Smiley Lewis. Everyone said "The Sparks" were really cool. I wanted to hear their music for myself.

Since my father kept his promise, I had to keep mine. The sodality meetings were held in the rectory office, a cold, impersonal place. Father Putnam answered the door and welcomed me with a smile. I was surprised to see him in a sport shirt rather than his black suit and clerical collar. I felt even more uncomfortable. Priests weren't supposed to be casual or friendly; doing God's work was serious business. I had no idea how serious Father Putnam really was.

"You're early, Mary Louise. Come in." He ushered me into a straight-backed chair, one of seven ringed his desk. When he sat behind his desk, things almost returned to normal, except for the relaxed way he tilted back the chair and smiled again. I didn't know what to make of his smile that seemed friendly but aloof. He seemed to know more than he was willing to tell. His dark hair crinkled

back from his brow and made him look older than I'd expected. I knew this was his first parish, and he'd just finished the seminary, but he looked and acted as if he'd been a priest all his life.

"I'm glad you could make it," he said, as if I'd overcome obstacles to be there.

"Uh, thank you." Habits of politeness might get me through this.

"Do you know Carol Drawe? She's taking the lead on this. Fine young person. You'll like her."

I was sure I wouldn't. Instead I answered that we'd never met.

"Oh. You'll like her." He smiled again, trying to make me comfortable. "She's bringing some of her friends from Dominican." I couldn't help squirming. I'd hoped to go to Dominican, an elite academic high school, but my family couldn't afford it.

Father Putnam answered the door again, this time welcoming a group of chattering girls who seemed happy to be there. I tried to slink down smaller in my chair. I'd never know what to say to these girls. Maybe their chatter would let me disappear.

Right away I noticed the tallest girl, who looked Father Putnam straight in the eye as she handed him her

coat, a stylish boxy wool jacket that suited her large frame. I squirmed again, realizing I'd forgotten to take off my navy pea jacket. She joked with Father Putnam like a friend as she introduced the other girls. Then Father Putnam turned to me,

"And here's another new member, Mary-Louise Ruth."

The tall friendly girl channeled all her warmth in my direction and smiled so widely I felt taken into the group. "Mary-Louise, I'm Carol. It's great you're here," she almost gushed.

Even before I'd met these girls, their world certainly appealed to me. I longed to look, act, and feel as confident as they did. I'd always wanted to belong in a crowd like theirs. My mother and I daydreamed about living in a big house with a lawn and barbeque instead of our rented double house with all eight of us crammed into two bedrooms. I was sure each of these girls had her own bedroom. At my house, the dining room served as my parents' bedroom. I seldom found a quiet corner to read or do my homework.

I loved to read and was discovering other possibilities, other ways of living, though for me, these worlds existed only in books. At the time, I was reading Too Late the Phalarope by Alan Paton and felt very moved,

even disturbed by the story, set in South Africa, but I didn't connect apartheid with segregation in New Orleans. However, the life I knew was already beginning to crack apart in 1956.

One day, I did what I thought was expected when a wrinkled old colored lady with a bag of groceries boarded the crowded streetcar. I gave her my seat. The signs "Colored Only" had just been removed from all the buses and streetcars. I'd read about the changes in the newspapers. I was supposed to offer my seat to an older person but I couldn't have expected what happened next.

The old woman looked startled, then frightened, as I smiled and stood in the aisle waiting for her to sit down. Suddenly the elderly white woman I'd been sitting next to, who was even older than the woman I was offering my seat to, spat out, "Don't 'spect me to sit next to no nigger."

The streetcar lurched forward almost toppling me back into my seat; I grabbed onto the overhead strap and ignored what I'd heard. But everyone else had heard it. A middle-aged white man in a dark suit brusquely folded his newspaper, pushed past the old colored lady, and gallantly offered his seat to the woman who was still screeching, "Can't no law make me sit next to no nigger."

He'd jostled me from my position and was extending the crook of his arm to the outraged old white woman who jabbed me with her umbrella while lumbering out of her seat. The man glared at me over his shoulder as he pushed the woman past me, his icy stare almost poking out my eye.

Another voice from the front of the bus shouted, "What's the matter with you, girl? Didn't your parents teach you anything?"

Suddenly I glimpsed the hatred beneath the courteous Southern way of life I took for granted and tried so hard to live up to. I stood firm when the streetcar made its next stop and waited for the colored lady to take her seat. She re-situated her bag of groceries on her hip as if to show she could manage without sitting down, but sensing my predicament, she nodded agreeably, more to relieve my discomfort than to make any statement. Too late, I realized it would have been more polite to do nothing; now we were both forced to take a position. She took her seat next to the window and I sat next to her.

After a couple of months of trying to improve our souls the sodality group began to shrink, two girls dropped out and we didn't have any new recruits. Then one Sunday evening Father Putnam introduced a new idea. He told us

about another Catholic youth group called Young Christian Students (YCS). It was a discussion group based on readings from the New Testament. Father Putnam handed us each a booklet of YCS readings and discussion topics. As I flipped through the pages, I noticed how slick and modern it looked. There were photos of teenagers in school, in cars, at dances, instead of old fashioned images of saints or costumed drawings from church history. I'd never seen a religious book with teenagers in it.

"YCS is an action group," he told us. "The object is to take what you learn from the discussion and develop an action, some kind of activity that you can carry out in your daily life. A social action. Something that will influence people."

None of us felt very comfortable with what he described. I didn't want to go around telling people what they should do.

"No. No. It's not like that." Father Putnam tried another approach. "It's a social group. It's a way to see the connections between modern life and the New Testament."

"But I thought mainly Protestants studied the Bible," said Carol who looked very puzzled. I felt confused too. What did the Bible have to do with the colorful YCS

booklets he'd handed us? None of the kids in the book seemed to be reading any bibles.

"What's social about it?" I asked.

"Everything," Father Putnam replied, getting enthusiastic again. "We'd use the New Testament to interpret Christ's teachings in our lives today. Mostly you'll be talking about the things that are important to you."

"Like dating?" Piped up Beverly who'd missed a few meetings lately.

"Well, yes," answered Father Putnam uncertainly. "The focus is on your interests. It's for young people who want to learn new ideas, who want to make Christ's teachings relevant in today's world."

Some of what he said went over our heads but the deciding factor was that YCS was a group for both girls and boys.

"How will we get any boys to join?" Carol wanted to know.

Father Putnam smiled with that look in his eyes that showed he'd known all along how to convince us. "I've already talked to some young men at Jesuit High School who are interested. They want to join us next week."

I liked the switch from spiritual topics to the more intellectual approach of YCS. Of course, it helped that a couple of the boys from Jesuit were pretty cute. A couple of college guys from Tulane started coming to our discussions, too. One guy, Bob was tall and scrawny and studied science; he asked a lot of questions that even stumped Father Putnam. His friend Charlie was from Chicago and wanted to be a lawyer. After a few months, I realized I was learning more than I'd ever learned in all those years of studying the catechism. In YCS we got to ask questions instead of memorizing confusing answers to questions we'd never ask. I preferred using my brain to figure things out rather than being told what to believe. As my enthusiasm grew for the group, Carol's began to stall.

"My father doesn't like the changes," she told me one evening. She and I were in the back seat of Bob's car.

"What changes?"

"You know," she answered. "All this talk about social action. He says we should leave well enough alone."

At our recent YCS meeting we'd discussed Advent, the four week period of penance and fasting before Christmas, and considered some kind of social action to make more people familiar with it. Many New Orleans Catholics

objected to Advent because it was too much like Lent. Even my mother thought Lent was enough---another penitential period was too austere, too Protestant. Father Putnam suggested sending one of us on a weekend retreat to learn more about the revival of the Advent liturgy. I was selected to attend and actually looked forward to it, especially since this retreat wouldn't require the usual silence but rather a lively participation in new ideas.

"Your father doesn't like the idea of Advent?"

"Oh, it's not just Advent," Carol answered. "He doesn't like any kind of change. He says Father Putnam is stirring up too many new ideas."

"Really?" I wasn't sure what she meant. My father still thought Father Putnam was a miracle worker. Not only had Father Putnam saved his life but I'd lost interest in the Sunday night dances.

"I thought he'd forbid me to come to the group once boys joined," Carol continued, "except my mother convinced him I was at least meeting good Catholic boys."

"True," I agreed. "Gee, I didn't know you were having a hard time."

"I'd hate to have to quit," she confessed and dropped her voice even lower, "I really like Bob a lot."

I quickly glanced at the back of Bob's scrawny neck then to Carol's sheepish grin.

"No kidding?" I nudged her and we both laughed out loud.

"Hey. Let us in on the joke," Bob said eyeing us in the rear view mirror.

My old self sympathized with Carol's concerns, but the new me realized it wasn't a good idea to tell parents too much. The less they knew, the better. My folks didn't even know that we'd switched from an all girl sodality to YCS with boys. They did know I'd been chosen to go on a retreat and welcomed my conversion from running around with that wild bunch hanging out at the dance hall every Sunday night. Another thing I didn't tell them was that the retreat would be integrated; some girls from a local Negro high school were also attending.

At the time, there were only two Negro Catholic high schools in New Orleans. Even churches were segregated. The few Negroes who attended Sunday mass at white churches had to sit in pews at the back and wait until everyone else had received communion. The miracle of transubstantiation, the big words I'd learned at age seven to explain the mystery that changed the thin white wafer into the body of

Christ, was distributed according to the law of segregation-- not the law of God. Negroes had to wait their turn until the whites were served first.

Father Putnam drove us to the retreat house out of town, across Lake Pontchartrain. As soon as we turned off the main highway onto the gravel road I felt far away from the city. Dusk was deeper and darker out in the country. Father Putnam's car bumped over the ruts and potholes until finally the headlights lit up a sprawling white house with porches winding all around it. Oak trees burdened with Spanish moss arched over the driveway; no other houses were in sight. When the car stopped, the stillness silenced our conversation.

"Time to unload," Father Putnam announced. He was staying at a seminary nearby and would come back on Sunday to take us home.

As I stepped out of the car, I heard the clamoring of insects, then saw stars and stars and stars crowding the darkness out of the sky domed overhead. Nightfall was a miracle in the countryside.

A soft voice from the porch welcomed us. I turned to see a small woman, her white hair falling in short waves around her face and her blue eyes sparkling in the dim light. Even though I knew the retreat house was run by a

group of women missionaries rather than nuns, I was surprised she was wearing a flowery dress with a soft blue sweater that matched her voice and her eyes.

It was the first of many surprises for me that weekend. The biggest and most important was meeting Anna, a fair-skinned Negro girl from Xavier Prep. After discovering we were both editors of our school newspapers, we spent the rest of the weekend becoming friends and sharing our interests in books and writing. She liked Alan Paton's work too, especially Cry, the Beloved Country.

"What's the difference between South Africa and here?" Anna's question sounded more like a statement. In that instant I clearly felt the connections between apartheid and segregation. I felt ashamed but Anna impatiently told me, "Just do something about it."

"What can I do?"

"Who knows? You'll figure something out." She sounded so sure that I felt better about myself. "Maybe you'll write a book."

We giggled because we both wanted to be writers.

That night, I tossed and turned for a long time in my narrow camp cot thinking about what she'd said. It was still dark when I felt Anna shaking me,

"Wake up or you'll miss mass in the chapel."

Later, at breakfast, I told her about YCS, our discussion group. I'd already figured out something to do.

"Why don't you join?"

Anna laughed, "You mean integrate your group?"

"Well, yeah, I guess so."

"Why?"

"Well, why not?" I hadn't prepared any convincing arguments.

"Because I'm the one who'd be insulted."

"Oh no, Anna, our group's not like that." Then I began to wonder if I could be so sure. "I'll set it up ahead of time. Invite some other friends so you're not alone in a new group."

We spent the rest of the morning discussing it and by afternoon she'd agreed to see if anyone else from her school might be interested. Before parting we exchanged phone numbers and planned to talk some more. On the return trip, I told Father Putnam that Anna and some friends might join our group. At first he seemed concerned about how the rest of the group might feel.

"Carol's father has already criticized some of my ideas," he said.

"But this is my idea, not yours. Besides, what's a more logical action for our group? You've been telling us

to find ways to change our lives, our society. Segregation needs to change. Let's start with ourselves."

It really didn't take much to convince him, especially when the other girls in the car said it made sense to them, too. By the time he dropped me off at my house we'd agreed that I'd make the recommendation at our next YCS meeting. That night, comfortable in my own bed, I thought about the whole exciting weekend. Right before I fell asleep, it occurred to me that all along Father Putnam might have wanted it to work out this way.

It surprised me that a few people did have some trouble with the idea. I knew Carol was worried about what her father would say and maybe the rest were, too.

"Look, we're a Catholic group," I tried to reassure them. "We're not going to do anything crazy. Just get together and talk." I couldn't tell them how shocked I'd felt meeting Anna and discovering how much we were alike. She was the first Negro teenager I'd met in a social situation and it turned out to be so easy, so comfortable. I knew they'd all feel the same way when we all got together.

Father Putnam required that we tell our parents we planned to invite Anna and her friends to join us. "It's important to be open about all we do," he told us.

Usually we met in his rectory office but our next meeting would be at the home of Mrs. French, a parishioner who was very active in church affairs. My father blew-up when he heard about the change.

"That's out of the question," he shouted. "There's no way you're going to meet with a bunch of colored kids in somebody's home."

"Why not?"

"Because I won't have my daughter socializing with n...coloreds."

"But we're not socializing. It's not like we're going dancing at St. Andrew's."

"Don't get smart with me. I said no and that's that."

"It was your idea in the first place, I didn't want to join Father Putnam's sodality. Now you're telling me I can't do it any more because you're prejudiced."

My father slapped me so hard it felt like a punch. My mother started crying. I was too stunned to cry, then found it easy to resist tears as my anger grew.

"You can't stop me." I restrained my voice through clenched teeth and watched him raise his hand again.

"Lawrence, please," my mother finally found her voice.
"Please."

He dropped his head before his hand. I couldn't see his face but thought I heard tears.

"It's not safe for whites and coloreds to be together in somebody's home," he said to my mother.

"What are you talking about?" I felt angry and exasperated. "Father Putnam will be there. He's a priest. What could be safer than a church group?"

My father didn't answer, just told me to go to bed. I hardly slept, worried about whether I would or could defy him. He spared me the decision when we talked the next morning.

"Promise me you'll leave if there's any trouble. Get to a pay phone and call me right away. Promise me."

I almost balked at my father's terms. I was embarrassed at his expectations of violence, but agreed. We barely looked at each other. He felt he'd lost but I didn't feel I'd won.

I was ashamed of his reaction. How could he imagine our calm, reasonable discussions erupting into violence? Not everyone's disagreements exploded into shouting matches, as so often happened in our family. I couldn't imagine Anna's father, a college professor, yelling at her

or Carol's father threatening her. They wouldn't strike their daughters. I was embarrassed that my new friends might find out how my father had treated me.

Only much later did I discover that in 1956 it was illegal for whites and blacks to gather together in a private home. In New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, it was also illegal for black and white musicians to play music together. If a neighbor had complained, we could have been arrested for meeting in Mrs. French's home. My father knew that. Even so, he relented and let me go.

Anna and I arranged to meet at the bus stop at Napoleon and Magazine. My father didn't know I was the organizer of this event so I certainly wasn't going to ask him to give us a ride. I hadn't thought much about the logistics but as soon as Anna and her friend Carl arrived I realized we were going to turn heads. Anna's light dusky coloring, blue eyes and blond-tinged tight curls contrasted sharply with Carl's ebony handsomeness. He was very tall and carried himself like a movie star or a champion athlete. His deep, warm voice made him seem noble and friendly at the same time. I was immediately swept off my feet.

We waited until everyone else got on the bus, then he gallantly stood aside as Anna and I boarded. I felt awkward hesitating before sitting down but Anna nudged me into a single seat and took the empty seat behind for the two of them. Obviously she and Carl had planned how to handle all of this. People tried not to stare but I felt the tension and decided to buck it rather than sit quietly weighted down by it. I scooted around a bit in my seat so I could talk to them and soon our conversation isolated us from the discomfort. By the time we got off the bus we were having a good time.

I was impressed with how graciously Anna and Carl fit into our group but also envious because I still felt like an outsider. I enjoyed flaunting my new rebellious persona in the group yet resented Anna for making friends with an ease that still eluded me. Anna deftly shifted the focus from their presence to the reason for the meeting.

"Mary-Louise was so enthusiastic about YCS that Carl and I had to come and see for ourselves."

Anna leaned back into her arm chair and let everyone else take over explaining the group. She and Carl were so relaxed in Mrs. French's comfortable living room, they felt right at home. I felt edgy as I listened to the discussion, finally Father Putnam turned to me and asked,

"Well, Mary-Louise why don't you explain your idea to everyone?"

I didn't think I could find the words to break the silence until I saw the gentle twinkle in Anna's eyes urging me on. "Uh, well, uh, we talked about how social action is the most important thing in our group and. . . uh, well, we. . . I . . . thought it was a good idea to take some social action in our own group." The word "integrate" didn't seem right for what was already happening between all of us. "I knew you all would really like Anna and that together we could do some real actions to try to make the social situation better."

"What she means is," Anna interrupted, eager to get to the point. "This is the kind of group that could do something to help all the trouble going on right now about integration."

"You mean integrate other places, besides our group?" questioned Bob.

"I think that's what Mary-Louise had in mind." Father Putnam's answer made it clear to me that he'd been planning for this all along and knew just where to go next.

"I guess I thought we'd all figure out what to do next." I blurted out. "I don't really have any plan in mind."

But Father Putnam did and it was a good one. His idea was that a group of us, both black and white, would attend Sunday mass together. We'd go to church with our new friends. Together we'd integrate mass.

We decided on St. Stephen's, my parish church, for our first attempt. I wanted to make a good impression so I wore my new blue felt hat rather than a scarf. Since my parents didn't know about our integration plan, my mother wondered why I was all dressed up. "Are you trying to catch some guy's eye?" she teased. I couldn't tell her I had my eye on dark-haired, dark-skinned Carl. In fact, I could barely admit it to myself. I suspected Carol had her eye on Carl, too. She looked great in a red woolen suit that probably cost more than all the clothes I owned.

We gathered in front of St. Stephen's Church, excited, expectant, and a little anxious. The Gothic spire of St. Stephen's soared high above the spreading oak trees lining Napoleon Avenue. The day was sunny and brisk--matching our enthusiasm. This was the real thing. A social action. And we were in charge. Father Putnam wasn't along. This was our show.

Anna blended in, her light complexion absorbing the soft pink glow of her fuzzy sweater, but Carl's ebony skin

radiated, drawing stares to our group. Two other students from Xavier Prep joined us for quick introductions; then we all took a deep breath, whispered a quick prayer, and started up the stone steps. As we entered the vestibule, people seemed to make way for us like the parting of the Red Sea.

I saw a few Negro parishioners seated in the last two pews at the back of the church and noticed a heavy-set usher watching us, waiting to see how far we'd go. He stepped up to one of the back pews as if to seat us but we moved past him, heading for the center of the church. St. Stephen's, with the longest aisle of any church in the city, seemed to stretch at least a block to the altar. My high heels clicked loudly, echoing in the vaulted ceilings overhead. Every sound was amplified, the swishing skirts of women twisting around to watch us marching towards them, the strangled coughs sounding off one by one as we moved further down the aisle, the hymnals snapping shut, even the organist striking a wrong note as he craned over the choirloft. I felt we deserved loftier music to accompany our procession than the startled, nervous sounds erupting all around us.

Bob had taken the lead and halted midway towards the altar as we'd planned. I almost tripped on Carol when she

bent down to genuflect before entering her pew, but regained my balance just in time to slip into the seat next to Carl. Suddenly a loud bang resounded as a man in front of us slammed the heavy wooden kneeler up and rushed out of his pew. He was a skinny man with a skinny tie flailing behind him as he ran down the aisle cursing "the goddamned niggers and nigger-lovers taking over everything." He stopped long enough to spit at Carl but the wet clot landed on my skirt and slid down my stocking into the arch of my low-slung pumps. I was paralyzed until Carl quietly handed me his starched handkerchief to wipe off my skirt and leg. I jammed the damp, desecrated cloth into the hymnal slot; I couldn't bear returning it to Carl.

Organ chords announced the entry of the priest, Father Brown, and overwhelmed the man's fury. Everyone rose on cue. Mass had begun. But the distractions continued, several more people left, some of them angry and some distraught. As soon as the organ stopped, I heard the high, whining voice of an elderly woman in back of us demand, "How dare they make such a spectacle in the House of the Lord?"

We'd been ignored standing around outside the church, invisible until we crossed some forbidden threshold to threaten their sanctuary. But this was my church, too. I

came to mass at St. Stephen's almost every Sunday. When I was a little kid, aiming for sainthood, I went to mass every morning and often made a visit to church after school, just to talk to God. How could they make me feel as if I didn't belong? Surely Father Brown would calm the disturbance when he mounted the pulpit to give the sermon. Instead he droned on and on announcing the bans of marriage, baptisms, and deaths as if nothing was happening.

After the consecration, when Father Brown held the chalice and the host aloft, I relaxed, secure again in my familiar surroundings. We'd planned to file out of our pews together and walk up to the altar rail to receive communion as a group. Carl waited in the aisle to let me go ahead of him. At that moment, a middle-aged woman behind Carl pushed him aside so hard that her flowered hat tipped over her eye and ground her thick, sturdy heel into my toe as she hurried past us. She was determined to receive the host before we got there

At the altar rail, I watched Father Brown hesitate as Anna knelt to receive communion, the altar boy's eyes fearfully questioning whether he should place the paten beneath her chin. Anna lifted her head, eyes closed, waiting to receive the host. Did her heart stop, too, during the priest's long pause? She held her head high and

calmly waited until the priest finally placed the host on her tongue. She bowed her head and the priest moved on to Bob, Carol, and me. I wanted to look him in the eye as he placed the host on my tongue but knew that would seem like sacrilege, so I bent my head back, closed my eyes and felt the dry tasteless wafer placed quickly on my tongue. I refused to cast my eyes down as I walked back up the aisle; instead, I returned the stares until a few people dropped their eyes in confusion or embarrassment.

None of us were eager to leave at the end of mass. We knelt quietly until the huge church was almost empty. By the time we walked outside hardly anyone was there. I spied Anna's father in their grey sedan parked at the curb; he was patiently waiting to take her away. It was hard for any of us to look at each other; we didn't know what to say. Anna sidled up to me and whispered, "It doesn't feel too good, does it?" I felt brittle, like a thin egg shell splintering from the pressure of what she had always experienced. I hadn't expected it to be like this.

At our meeting that evening the mood was somber. We felt like failures, despite Father Putnam's enthusiasm.

"You all were great." He actually smiled and seemed to believe it. "The pastor at St. Stephen's was irate. He

threatened to throw you out if you disturbed his parish again."

"I thought the priest was going to welcome us." Father Putnam's excitement irritated me. I could still feel the spit sliding down my leg. "Why didn't he say something?"

"He didn't know what to say," Father Putnam replied. "Be thankful he didn't tell you to leave."

"How could he? How can he keep any of us out of church?" I asked.

"They do it all the time," answered Carl. "Some churches won't even let Negroes sit in the back pews."

"How can you stand it?"

"You just do." Carl replied.

I could almost touch the shield around Carl, the wall that distanced him and made him seem so strong.

"I won't get used to it," objected Anna. "I'll always resent the way they treat us."

"What can you do about it?" asked Bob as if he knew already that the answer was "not much."

"What can we do about it?" I answered. "That's what I want to know."

We spent the rest of the meeting figuring out how to continue what we'd started. By the end of the evening we

all agreed to attend Sunday mass at different churches each week to avoid direct confrontation with any particular pastor who might forbid us to continue. It worked for a while until the Archbishop of New Orleans ordered our YCS group to disband. Individual pastors had taken their complaints to the archdiocese demanding that we stop disrupting their Sunday masses.

Our discussion group that had opened the world to me was suddenly under suspicion, accused of being a communist "cell", a virulent threat to Church, community, and the federal government. How could the exchange of ideas be threatening? How could it be dangerous to learn about the world? How could a Catholic priest be a spy brainwashing us into communist ideology? How little I really understood about the world in which I lived.

My world had been strictly defined by Catholic or non-Catholic, upper class or lower class, and of course, black or white. That's just the way it was. How could any of us have imagined that our genteel girls' sodality group would eventually be labeled a communist front group?

What was a communist? I had to admit, I was trying hard to be a liberal, an idea that was new to me, but a communist? How could I be something I knew nothing about? Charlie, a northerner, explained that communists believed

everyone should be equal--- but that sounded like democracy to me.

"Not just in ideas," he went on, "but equal in money, too. Everyone should 'share the wealth'."

"What does that have to do with integration?" I asked.

Charlie laughed. "Everything. Ever notice how poor the colored people are?"

Of course I'd noticed, but Anna and Carl weren't poor. They had more money than my family.

"True," Charlie acknowledged, "but they'd have even more money if they weren't Negroes. Most Negroes can't get out of the lower class."

Was my family lower class? My mother always warned us about the lower classes.

"Your family's working class," Charlie told me.

It was the first time I'd heard about the working class. I wanted to be middle class like everyone else in our discussion group. Like Charlie himself. Was that the reason I felt like an outsider?

Who had the answers? Father Putnam seemed to have answers for everything, but even he couldn't convince the archbishop to change his mind. Finally, Father Putnam had to follow the orders of the archbishop. We were forced to disband our YCS group.

After that, I questioned everything, even my vow to join the convent. What was the point of becoming a nun to serve a church that didn't serve its people?

VITA

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