

LIFE IN THE SUNSHINE AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

by

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Master of Fine Arts

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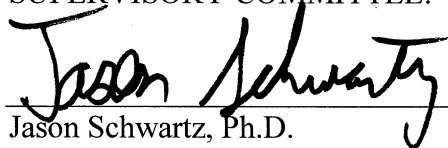
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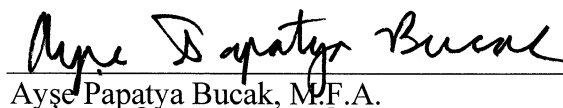
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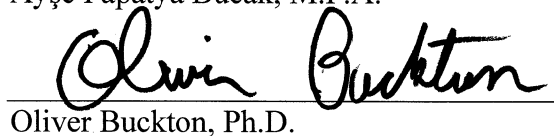
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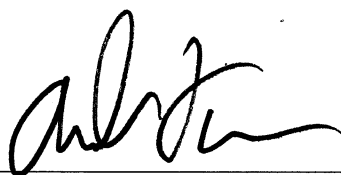
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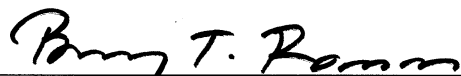

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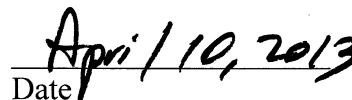
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I wish to thank all my family and friends who have encouraged me throughout my life to pursue what I feel is a creative talent for storytelling. My thesis is my first formal attempt at organizing memories, fictional events and characters into stories that I hope has explored some meaningful aspects of life.

I am grateful to the faculty and staff of Florida Atlantic University English Department for all their help through instruction, support and encouragement to get this project and the entire course of study done. I am especially grateful to Mary Sheffield and Stefanie Gapinski whose dedication to help me in the final push of this endeavor makes it all possible.

ABSTRACT

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Language: the sounds of it, the richness of its rhythms, the connotative and the denotative meanings of words have all played a part in my development from a child to the adult I have become making a life for myself. Whether the words I heard flew like fiery darts, or whether they lifted my weary soul, I somehow always found they meant something to special me. Because of my love of language, I began early to read voraciously. The first novel that I read was *Gone with the Wind*. That story whisked my imagination to a dark and mysterious time and place that, along with the narrative powers of my mother, convinced me that Margaret Mitchell had recreated a real world from her imagination. I still have my own dream that there is a mysterious and hidden world waiting for me to recreate out of my imagination, too.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother, Lizzie Johnson James, whose words, funny stories and ghost stories instilled in me a love for language and creating stories of my own.

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LANGUAGE AND MY REAL WORLD

When I was a child, and growing up, language was a major shaping force upon my imagination, and it still is. My mother was a skilled storyteller. At a certain time of the evening, when finally, she got to sit down, my siblings and I scrambled after her fighting for the spot closest to her to snuggle up and hear those amazing tales that connected her childhood and early life to ours. The tales my mother spun were obviously intended to amuse her children. One such story was about her grandmother Liza Johnson who was born with fire red hair. She was, according to my mother, a hysterical woman who was prone to fits and the need for palliative care when any of her children made it known that they were going to get married. My mother said that when one of her uncles announced his marriage, Liza actually jumped into the backyard well and had to be fished out.

Others of my elder relatives and friends of the family had their stories, too. One, Elder McQueen, our pastor, amazed us children with stories of his Sampson like feats. Once he told us, "I tried to save a cow from a train track. That tra-a-ain was comin'!" He crowed, but he made his way to that poor cow anyway and grabbed it by the tail. Sadly, it was too late. The train, despite his heroics, sheared the cow in half. Elder McQueen could hold on to only the hind part of the animal. Back then, that story was good for a thousand laughs. Its veracity could rightly have been questioned, but I was a child. What was the upshot of the story? I've never figured that out. It was told and it stimulated my imagination. It gave me a definite sense of the power of language and it

sculpted my life and influenced the paths I eventually chose. The memory of the cow tale and its teller are still a pleasant reminiscence.

Another story that my mother told was about me. “Nobody taught you to read,” She declared, “You just picked up your book and started reading.” I know my mother wouldn’t “trash” talk me, and she insists the story is true. I do vaguely remember reading my little red Dick and Jane Primers, but how and when I got to that ability, I have no memory. All of the stories weren’t told by adults, though. My older brother told a couple of stories that I remember very well and they are still filled with conquest, humor and nostalgia.

He and my father went fishing on the Tamiami Trail. At the time, my brother may have been thirteen years old. Upon arriving on the trail, they encountered, he said, a large water moccasin. “Man! That dude (my father) just stepped on the snake and ground it to death with his boot!” At another time, my father took him shopping for school clothes at the old Army Navy store in Miami. They were greeted, according to him, by the sales clerk, to whom my father said “I want to buy some britches for my boy.” The clerk responded, “I’ll take you to the boy’s pants.” My dad responded, “No, I want to buy him some britches.” Permitting of my brother, this went back and forth for a short time and finally the sales clerk gave up. He took my dad and brother to the clothes section for boys. Of course, my father meant *dungarees* (blue jeans now) and the clerk probably meant dress pants.

Growing up, with all of its nuances, in Florida in the 1950’s and 1960’s, I *heard* language in every conceivable form. At home, in addition to my mother’s and Elder McQueen’s stories, it may have been in the form of praise from someone. It may have

been the comforting sounds of a song sung by my father. I *saw* language acted out and acted upon. In school, it may have come in the form of a quiet acknowledgment of a lesson successfully understood and mastered—or in the reassuring and sometimes firm voices of redirection. It might have been in some word or words of admonishment or guidance, or in an x-ray glare from one of my parents to get their point across. I *felt* language in the tapping of feet on the wooden floor of my church, and language *touched* me through the soaring oratory of the preacher who encouraged everyone to believe that hope did exist beyond anything anyone could see, or might be experiencing. I *tasted* language in the “goodness” of carefully prepared and well-seasoned food served up at every meal. Words, speech, song, language, concrete and symbolic, were everywhere at once and at once everywhere. And what people did not, and perhaps, could not say aloud was understood; granted that what wasn’t said was equally or more important than and just as influential as what was said. Regardless of the medium, it was language—the one thing in my community—that belonged exclusively to its members. In all of its dynamic significance, language helped me to construct again and again a world where I felt I could and did belong. That language, spoken and unspoken helped me construct a reality of boundless optimism and a feeling of order and purpose, which I believe today, only words aptly spoken, can give.

Fortunately, my construction of reality was accompanied with an intended trajectory of selflessness. Everyone around me seemed so giving. My teachers looked out for us students; our neighbors did too. This spirit of generosity helped me to relax. It instilled in me the awareness that I can participate in the world that lay largely outside my own small orbit. I learned that no matter what I perceived as shortcomings in my

own life, I could reach out to others, and had a moral obligation to do so. First, though, I had to “make use of myself” and of my abilities so that my existence mattered to the end that I might help someone else who entered my sphere of influence and need help.

To this end, it was the language of the church that facilitated my building the discourse of creating boundaries outside of “me.” I learned to ask then, and still do grapple with the question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” It is this very matter that I continuously seek to resolve, and it has placed me on a lifelong journey to understand my responsibility to other human beings and to accept my portion of it. As faith in God became more essential to how I found and defined myself, this question became less axiomatic and more encompassing so that the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” was answered with “Love thy neighbor,” and whether it is “thy neighbor” who lives next door, or who lives in some distant hamlet across the globe, I’ve decided that every day of my life is an unrepeatably miracle handed me by God. His abundance and lavish generosity requires me to serve, in some way, others.

In the 25th Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus admonishes his followers to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to care for the sick, to open your doors to the stranger, to visit those in prison and last, to clothe the naked. Most of those to whom He spoke had little themselves; yet he compelled them to look past the tangible measure. The lesson to me from this directive means that the self of “me” is qualified by One—Him because in Him, I am plentiful and have sufficiently to give. According to Roger Lundin, human “attempts to bring about God’s kingdom include physical acts of love and compassion as a means of reordering creation and serving our fellow human

beings” (49) and that, I believe, includes each one of the mandates above. How one eventually understands and executes these mandates is its own journey.

More than ten years ago, I visited Kenya, East Africa. Once there, I experienced a strong sense of familiarity, of recognition—like I had been there before—that I had heeded an ancient call of a deep atavistic beckoning—to go back to Africa. This was my first visit, and I was something of a peculiarity to the Kenyans. They told me that I was the first western black to visit their village. They also felt I was returning and not visiting. In fact, over and over again, they introduced me around to the villagers as: “a slave who has come back.” Over and over again, like my father so long ago who wanted britches and not pants; I insisted to my new friends that I am not a slave. “Well,” came one response, “You left in our ancestors!”

“Yes,” I said.

Another asked, “If you are not a slave, why don’t you come back to stay—why don’t other blacks come back?” Like the store clerk, I quietly gave up.

That trip has forever changed me. More than any other, that experience heightened my sense to what is real in the world—the world that lay outside my own. I was staggered by the stark contrast of Kenya’s natural beauty and its spectacular natural resources contrasted by the abject poverty of the inhabitants of the villages I visited. Back then, I could not understand what my eyes were seeing. *Certainly this cannot be!—surely, I have fallen through a time tunnel. I have spiraled backward to the early days of pioneer America: Gunsmoke—Dodge City! Bonanza—Virginia City!*—my two favorite imaginary pioneer towns. This time and this place; however, was not imaginary.

The Kenyans are resilient. I was impressed and somewhat comforted by their hope of better times to come: *How can this be?* I pondered deeply. *Can better happen?* If so, the challenge is daunting. I was too shaken to access my own early life doctrine and emerging belief of transcendence; of hoping for amelioration in life without being too bowled over by what is tangible. Weighing the matter, I estimated that stark Kenya was a universe away from the green Kenya I heard existed. This was thus far my worst encounter with life's contradictions and human experience.

In the story "Flight," I try very hard to do it, but do not believe that I succeed in recreating my wondrous yet disturbing impressions of the visit. With the story, I struggle to reconcile my dual conversations of human need, the obvious limits of compassion and the realistic capacity for response. The title, "Flight," may be a not so subtle double entendre. Not only am I writing about a trip from one continent to the other, but about Margaret Walker's attempts to resist, deny, to run away from what she sees, if only to emotionally deny the nightmare of its realness. Of course, I was emotionally and spiritually awakened by my visit to Kenya. I could not help but wonder if Jesus knew about this place. Was this a place He intended when He gave His edict to help the poor, to feed the hungry, or to visit the stranger?

By the end of the story, I came, at least, to understand that verisimilitude had been lost in the vortex of my straining in need of further self-discovery. Absolute truth had intruded upon my tenuous speculations on benevolence, and the difficulty of reconciling the truth lay somewhere in the middle like a brick wall. I found myself unable to separate the "I" of me from the "they" of the Kenyans. Of one thing I was certain: that except for repeated cruel slights of hand, the repeated rape of Africa and

repeated sadistic crimes against nature, I would have been born somewhere on that Continent rather than show up as a confounded tourist. Throughout my visit, I maintained my composure. I helped and I enjoyed the people, but the trip continues to haunt me.

The process of writing the story *Flight* was a process of trying to circumvent my emotional response to the trip and trying to find expression, a way to access my personal language to articulate the authentic daily misery of the Kenyans and the conundrum of my new awareness. According to Joyce Carol Oates, “getting the ‘heft’ right—getting the words to correspond to the vision” is a must (81). Through the sensitive, though self-serving, perceptions of Myles Harris and the slightly skewed perceptions of Margaret Walker, I don’t think I achieve bringing together words, heft, vision, and on the ground experience, but I tried and continue to do so.

The two principal characters in “*Flight*” are married. It appears that they will remain so despite the archetypal cultural and idealistic disagreements apparent in their relationship. Even with the rifts, they have built a beautiful and stable domestic life together. Their struggles to come to terms with their differences are almost comic; nevertheless, Myles’ sponsored and unwavering altruism toward Africa encourages him to compel Margie to live this life of adventure with him. Myles is the literal Good Samaritan. He sees the Kenyans as his wounded brothers beaten and battered by the roadside of political dishonesty, upheaval and corruption; thus—he stops to render aid. Myles is committed and has offered his life as a channel of service and humanitarianism by partially “dispossessing himself from the rooted environment of his place (Poirier 118). Myles seems to have found himself in giving and helping. He wants Margie to

snap out of her marginal existence and give herself to service. Margie, however, is overtly indifferent to the plight of the Kenyans. She is “possessed” of her environment and sense of place and is vocal about her reasons and reluctance to go beyond her own familiar boundaries.

Perhaps, long ago, Myles learned that he cannot solve all the problems in Kenya or anywhere else; nevertheless, he is steadfast. And just because he cannot change everything does not hinder him from trying to change something. Cornelius Plantinga says that, “none of us reigns in isolation; much of the time we have our say only in community with others” (107). In other words, the practicability of Myles’ life corresponds with helping to build and repair the lives of the Kenyans—this is his community. It is a big world, but it is the place where his voice finds significance. Again, Lundin says that, “the responsibility to serve. . . suggests that we must do more with our time on earth than wait to go to heaven; we must demonstrate our love and obedience to God as well as love and care for our neighbor” (42). Margie, on the other hand, has had no such illumination, and it seems that she does not care to have—or is it that the problem to her is so large that to do nothing is to leave well enough alone.

Still, she resents Myles’ ease with his work though she camouflages her resentment toward him as cynicism toward all things Africa. She agrees to go to Kenya, and genuinely feels a strong primal connection, but is agitated and disconcerted once she arrives. Margie is overwhelmed by reality, and quietly relieved that she feels advantaged by her ancient escaped from Kenya’s devastation, and indeed the devastations of Africa.

In Margie's eyes, Kenya has experienced a fatal existential collapse before its people ever had a chance to work a national vision on their country. They've had no experience with taking their land into progressive economic and industrial development. She feels as much an ideals project of Myles' as are the Kenyans. Her feelings that Africa might never live up to its possibilities are deeply entrenched, and not even the optimistic Myles can help her.

Long before I went to Kenya though, I greatly enjoyed decades of the tropical atmosphere of Miami. Miami, of my childhood, was bright, crisp and refreshing; and, yes, somewhat easygoing. The grapefruit and orange trees in the back yard, the lime tree in the front yard, and the sea grapes along the highway had everything to do with who I was and who I became before I entered Kenya. Florida flora, their very presence, were as important to shaping my life as was the slightly peculiar mixture of what I thought were African language retentions and southern dialect did in the speech of people I listened to. The rhythmic speech of those around me was as resonant as the rippling surface of the Atlantic Ocean, and the souging wind against the corners of our house during a hurricane. There were secrets; I was convinced, in the huge dark groves of tamarind trees, cool and mysterious like an enchanted forest, at the end of the street in my childhood neighborhood. My memories of it now gives a perfect but continuously enigmatic sense that all of my life had been held together by the inscrutabilities of my childhood in Florida and the jarring obscurities, but now much appreciated experiences of my travels in Kenya. Today, I think that the natural beauty and mysteries of both places have to be, must be complexly bound together by the bands of the equator tied around the earth. Finally, on this point, years before going to Kenya, I had recurrent

dreams of places and people whom I did not know or recognize. While in Kenya, of course, I actually met some of those people, and went to some of those places of my recurrent dreams in waking contacts.

In the stories “Sweet Lily,” “Matilda” and “Life in the Sunshine,” and, to some degree, “The Quiet Heart,” nature is important in shaping force in the lives of the characters of each story and becomes the backdrop for helping me to understand the motivations of my characters and their experiences.

Nature in all of its sweetness and simplicity is a verdant laboratory for “Sweet Lily.” Sweet is something of a freely ranging country urchin, and in her isolation, she embarks on a solitary quest to find herself and to try in her own childish way to understand her existence. Nature, in this story, is Sweet Lily’s playground of wonder, when suddenly, one day, in her innocent explorations, Sweet Lily’s concourse of play and learning is abruptly intruded upon by one of the horrors [the serpent in the garden] of life in her times, and the great outdoors becomes a schoolyard of horrible awakening. Daily, Sweet Lily cast about the landscape looking and searching, wondering and learning until one day, she comes of age while perched in a tree by the roadside. She sees for the first time, and discovers the Ku Klux Klan.

For Sweet Lily, the story begins: “She was born of trouble” and so it is. She becomes the inadvertent child of her grandparents after being born to a mother who is inconsolably grieved by widowhood.

As the complexities this story unfold, Sweet doesn’t fully know why, but the lady with the “clownish face” gives Sweet a fleeting and sobering glimpse of the truth that the world she sees, loves, and explores is not as simple as she, up to this time,

believes it is. If Sweet's free-range agrarian paradise is her Garden of Eden, then the incursion of the scary sights she witnesses are the serpent in the garden. Sweet's innocent unfettered moves, "in her quest to discover the shape of life itself" (Griffith and Kartiganer 187) happens outside her grandparents' governance on the day she discovers the serpent in her garden; the day she eats of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The pre-lenient grace this family tries to offer their young granddaughter fails. From the day of her birth, that grace, which was not theirs to offer, was a dilemma on a collision course with chance and reality. After all, when and how do grandparents and uncles and others tell children, you are hated because of the color of your skin?

Not so central to Sweet Lily's existence personally, the adage "what you don't know won't hurt you" takes on new meaning, but Sweet, however, is not impressed by the "creative Anti-Realism" (Stob 139) of her adult relatives, nor will she ever be. The story ends with her telling her relatives that she is not afraid of snakes; but, she did see people who frightened her.

In "Matilda," nature holds whispers of sensuality, of experiences that are life altering. In both stories, nature bespeaks the existence of a Creator of magnificence and abundance. In neither story, however, is nature the primary subject; it is the sheath that provides shaping atmospheres for my characters in their adventures.

Like Sweet Lily, Matilda is also isolated and tries to define herself in an isolated and confined framework. Sweet Lily however is adventuresome and, paradoxically, is set free by her isolation. She blossoms under the curiosity of own natural tutelage. Matilda is confined by a strict, self-imposed inhibition. It is what Matilda thinks she

knows that stifles her; and it is what Sweet Lily suspects is being kept from her that motivates her to explore and find answers on her own. It is her snooping that opens the world to her and helps her to grow.

The situation begins and ends in the small fictional town of Holman in a church called Lovely Hill where Matilda, malnourished by crippling sheltering, is threatened with death on the vine of life. Matilda is neither thinking nor living for herself. She has more or less fallen into the line of heritage and is living the life she feels she should because it is the life she bequeathed to her from her mother. Regrettably, those around her expect nothing more from her than this monotony and no one encourages her to find and live a life of her own.

Church relationships might be important to Matilda—they provide her with a large unconventional, but familiar extended family. The one thing about this big church family is that their world around them is a narrow dystopia. Hector is present, but almost anomalous; yet he is one of the disparate characters who provide disparate voices and messages for the childlike Matilda. In a failed and strife-laden atmosphere, her church friends deepen her dependency and make her more uncertain of whom she is. In this community that confuses her quest for a personal and wholesome identity, these self-appointed surrogate parents take up where her smothering parents left off. These mixed signals off-road parenting and raw power struggles further inhibit Matilda's development from girl to woman. Relentlessly overwhelmed, she finally declares: "Maybe I should get with those who *help* me. . ."

Matilda is as full of compassion and natural ability as Sweet Lily. Her community might have educated her in the absence of her parents; they don't. They

might have helped her take her talent for cooking beyond their small community and their church, but they don't. They might have created an atmosphere where Matilda can thrive, but they don't. She is stifled for sure, but it remains to be seen if her suitor, Hector, will rescue and help her.

"Life in the Sunshine," is the story of Honey Williams. She is young and obsessively disciplined. Honey has lived a rigid existence (every day is planned in her book) whose reality is upended by four words: "Honey, you have lupus familiar. The words of her doctor and the enormity of his news thrusts Honey backward in her memories and forward in her present. Honey recalls her childhood on the beach. What will lupus take from her there? She remembers the suffering of her grandmother who also had lupus. Lupus is painful, it is crippling; Honey is certain she will suffer in the same way as her grandmother. She still feels the pangs of grief and sorrow when she remembers her grandmother.

Her doctor's words disorder her life. She knows that this situation is larger than she. How will she manage now? This question brings Honey face to face with the truth that her strict life of discipline cannot control all things. Honey tries to stifle her very natural desire to panic. *But she decides, as is her will to do, to stay present in this moment.*

Though Honey tries to take what comfort she can in quietness, she does not recover her confidence. According to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, she is humanly "projecting negative descriptions of uneasiness on what is now real in her life" (247). Her vulnerability, in fact, provides a turning point for her to learn to relax in her life and with her circumstances. She will journey through what she calls a "hollow place" into

this new wilderness. Yet, this is a wilderness journey where she finds beauty. And this begins Honey's new life and epiphany.

The story "Intermission" is a short example on the weightiness of what is said and of what is not said by Nathalie Fickens' father to his young daughter about her future. She is actually benefiting from what is not said to her by her father when he challenges her to stand up for herself. She wants to take an unlikely foray into the field of astronomy. When she tells her father she wants to go to college to become an astronomer, he tells her he is only going to pay for four years of college—that she should make the best of that opportunity, go to school and become a teacher. Natalie is puzzled by this idea from her father who has always told her, "the sky is the limit—you can do anything, be anything you want." She, however, is resolute. Nathalie is certain that she wants to become an astronomer, and her father is certain that he wants to know how much she really wants to pursue this goal, and whether she will stick to it when things get hard.

In "The Quiet Heart," Laurel Ann Reed is not the protagonist in the story; nevertheless, the conflict in the story is seen through her eyes. Her perceptions of events are integral to its telling and any evaluation a reader may make of them. The story shows that Laurel has been outside the community and has returned. When she returns, she finds that she feels almost nothing in common with these people she has known all her life. If Laurel has changed, to her the change was imperceptible. She had merged a new outlook on life with her outside experience that made relations difficult with some and the culture that formed her now seemed shallow and foreign.

Ironically, Laurel's new consciousness leaves her feeling "outside" in something that feels like an experience of death. Especially, in church, which is the focal point of the community, she finds that the hermeneutic language and religious rituals no longer met her needs. But the problem is bigger for her than it is for anyone else. She has changed, but her people may not. She has to find a new way to express herself within the community or leave it again.

She has nowhere to go with her concerns except to her grandfather. She appeals to him to rescue the truth of the Gospel and to restore the former stature of their community, to take again and assume full leadership of the church. What she doesn't know is that he never has had full leadership. Her "restless wistful desire" to do something to resurrect her worship community compels her to do the only thing she knows to do and that is to speak with her grandfather. Laurel believes in right and wrong. Her idea of "What makes something right is that God commands it, and that we [each] have access to this righteousness or justice by a special affection of the will" (Hare 52).

At the outset of Christianity is the recognition that "repentance and confession have always had at their base an understanding of the potential for good and evil" (O'Connor 110) in every living human. Unless each individual in a community deals with his own spiritual shadows and moral flaws, there can be no cohesion. "The Quiet Heart" wishes to posit that until the "church awakens again . . . there can be no consequential change in the lives of people unless there is community" (110).

Language in its sufficiency is powerful. In its insufficiency it is full of capabilities. But in the real world circumstances of each of the characters discussed in

this paper, the language of their real world will be sufficient and competent to verify the love and faithfulness of those they trust to speak to them in truth and power: for Sweet Lily, “Some things God has created will harm you.” For Matilda, “Change is frightening, but alternatives are what make life worthwhile,” and for Laurel, “I will put a stop to this” are words that can alter the course of their lives with promise. God alone protects and preserves nature in all of its exuberance and beauty. God alone with His Word attests to and confirms the resilience of His people: “I AM.”

FLIGHT

Flying terrified Margaret Walker. If faced with the possibility of deciding whether to fly abroad with her husband Myles Harris—the answer was quite simply: no. It never bothered Margie to stay behind when Myles traveled. The aims of his career she understood. She admired his dedication, but frankly saw life differently for herself. Most of the time, they lived together comfortably with that realization, but Myles made it clear that he wanted Margie to share his love for humanitarian work. More often than not, they had to carry on knowing their love for one was secure, though they couldn't share everything. Both felt free and pursued their individual ambitions unencumbered about how or whether each participated in the activities of the other.

Early one morning, however, not willing to give up on interesting Margie in traveling with him, Myles walked over to where Margie stood in their kitchen and he asked her, “Do my regular trips out of the country bother you *at all* Margie?”

She cracked eggs into a white bowl laced with an ivy border. She sprinkled small amounts of shredded cheddar cheese on them and whipped the liquid into a fluff. She marched across the kitchen to the stove and dumped it in the hot cast skillet and whisked briskly. Margie maneuvered a quick look at Myles and smiled pleasantly, but answered earnestly. She said, “My dear husband, good friend and companion—feel free. Pursue. Please don't worry about me. I plan to be here for any children who might need me. Go whenever, wherever, your work needs you,” she said. “Although—I

admit—I do wonder if I said that your traveling so much did bother me, would you then stay at home?”

“No,” Myles said, “I wouldn’t.”

“Huh,” she mused. “So why ask?”

“Because I want you to know that you are welcome to come along anytime.”

“Myles, I do miss you when you’re gone.”

Margie continued her cooking. Myles, who stood nearby, was in deep thought. Quietly, his tall, lean frame settled against the gleaming white cabinets in their kitchen—not wanting this conversation to end on such a final note, he settled in—folded his arms and crossed his legs. Casually, but cautiously, he looked contemplatively on the dark smooth skin of his wife’s still face and said, “Yes. Come with me this time? I’m going to Kenya, again.”

“No. I don’t want to go,” she smiled.

“Uh, *why* not?” he asked, not sensing any real opportunity to change her mind, yet not ready to concede the matter either.

“When?” She asked.

“December eighteenth.”

With a nervous laugh, she asked “At Christmas? No.”

“Margie, can’t you even think about it before you just say, “No!” “It *is* safe to fly.”

“I don’t think so, Myles,” she answered firmly. It isn’t just the flying—I don’t want to go to Kenya.”

“Flying is safe,” he smiled.

“I don’t have to fly to get to any place here in Miami.

It’s *safe*,” he said.

“Flying to Kenya on a jet is probably safer than your drive to work,” he said.

“Then I’ll stay here and see if that’s true. “Enough, Myles, the spiel that flying is safer than driving; I’ve heard it all before.” She laughed, “It’s not just the flying—I don’t want to go!”

“You’re childish!” What’s the big deal about flying?!” Myles yelled.

“Is that your high and noble opinion?” she asked and stomped away from her cooking.

“Off the ground—and out of the country!” He said, “Is that the real challenge here?”

“There’s no challenge Myles! It’s your job—you have to go—I don’t!”

Myles threw up his hands and walked to the breakfast bar and sat, “Have it your way, lady,” he said.

“Why not, she answered. “It’s as good a way as yours!”

Myles’ work with the United States Agency for International Development agency often took him to countries in Africa, and South Asia. December 18th was only a month away. Margie changed her mind to go to Kenya, but had not yet told Myles. She would have to act quickly to prepare to travel with him.

Margie had feelings about Africa that she felt certain she would never share with Myles. Often she felt saddened by the constant news of devastation and what seemed to

her like dystopia coming from all parts of the Continent. Her fear of flying was one thing; her fear of seeing Africa in all its lack was another.

The massacres of Rwanda had sickened Margie. And to her, the sad stories from Africa never seemed to stop.

That day while they sat at their breakfast bar, she said to Myles, “All of Africa is ravaged by its beauty and wealth.”

“It’s exploited, from within and without,” and that’s why we have to keep going,” Myles agreed, “to try and help them do things differently.”

“Why can’t they get to that point by themselves?” she asked.

“I don’t know, Margie,” Myles said.

“You don’t know?” she asked. “They have everything they need to have organized societies. Human rights and decent lives and all that comes with that for people in Africa ought to be a given. Why can’t they figure that out?”

“What do you want—me to tell you lies like those told across Africa every day?”

“I don’t have the answers you ask. I just do what I can do!”

“Oh, *P-l-e-a-s-e!*” she said exasperated. “I’ll stay here, thank you!” she said.

Margie’s ideas of the countries of Africa were misty, and far away, and she did not, now, really mean that she would stay in Miami. Going to Africa was beginning to excite her and images reeled about her mind, unable to fully be grasped. She could not even visualize the height of a tree there, or the sound of a bird a twitter in that tree. She could not imagine the draping of a late evening sunset behind a tree, but thought

perhaps this is time to erase the mysteries, and to dispel her secret innermost fears about travel abroad. She wondered, *how difficult can it be to make a trip to Kenya?*

“I’m thinking about it,” she said softly to herself as she walked over and sat next to Myles.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said as she sat next to the man she called her best friend.

“Have you ever traced your heritage?” he asked.

“Myles, it wouldn’t lead to Kenya would it,” she said.

“Maybe not, but how do you know?” he asked. “In the beginning the people were nomadic.”

“I suppose anything is possible, isn’t it? Have you ever traced yours?” she asked.

“No,” he laughed, but I know I’m English, Welsh.”

“Does it make you happy to know that?” she snapped.

“Thank you for breakfast,” Myles sighed heavily. He took up his dish, went to the kitchen sink, washed his plate and put it away.

She said, “I’m making a silly argument aren’t I?”

“Look, I’m not looking for a fight,” he put up his hands. “If this is how you see things—maybe you’re right. It’s a pretty day. You shouldn’t be so edgy. Let’s go out.”

“I shouldn’t be so edgy because it’s a pretty day, or shouldn’t I be so edgy because you want us to go out?”

“That’s, again, your way of seeing things—but stop being so edgy—let’s go out,” he said.

“Okay, let’s go out, but not until you dance with me first,” she said.

Margie loved to dance and it was her way of diffusing the tense atmosphere with Myles. She walked out of the kitchen and across the living room where she sifted through a small stack of discs.

“What?” she asked holding up a disc.

“Whatever,” he said.

She slipped the disc into the player and the soft sounds of melody floated crisply, through the air. She went to Myles and fitted herself into his arms; he drew her close to him. Their room was elegant and so were the feelings of tension slipping away. A large lively leafed tropical plants, placed sparsely near the window in the room pointed at the light outside as if gave directions to a true north, as if they knew they were pointing the way to new directions and were happy about it.

Myles and Margie had built their life comfortably. Their home faced east on a quiet Miami cul-de-sac. Myles buried his face in Margie’s scatter of natural hair and swirled her gracefully around the room. Cutting through the streaming light, she rested her head on his chest. Sometimes, it was difficult for her to convey it, but she felt happy to be a part of his life. Obvious to her for a long time was his desire for her to travel with him. He wanted to share his work with her. She would do so, but she did not like to travel—especially abroad. She understood that she must share in this part of his life eventually if she was to share in it fully—even if that meant going to Africa. If it meant going this time, then she had to take that step.

“Myles,” she said. “You don’t have to hover.”

“Pardon me if I do. But must you be *so* inhibited?” “What are you so afraid of?” he asked.

“I try not to always be so,” she said quietly. “*Forgive me.*”

While they danced, immersed in one another’s presence, they heard the quick sounds of the weather changing. Lightning crackled and thunder peeled loudly from the west. The rumbling shook their house. “My goodness,” said Margie, “Let’s stop this.”

“It’s still sunny outside,” said Myles with some incredulity.

“That might not last much longer,” said Margie.

“No matter,” he shrugged. “Then let me show you some pictures of Kenya—the Rift Valley.” He walked to the bookshelf, pulled out a large photo album, brought it back and sat next to Margie on the sofa.

“You’ve already shown me those, Myles.”

“Okay! I’ll show them to you again.”

“The Rift Valley?” She laughed, “The place we visit to continue our conversation on whether I’ll go to Africa?”

“No,” he laughed, too. “The Rift is always there. It’s always beautiful—always amazing. I can never get enough of looking at that huge hole in the ground. It literally divides the country in half.”

“And you think I’d also fall in love with this big hole in the ground?” she asked.

“It’s spectacular. He turned to his pictures of the Rift Valley. There’s nothing else like it—looks like another planet—a world below—from millions of years ago. The canyon looks as if God might’ve stepped out of eternity right there and scooped up his hands full of dust. Volcanoes are still active in The Rift. It’s a haven for wildlife.”

Myles's words tumbled excitedly, and Margie could not help but notice with affection his passion.

Pictures of delicately colored flamingos lifted themselves into the sky, narrow legs slanted behind in flight across the great gulf. An eagle soared over a lake, swooped down and plucked up a meal of catfish. "Wildlife beyond what you can imagine," Myles told her. "There hot water springs, salt, everything spills right out of that huge gorge, Margie.

Like crystals from the raven, Myles's brilliant blue eyes sparkled as he talked. There is even a volcanic mountain in the Rift named *Margaret*. "It just goes to show, babe" he gestured excitedly—"that out of every void of chaos, great beauty *can* come."

Margie was pulled, albeit reluctantly, into Myles' excitement. "What else is there?" she asked genially. Sharp spatters of rain began to drum heavily against the windows. Those drops hitting the aluminum gutters of their house made pinging sounds that were as clear as the strikes of flying needles. To Margie, the rain seemed to wrap them in a warm bubble. The sounds of the world outside pleased Margie. "I suppose going out now is out of the question." she said.

"Hey, I think you'd enjoy going to Nanyuki, to the equator," Myles answered. Suddenly, he looked to seize this moment. He was determined to convince Margie that going to Africa would be a good thing.

"The *equator*?" she questioned, more involved now. "You know, that's interesting. I've never thought of the equator as being a place to go to.

"It's a place: the town of Nanyuki is there," said Myles. "Real people live there, with real and difficult lives."

“And the equator is at that particular place?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Myles.

“Imagine that,” she said.

Just seven days before Christmas—on December 18—Margie was, after all, on the plane. Seated by the window, Myles beside her, she had only thoughts of her dread for the nineteen-hour flight. The first half of it would take them from Miami to Paris. When the plane lifted, the engines roared, and the landing gear retracted, and the thuds and tremors against the body of the plane frightened Margie. Myles sensed her uneasiness and placed his hand over hers. *Thank you, Myles*, she thought—his gesture enormous in its simplicity comforted her, *you have been a comfort to me and an inspiration to my life*.

He kissed the tiny gold band on her finger. He quietly appreciated that despite her qualms, she had decided to come with him.

Margie didn't want to burden or worry Myles with her fears; yet, she still needed to draw her strength from his. She leaned over to him and said, “Thank you. Can we take a look around Paris while we wait for the next flight?”

“We won't have time. Maybe we can on the way back?”

The trip across the Atlantic seemed endless to Margie. Myles settled in and closed his eyes. Trying to appear calm, Margie read. She pulled a book from the back of the seat in front of her titled *The Case against Alger Hiss*. She read for the entire flight, and when the plane landed in Paris, she sighed heavily.

Once the plane docked, the passengers spilled out into the isles and out of the plane quickly. Fast moving crowds of people scattered throughout Charles DeGaulle Airport in what seemed like focused desperation. It was rainy, cold and dreary outside. Men in yellow rain suits swarmed busily about the planes doing their jobs. Myles and Margie hurtled along in the crowd going to their next points of entry to everywhere in the world. It had taken Myles and Margie the entire two-hour layover to get from their first plane, through customs, and on to the next Air France flight to complete their trip to Nairobi.

Soon after the attendant announced departure and arrival information, the pilot rolled the plane back and away from the terminal. He began a slow crawl toward the runway and shortly, the plane came to a stop. The jaunty, cheerful voice of the plane's captain announced, "The compu-tah warn of problems with the landing geah. Not to wor-reh, we shall be on our way shawt-leh." The assurances of the pilot meant nothing to Margie's. Her breath caught and her dread of the flight came roaring forward. She tried to maintain a calm appearance. She turned toward the window and looked out at the dreary grey day of Paris. The afternoon's thin veil of, the thick hanging fog, fell lazily against the plane's window. The sight of it chilled Margie, and the sound of its steady sweeping mesmerized her. "Who plans these moments in time?" she thought.

"You okay?" Myles asked.

"I'm not," she answered.

"You will be," said Myles.

An hour later, they were sweeping over parts of the Mediterranean Sea. She could see the image of their flight on the plane's monitor as it glided across the sea's basin. The continents of Asia, Africa and Europe enclosed the waters on all sides of the Mediterranean like a stalwart multi-colored skirt. This flight, and the earlier one, was mostly over large bodies of water. Even with her discomfort Margie could not suppress her feelings of wonder—the irony that twelve hours ago she was on one side of the world; afraid to leave her home, and now, as darkness drew over the skies, and stars shone like tiny footprints on the heavens, she was on another continent, to finally go to yet another.

It was nine o'clock at night in Kenya when they arrived. As before, everyone rushed to get off the plane. Maybe it was her imagination, but it actually looked darker in Africa than any dark night in America.

“Myles is it still the eighteenth of December?” she asked.

“Here it's seven hours ahead of our time. It's the nineteenth. Do you already feel disoriented?” he asked.

“I feel anxious. And loss.”

Inside, Margie found the building not like any airport she had seen before. It was sparse and utilitarian. *Be fair. Give the place a chance.* The thin red carpet was a fragile and puckered—not even sufficient as a veneer of hospitality—it had served its time. Margie looked around the airport—there's nothing here—no food, no books—not a single trinket—nothing. Oh, God, what am I thinking? There isn't anything here—not a picture on the wall. This is contained barrenness—a very bleak place.

Passengers hurried along. Margie was tense, but aware of muffled voices around her. The sounds of brushing feet against the old floor held purpose for everyone. As they wound hurriedly through the narrow corridors, the walls shuddered as the restless crowd pushed toward the baggage area.

“You mean you feel lost?” She was summoned back to the moment by the sound of Myles’ voice.

“No. I feel anxious and I feel loss.”

“The anxiety I understand—this is a new place to you—but loss? About *what*—exactly?” he asked.

Margie was happy to be out of the cramped airplane. “I suppose I should get out more,” she laughed.

“Is that a promise?” Myles asked.

A tall and large dark brown woman walking ahead of them peeled off her heavy black cowl neck sweater as she glided down the corridor. She passed it to the portly man bumping along beside her. And as Margie and Myles burrowed in around the carousel shoulder to shoulder with the other travelers to wait for their bags, the old conveyance had already cranked to life and the black pallet crept slowly along. The big dark brown woman shook and smoothed her tousled hair and took her place at the carousel.

“Myles, how long will we will to huddle around this place before we get our bags?” Margie asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he said.

“You should know,” she answered.

“You know, I don’t remember ever seeing a security officer in an American airport.”

“And here, here you see soldiers everywhere, with rifles?”

“Does that mean we’re safe?” *It’s so dark outside.* “I don’t feel safe.”

“We’re safe. You’re safe. They’re—the soldiers aren’t usually here. It’s probably because America’s bombing Iraq.”

“Oh, great!”

“What’s great?” asked Myles

“I’m just thinking.”

“Well, something ought to be great, babe—you’re in Africa!”

It’s dreary and I feel loss.

“Here come our bags!” Myles said, and his voice startled her. “What’s the matter with you?” he laughed. They watched as the bags began to spin out from the portal of the carousel. They rolled and tumbled along as did her thoughts.

“I feel loss,” she said quietly.

“That’s not unreasonable, but don’t overthink this. Just learn and enjoy. Try to relax,” said Myles, patiently.

“I never once thought of coming here, even after we got married,” she thought

“Will you get a lot done while we’re here?”

“Maybe. I hope so. What we have to work with is just a drop in the bucket to what these people need—

And what do you mean by *these* people?” Margie asked.

“I mean those who need help,” Margie.

“And so tonight, you’ve come here to save the Continent?!”

“Not really,” He answered coolly. Just this one tiny corner of Kenya, I’m trying to help.”

“Do you think that God created the universe with your point of view in mind—how do you know what help might mean for *these people*?!”

“What people? *These people*? You’re being cynical!

“No!”

“Then stop this! Get your bag and let’s get out of here!” The strong banter, Myles and Margie had secured the audience of passengers near them.

Myles turned and walked away. He stood in a line with a sign overhead that read, “For Non-East Africans.” A soldier, dressed in olive drab, strolled past and stopped abruptly. With his rifle angled toward the dimly lit ceiling, he motioned to Margie, “Go stand there!” Am I standing out here like a sore thumb? It was the line with the sign that read, “For East Africans.” *Do I look East African?*

“I’m not East African,” she answered.

“It does not mat-tah. Stand there anyway!” he said.

Oh, don’t take yourself so seriously. You go stand there—you’re East African. If it does not mat-tah, then go stand there yourself! Margie laughed for the first time since she left America, amused by her silent retort and secret battle with the soldier.

Margie walked to the line with the fading sign that read, “*For East Africans*” and waited as long lines of people snaked along slowly trying to complete the last leg of

their trip through an antiquated processing post. An officer sat stoically framed in a window of putrid green link wire, waving each passenger aside after a cursory inspection of their papers and a swift stamp on them.

Just before Margie reached the window, a man brushed against her heavily. She almost fell over from the force of his push. She handed her passport and visa to the officer and thought nothing more of the incident. He viewed it briefly, applied an official mark and pushed it back to her with smooth perfunctory precision.

I'm almost into Kenya without having to say a word... Huh-h-h. It does not mat-tah that I'm not East African. It does not mat-tah either that I'm American—here in Kenya—first things do not mat-tah. The next line in which Margie stood moved even more slowly—*Are you lost in this crowd of strangers? This is all so chaotic, surely there must be a better way to do this—do you even have a face here lady? A name? Go with the flow—is this “Welcome to Jomo Kenyatta Airport?”—This is welcome to Kenya.*

Restless, Margie into her bag and trawled out her mirror. She stared for a moment at her own brown face—*what am I doing?* At last, Margie saw Myles. He was almost out of the airport. An agent searched his belongings more carefully than the agent behind her had inspected her passport.

The man carefully combed through his belongings. Myles stood calmly—and waited. The agent placed his slacks on the suitcase and laced his fingers around the cuffs. Deftly, the man pulled out the small brown grip that held Myles's toiletries. He snatched at the zipper and removed his soap, his razor and cologne. He patted the bottom of the suitcase, and flipped purposefully through the compartments. Appearing

satisfied—the agent began to carefully return the articles to places as he earlier found them. “Thank you, sir,” he said politely to Myles, and stood curtly aside while Myles removed his bag.

The lithe, dapper Kenyan who manned the line in which Margie stood dragged her bags forward heavily with both hands. He stared at her—she stared back. He made no effort to search her luggage. She looked around for Myles. He was now standing outside near hundreds of people gathered behind a perimeter. They waited anxiously, each face alight like concentric dancing moons, waiting for their loved ones. *Everyone’s so dressed up. And in Western clothes. Did you expect nose bones and warrior sticks?!*

“What do you have in your bag?” the Kenyan asked.

“My clothes,” Margie shrugged, “The things that I need.” Margie thought him friendly, and that he looked mighty handsome in his black blazer and khaki slacks.

“You are an American?”

“Yes.” She pushed her passport toward him.

“I don’t need that. How long are you here for?”

“Two weeks,” she answered.

“You may go,” he said. “Enjoy your stay.”

You may go?! It does not mat-tah. Are they, or am I, confused?

Margie took her bag, thanked the man with a smile, and stepped into the warm night air of Kenya: into another time and place—into a world that had a chance now to

intrigue her. The people standing there appeared to vibrate in the swirl of the color and energy.

The low hum of voices mingled with the back traffic of moving cars and blaring horns. The swaying noises blended in the night and made it feel awake. Suddenly, Margie was aware of Kenya seemed. It was if a part of her that she had been unwilling to search began to feel familiar with the very air of the night. She sensed, ironically, as if she might have been here before.

Smiling, Myles strolled over to her, “Did you grease that man’s palms?”

“What are you talking about?” she asked lightly.

“He didn’t check your bag,” said Myles.

“So?”

“Maybe he thought you were a native,” he said jokingly.

“Then all the more reason to search. They have a separate line for *East* Africans.

“That just doesn’t happen. Nobody gets in without being searched.”

“You’re funny,” she said, looking in her purse—she put her passport back.

“I’m telling you, Margie, nobody, but nobody, gets through those lines without being searched.

“My bags didn’t get searched. Myles, I can’t find my wallet.”

“What?”

“I can’t find my wallet.”

“Have you looked well in there?” he asked.

“It was here.” Margie turned and started to walk back into the airport.

“Hey, hey! Wait.” He took her by the arm and turned her around. “You can’t go back in there.”

“Why not? I don’t have my wallet. Maybe I left it at the customs window.”

The noise of the waiting crowd grew louder. The people seemed to sway once and moved forward—there were angry voices from outside the airport that floated above the anxious crowd.

Did you take it out of your bag at the window?”

“I don’t remember doing that, but I must have,” she said warily.

“Margie,” said Myles, “We can’t do anything about a lost wallet here, now.”

“Why, not?” she asked.

“We’ll have to go to the American Embassy. The best we can do is report it there. We’ll have to wait to replace your things—back in the States.”

“All that time?” she asked.

“I’m afraid so,” he said. “Come on, let’s see what’s happening outside.”

An assembly of tiny ramshackle cabs (*matatus*) lined the curb. None looked safe enough for service. Despite that, drivers stood close by their vehicles as expectant of a fare as those inside were expectant of the arrival of their loved ones. But this was not a usual night at the airport. A bloodied man lay tangled in the front wheel at the front of one of those tattered little cars. He had been in a fight and lost. He had gotten in to an argument over a customer, the frantic cab drivers said as they swarmed about the scene.

“My God,” Margie moaned.

“Margie, I’m sorry that you had to see this,” said Myles, smiling sadly.

Margie stumbled away, “Why did he have to kill him?” Margie glanced at the man guilty of the crime, himself bloodied, subdued by other drivers who held him for the police.

“This is a picture of the bare bones reality of life here,” Myles answered.

They walked back to the airport to the corner where they had pushed their bags. When Myles and Margie were on the outside again, Myles waved for a driver.

“Where to, sir?” the driver asked as he scooted out of the little car to grab their bags.

“Take us to the Anglican Hostel, please,” said Myles.

“Are you from America?” the driver asked Margie.

“Yes.”

“You’ve come home—to the place of your ancestors.”

Before Margie and Myles settled fully into the back seat of the tiny car, the driver was scuttling down the rough road to Nairobi. As the landscaped floated past them in the breeze of the night, Margie took quick glimpses of what looked like still, dark clumps of mangroves silhouetted in the background. She read the brightly lighted billboards that advertised Coca Cola, and Mercedes Benz. None of these familiar sights were enough to sweep away the sight of a dead cab driver from her thoughts.

Speedily bouncing along, the driver glanced at Margie over his shoulder: “We’re glad you have come back. Our people will be kind to you!”

LIFE IN THE SUNSHINE

“Dr. Henry sat on his stool and rolled himself close to Honey. She sat on the examination table with her legs crossed at the ankles. He said softly, “Honey, you have lupus.”

Honey sat stunned at the sound of the doctor’s words. It appeared to her that all the sun’s light outside the tinted office window went completely black. “How can I have lupus?” she asked anxiously.

“Honey, haven’t you felt arthritic lately—any difference from your normal well self?”

Honey sat silently. She did not answer the doctor. “Yes? No?” asked Dr. Henry. She looked at the doctor incredulously unable to answer. She had felt achy lately, but she attributed that to no more than her usual strenuous routine.

Honey Williams had always lived an active, vibrant and busy life with a happy outlook on every day.

“The world is a huge wonderful gift,” Honey exclaimed one day to her mother.

“Well life is certainly full of prospects for good, and successes,” her mother Leah responded feeling proud of her daughter’s zest for getting things she set out to do accomplished.

Until now, Honey, with all her liveliness, viewed and lived her life in neat little increments of planning and time—she thought of her daily planner as the document of her hopes and her aspirations—she had written down every goal for five years into the

future. Honey swept along the corridors of life stroking it and enjoying every second of it.

“With good health, it is certainly a heavenly highway,” said she with never a thought of failing health, or debilitating pain or chronic disease as part of any worst-case scenario that might incapacitate her.

“Honey, the problems with your vision and the feathering of your skin—tests show it’s because you have lupus,” he said.

For Honey, her doctor’s voice was a jangling symbol with memories that dragged her back to the final days of her grandmother’s life. She felt again the dissonant pain of the experienced as she sat by her grandmother’s bedside during the last days of her illness. Honey comforted her grandmother in the only way she knew how. She read to her from passages of the Bible requested by her grandmother. Those were all from the Psalms. Honey loved reading to her grandmother—she didn’t like it now—more than anything, she wished her granny could will herself well—that she could will her well. Now, sitting in her doctor’s office, those memories, as if from some secret obscure chamber—felt like rocks tumbling against her heart.

“Dr. Henry, I watched my grandmother die with lupus,” she said.

“Medicine has come a long way since your grandmother, Honey,” said Dr. Henry.

“I watched her die in agony,” said Honey.

“I know,” said Dr. Henry. “Today, people can live healthy fairly normal lives with lupus if managed properly. It is no longer an automatic death sentence.”

“I thought that I had done everything right for good health—fresh air, walks, good food. How is it that I find myself sick with lupus?”

“Because,” said Dr. Henry, “genetic diseases have a path and a time all their own. They are rarely about what you do or don’t do. It’s only a point in time, before the clock hits the fuse. You have no control over that.”

“So, it’s now my time?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Dr. Henry, “but don’t feel that this is futile. It’s serious but not futile. Medicine has come a long way,” he said. “We’ve learned how to treat this disease. What happened to your grandmother won’t happen with you if you comply.

Honey, deeply disappointed by what she heard, sat with her elbows buried into her knees, her face held aloft with her palms.

“This makes my body feel like my enemy,” she said.

“No need,” said Dr. Henry, “You have to become the enemy of lupus.”

The bright lights and the sterile white walls in her doctor’s examination room magnified her sense of forlornness. She slid slowly off the examination table and sat in the chair next to it. Right then, she felt winded—as if she had been rowing in cold, unfriendly waters.

“I’m quite let down,” she said. *But I will stay present in this moment.*

“Of course,” answered her doctor. Everyone feels that way when they learn they have a serious disease.

“Will I suffer pain?” she asked.

“Only,” said Dr. Henry, “if you don’t follow instructions.”

“What instructions?” she asked.

“First, look up. We can and will get through this. I’ll give you something to help your mood,” he said. “Having this illness does mean a lot of shifts in the way that you go about your day-to-day life.”

“How?” asked Honey. She felt timid, unsure of whether she is capable of subduing her new challenge.

“It’s most important—you must stay out of the sunshine, especially between noon and three o’clock. Whenever you go out, you must be covered.”

“Yes,” Honey said. His voice slipping into the void of her emotional pain, she asked, “Is that the case even if I take a walk on the beach?”

“If you go after sunset, there’s no need to worry—just use sun block; but, at any other time of day you must wear a hat, long sleeves, slacks—a long skirt—socks. The idea is that no sunlight touches your skin. Sunlight is extremely dangerous for you Honey.”

“Have you seen a dermatologist yet?” he asked as he thumbed through the pages of her medical file.

“No, I haven’t. . .” she said.

“Do that as soon as possible. In the meantime, don’t put any make-up, or lotions and creams on your skin.”

“Is that it?” She hoped that the disease might require only this small sacrifice of her.

“We’ll have to start right away to treat you with chemotherapy. Your chemo will be followed with steroids,” he said. “At the outset, this will be the hardest part of the treatment. If we do this now—act aggressively, we won’t have to do it later. You *will*

lose weight and you *will* lose your hair. Afterward, with the steroids, your hair will grow back and you will *gain* weight.” Honey and Dr. Henry looked at one another with various final and questioning expressions when Honey asked, “Are these the medical advancements you’ve made?”

“The treatments work, Honey,” the doctor said firmly. “Hundreds of thousands of people stay alive each year doing just these things. They will work for you, too.”

It was late morning when Honey left her doctor’s office. She felt subdued and tried to anticipate what awaited her in the near future. This was a goal she could not record in her planner with a projected outcome. She didn’t know what to think of her health or her appearance. But nothing mattered more to her than that she get better. She left the building and walked to her car. The sun was nearing its highest point in the sky. *High noon for both of us*, she thought. She leaned against her car and turned her clear, oval face toward the sun. She stretched out her bare arms and for a moment, and just for a moment, she allowed the familiar warmth of the sun’s heat to penetrate her entire body. Finally, she got into her car and drove home.

Soon, after Honey returned home, she took up her book, *Storyteller: Folktales, Legends and Myths from the South*, and walked to her patio, where she spotted her neighbor walking spryly toward the beach.

“Hello, Ana.”

“Hello, dear, how are you?” she answered vigorously in her rolling Spanish accent.

“I am fine, thank you,” said Honey.

“You fine?” asked Ana.

“Yes, I am fine, but I will need you to drive me to a doctor’s office next week.”

“Next week?” asked Ana Santos.

“Yes. Tuesday,” answered Honey.

“You remember me! Okay-ee!”

Ana lived life for herself and her husband, Sergio. Sergio had forgotten life, had forgotten the day’s sunlight, and perhaps had even forgotten Ana, but he always recognized Honey. Ana was boundless in energy and cared for him as if he were the same young man she met fifty years ago in Cuba. Honey helped Ana when she could. She wondered now how Ana would feel when she told her that she needed her help also.

One day, Sergio told Honey, “She is not my wife—though I treat her as if she is.” Honey smiled when he told her this. His disease had captured him completely. It either afflicted him with oblivion, or with oblivion had rescued him from the past and the present, although there were times when Sergio occasionally wandered lucidly between the two. He no longer waited for, nor was aware of the inevitable. Those who loved and cared for him waited for the inevitable. Sergio simply waited.

Honey walked to rail of her patio and watched Ana Santos fade into the distance on Boynton Beach. Some of the mite-sized beachgoers disappeared, too, in the swell of rippling waters that disappeared in the deep of the ocean.

When Tuesday arrived, Honey went downstairs earlier than she had promised; nevertheless, her neighbors' apartment door was open and they were dressed and ready to go.

“Good, morning Ana,” said Honey.

“Ah-h-h, Good morning, dear,” said Ana, “Espresso?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” said Honey.

“Why not?” Ana sang “You never dr-r-rink. It good for-r-r you.”

“If I drink it,” Honey laughed, “I’ll be awake for a month.”

“Oh-h-h, Ser-r-r-he-ooo, Honey—Ser-r-r-he-ooo—you see? We go now.”

With Ana on one side of Sergio and Honey on the other, they gathered him by his arms and ushered him into his halting comatose march to their car. Ana drove Honey to the doctor's office where she took her first chemotherapy treatment. When they arrived to the location, they shuffled Sergio inside, and they settled him heavily into one of the royal blue tweed chairs; Ana sat next to Sergio. Honey checked in with the receptionist. Shortly, she was called into the examination suite. The nurse pushed through the door of the examination room, and said, “Have a seat on the table, Sweetie.”

She pushed a thermometer under Honey's tongue, and afterward wrapped a blue plastic cuff around her arm. When finished, she attentively recorded the information on a thin chart that had Honey's name on it.

The pretty nurse had dark brown hair and striking green eyes. She smiled broadly at Honey and said “Dr. Henry has told us all about you, Honey, and we're going to take good care of you.”

“Thank you,” said Honey, and marveled at the audacity of such a big promise: “We’re going to take good care of you.” *I’m depending on that.*

“You do understand why you are here today, right?” asked the pretty nurse.

“I’m here for chemotherapy. I have lupus,” said Honey.

“Yes and this treatment may or may not be unpleasant. Everyone reacts differently to the medicines. But whatever the case, you will get through this,” the nurse reassured her. “The doctor will be in soon.”

When the door opened again, the doctor entered, the same nurse behind him. Honey found him warm and reassuring like his nurse. She prepared Honey’s arm for the treatment. The doctor came over and gently punctured her arm with the needle that started the treatment.

“This will take about two-hours,” he said, almost apologetically. “In the meantime, we’ll be in and out to check on you. If there’s anything you need, let us know.”

“Thank you,” Honey said again.

The slow dripping chemicals entered Honey’s body. She lay still, flat on her back on the examination table. She gazed at the white ceiling, and tried to imagine which healthy normal cells in her body were being burned to death by the caustic fluids. She watched the steady drip, one tiny bubble at a time, roll out of the plastic I.V. bag, along the tubing and into the tiny opening in her arm. Honey thought it too much to expect not to be ill from the treatment, but she’d keep her hopes high.

In exactly two hours, her first therapy was completed. The nurse carefully discontinued the infusion.

“Sweetie, you’re all done,” the nurse said helping Honey to a sitting position.

Honey got off the table and walked back to the waiting room and arranged her next appointment.

“Jou finished, dear?” asked Ana.

“For this time,” said Honey.

“Okay, dear,” said Ana. “When you need help, we go waving one hand lavishly.”

Ana and Honey gathered Sergio as carefully to leave the doctor’s office as they had done to bring him there. They were all tired and the drive home was quiet. Honey decided she would wait to tell her friend Ana about her new journey.

Back at home, Honey again went to her patio where she lay on the sofa to read her book. Soon though, she dozed quietly into sleep. She dreamed.

Honey saw herself running down a broad street that had a breezy canopy of large magnolia trees. They fluffy white blossoms smelled of sweet summer nectar. Its large dark green leavens gave her respite from the sun. As she ran along, Honey jumped high. She wanted to touch the wide dark green opulence of the magnolia leaves. The farther she ran the higher she jumped. *Are there magnolia trees in Florida?* She marveled in her dream. *What are they doing here? Maybe there are some, but not that many.* She continued to run and jump, and in the distance, she eventually saw the sparkling face of the ocean. When Honey awakened, she lay still, looked toward the beach fascinated by her dream. She did not feel any ill effects of her treatment, and Honey was grateful.

In some ways, the dream reminded Honey of her childhood. Her father had been the official vendor of fun as he streaked them merrily across the Causeway to Virginia Key Beach almost every weekend. During those times, she did run, jump and romp around the beach with all her strength. Her first stroke at learning to swim had been at Virginia Key Beach. Now, as she thought of that old beach, she remembered the fire trees so beautiful in their brilliance growing along the streets and beautiful neighborhoods on the way to Virginia Key. There also stood ficus trees, and dense clumps of sea grape bushes that whisked quickly past as we sped to the beach. And, there were the traditional or occasional line of tall palms trees on Florida beaches, but never had she seen a magnolia tree anywhere in Florida. Oh, well. It was only a dream.

All through Honey's life, the beach and the sunshine had been an important part of her life. It was to a beach that she would go with friends and often alone to celebrate and to commiserate. She laughed as she remembered her first job on Crandon Beach playing with children—and decades later, in her daily career as a teacher, she felt that she was still playing with children.

Now, Honey looked anew at the beach that lay in view just below her patio. Grateful that it was summertime to learn to cope with her new circumstances, she was fond of the crispness of the dancing ocean, the frolic of beachgoers who were as contented as the motion of the waves. She watched some bask in the sun—not moving for long periods of time. Some walked away transformed. Some left as they had come, though a little worse for the wait.

With the sun still high in the sky, Honey decided to go to the beach. She walked to her bedroom and searched her closet for the longest skirt she owned. It was a yellow

broomstick skirt. She undressed herself and stepped into it. She sat on her bed. *What will people think if I come to the beach dressed like a scarecrow?* Quickly, she jumped to her feet and pressed through her closet for a long sleeved blouse. She found a white shirt and put it on. Buttoned up to her neck, she stiffened and turned up the collar. She tied a silk scarf around her head and around the collar of her shirt. Honey carefully tucked her hair under a big brimmed floppy hat and walked out the door. With haste, she left her apartment and skipped down her back stairs and onto the beach.

The sandy shoreline was hot from the sunlight and moist of sprays from the ocean. She sank into the soft sand as she walked. A huge and curious pit bull—threatening in his sudden brown appearance ran to her and sniffed. The dog’s owner also ran to her, grabbed the animal by the collar and dragged him away. The lady looked sheepishly at Honey and smiled. Honey smiled back.

A large vessel on the horizon seemed to teeter there—that if the captain made one wrong steer, the ship would fall over into nothingness forever. I, too, am triangulated between the ocean, the sun, and nothingness. I am a meter away from nothingness. I must learn compliance and humility by this thing I suffer and I will go on living.

Honey looked south and then north and decided to go north. She walked and became bogged in the wet sand. She pulled herself free and toggled on. Familiar stands receded into the ocean. She saw people along the way. At first, she was hesitant to look into the face of anyone, but they looked into hers. She did not want to avoid their eyes and so she looked back at them. When they smiled to her and said, “Hello,” she returned their smiles and said, “Hello.” A few women whose hair trailed behind them in

the wind looked at her, smiled and said, “Hello.” She smiled back to them and said, “Hello.” Friendly, smiling people were those she met on this walk. She was glad she came.

Once more, Honey stopped and looked across the beautiful expanse of the ocean. She suspected there were a rhythm and a clip to life she never experienced, or ever quite understood. Life itself always seemed short paces ahead of her as now; just out of range of her grasp to understand it. She said a prayer, silently: Father, reveal to me the mysteries of life. I want to know about life and what is it. Honey relaxed her shoulders. A swishy breeze from the ocean swept over her. A wave roared in and crashed around her ankles and caused the earth under her to sway. She bent and scooped sand in her hands. She studied it. Caressed it—allowed it to settle in her palm and slither through her fingers. For all the years she had come to the beach, this was the first time she noticed that the tiny grains mingled together were orange and white and granite and beige. Tears filled her eyes. Can you first see, and then learn from the sands of the sea? Can you take any one of these small grains and balance it on the head of a needle? Can you separate these pebbles and place them in piles of their colors? She questioned herself deeply.

“No, I cannot,” she said aloud, and thought, “*and the meek shall inherit the earth.*”

Honey stooped and allowed the waters of the ocean to cleanse her hands. She turned then and walked back home.

SWEET LILY

Sweet Lily was born of trouble. In this manner, her life began: That night, a steady warm fire cast a soft glow in the sitting room fireplace. A small quilt was slung over the bedroom door. Outside, the moon shone brightly against the tapestry of stars and planets light years away in the deep vastness of indigo sky. From within the forests, low mournful hoots of owls crept past the cacophony of night sounds and into the room where Eva Lee Lily lay in her bed.

Eva Lee was oblivious to the dances of nature. She was little comforted by the soft aura and warmth of her house; neither was she by the presence of her mother Lucille Johnson, nor by that of the midwife Bootsie Mack Stephens. Eva Lee was sad. And, she was weakened by grief over the recent death of her husband Keller Lily. Drenched in the sweat and difficulty of her labor—she wished only for the comfort and presence of him whose physical companionship she would never again know.

On January 1, 1949, Keller was killed while hunting for rabbits. Rabbit hunting was a New Year's Day tradition of long standing in that town. Keller, his brother Marion Lily and their friend Lindsay Steel traipsed into the woods near their home where the three men soon agreed to separate. Not long after, and in the flash of a moment, Marion, mistaking the faint crackling sounds of his brother's steps on the dried pallets of winter shrubbery, shot Keller in the belly with a single crackle from his rifle. Keller was dead instantly. In the hours and days that followed, Eva Lee's sadness was no secret. This tragedy devastated her, Marion, their families. For Eva Lee, all joy and

anticipation of having the baby vanished. Inconsolable in the short time since the demise of her beloved Keller, she went into labor to give birth to their third child. During her ordeal, she closed her eyes and kept them tightly shut throughout. Eva Lee recalled how Keller waited outside the bedroom until their first two babies were born; how each time he had rushed in to welcome their newcomer into the world.

However, with this baby, her father Jesse Johnson waited outside the door, pained and pacing for his daughter. Eva Lee waited—in her thinking, alone. Throbbing waves rolled through her body. Grief—cold and solid—had settled over her anguished chest like a breastplate—ever more frequent, the pains rushed forward and landed in her abdomen. With great force, they created contractions that made her push; yet, they were not strong enough to give birth to her baby. “Come on, girl,” coaxed Miss Bootsie, “have this baby.” The midwife sat at the bed’s end—her hands resting on Eva Lee’s upraised knees—she looked below for any show of the baby’s arrival. Eva Lee was unresponsive. Her mother, Lucille, edged herself around Miss Bootsie to the head of the bed where she sat and lifted Eva Lee by the shoulders. “Hold your breath when the next pain comes, then breathe through your mouth and push—hard.” In the secluded world behind her closed eyelids—Eva Lee’s forlornness increased. She felt as utilitarian as a clothespin—two sides squeezed together at one end—and opened perfunctorily at the other. In spite of her despair, she complied, and mercifully, brought into life, her second girl, and an end to her long troubled labor. Deftly, Miss Bootsie separated the baby from Eva Lee, tapped her lightly, and when she cried told Eva Lee, “You have a sweet baby girl.” Silently, Eva Lee twisted herself into an infirmed knot and lay perfectly still as Lucille changed her and her bed.

Three days later, Bootsie Mack Stephens returned. “Eva Lee, I need the baby’s name,” she said. Eva Lee, sitting, by the window in a rocker, looking out across the barren landscape said softly, “I don’t have a name, she answered stonily.”

Lucille walked with spry short steps into the room, carrying her newborn granddaughter close to her breast, and placed her in Veale’s arms. “She’s such a sweet baby, Bootsie, no trouble a’ tall.”

“Well I thought she was from the minute I laid eyes on’er,” answered Miss Bootsie, a smile spreading across her wizened face.

The two older women moved across the room and into the kitchen in the little house in this string of little red houses called The Red Line—the birthplace of the baby until now simply called, “sweet.” Miss Bootsie, mindful that Eva Lee was left here a young widow with her two other children, and ‘sweet,’ she, nonetheless; with the urgency of a woman on a mission, said to Lucille, “I have to turn a name into Records today for the baby.”

“That girl of mine shows no interest in the baby,” answered Lucille. “The sweet thing; these past few days, I feel like her life has been dropped into my hands.”

“Eva Lee will come around. Just give’ er time. You know, we’ve been callin’ the baby ‘sweet’ since she got here, so let’s just name her Sweet, Lucille,” said Miss Bootsie decisively. “That’s a nice name.”

Lucille agreed, “Children sure don’t ask to be borned.” Miss Bootsie left with the name Sweet Lily to record at the Office of Birth Records for the little girl born without a proper welcome from her mother.

The bond Lucille felt for Sweet Lily was immediate and thorough. She was keenly aware that she had not felt such joy and newness of purpose since giving birth to her own, Eva Lee, twenty-five years ago. In the spare clean kitchen where she kept Sweet warm by the stove, she had gathered her resolve, that if she must once again, she would commit herself to child rearing, to nurturing and protecting her granddaughter who seemed, now, in the world abandoned. Lucille and Jesse stayed with their daughter and her other children for two months before they returned, just across a large cornfield, home. Sweet was still an abstraction to Eva Lee, so, when Lucille and Jesse left, they took Sweet with them, and it was all the same to Eva Lee.

The years passed and Sweet grew happily. When she was six years of age and ready to go to school, she walked the mile from home to school with her brother and sister—she got to know them, some—but, for the most part, they and their mother remained aloof from her. And, Sweet, growing up as an only child, let nothing, not even that, stand in the way of what she wanted to do. That summer after her first year of school, Sweet Lily was seven and tiny for her age. Sweet was loved by her grandparents, and they kept close watch over her; yet that summer, she was so free, she routinely made her own decisions about what she would do and what she would wear each day.

One day, when she was in an especially happy mood, she decided to dress to suit the occasion. Outside her bedroom window, she heard the birds flocking in and around the trees. Wide bands of light streamed into her window, and she rolled out of bed and dressed hurriedly. She pulled on a pair of little striped shorts and a blouse with pink

plaids. She slipped her feet into her Buster Browns, tied them firmly and sped out the door.

“Sweet,” her grandmother Lucille called, “did you wash your face, comb your hair and brush your teeth?”

Without a word, Sweet spun herself around and ran back to her bathroom. She lathered her face with Castile soap. The fresh soft smell of the white square excited her senses and she rubbed her tiny face firmly. After rinsing away the lather, she picked up her toothbrush and squeezed on the paste then brushed vigorously. While looking into her mirror, one shaped vaguely like an ornamented hourglass, she swept her hair into the air with her large tortoise shell comb. It spiked up stiffly and stood straight as if each strand were a partition in a great black umbrella. For a moment, she studied the light amber hue of her smooth skin. She moved close to the mirror, stretched her brown eyes wide and stared into them. Suddenly, Sweet remembered that she was in a hurry to get outside into the air, the sunshine and the wide-open spaces around their home. She made a tickled squeal; then, with a quick swing of her arm, she parted her hair into three large sections. She grabbed hands full and twisted it into big cumbersome braids. One in the back protruded straight behind, and both in front fanned out like the fixed wings of an airplane. Sweet liked her hair; and, in fact, she made it a weekly ritual to fight with her grandmother when Lucille tried to straighten it with a hot comb.

“Sit still!” Lucille wrestled with Sweet every Sunday morning. She tried to win Sweet over, to have her behave agreeably, to stay in her little red chair, to get her hair straightened and wrapped in ribbons or colorful bows before church. Lucille thought this activity to be the gift of Sunday best grooming, but Sweet hated the sight of the

smoking comb left to set on the stovetop until hot. She hated more the long hot sections of hair that fell limply around her neck and shoulders. This is the very instant that was always the catalyst that started the battle in which Sweet pitched herself forward, out of the chair, onto the floor.

Today, though, thinking her hair perfect just as she had bundled it, Sweet ran out the door and into the front yard. She hoisted herself into the stout lower branches of the chinaberry tree that stood on the south corner of the house. The morning air was friendly and cool, and she pretended she was a vine that spiraled out from those sturdy branches that created the shelter into which she nestled herself. She looked above the fields and felt playful.

Their house was set back in front of a dirt road framed by endless acres of verdant corn and expanses of slender stalked sugar cane. Sweet's grandfather, Jesse Johnson worked the land for the owner, and her grandmother kept their house and cooked for them. Their employer owned the house in which Sweet and her grandparents lived, and hardly ever did a car pass on the road. Everyone they knew walked or traveled in a cart drawn by horse. From her perch in the tree, she could see cars gathering at the north end of the road perpendicularly to a neighborhood called The Red Line because all the tiny houses there were red. Never before had Sweet seen so many cars in one place, especially not so near her house.

Slowly, Sweet climbed down from the tree. She ran to the side of the house and called her dog: "Clinch! Come on Clinch!" She looked under the house and made a clucking sound—"Come Clinch!" Soon, her dog Clinch, blind in the left eye, pulled

himself from the coolness of the shade beneath the house. He stood staring up at her with his one enormous brown and white eye.

Sweet wanted to know who were in the cars, why they were lined up there, and what they planned to do. She and Clinch moved along, slowly, to get to the spot where she saw the cars. They edged along the cornfield. Clinch swished along beside her—his tail pointing, his nose to the ground. Partially hidden by the cornrows, she and Clinch were still close enough to the patchy side of the road to carefully pull tender ripe blackberries from their wild vines. She stuffed them into the burlap bag her grandmother had made for her from a large sack of rice. She slung it over her shoulder whenever she and Clinch marched into the verdant countryside.

She neared the cars, and heard the passengers talking, but could not understand what they said. She grabbed Clinch around his neck—“Quiet, boy,” she whispered. Sweet had never seen these people before. Out of the cars clambered women, men and children of all ages and sizes. An old black truck, parked alone on the opposite side of the road from the other automobiles, had a man and a woman sitting in it. These passengers seemed to be waiting for everyone else to drive up, but when the man emerged from the truck, Sweet was startled by his size. She thought her Grandpa Jesse was tall, but this man was taller and skinner than he. He walked to the back of the truck, and opened the tailgate. He reached in and dragged out a large wooden cross.

At last, the woman in the truck got out and also walked to the back of the truck. Her hair was an unnatural red. It was a red that Sweet had never seen before. Her lips were painted an even scarier color of red. Pasty white make-up smothered her features and gave her face a clownish look. Sweet wanted to laugh, but her instincts warned her

that this might not really be a funny moment. Happy for the shelter of the leafy corn stalks, Sweet thought this frightful woman was the perfect companion to the tall man and what he was concerned about doing with the cross.

The tall thin man hopped onto the tailgate and moved about in the bed of the truck bent deeply at the waist. He gathered several burlap bags and Sweet snatched a look at her own burlap bag hanging from her shoulder that held her blackberries. Made of the same coarse tan material, the man shook the bags straight and tossed them to the clown-faced lady. She spread one bag smoothly and lifted the cross onto it. A man from one of the cars sprinted across the road and helped her. It was as if they were dressing the cross for whatever ceremony they planned for: they wrapped the cross with the bags and tied them with heavy cords and slammed it to the ground. The tall thin man hopped back out of the truck with a can. It was filled with liquid that he splashed liberally onto the burlap the woman and other man had tied around the cross. After this, they all, including the children, put on white robes and pointy hoods with eye holes.

Suddenly, Sweet felt a lonely creeping feeling go up the center of her back. It caused her to tighten with fear so intense she couldn't move. "Be quiet, Clinch," she whispered to her old bird dog. Clinch, retired from hunting and farming by her grandfather was a good dog. Sweet was happy to have him. She wrapped both her hands gently around his snout and pulled him slowly away the edge of the field, deeper into its safety. For the first time in her seven years Sweet was without a seven-year-old's opinion about what she saw; she wasn't even sure now if she could say with certainty that the sun would continue to rise in the sky that day. She was close to her mother's house on The Red Line so she moved cautiously, through the cornfield to get there.

Once Sweet and Clinch reached the spot in the field adjacent to her mother's house, she walked to the edge. Still concealed by the corn, she saw Eva Lee kneeling on the porch, with her brother and sister embraced to her, one in each arm. She talked to them and pointed toward the scene on the road.

Sweet ran from the field and onto the porch with her family. In a rare gesture toward Sweet, Eva Lee gathered the little girl into the circle of her other two children. She said, "Come on, let's go inside." She rustled them into the kitchen with Clinch close on Sweet's heels. "Listen," she whispered, "We're going to Grandpa and Grandma."

"Stay quiet while we walk across the field. Not a sound, you hear. Do you hear me, children?" They nodded, even Sweet, usually talkative, in silent compliance.

Sweet was exhausted when they reached her home. They huddled, ducking for cover as they moved swiftly across the field. She still had her burlap sack full of berries. Her mother, brother and sister went inside the house and settled quietly in the sitting room. Sweet ran to the old pump in the back yard.

"Get here Sweet!" her mother hissed.

Frightened, but still not certain why, Sweet said, "I'm coming." Still, she primed the old rusty handle until it coughed up clear cool water. She set her open bag under the pump and rinsed the dust away from her blackberries. She took them inside and gave them to her grandmother.

Jesse, much too early for dinner, was, nevertheless, at home. Jesse's brother Cleveland Johnson, who worked with him on the farm, was there, too. It amused Sweet how much her grandfather and her Uncle Cleve looked so much alike. Their

resemblance, right down to the bushy mustaches, couldn't be more obvious had the brothers been twins. They were not twins: Jesse was tall and slender; Cleveland was tall and slender, but not as tall as Jesse. Jesse was the older of the two by three years. It was obvious that these brothers liked each without any sibling reservation and genuinely enjoyed one another's company. Their skin was the color of raw pine, though today they were both farm dirty, completely covered with dust. Cleveland had a firm face that was softened by his gentle manner; on the other hand, Jesse was animated and lively, a permanent look of bemusement on his face.

No one had to tell Sweet the day was different. Even with them all there, the house was quiet. That was different, and so she, too, maintained her quiet vigilance. Her grandmother had left the shades drawn all around. That never happened after she got home: she habitually opened every window in the house to, as she said, "let the house breathe some." Sweet knew something today was different.

"Sweet, I don't want you walking along those fields, especially not to pick blackberries. You might walk upon a snake," Jesse said pulling a chair away from the kitchen table and sitting.

"All right, Grandpa," she answered, though snakes were not her concern. Sweet was accustomed to the dusty rural atmosphere of Holman, South Carolina. She had seen all the snake rattles her grandfather stored in a small square cedar box, trophies of his conquests over the serpents. He killed them and popped their tails.

One day, when Sweet was riding on the tractor with her grandfather, he spotted a rattler winding quickly across the hot ground. He stopped the tractor and set her gently on the seat. He sprang off the tractor—ran after the snake—and ground its head into the

sand with the heel of his boot. He broke off the rattle and placed it in his pocket. So, until today, nothing she had ever heard or seen made her afraid to travel around the fields. It was her place of busily discovering the sights and sounds of life in and of the fields; the wide-open spaces were friendly to her, and uninterrupted, until today.

“Sweet, I want you to listen to what Grandpa said, Okay?” Lucille added. She remembered the day Sweet came home with her burlap bag filled with deep red clover. Their pungent aroma filled the kitchen. “What do I do with these, Grandma?” she asked.

“What do you want to do with them, Sweet?” her grandmother asked in return.

“I don’t know yet. What are they for? Sweet knew by now that everything on the farm was suited for something.

“Well, okay. Put them some place cool, baby,” Lucille instructed, not wanting to tell Sweet that if boiled, the cloves could be used as medicine. She did not think of Sweet as rebellious. She did think her different, curious—a little girl who had come of hardness into the world—had somehow already formed a vision of who she was and what she was yet to become.

Both Jesse and Cleveland, at present, with their shirtsleeves rolled above their unwashed elbows sat comfortably at the table while Lucille fixed her usual hefty lunch for them. She was boiling raw cane sugar in water that would soon turn to the syrup that would drench Sweet’s blueberries. Sweet sat on her grandfather’s knees.

“Jesse.”

“Yeah, Cleve, that coach whip is a dangerous snake.”

“Uh-huh. You know you are right, Jesse. Anytime a snake can turn itself into a circle and roll itself at you that *is* a dangerous snake.”

“That’s right. And once they catch up with you—it’s all over for that person!”

“I never heard of anybody running faster than one of those snakes, so there is no getting away from one.”

“No. I never heard of anybody out running one either.”

“Children especially, Jesse, ought not to be out and around in these fields meddling around where those kind of snakes might be.”

Sweet observed each man closely and listened as they talked. She pushed back and forth, the motion of her legs causing the chair on which they sat to creak. “Tell me they are especially dangerous to children, Cleve.”

“Yep, Jess. That’s because children have milk behind their ears.”

“Is that right, Sir?”

“Yeah. Any snake can pick up the scent of milk real fast—but I tell you, none as fast as those coach whips,” said Cleve with conviction.

“You *don’t* say!?! And you said nobody can out run one of those things?”

“Nobody. They certainly cannot. And once they catch up with you, they stick their head straight up your nostrils and suck all the air right out of you!”

“Food’s ready.” Lucille’s voice broke through the back and forth between Cleve and Jesse. She stood in the doorway between the dining and living rooms and called Eva Lee and the other children to the table. “Come on now,” she urged.

Sweet Lily jumped off her grandfather’s knees and scurried ahead of him and her uncle to her usual place at the table. Sweet appeared completely unmoved by their

tales of rolling snakes. They gathered around the table spread with fluffy light brown biscuits and golden fried chicken. The rice was browned with chicken broth and collard greens were piled high in a cheerful yellow serving bowl. Sweet's blackberries were now a succulent and dark purple dumpling.

“Gracious God, our Father, we are thankful for your mercy. We accept with humbled hearts your kindness and patience towards us, and your plentiful provisions. Bless our food, Father God and sanctify our drinks. Strengthen our bodies so that we may ever bless your holy and precious name. We thank you,” Jesse prayed.

“Yes, we do thank you, Father,” said Lucille. “Pass everything around, Jess.”

They sat quietly and ate sumptuously. When everyone had finished, Lucille rose and cleared away all the food leftover. Sweet, Eva Lee and the other children helped also. When dinner was finished and everything returned to order, Sweet and Lucille came back to the table to sit with Jesse and Cleve. Sweet spread her arms across the table in front of her and said, “Grandpa, I’m not afraid of snakes. You and Uncle Cleve can’t scare me.” She paused and said, “I saw *people* today that scared me.”

THE QUIET HEART

Laurel Anne Reed drove to church and parked. She sat in her car feeling quiet and subdued, more detached from her experiences at church than ever before. She looked over the parking lot. Pink and white azaleas bloomed around the property and hugged the perimeter of the church. Their beauty drew her in and greatly rewarded her senses. Inside the building, she knew there would be no such compensation for her senses, or for her heart. She didn't want to go in. Though dutifully there to support her grandfather, she wished instead to sit and enjoy the warmth of the sunshine. It comforted her, and was better than anything she was absolutely sure she'd encounter inside the blond bricks of Lovely Hill Church.

Lately, it seemed that for every one thing her grandfather, Reverend Duck Godbolt, did to hold the congregation together—to plan for the congregation and move forward, the senior Deacon, Handey Alexander acted like a malignant tumor in his side to obstruct him. Alexander's ability to divide the congregation managed to keep the church in an uproar unable to function in any meaningful way.

Deacon Alexander was in charge of the church's finances and had been for years. For the past three Sundays, his conflict-ridden agenda had grown craftier. He made an open show of his willingness to thwart Reverend Godbolt's efforts to call meetings with the members. Reverend Godbolt wanted to discuss enlarging the church with additional rooms for the church's school. Deacon Alexander's opposition was sinister and no one could understand why; after all, the only thing the preacher wanted

to do was talk with his members. Alexander's discordant behavior angered Laurel Anne Reed.

She observed the members as they arrived. They streamed in with small children and young babies. Laurel Anne wondered—to what end would this voluntary, seemingly wholesome, ritual come for these children. Right now, they were oblivious to Lovely Hill's quandaries. In her thinking, they were little gold buttons still tumbling out of their family's cars and scurrying up to the sanctuary. Over the years, she watched many grow out of their bassinets and into the pews of Lovely Hill Church.

Members who had been at Lovely Hill thirty years and longer had watched her grow too. Year after year, everyone—no questions asked—bumped along to the same monotonous tune without missing a step. These children were growing not only as members of this church; they were absorbing a doctrine, the soundness of which Laurel Anne now questioned.

The words and perceptions that had helped her settle into that church and had helped her define herself and how she look at the world now seemed shallow and unsettling. What she saw previously as a reasoned way of life had descended as she came to understand that so much of church life was raw greed and a wrest for power. She found herself face-to-face with duplicity so frightening; a respected old church was being swallowed by it.

Now, Laurel Anne was certain that in every word, and in every perception, the truth was as elusive as ever. If the children of the children grow up and begin to see and question what she sees and questions, then what will this entire ritual amount to? *Nothing*, she thought.

The muffled sound of a closing door broke into her thoughts. It was her grandmother leaving the parsonage. Laurel Anne watched as Kathryn Godbolt fiddled with the key until she locked the door. Kathryn stepped from the shadows of the house and tiptoed to the church; at least that is what her walking looked like on her clicking high heels clicking. This Sunday, like all the others, she shimmered like fool's gold in her ostentatious apparel. In her royal blue suit with silver sparkles and six-inch silver-heeled blue pumps she tapped along as if she were in a protest march. The faux feathers spiked and bounced on her spectacular wide brimmed blue hat as she teetered down the winding sidewalk: *Gaudy Grandma in her UFO*. We could heat the church for a month in the dead of winter with those hats if we needed to.

At the church door, Kathryn grasped the knob. She parted her lips in what looked like a forced smile. She pulled the door open, propelled herself forward and disappeared into the hollowness of the building. I have to find a smile for my own face. I have to find a new language for my silenced heart. I have to find the will to walk into this church.

Laurel Anne removed her keys from the ignition. She dropped them into her purse, picked up her Bible and slipped from the car. Grateful for the lull in people arriving and the parking lot momentarily quiet, Laurel walked toward the church. She didn't go in, but went to the far side of the building. There she sat on the stoop at the entrance to her grandfather's study. Again she heard the sounds of cars coming in. People rushed eagerly inside. She stood and walked farther to the side of the building, near the corner, to hide herself.

She noticed her friends Cassie Collier and Matilda McCleary also arriving. Matilda walked in from the direction opposite the parking lot as Cassie emerged from her car. They waved happy to see one another. Matilda had sided with Deacon Alexander to oppose expanding the school and Cassie had admonished her roundly for doing so. Those two have absolutely no complexity in their thinking or for that matter any self-awareness. They seem quite entertained by the antics going on in the church: *Don't mess with what I think. Don't ask me to change—the way it is, that's good enough for me.* Laurel recognized that Matilda and Cassie were people committed to what they believe. I've been here all of my life. What does that say about my own complexity or awareness of myself?

The door of the study opened and Reverend Godbolt stepped out.

“Well, young lady, what're you doing back here?” he asked.

“Hey, Grandpa.”

“Good morning, darling” said Reverend Godbolt. “What're you doing back here?”

“Taking a last deep breath before I enter the gates of hell,” Laurel Anne answered with a laugh.

“You're thirty-seven years old, Laurel. This doesn't have to be your hell,” her grandfather answered.

“Grandpa, this church and you are more to me than about whether I am old enough to walk away. I'm thirty-seven years old, but you are still my Grandpa. I feel as if I've lost a member of my family when I see how much this church has changed. I

don't hear myself thinking of hope anymore. I feel as if we're losing something we can never get back if it goes away. I feel that I don't know you anymore," she said.

"Is it because I don't challenge Alexander directly?" he asked.

"You hardly challenge him at all. And you're letting him destroy everything you've worked to build," said Laurel.

"It looks that way, but not so. Jesus was as silent as a lamb during His greatest challenge," he answered. "I believe that one day, you will agree with me. You don't have to fight every battle to win, Laurel. He was silent and fighting for what needed to be changed." *You're not Jesus!* She screamed inside. "You can't just stand by and allow Handey to destroy everything you have worked your entire life to build. Handey doesn't have a stick in the woodpile; yet you don't challenge him," said Laurel. "When I was a girl, I watched you clear this land. You built this church from slats on the ground with help from whomever you could get to pause long enough to help you!"

"With or without me as pastor, this church either will grow or it will fail. Those labors of mine were worthwhile. I'm glad I built this place. Yet, the only thing I had then, and the only I have now, in this woodpile *is* that work. My love for God and my love for the people—that's enough," he said softly.

"What?" Laurel asked incredulously?

"This land isn't mine. It's your grandmother's," he said. "So," he sighed heavily, "If this work goes on with me as your pastor when this confusion settles—it will be a miracle."

"Grandpa—"

“Darling, do you also remember that old song I used to sing? Be Still and Let God Fight Your Battles?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t believe that being still means doing nothing,” said Laurel Anne.

“There are things in life more important than being right or sympathetic,” he said. Reverend Godbolt placed his arm around Laurel Anne’s shoulders. She felt the smallness of her stature under the arms of her tall meaty grandfather. She felt little comforted.

“Your voice, Laurel, your inner communion, and the contents of your heart belong to you. No matter how hard things get in your life, don’t let trouble, or any person, silence your heart,” he told her.

“Grandpa,” she pleaded, “Don’t let this go on.”

“Darling, if you never cast your shadow over the door of another church, it won’t matter so long as God is first in your life. Come on. Go inside,” he said. Reverend Godbolt walked Laurel Anne to the front of the church. He opened the door. She walked in. He went back and entered his study.

Laurel Anne wanted to put her questions and doubts aside. Her grandfather sounded detached—unaware of the severity of their situation. The forlorn she felt only increased after she talked to him. Oh God, do not hide your sweet face from us. She rubbed her hand down the side of her white slacks and remembered that about the time the furor over enlarging the church started, her grandmother began to sleep in the guest bedroom at the parsonage.

Standing at the entrance to the sanctuary, Son Simpson and Matilda McCleary were in their usual places, as if nothing was different at the church. Carry on faithful soldiers. Dressed in her smooth, black linen usher's attire, Matilda's make up was beautiful and impeccable, though it could not mask the blank look she wore perpetually on her soft brown face. It was a look that cast doubt on whether she ever quite knew where she was, or how she got there. Laurel regarded Matilda as a little sister; her family, imminently involved in Matilda's well being after both her parents died. Like two lost cherubim, Matilda and Son stood sentry and, as best they could, welcomed worshippers to the sanctuary.

The air in the foyer felt fresh to Laurel Anne's skin. She lingered for a moment and stared at the cool, polished wood floors and the large mirrored wall as if for the first time. Before she greeted Son and Matilda, out walked Deacon Handey Alexander from the church's office, knocking along on his walking stick. He was visibly shaken when he saw Laurel Anne. It was no secret to him how Laurel felt about him. As he started to walk past her, he cast a sideways image of himself in the huge mirror. His own reflection frightened him and sent him into spasms. His own image, he imagined, was someone there to threaten him. He jerked his cane violently over his head and slammed it wildly at the mirror at his own reflection. He hammered the mirror repeatedly, then once again. Well before he recovered himself, the mirror was shattered, large shards of it on the floor. Oh God, hide us in your secret place.

"Don't nobody put they hands on me!—git away from me!" Deacon Alexander screeched like a wounded duck. No one had approached him—for a moment, Laurel

Ann, Son Simpson, and Matilda, stood in shock; for a moment, no one in the foyer moved.

“Laurel Anne. Come inside,” Matilda said anxiously. They walked inside. “I was wrong,” Matilda whispered. “I thought what Handey said about waiting to expand the church was right.” Passing by the partially opened door of the church office, Laurel Anne saw her grandmother quickly rising from behind the desk where lay the church ledger.

“You don’t always have to takes sides on an issue. Others should see how outrageous Handey is,” Laurel Anne said to Matilda.

Deacon Alexander’s spectacle sent Son Simpson whipping down the hallway to the pastor’s study. He rapped quickly against the study door. In the meantime, Deacon Alexander scrambled into the sanctuary and hobbled directly to the front pew and perched in front of the dais like a prehistoric raptor.

Inside the sanctuary, the members were tense; the commotion in the foyer made everyone afraid. If a disturbance had started outside before services—there would certainly occur turmoil inside. Only the sounds of ceiling fans were heard whirling around the bright white, tulip shaped bulbs.

Johnny Mack sat at the black grand piano; his eyes fixed, however, on the door. Compie Washington sat at the organ, her hands to her face. Leland Washington, her brother, stood with his elbow rested atop his guitar. The choir—robed in gold to match the carpet on the floor—sat in awe.

After he left the pastor’s study, Son Simpson spun in a circle and practically ran into the sanctuary. Rather than return to his post at the door, he sat where he did

regularly, on a pew on the right side of the pulpit. Finally, the musicians, snapped out of their stupor, began to play *Sweet Hour of Prayer*, not because that is what had arrived, but because that is what they wanted. The choir did not sing—they waited to see if what they did get was a *Sweet Hour of Prayer*.

Instead of entering the sanctuary from the side door near his study as he always did, Reverend Williams entered through the front door. He marched solemnly down the aisle in his ceremonial black robe. He only wore his regalia when conducting a wedding or a funeral. Now, he wore it and looked completely bewildered, as if he were conducting a funeral or presiding at a wedding where the bride had been jilted.

In a loud and formal invocation, “Oh taste and see that the Lord, He is good,” he chanted. “Blessed be the name of the Lord. The Heavens declare His righteousness, and all the people shall see His glory.”

His steps short and deliberate, he approached the pulpit. He mounted, slowly, the three circular steps. He turned and faced the congregation. After Reverend Godbolt was in the pulpit, Kathryn Godbolt slipped into a back pew, bowed her head, and folded her arms. Resembling a tent under which she took refuge, she craned her neck forward and peeped out cautiously from under her immense hat.

“Will the congregation stand please?” Reverend Godbolt asked.

The choir and most of the congregation stood. Deacon Alexander and his cohorts stayed seated, he with his good leg stretched in front of him. “I stood outside this church this morning with my granddaughter, and I found her heart to be heavy—very heavy. I realized after that my answers to her were scant at best, at worst, insulting, concerning the confusion that’s abounded in this church over the past few months. I

know that many other hearts here this morning are heavy. As pastor, I feel myself to be parent and grandparent to each of you—teachers will you take the children to their classrooms please—musicians give them some music while they go out.”

Cassie Collier and others responsible for the children stood and gathered the children and huddled them out of the sanctuary.

“There was a time in the history of this church,” the pastor continued, “that the order of business was worship. Worship of a holy and living God. Today, it’s different. We haven’t worshipped God in this church in the last several weeks, but I’ve decided today that we will do nothing else. I know of no medicine superior to make a heart merry than worship of God. We will not follow our regular order of service. We do nothing else save sing songs, old and new, and pray. . .” Cassie returned and sat next to Laurel Anne and Matilda, who had come in and taken a seat.

“I beg your pardner preacher. We go take up collection this mornin.’ We kin git that out the way before you start wid yo’ singing,” Deacon Alexander asserted. He wriggled himself from the pew, without his stick, to make his point.

Johnny Mack stood, closed the lid of the piano, and left the pulpit; the choir left the stand. Leland Washington took his guitar off and placed it in its stand. He walked over to Reverend Godbolt. “Reverend, may I please have the microphone, please?” he asked.

Reverend Godbolt didn’t ask him, “Why?” He surrendered the microphone to Leland. “Reverend, why don’t *you put* this old dude out this church?” he asked. Handing him back the microphone, Leland walked away.

In short order, all but a handful of the people filed out the church. Removing his robe as he went, Reverend Godbolt retreated to his study. Deacon Alexander surged in behind him. Loud protestations could be heard from the deacon, but not a sound from Reverend Godbolt. Son Simpson and other members who stayed decided not to leave just yet. They'd wait until Reverend Godbolt was safely inside the parsonage.

At last, Deacon Alexander gushed from the study and fled the sanctuary without his cane. He appeared to glide out of the building. His quick movements gave the impression he never needed the cane at all. "You jest wait! I'll be right back!" he hollered. His coat tails flapped as he headed for his car. Kathryn Godbolt scurried behind him, but he moved so fast that if she wanted to say something to him, it wasn't possible. Alexander jumped in his car and sped away in a flying trail of dust and gravel.

As promised, he was back shortly. He jumped out of his car and stepped back. He slammed the door as if he had a personal grudge against it.

Deacon Alexander brushed past Matilda, Cassie, Laurel Anne, and Son Simpson, who stood on the church steps like a frenzied cartoon. Son Simpson noticed first that Deacon Alexander, headed back inside the building, had a gun.

"Oh, my goodness!" he exclaimed and ran toward Deacon Alexander.

"Son! Son! Don't go over there?" Laurel Anne shouted. She grabbed his arm, "Don't go over there!"

"That man's crazy," screamed Matilda, flopping around.

Laurel dropped her purse and Bible to the ground and ran to the parsonage to call the police. She didn't see Deacon Handey Alexander fall to his death. He was dead

before he hit the ground—the moment he set his foot on the first step of the church. Laurel realized when she reached the parsonage, she didn't have her key. Running back to the church, she met her grandmother.

“Your granddaddy's all right. Handey's on the ground dead,” she said.

Reverend Godbolt stood outside, “Poor Deacon Alexander was more afraid of this congregation and the law than he was of God,” he said sadly.

The next Sunday, no one came. Reverend Godbolt sat in the pulpit, dressed in his robe, alone and watching the sanctuary door. Laurel Anne sat in the parking lot. She was neither surprised nor disappointed. This randomness was as mystifying as the disruption of Alexander's murderous intentions at the church steps. This church may disappear. It may not be around for another generation of children. If it isn't, so be it. This might be an opportunity for them to avoid this kind of nonsense. It would be an opening for some of these children to learn to follow God and not man. She started her car and drove away.

MATILDA

Matilda McCleary's reputation reached far in Holman as the best cook in South Carolina. For years, a member of Lovely Hill Church, she cooked breakfast and lunch for the children of Lovely Hill's day school. Every morning, at the darkest part of the day, she slid out of bed and dressed herself neatly. She tied a pretty scarf around her long thick plaits. She pulled her lively colored apron from the back of a cane-backed chair in her own kitchen, left her small house, and walked the short distance to the church.

Summers in Holman, at the peach barn in town, Matilda shopped food for Lovely Hill. The fruit were stacked high in boxes and in open bins. This time of year was Matilda's favorite because after work plenty of light remained in the day. She walked, like so many others, to town and milled around the aisles of fresh fruits and vegetables. Though crowded at the market, Matilda enjoyed these solitary times and the mystical perfume, the mingled aromas of juicy hand picked peaches and other summer fare that hung like a thin warm blanket in the air day and night. She filled her own little *Red Flyer* wagon with food and hauled it to the church, or to her home.

A particular Monday, on her way to work, Matilda was captivated by the smell of ripening peaches and gentle whiffs of green plums. These were the delectable commodities of her home-learned expertise as a marvelous cook. Often, the gifts of other fresh fruits and berries from parents of children and members of her church provided her chances to experiment, to craft the tastiest desserts. Mornings, first thing,

she chopped, cut and sliced, minced and diced, until watermelons became open bowls of mixed fruit, until apples became birds, and until pineapples were literally renovated, turned to flowers, and swam in their natural juices. She cooked all kinds of other fresh dishes too. Whatever Matilda cooked delighted the school's children. She loved to see them eat, squeal with pleasure, and ask for more. With what was left, but only after the children were filled, she returned to those who had given to her, or she gave to anyone who came in from the fields, hungry after a morning of hard work. Charming in her ways, Matilda thrived on serving and wanted the experience of anyone who ate at the church to be pleasing.

As was often her routine during her summer walks to work, Matilda left the roadway for a narrow wooded path on her way to Lovely Hill. Hewn through the fertile acres of peach, plum, and pecan orchards, the land through which she walked was owned by her friend Hector Vallez. That morning, when she arrived at the spacious kitchen of the church, she found a small basket of beautifully ripened peaches on the back steps where she entered. A crisp piece of paper lay pinched between two peaches with one word written on it: Hector.

The young cook groaned, only half pleased with his offering. What am I going to do with that Hector? From the pocket of her dress, she fished a key and opened the heavy bolt lock. She lifted the box of peaches and went into the cool, dark room. She set the delicate fruit in the sink and ran water on them. Following a generational custom in the rural homes of Holman, she propped open the windows around the kitchen and allowed the dew-filled atmosphere of the morning to flow in. She watched light gradually splay itself over the early darkness while she busied around washing, peeling,

and cutting the peaches. At the first light of day, Matilda peeked out the window to see if the moon still hung on the face of the crisp, cloudless morning. It did. She smiled:

Good morning, God. Well glory be! The heavens do mightily display Your wonders!

Matilda popped a slice of peach into her mouth. I didn't know Hector would leave these, but I sure know how to make good use of them. She figured her idea for them would certainly thrill the children. She appreciated that her knack for cooking pleased the appetites of even the finicky ones—those who otherwise routinely refused to eat at home with their parents.

Slice by slice, Matilda dropped the peaches into a pot of gently boiling water. She went to the cabinet, pulled out a sifter, a large shiny aluminum mixing bowl, and a big spoon for stirring. She double sifted the flour into the bowl. She cracked the eggs together and with her hands held high above the dish, dropped them—*puff puff*—into the silky flour. Briskly turning about in the kitchen, she shook a dash of baking soda into the mixture, and with just enough buttermilk, Matilda made the batter supple and smooth. She removed the pot with the peaches from the stove and drained them. She gently mashed the peaches and dumped them into the lively batter. Ever so carefully, she measured in a tablespoon of vanilla flavoring. For thirty presses, Matilda smoothed all these ingredients against the sides of the bowl until the softened peaches disappeared and became the sumptuous flavor of a mixture ready to become pancakes fluffy enough to float to the ceiling.

By the time it was 6:30, Matilda had half her cooking done, but it was still more than an hour before the children arrived. At 7:00, she decided, I will slowly heat the syrup, cook the pancakes. Everything will be ready, warm and moist for the children.

Matilda scooted herself into one chair and pulled another forward. She settled her feet onto it for a few minutes to take rest. The hushed quietness of the countryside provided her with the respite she needed, by herself, to consider the astounding turn of events that happened recently and on yesterday at Lovely Hill. Convulsed by dishonesty and betrayal of its trusted leaders, all was not well with the congregants of the assembly. Lovely Hill Church now threatened to die a slow death. The main trouble: Sunday, yesterday, slightly more than half of the worshippers returned to church after the sudden and dramatic death of Deacon Handey Alexander two weeks before. For longer than the length of Matilda's life and for as long as she could remember, Deacon Alexander was the man they trusted exclusively with the church's money. The job was his to oversee the church's budget and official business affairs. Yesterday unmasked a separate story about Deacon Handey Alexander and his dealings.

Standing solemnly before his diminished flock, Reverend Duck Godbolt said, "It isn't good news that I must put before you today. A few of you already know what I will say; however, it is with heavy heart that I tell the rest of you that Deacon Alexander robbed us of just about all the money we had—in fact, let me say simply: all of it! I don't wanna paint a picture pretty that ain't pretty," he said shaking his head. Indignant, his voice boomed: "What's left ain't enough to buy us two loaves of bread!" A shudder roped its way across the half empty sanctuary and harnessed the grief of the people.

“Oh, no,” a woman whispered painfully. “What’ll we do now, Reverend?”—a gentleman intoned mournfully.

Sitting between Laurel Reed and Cassie Collier, Matilda said to Laurel, “I’m shocked.” Cassie overheard her.

“For the life of me, gal!” She said under her breath: “You shocked?! Welllll, I’m not.”

Later, when the three walked from the sanctuary, Cassie said to Matilda, “*Whenever* you see somebody fighting so hard for what’s not theirs like it is theirs—you mark my words—something’s wrong!”

“I thought I could believe him,” Matilda answered. “If I can’t take the word of a person in church, then whom can I believe?”

“You trust people Matilda,” Laurel said maternally. “That’s not a bad thing—it’s life: push and shove, give and take, fall and get up. This happens to everyone—you weren’t the only person here who believed Deacon Alexander. And many of them, like my granddaddy, been around him a lot longer than you have.”

“Reverend Godbolt only wanted to do the right thing, and that man stole the church from under’ im,” said Cassie in her shrillest tone.

“Then Cassie, go screech at Granddaddy and the others who believed Handey, too,” Laurel said. She pushed Cassie back into the sanctuary. “You leave Matilda alone. She did what she thought was right. You can’t blame her for that!”

“When are you going to stop babying her? When is she ever going to learn to stand on her own two feet?” Cassie asked.

“When she’s ready, Cassie. She’s *is* young—on her own. We look out for her—don’t’cha know? I won’t stand by and let you pick at her, Cassie,” said Laurel.

It didn’t seem to matter that Deacon Alexander had waged his last church battle. His deeds, quite frankly, ensured that the broken church he left behind continued to fight—that it would continue to disintegrate.

Waiting in the foyer, Matilda stood in front of the same grand mirror Alexander attacked and shattered with his walking cane on his last day of life. She studied her fragmented reflection and sensed the weight of the growing faction coming to bare on the members of the congregation, on personal friendships like hers with Cassie and Laurel. Matilda thought of the utter perversity of Deacon Alexander before his calamitous death—how he stood behind the outsized collection table, his palms settled over the two offering bowls as if holding cash in and waiting for more to fall into his upturned hands. He said, “Let everybody in favor of keepin’ the money in the treasure stand to your feets right now.” Feeling personally summoned, and wanting to play a role in the church in something important besides cooking, Matilda stood and voted with those in favor of Deacon Alexander’s shady proposal. It was a shaky perch on which she stood, but from her place of well meaning shallowness, that day was fateful for Matilda. She had summarily dulled her senses to the pained look on Reverend Godbolt’s face. Her hands dropped and folded in front, her face blank and pinched in determined solidarity with Deacon Alexander, completely unaware how he ill-used and pilfered Lovely Hill’s treasury. In the stillness of this hour, Matilda readily acknowledged Alexander’s wiliness. Never had she considered a reason to question the man’s sincerity.

When a child, twenty-year-old Matilda watched every move her mother made in the kitchen. An extraordinary cook who lived in meager circumstances, she taught Matilda how to scratch together excellent meals from little. Now orphaned, while her mother lived, Matilda learned well.

Throughout her cooking ventures, Matilda always surprised herself and mystified those who ate the meals she prepared. However unwittingly, she superimposed her same home standard of creative frugality on the workings of the church. As no more or less than her pleasant home life as an only and dearly loved, but overly parented child, she acted as she witnessed her mother act—she did in most circumstances what she saw her mother do. Without misgivings, she accepted Lovely Hill as a place like her home—for Bible reading, for singing, and for offerings of benevolence. No more and no less to her than an extension of her living room and her kitchen she once shared with her late life parents, Lovely Hill, after the lifelong association of her mother and father, replaced the closeness she no longer shared with them.

“We need to save the chutez’s money fuh a rainy day,” Alexander said passionately that Sunday.

“If we are looking for rainy days, then we should save the money,” Reverend Godbolt opposed from the pulpit. “But I’m not looking for rainy days. I expect excellent days ahead. This church has a glorious future. As a part of the body of Christian believers, we must expect and seek that better future, and prepare our children for it.”

Throughout his tenure as head deacon at Lovely Hill, Deacon Alexander continuously cultivated a brand of mindless, befuddled devotion from those who

supported him—that they should follow his lead and vote for hoarding Lovely Hill’s money for a time later, rather than use some of it purposefully for growth. After her vote, Matilda felt no remorse. She held no personal animosity toward her pastor. After all, that wasn’t the first time Deacon Alexander had acted that way. She expected that through such fitful tomfoolery—Lovely Hill got its business done.

There, as she stood alone, in front of those hideous cracks in the mirror, Matilda’s friends had engaged in heated discussion about her. Even though those ladies were both older than she, the only time they excluded her from a conversation was when they disagreed on some point concerning—her. As Cassie and Laurel talked, Matilda, though saddened by her role in Deacon Alexander’s schemes, began quietly to think that maybe all this church going and doing wasn’t about faith in God and doing his bidding at all; that instead, it was more about self—personal aggrandizement—about how and to whom a person should be loyal. She thought, then, her next step must be to reassemble her allegiances. Perhaps she should align with those who helped her—who cared for her. About nothing was she sure except that her faith had been wounded and shattered like that mirror.

When Laurel walked over and put her arms around Matilda’s shoulders, Matilda said, “When other people wanted the job of church cook, Reverend Godbolt gave it to me Laurel.”

“He gave it to you because he *knew* you could do it,” Laurel said. “And you’ve done it well. You don’t owe anyone anything for that.” Laurel sympathized with Matilda and grasped the innocence of her quandary. Laurel realized also that her

grandfather's, Reverend Godbolt's, ideas and their meaning may not have summarized well for Matilda.

“Matilda, as you live your life—and people do for you what is reasonably expected they can or will if a situation arises, there is no need to feel indebted. Gratitude—thankfulness—is one thing, feeling indebted is not what you need to feel to this church. The same is true if *you* do something for someone who needs your help.”

“I don't have to sell my soul for a bowl of porridge?” Matilda acquiesced.

“You mustn't if you want to live and love yourself afterward,” said Laurel.

“How do I make decisions now if the biggest one I've ever made was wrong?”

“None of us ever knows. The important thing is that you keep trying. Learn to trust God and to trust yourself.”

Matilda recalled her tears that came. Laurel's words helped her accept Reverend Godbolt's generosity and all it meant for her; that despite the frenzied atmosphere of church politics, it was fine that she attempted to parse the difference between her role as cook appointed by Reverend Godbolt and paid by the congregation, and her role as a lay affiliate with an equally rightful voice in the affairs of the establishment. In their party atmosphere, she had not yet figured out her voice. She never looked at it or weighed its given power. Laurel's counsel helped her to wholly consent to her two roles in the church as separate.

“You know,” Matilda said to Laurel, “with Deacon Alexander gone, we can all look forward to better things.”

“He wasn't the one to recognize you can make somethin' outta nothin' in the kitchen,” harped Cassie.

“Maybe more of us will begin to think for ourselves and look for God where He may really be found.” Laurel said looking at Cassie.

Troubled by the entire mess, “It’s bad when nobody’s sad you’re gone,” said Matilda.

“We’ll all have to face up to our deeds eventually,” Laurel answered.

Just then, Matilda heard the sound of a truck, breaking into her thoughts, pulling to the side of the church. *Who is that?* She thought with a skip of her heart. It was not usual for anyone to visit the kitchen before the children arrived. Matilda got up, tipped to the open window, but as she did the door creaked, pushed open by Hector Vallez as he strode past it.

“Hector!” she yelled, “You scared my wits from me.”

Hector, happy-go-lucky and rugged in appearance, said “Call’em back sweetheart, you need all your wits about you.”

“What’cha doing here, Hector?” she asked suddenly feeling very shy.

“Heard about what happened at the church and all—just thought I’d come by—see how you’re faring,” he answered.

“That’s real nice of you,” she said.

“It’s not just nice, it’s the honest truth,” he said. “I wanted to see how you’re doing after such a ruckus.”

“The truth?—‘what is truth?’” asked Matilda, a cloud of melancholy slipping over her mood and into her voice.

“You’re asking me, ‘What is truth?’ standing right here in church?”

“You’re standin’ right here in church and you miss the point. It’s a question I think I can ask standin’ anywhere,” she answered.

“You’re right. That’s a big question. Most times the answer is real simple, but you have to find it for yourself,” he answered jovially.

“Thank you for the peaches. The children will like them,” she said, not wanting to dwell on the subject.

“You owe me no thanks;” said Hector—“I can give you more.”

“Uh, huh. That’s enough peaches for this week,” she said. “Everybody looks out for me,” she continued softly. “Peaches and everything else.”

“I’m not talking about peaches,” answered Hector. “I want to look out for you all the time.”

“All the time until *when*, Hector?” she asked.

“I foresee *no when* while I live,” Hector said.

“We’ve talked about this before,” she said. “Go find somebody smart and Puerto Rican like you!”

“Uh-h-h. Obviously, we need to talk about this some more. Listen to me little girl all alone. . .”

“What’cha askin’ me makes no sense,” she interrupted.

“Let me take you for a drive today,” he went on.

“I’m fine,” she said nervously. “I like to walk. The air smells so good right about now.”

“I wasn’t talking about taking you home, but maybe I can come by after you get there if you don’t want to be picked up,” Hector said.

“You’re thirty-years-old,” she said. “How come you’re not already married?”

“Marriage is more than an idea, or an event—the biggest part is finding somebody you want to share your life with,” he answered.

“It’s so dusty and dry, don’t you want some cool water?” asked Matilda coughing.

“The sun’s not up yet—what?—tell me if I can take you for a ride,” said Hector laughing.

“Go away you old man—what’cha you want with me!?” she whined defensively.

“I’m a thirty year *old* man! I want a woman of child bearing years!” Hector spouted through his laughter.

At the end of her workday, Matilda didn’t want to go home. She was affected by Hector’s long persistence that he and she marry. She sat for a while on the back steps of the church and watched the sun move from the center of the sky and begin its slide westward. She stared for a long time in the distance at a stand of pine trees. The town lore was if anyone looked at them in a special way—the trees could be seen to form the shape of a man’s sad face. Matilda never saw that face, but she pondered Hector’s—not at all daunted by her rebuffs, and not at all sad. His fun-making set her somewhat at odds with her willingness to say, “No” to him. He wanted her to make a decision that for the time being she didn’t want to.

Go away, Hector! she thought. After about an hour, she convinced herself to tell him, once and for all, “No!” That, she conceded, would put an end to the whole

matter. Matilda got up, brushed the back of her dress, and started to walk home. To avoid any chance of seeing Hector, she went along the roadway. Here and there, hearty red cloves sprouted in the grass. She stopped and picked a few, and each time she did, she rolled her fingers along the stem and pushed the fleshy pod to the ground. As she got closer to her house, disappointment arose. What, but Hector's truck, did she spot parked by the roadside.

"Oh, brother," she moaned.

"I don't believe in your bloody religion," he said to her once, though like everyone else in Holman who loved Matilda, Hector did too. At every opportunity, he tried to help and protect the little girl who played inside her. And out of respect for what she believed, he never worked in his peach orchard on Sunday until after church was finished.

"It's your soul," she had chirped in her childish way. "Eternity is a long time."

Following the curve of the road along the embankment and up on the ledge of the orchard where Hector and his workers dug post holes, she stepped along spryly. Her print dress flounced around her little smooth legs. She hoped to slip past. That didn't happen. She glimpsed Hector and his foreman friend, Regal Burgess, coming across the orchard. They saw her, too.

"Matilda! I will see you later," called Hector.

Matilda waved in return. Again—she weighed her thoughts about Hector. She was sure she wanted to tell him to forget about her marrying him—she didn't think she was the right person. She hoped he would get the message. Matilda danced on her merry way like a brightly colored canary.

At home, Matilda soaked herself in a tub of hot soapy water. She closed her eyes and relaxed. Afterward, she smoothed her skin with sweet lotion and dressed herself in a soft cotton housedress. Matilda felt pampered, but exhausted. She laid on the cool comfort of her bed and fell asleep quickly. So sound was her sleep, Matilda did not know the minute or the hour that Hector squeaked into her front yard and parked his pickup truck. In his hurry to get to her front door, he leapt over two of the four steps leading to her porch. He tapped lightly at first, then harder. He got no answer. “Matilda?” he called. “Matilda?” When she didn’t answer, he jumped off the porch and went to her back yard. He saw no one, and came back to the front porch. This time, he pushed lightly on the door. It was unlocked. Having been friends with Matilda’s elderly parents, Hector was no stranger in her house. He walked in and called again, “Matilda.” Through the door of the same bedroom where she slept since she was a child, Hector saw her on the bed sound asleep. He walked back to the living room, sat, rested himself on the sofa, and finally himself nodded off.

It was the feel of darkness surrounding the house that awoke Matilda. My goodness—I’ve been sleeping a long time. I won’t sleep tonight. If I can’t sleep tonight, I’ll be tired at work in the morning. I’d better get something started tonight for the children. She pulled herself up. She sat on the side of the bed and slipped her feet into her bedroom shoes. She walked to the living room to light up the house. Matilda snapped on the lamp next to the sofa. In that instance she screamed terribly and ran for the door. Hector jumped up and ran after her. He captured her at the threshold of the door and lifted her back into the house. Her legs spinning in terror, he said: “You’re at

home. You're okay." Breathless, Matilda said, "This is the second time today you've scared me, *Hector!*"

"And this is the first time since I was fifteen I've scared a girl this much," he laughed.

"Loose me!" she demanded, struggling. He instead tightened his grip.

"Now—you see—if you marry me you could avoid this kind of fright. You'd know that the man asleep on your couch is your husband," he said.

"Hector, I'm not goin' to marry you! That's it!" she said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Because I don't want to!" she said vigorously.

"No? You don't?!" Hector set his joviality aside and said seriously, "Allow me to say this. Life—no matter how good—is mostly winter. We cross many frozen ponds before we get to where we want to go. Sometimes, we cross to where we don't want to go."

"At times life is fruitless, harsh and barren, much like them peach orchids of yours in December," she agreed settling down grudgingly. Hector took Matilda by the hand and led her to the front porch.

"Stand here," he said to her. "I want you to pretend this porch is a frozen pond. The cracks—pretend they are soft spots in the ice." Hector jumped off the porch and faced Matilda. "Now, I want you to come to me. Take one step at a time. Test the weak spots before you make your step firm—avoid any cracks you *can*," he instructed.

"Okay," Matilda complied. She walked slowly, one foot in front of the other until she reached the end of the porch. Hector stood in front of her.

“So—what?” she asked. “I’ve been walking across this porch my whole life.”

“Jump,” he said.

“What?” Matilda asked.

“Jump,” Hector said again. Reluctantly, Matilda squeezed her eyes shut and jumped. Hector caught her. She opened her eyes in his arms, his face close to hers.

“No matter how difficult life is—what’s important is not the wrangling we can do to cheat and hurt people, but the selfless help we give one another,” he said.

He put Matilda down. “Tell Reverend Godbolt, I’ll be glad to replace his broken mirror.”

“You tell him,” said Matilda.

“I can do that,” said Hector.

Together they walked back on the porch. They sat in the refurbished aluminum chairs that her parents bought when they were first married. In silence, Hector and Matilda watched lightning bugs dart about the yard like tiny shooting stars.

THE INTERMISSION

In a few days, I put behind me the hushed stillness of my studies at Robert's Agricultural Technical and Teacher's College in Holman, South Carolina, and even farther behind me, the quiet sheltered upbringing of my childhood in Florida. My name is Nathalie Fickens, and I will never forget the day that I arrived at the stately brick and white structures set in the shade of a forest of palmetto trees that rose to the sun. In a matter of days now, with the other fifty-seven young women and men of my class, after I have diligently studied science, mathematics, and physics, I will toss my mortarboard hat into the air, and begin a new life.

Four years ago, in the summer of 1962, when I finished high school, I learned to learn quickly. That was the beginning of a life lesson taught me by my father before I began my formal studies at Robert's. I had to tacitly grasp and hold to what I thought then only I could imagine.

One night that summer, I told my father that I wanted to become an astronomer. Immediately, he began an impromptu quiz: "What do astronomers do?"

"They study the stars," I answered proudly.

"Can you touch the stars?"

"No, sir, I can't," I answered.

"Then why would you possibly want to work with something you can never see, feel, or *touch*?"

“I like the stars and the moon and the sun. They are pretty and they interest me,” I said puzzled by the stiff inquiry from my normally kind and genial father.

In those beginning years of youthful hope I was certain beyond fluster that I wanted to become an astronomer. I read everything I could find about the galaxies and the nebulae and all the celestial wonders. Each clear night, the sky used to be so black. When I ran out to our back porch and said goodnight to the constellations: the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, the Scorpion, and (my favorite) the Bear, I felt that whatever the universe is, I too am exactly that. Before the sun arose mornings, as if beckoned by softly falling dew, I’d get up, go to the back porch once again to locate the North Star and the planet Venus. Every single day, I wanted to reach for a star, and search for knowledge of those heavenly bodies that were flung farther out than Pluto.

“Why don’t you become a teacher, or a nurse—that’s what most young ladies do?”

“I don’t want to become a teacher or a nurse,” I muttered.

“Well, how many jobs are there for women in this field?” he shot back.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t *know!*?”

“You never said: ‘Here are the limits, here are the boundaries—this is what you can be or do and no more.’ You always said, ‘You can be anything and do anything you set your mind to.’ I want to be an astronomer. That’s what I’ve set my mind to.”

“Well now, let’s be reasonable,” he chuckled. You can’t go off to school to study something you don’t know the least thing about! You go on, get four years of

schooling, come back home and get a good job teaching school. I'll pay the bill, but your Mama and I won't always be here for you."

"Where are you going?" I sulked.

"Where *everyone* eventually goes," he snapped.

At the time, both my parents were under forty years old. I was seventeen, shy and painfully so, but because of their ages I assumed daily that they weren't to die soon. In my seventeen-year-old mind, I thought my father's statement was the indication that our conversation was done, that "Your Mama and I won't be here for you always" was the secret of specific insider knowledge he had about the future that I didn't have—hurry up, stand on your own two feet before we die! Even if that wasn't what he meant, his opaque speech threatened a sense of loss I had never before felt. The thought that I might spend my life toiling in work I never wanted to do was like a large cold wave about to swallow me.

"I know a lot about astronomy," I offered.

Stiffly, he said, "But you haven't answered one of my questions and I certainly can't read your mind."

I can remedy that, I thought.

The next day, under a cloudless Florida sky, and brilliantly streaming sunlight, I skipped all the way to the neighborhood library. I felt like a baby chick pecking her way out of the shell, but when I returned I was prepared. I had factual answers to each question my father had asked the night before. Not only that, I knew exactly what I should expect of myself and how to prepare for an astronomer's career.

Today, I think of mine as a decent past, a fair and reasonable start to life. Though my graduation from college is an occasion for genuine celebration, I, however, must conjure the jubilation the moment deserves. It is the next step—the journey of honest pursuit—I celebrate.

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