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### Short Story Collection: The Old Soap Opera ain't Just Black and White, It Comes in Color Too!

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SHORT STORY COLLECTION: THE  
OLD SOAP OPERA AIN'T JUST  
BLACK/WHITE IT COMES IN  
COLOR TOO!

By

Kathleen Marie Bullock

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of (Fine)  
Arts of the City College of the City University  
of New York City

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Thesis Advisor: Salar Abdoh

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## Lox, Collard Greens and Pig's Feet

*"The bagel is a lonely roll to eat all by yourself because in order for the true taste to come out you need your family. One to cut the bagels, one to toast them, one to put on the cream cheese and the lox, one to put them on the table and one to supervise."* Gertrude Berg (1899-1966)

I love homemade gefilte fish, and not the yucky looking kind you see in jars at the store that look like bloated floaters. I think that I love eating gefilte fish more for the tradition it represents than for the taste. Gefilte fish or *gefüllter fisch* takes its name from *gefüllte*, the German word for stuffed or filled, and is eaten during Passover Seder or on Sabbath Friday. My grandmother cooked it the traditional way, except for stuffing the mixture back into the fish skin. First, she'd cut the fish (usually carp, or pike) into parts, and expertly remove the bones and skin. Then, she'd chop the fish flesh to a fine consistency and add matzo meal, eggs, salt, pepper, and onions. Rolling the mixture around in her hands, she would drop the patties, one by one, into the fish broth and slowly let it simmer. Later, the family would gather at the dinner table where we'd eat cold gefilte fish with a side dish of horseradish and beets. Some Jewish people lovingly call it "Jewish scrapple" and everyone ate it based on their grandmother's secret recipe. It was traditional food and extremely economical. One large piece of fish, finely chopped, could be stretched to feed an entire family.



My story would sound like a happy little girl growing up on Long Island with all the wonderful Jewish traditions. The Orenstein family was well-to-do Jewish family; Daddy Alan was a jeweler in Manhattan who was part of the Long Island weekday rail warriors commuting with his fellow male suburbanites. Mommy Helen was a stay at home mom with a live-in maid, servant quarters, Scottish terrier, two teenage children, and me.

I was a princess put on a pedestal and treated with an abundance of love. The house was my playground, and I played and fantasized over every square foot. The family coddled and spoiled me, and I was beloved as any little princess could be. Except for one glaring, irreversible physical and visual fact — I was a brown-eyed, nappy-headed colored girl, and the maid's granddaughter.

The Jewish comfort food, love, and care shown to me by the Orenstein's, shielded me from the outside. I would be sitting at the table for dinner, and everyone would talk about what kind of day they had at school. Mom would talk about her charity work and Dad would turn to me and ask, "Kathy how was your day, today? Did you learn anything new today?"



The Orenstein's house was located on the cul-de-sac on Lydia Lane in the Hamlet of Salisbury, northeast section of the Town of Hempstead. The Hamlet of Salisbury is one of those many villages and hamlets on Long Island where none of the communities had their hamlet name in their zip code. Homes in the Hamlet of Salisbury, had a Westbury, NY mailing address, but was not in any part of the Village of Westbury. Salisbury proper was largely a Jewish middle-class community that had migrated from New York City during the post war baby boom.

The house was built in 1957, one year before I came into the world. It had a long driveway with a two-car garage, three bedrooms, maid's quarters, and a sprawling backyard that included an in-ground, Olympic-sized pool and patio. In the middle of the driveway, a huge old oak stood solid and deeply rooted in the prosperous soil of Long Island. Sprawling across the entrance of the house, its huge branches reached out and slightly tickled the windows to the second floor master bedroom. Inside the hallway foyer, a painted mural that was a replica — brought the beauty and strength of the tree outside — in. My grandmother (in her black maid's uniform) would sweep the front steps as a part of her daily chores. Back and forth. Sweep. Back and forth. With each swing, she'd whisk away the dead leaves, debris, or anything offensive that sullied her freshly scrubbed and waxed floors.

Once inside you could immediately smell the warm succulent aromas of a slow cooking brisket, baby peas with pearl onions, and mashed potatoes made from scratch for dinner.



My grandmother was a great cook, hands down, and her employers loved her for that. She could understand and prepare delicious Jewish delicacies besides keeping a kosher household, all without knowing how to read that well. In the North, she had always worked for Jewish families, and through her employment with them, she was able to educate herself. It was a complex arrangement, because they still wanted her to remain in her social place of subordination, but they wanted her to be educated enough to serve them better. One of her employers used to give her the newspaper every night after the family was finished with it. While looking through the newspaper my grandmother noticed that each time she received the paper, there would be an entire section missing. Because my grandmother could not read well, she did not know what section it was, or her employer's intent. However, she felt there was something that her employer did not want her to see (she'd always told me, "white folks can be crafty like that, sometimes" and she needed to be able to read to find out what it was. So, my grandmother purchased a dictionary and looked up the words that she didn't understand (she was equally crafty). She

was able to identify the missing pages as the classified section of the paper that advertised for household help. This is when she realized the importance and the power of being able to read. Shortly thereafter, my grandmother started purchasing the newspaper for herself, and applied for the housekeeper position at the Orenstein's. They had placed an ad in the help wanted section of the newspaper and this time my grandmother was able to read it.

My grandmother considered herself a lucky woman to have escaped the hard physical labor of toiling in the fields of the South, to end up housekeeping for a liberal Jewish family. Her migration North also gave her the opportunity to escape the cruelty toward colored folks and their nemesis, "Jim Crow," in the South. She ate well at the Orenstein's and had her dinner downstairs in her room (I ate all my meals with the family) after serving the family and cleaning up. Missus Orenstein didn't count the pieces of chicken to make sure there was only enough for them, like some of the other families she had the misfortune to work for. The ladies of the house would count the pieces of chicken, along with the silverware, glassware, and plates — all before she was paid.

She started working for the Orenstein's when she was twenty-five and at twenty-eight years old, she became a grandmother. I was in the hospital for the first

eighteen months of my life (my mother had attempted several self-inflicted miscarriages during her pregnancy with me at fifteen.) Having failed in her numerous attempts to abort me, I was born with multiple birth defects and the doctor's said it was doubtful that I would survive the night. I couldn't cry or swallow. My tongue was fused to my palate. My anus was closed, and huge calcium deposits protruded from behind my ears. My mother almost got her wish. Riding the Cyclone at Coney Island and drinking turpentine didn't dispel me from her womb, but instead caused me to be born imperfect. I needed numerous operations and no one knew if I would survive them all. My mother took one look at her handiwork and had a nervous breakdown. No one really knows if she fell apart because I lived, and would always be a constant reminder of her desperation not to be a mother so young, or there was something greater going on and my birth made it all too much for her to bear.

I stayed in the hospital for so long, my grandmother could no longer wear the housekeeper's required white maid uniform, because I would scream at the top of my lungs in terror and start clawing at her to take it off. Her white uniform reminded me of the doctors and nurses who were always prodding me with needles. When it was time for me to be released from the hospital, my grandmother told Missus Orenstein she couldn't sleep-in anymore because she had to take care of me. The Orenstein's adored my grandmother so they told her to bring me out there to

come live with them. I arrived there at eighteen months old and weighed less than twenty pounds. Missus Orenstein took one look at me and made it her family's mission to administer food, love and the Jewish culture to me. In return, I called them, "Mommy" and "Daddy," and my grandmother, "Chris." They taught me how to read, write, and spell my name all before I was four years old. I was their little princess.

I didn't have any playmates or play dates at the Orenstein's. Mothers on Lydia Lane forbade their children from playing with *that nigger child* from across the street. No one wanted to play with me unless it was in the summer. My grandmother had told the neighbor's kids that if they wanted to swim in the pool, they would have to play with me. Once summer was gone, I was back to being alone with the imaginary friends I had on television, in the mirror, and with my white dolls. I would sit in front of the television, pretend to tell the news to the wall, or the mirror, while my grandmother vacuumed around me. I watched Wonderama, Bugs Bunny, Kourageous Kat, and Minute Mouse. I would have lunch with Bozo the clown everyday at noon and together we would eat matzo ball soup with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches brought to me on a tray by my grandmother. Bozo and I would lunch in style. This was my daily routine. Cartoon characters and dolls were my only friends and in their world, they didn't care what color I was or that I wasn't a Jew.



In the fall of 1963, the same year that President Kennedy was assassinated and I was five years old, I started Kindergarten in the East Meadow school district, and the world I lived in changed forever. I was the first and only “colored” child at Salisbury Elementary school, not to be confused with the culturally diverse neighboring schools in Levittown, Bowling Green, New Castle, or Westbury. My teacher was astounded that I could read and write — I imagined she had expected me to be low functioning as a student. I remembered being mostly ignored in class and regulated to the back. As long as I was quiet and polite, that was all that mattered. Often, I was scolded for creating a distraction by asking too many questions. The questions were important to me as I grappled to understand with my young mind, why being colored was wrong? Why did the other kids call me names, and say I was nasty. Why would no one sit next to me in class or play with me? I regressed mentally into another world and would look at the whiteness of the palms of my hand, and proudly proclaim to my grandmother that, “one day I would be a Jew.” She thought, as did the Orenstein's, that by attending school in their neighborhood it would better my chances to succeed and I could “become a credit to my race.”

Every day after school, my grandmother would have to soothe me and try to find comforting words to explain why some people didn't like us. It was an extremely complex emotion for a five year old to navigate, and it was not without a lot of tears on both my grandmother's behalf and mine. I went to school longing to return home to the warm and comforting smells of chicken noodle soup and lemon meringue pie, and to people who didn't mind touching or hugging me. However, all the sweet things I loved to eat, kids would call me in scorn and hatred. I was commonly called "brownie," "coco puffs," and "chocolate nigger ice cream." I don't think at that time I was hurt by what they were calling me, but how they said it. Their twisted, angry, and distorted faces still linger in my mind's eye, and the memory rarely fades. Even to this day, I still feel that sense of filth associated with my color and wonder if now, as an adult, my white counterparts still feel the same way about me.



Back then, I felt like my life was moving in shadows and there were these moments of intense emotion that stand out and stops the time clock of those years. I remember when I was four; I had a huge birthday party in our backyard in Queens, and doing the dance "The Twist," so hard my sides hurt. I was five when I was molested in the back room at a weekend rent card party, and started Kindergarten

and quickly learned that not everyone thought I was cute and special. Then, I was six and then eight and the years slowly merged into one large shadow of experiences — of stops and starts, of tears, godly promises, and prayers – yet, I always moved forward.



Before we left the Orenstein's for good, my life only existed in black and white, one in Jewish Long Island, and the other in the Black section of Corona, Queens. Our soul food was chitlins, pigs' feet, neck bones, hog maws, hog's head cheese, pigtails, fried chicken and fish served with a 'mess of greens', white rice and black-eyed peas or lima beans. My grandmother and grandfather had an apartment in Corona in a two family house; we lived on the first floor and had use of the yard for BBQ's and summer entertaining. My grandfather lived there alone throughout the week, and we would come home late on Friday nights and then go back to the Orenstein's on Sunday afternoons. My grandmother and I would board the Long Island Rail Road to Flushing, and take the Q66 bus to Corona. I never was happy about going home or leaving the Orenstein's. We lived on the same block as Malcolm X and his family before it was fired bombed. I didn't have the run of the house and everything was all on the same floor. The kitchen, bedrooms, and bathroom were all right there. I couldn't hide, or look into wall-to-wall mirrors and

play my favorite game of the long blond haired, blue-eyed princess. The towel wrapped around my head didn't have enough room to swing while I pretended to have long luxurious hair, as I did at the Orenstein's. I couldn't roll around in an expansive yard with a well-manicured lawn and green grass, as I did at the Orenstein's. I didn't have any friends there either, but for different reasons. I was not colored enough; I talked white for some and was too light for others. In fact, often, the kids called me “whitey,” “honky bitch,” “cracker” and “vanilla ice cream.” It should be understandable why — at this point, to this day, I am not fond of ice cream in any flavor.

Most of all, what I hated at home on those weekends and holiday trips were the food. The aroma of cooked food was different and not as comforting. First, it smelled bad; my grandmother would start cleaning ten pounds of chitterlings or chitlins as they are affectionately called. They stunk up the house while she was cleaning them, and even worst while they were cooking, and the sad part about it was, I'd have nowhere to hide, but underneath my blanket cover. Those ten pounds some three hours later would be reduced to one small smelly pot on the stove along with a pan of cornbread.

Chitlins are the intestines or guts and rectum of the hog and black people loved them, or at least they did back then. Eating them was traditional and stemmed from eating the scraps of food given to slaves in the South. With chitlins, either you loved them or you hated them — there was no in-between with eating them. They could be eaten fried, soaked in vinegar, with hot sauce or in a sandwich. A house party was not a house party if you didn't have some chitlins, collard greens, and fried chicken on that table to serve. Folks would look at you side-eyed if any of those dishes were missing from the menu.

My grandmother would clean her collards with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, and set them to boil with a huge piece of smoked ham hock cut up for flavor. I wanted to die on those occasions because not only did I have to endure the smell, I was expected to eat it as well. I refused outright. This caused one of many arguments that happened between my grandparents about me. My grandfather would tell her, “Chris - this child ain't gonna always be able to eat prime ribs and steak. She needs to know that and you ain't helping her by not making her eat what we eat when she comes home.”

This same observation was made by many of her friends and prompted them to tell my grandmother that I was a spoiled brat (and would amount to nothing with my uppity ways), and should be happy to just eat.

“There are many colored children out there starving and this girl here sticks her nose up and refuses to eat good home cooked food,” her friends would tell her.

This was black folk's soul food. It was comfort food but to me it was punishment, I wanted my lox and bagel, lamb chops and spinach, or brisket or even peas (and I hated peas). Instead, I was fed chitlins and greens. The pots would be bubbling over with all these dishes on the stove and my grandmother would stir her pots while slowly sipping on her glass of Martin's V.V.O. scotch — straight.

Nights like this were all in preparation for the card games that my grandmother sponsored. Pity-pat was the game and money was out there to be made. She would sell chitlins, fried fish, or chicken dinners; spicy hot souse meat that consisted of pig ears, pigtails, and other offensive parts of the pig put through a sausage grinder, poured into a pan and chilled. Then, the souse meat was cut into squares, topped with fancy toothpicks, and served like hors d'oeuvres on a plate, along with pickled pig feet and plenty of alcohol.

Afterward the kitchen became a hubbub of activity, all the seats would be taken at the table, and cigarette smoke would hang heavy as a halo cloud over their heads while they trashed talked and played cards. They would have the music of Soul Brother Number One, Mr. James Brown and Sam Cooke, Ray Charles and Jerry Butler playing in the background. Someone would be in charge of the music; another person would be in charge of the drinks and food. At the end of the night or early morning — depending on how good the night went, my grandmother would give everyone who helped a piece of the house take.

House card games could be lucrative; every hand that played, a dollar would be placed in the house kitty. The money kitty resided in my grandmother's bosom and no one dared come near her. The more alcohol they drank, the more games played and the longer people would stay, eat, and spend money. Now and then, a fight would break out, but my grandmother was quick with a pot or ashtray and everything would settle down. The offender (most often drunk) would be thrown out, and everyone would go back to playing cards, eating, drinking, partying, and laughing.



It was a difficult and heart-wrenching decision for my grandmother to leave her employment at the Orenstein's after being with them for ten years. I lived there for close to seven of those years. However, everyday she would see me crying hysterically while I pleaded with her “to please” talk to God and ask him to make me a Jew. I promised to be a good Jew, one God would proud of. To me being a Jew meant living in a large house, good smelling food and people who liked you. I didn't know any better and would pray to God every night to wake up somehow, some way with blue eyes and long blond hair and to be Jewish. I began to hate my grandmother because she was colored, and therefore so was I. In my young mind, I wanted her dead, so I could live with the Orenstein's and continue to be treated as a Jewish princess.

Nevertheless, the reality was, I was colored, and as much as the Orenstein's had embraced and cared for me, I would never be accepted as one of them. My grandmother realized this and when I was eight years old, she sacrificed her “good job” and left the Orenstein's because the reality of who I was and who I wanted to be had become so distorted. My grandmother decided that in order for me to survive in the world, I needed to identify with "my people.” I had to learn what it was like to live with my people and not have any false notions about my heritage.

I was enrolled in the third grade at P.S. 143 in our neighborhood in Queens. Miss Britton was my third grade teacher and I can vividly remember the green hair rinse she used to cover her gray. She often admonished me for raising my hand one time too many with questions and answers. It became evident to my grandparents that the level of education I had received at Salisbury, was far more advanced than the school I was currently attending. My grandmother often complained to my teacher and the principal that I wasn't being challenged enough academically, but she soon realized that they didn't care about keeping me engaged as a student. Eventually, to fit in I stopped trying to excel academically because I just wanted to be accepted by my peers.

I spent my whole life looking for acceptance in both of the worlds that I had uniquely lived in and was a part of. I stopped being colored or a Negro in the late sixties and embraced Black Nationalism. I raised my fist in Black Power salutes and shouted, "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!" I wore the colors red, black, and green of the Black Liberation flag. Red was for the blood that our ancestors shed in their struggle for liberation; black was for the love of one's black skin; and green represented the abundant natural wealth of Africa. When I got older, I longed to hang out at the Black Panthers headquarters on 103<sup>rd</sup> street and Northern Boulevard. However, my grandparents had forbidden me to walk on the same side

of the street, where the men in black berets and leather jackets hung out. I embraced my blackness with the same fervor that existed when I wanted to be Jewish. However, the light color of my skin caused many to question the authenticity of my struggle as an African American.

When I left the Orenstein's, I began my incredible journey and left my hopes and dreams of being Jewish on the paved driveway of 846 Lydia Lane. However, I never forgot the important role that they played in my life. In the process, I left behind their Jewish soul food spread of love that included Sunday brunches of herring in wine sauce, white fish, lox, and bagels and replaced them with pork scrapple, salmon cakes, eggs, and grits. I, then entered and embraced the world of eating corn bread, Barbecue pigs' feet, smoked neck bones, fried chicken, macaroni cheese and turnip greens. However, no matter how far I was away from being Jewish, I have always lived my life on the fringe of being a Colored girl with a Jewish soul.

## Silent Witness

I was nineteen and in my sophomore year at Howard University in Washington, DC, and far away from my childhood home in Corona, Queens. The year was 1977, and I was still grieving over the sudden death of my grandfather the year before. My grandparents were my rock, yet as overprotective as they were about me — they couldn't protect me from the youthful fear of being labeled a "bad girl" when told to do certain things. It was a secret, along with many others, that I carried with me.

I called home once a month to check on my grandmother and during one of those calls, she mentioned that Miss Anna's twenty-eight year old nephew, Junebug had died from a drug overdose.

"You remember that boy, don't you?" She asked.

"I'm not sure, Ma, it was a long time ago."

Even though, I acted as if I vaguely remembered him, I knew exactly *whom* she was talking about. He had told me to call him James, as his real name was James Ray Charles Johnson. Along with his name, the memory of having his dick shoved down my throat at five years old lasted a long time. While my grandmother continued talking about the past, I half listened to her go on and on about Miss Anna, and all the good times they had.

"Yeah you do – you'd have to, even though you had to be maybe four or five years old at the time. At the very least, you'd have to remember his Mama. Let me see, what was her name again? Oh yeah, Ladybug. That's her name – Lady-damn-bug. She was a big old light-skinned girl who always wore tight clothes, high heels, and way too much make-up."

I inhaled, and then said, "Ma, those years are a blur for me."

"Really? Oh well, Ladybug was something else back then, still is and another thing..."

"Why do we have to call our children Junebug, Peaches, Peanut or Pookie?" She went on, "If something happened to Pookie, no one knows his or her real name. I think Junebug's real name was James, after his maybe Daddy, Big Jimbo. Lord, that man sure was handsome."

"Who was handsome, Ma?"

"Big Jimbo, that's who, he lived on Gilmore Street in East Elmhurst with his wife and kids. He was fooling around with Ladybug during the time she got pregnant with Junebug. But, who knows who Junebug's real daddy is? Anyway, as I was saying before you interrupted me, I couldn't even tell you what the hell Ladybug's real name was. See? I don't understand why our folks can't use their real damn names. That's why I'd never let anyone give you a nickname. I refused to use those types of names. Your name is Kathleen, and the only nickname I will let anyone call you, is Kathy."

“Ok, Ma, what happened to Miss Ladybug's son?”

“Oh — well, I don't know if I'd go that far to call her a *Miss* or a Lady, she was so trampy. Oh, they said he died from a drug overdose. His little brother, Tommy, found him on the bathroom floor — drug works and all. Junebug, God rest his soul, died with the needle still in his arm. Of course, Ladybug wasn't home, and no one knew where she was, so Tommy got his next-door neighbor to help. It's a damn shame, such a waste of life.”

"It must have been traumatic for Tommy to find him like that," I replied.

"Oh, I'm sure it was for that poor boy and his brothers, but those children saw more than they ever should. Their Mama never had money and was always begging someone for some. Yet, you could always count on her to be at Anna's house dressed to the nines, with all her badass kids anytime there was a party and free food. I always felt that all them boys needed in their life was a steady daddy, and a good old-fashioned ass whipping. They had too many Uncle Roy's and Uncle Jim's — if you know what I mean — running in and out of Ladybug's bed for my taste. However, that girl was always too busy flinging her titties in a man's face to care about how she was raising those kids. I'm not at all surprised that the boy's dead — with a mother like that. I was telling Anna that those boys weren't raised; they were dragged up through the streets, and thrown into the gutter to fend for themselves.”



“Ma, I’ve got to go study now. Tell Miss Anna and Miss Ladybug, I’m sorry to hear about Junebug. Bye. Love you.” I said.

I hung up the phone quickly before my grandmother could start reminiscing again. I smiled as I put the phone down because I was truly happy that James was dead. Silently, I thought to myself, "Yes, there is a God." James Junebug Johnson had gotten his just reward as far as I was concerned.



It was at this young age, I learned what it was to be a *big girl*. My grandmother always said I was a *big girl*, especially when I was quiet, and amused myself with my dolls and toys. I was supposed to mind my manners, and behave myself around adults.

Yet, people thought I was a spoiled brat, because I used to cry hysterically whenever my grandmother left me anywhere. If I saw her putting on one stitch of makeup, or dressy clothes at night, I would go into a panic, and start crying. I would cry so hard I’d make myself sick and throw up. My grandfather told her all the time that she was ruining me, and at some point, I was going to have to learn that she wouldn’t always be there.

“Christine, stop babying her. She ain't gonna never grow up,” he said.

However, I would cry so hard my ears would hurt, and nothing could console me until I saw her take off her clothes and makeup. I had this fear that every time my grandmother got dressed, she would leave me, and never come back. Against my grandfather's wishes, my grandmother would soothe me by getting in bed with me until I went to sleep. After I had behaved too many times like this, she took me with her to avoid my hysterics. Besides, at the card parties, there were always other kids for me to play with.



I was excited the day my grandmother told me that we were going to Miss Anna's house. Miss Anna was my godmother, and she'd always have a treat for me, whenever I came over to visit. Miss Anna lived in Ravenwoods Houses, in Long Island City, Queens. It was a clean and quiet neighborhood during the 1960s for it to be one of NYC Housing Projects. I used to love to play in the hallways with the other kids that lived in her building. We would slip and slide down the freshly waxed floors, or play games outside in the courtyard. Miss Anna treated me like the princess I thought I was. She used a baby-like voice all the time, no matter to whom she was talking to. It drove my grandfather crazy to hear her talk in that cutesy kind of Betty Boop voice. He didn't like Miss Anna and made sure that everyone including her knew it.

"Damn, why can't that woman talk in a normal voice? That whiny shit is a pain in the ass. No wonder she ain't got no man – who can deal with that shit all day?" He would say to my grandmother.

Miss Anna was having a rent card party. It was two dollars to come in, and then you had to pay for your food, liquor, and cigarettes – only the water was free. The house (Miss Anna's) got a dollar cut from for every round of cards dealt. If it were a good night, the rent would be paid with change to spare. Rent parties meant that as soon as the alcohol kicked in, the grown folks would start acting like kids. And, the real kids would soon be forgotten in the back.

No matter what age, all the children were put in the back room. Babysitters were hard to find, so people just brought their kids to the party" I was used to it by now. In those days, children were meant to be seen, and not heard. Miss Anna had turned on the TV in her bedroom for us to watch, and I had brought my favorite doll, Lucy to play with. Lucy was my best doll. She was a white doll with bright blue eyes, and long, straight blond hair that I loved to comb. I thought she was the most beautiful doll. I went everywhere with Lucy. Secretly, I wished my hair were long and as easy to comb as Lucy's. One day I wanted to look just like her. I did everything with my dolls; I took baths, and slept

with them. I would have tea parties, and make clothes for them out of old sheets, and rags. They were my best friends, and confidantes.

There were five boys in the room with me that day. They were noisy, as most boys can be except for Junebug who was the oldest. He was quiet, and he smiled at me. He didn't say much, but when he did, the other boys listened.

"You look really cute in that sailor dress, little one." Junebug said to me when I came in the room. I felt pretty when he said that to me, however, the other boys didn't seem to feel the same way.

Junebug was there with his younger brothers, Little Man and Sonny and their cousins, Michael (who I knew) and another cousin Ray-ray. I used to play with Michael when his Mom brought him over to my house. Tonight, however, he acted as if he didn't know me. He ignored me when I asked him to hold Lucy for me. Junebug told him to do it, and Michael took Lucy and held her upside down to show her panties.

"Stop that, you'll hurt her" I said.

"Who? This ugly thing? You're so dumb. Dolls don't have feelings," Michael replied.

He rolled his eyes and gave me back Lucy. Then, they all decided to tease me when I started playing with Lucy. They yanked my dress up and made fun of

my pink-laced panties. Little Man was down on the floor trying to look up my dress with a flashlight, while Ray-ray and Sonny took turns hitting me and running. Michael told me I was ugly and that I was dumb to be calling Lucy my baby – when she was just a stupid old doll.

Meanwhile, the grown folks were in the living room doing grown folk things. You could hear Sam Cooke's, "Another Saturday Night" in the background with the echoes of finger snapping and loud laughter. People's feet were shuffling, as they danced around in Miss Anna's tiny living room. The music was loud and the lights were dimmed. The place was smoky with the smells of fried fish, chicken, collard greens, and cigarettes.

Every now and then, my grandmother would come and check on me, but as the night wore on, she stopped. After awhile it got noisier and noisier out there, with the doorbell ringing and more people coming and going. For a long time, no one came to check on us. Their music and laughter were much louder than we were. From time to time, one of the "Uncles" would stagger down the hall, and use the bathroom, peek in, and ask if we were behaving ourselves.

"Yes, sir" we replied.

"We ain't starting any trouble - Uncle Billy," Ray-Ray and Sonny said.

"That's right. Ya'll behave, and watch my little girl there - isn't she the cutest thing?" Earlier that day, I begged my grandmother to dress me up in my favorite blue sailor dress. It came with a white sailor's hat trimmed in blue, and a matching pocketbook. I liked getting dressed up. I would feel grown up. Uncle Billy then staggered back into the living room through the dark and smoky hallway.

As the youngest in the room, that day, the boys didn't want to play with me. They said I cried too much, and always got them in trouble. I was a big girl; I told them and I wouldn't tattle on them.

"If you're a big girl show us your thing?" Little Man asked.

"What thing?" I asked.

"The thing between your legs, stupid - we bet that yours looks different from ours." He said.

"No — that's not right, I'm not showing you my thing — that's bad," I said.

Junebug, who was about 16 at the time, told them to shut up, and told me to come over to where he was sitting by the closet. Why Junebug was there that day, I'll never know, but Miss Ladybug always brought her kids for a free meal. I had a crush on Junebug. He was tall and didn't tease me. I didn't go over to him

right away, and he called me over. He said he had something to show me that he'd bet I'd never seen before. It was something just for me. Slowly, I walked over to him.

"What?" I asked. Feeling excited at the prospect of being let in on a big boy secret.

"What is it? What is it that you want to show me?" I asked excited.

"First, baby girl call me James. Junebug is my baby name. I'm a man now. Just come over, and stand right here - in the dark 'because I don't want anybody but you to see this. It's special," he said.

The other boys started giggling as if they knew what Junebug was about to do. When I got to the closet, I saw this big sausage looking thing sticking out of Junebug's pants.

"What is that?" I cried.

"Come closer, so you can see better." He said.

I shook my head no, and started backing up. He grabbed me, pulled me into the closet, put his hand on my neck, and pushed my head down.

"Can you see it better?" He said.

I started crying, as the tears rolled down my face.

"No, this is bad. I want my grandmother."

"Shut up. You see it — now put your cute little mouth on it, right here."

"No." I mumbled.

“Just like that, now, that’s a good little girl.”

His face changed, as I struggled to keep my mouth open wide enough, and not choke. He pushed, and pushed, and pushed, until I heaved, gagged and was about to throw up. Tears rolled down my face as my screams were choked back by every thrust he pushed down my throat. Harder and harder, he pumped. All I could hear inside my head was thud, thud, thud — with every thrust into my mouth.

He hissed, "You better not bite me. Just keep that little mouth of yours wide open. That’s it, that's a good girl — be real still. Yes, Yes, Ahhhhh.”

He stopped, and his big thing spit all this white, sticky stuff all over my face. I started crying, and my stomach hurt so badly, as my insides felt like they were slowly dying.

“Listen if you tell anyone, I promise I'll tell your grandmother it's your fault, and that you asked for it. Your grandmother will think you're a bad girl, so you had better not tell what we did. You, hear me?" He said with his hands still placed firmly around my neck.

“Yes,” I cried.

He released me, and I walked out of the closet. I was stunned. My face was still smeared with his sticky stuff. Michael and the others started pointing at

me and snickering. James told them to stop, and leave me alone, while he went back to watching TV. Still crying, I wiped my face with the hem of my dress.

I looked around the room for Lucy. I needed to hold her and tell her what happened. Lucy could make everything all right. I wanted to lie down, hold my baby doll, and cry. Looking around the room, I saw Lucy in the corner. Little Man or Ray-ray had tossed her aside with her panties hanging down by her ankles. I picked her up, went behind the bed to hide, and held her tight. I stayed there for the rest of the night. I heard the other boys playing games and laughing. I never heard James speak again.

My grandmother woke me up in the early morning, and told me that we were leaving. My eyes were puffy from crying.

"Baby, what happened to your dress? How did you get dirty?" My grandmother asked.

"I don't know," I replied.

"What's wrong, baby, was I gone too long?"

"Yes." I nodded.

The next day I cut off all of Lucy's hair. Little by little, I started breaking off her moving parts. First, it was her legs, one by one. I loved to hear them snap

and pop. Then I snapped and popped off her arms. I took a marker and drew red lines all over her face. I tried to gouge out her eyes, as she was a silent witness to my nightmare. I could no longer tell her my secrets, or find comfort in her. I hid her in the bottom of my closet, and took her out periodically to torture her. One day, I snapped her neck. I felt much better, or so I thought. She was no longer beautiful, so I threw her away, and never wore the cute little sailor dress again. My grandmother asked me one day why I didn't play with Lucy anymore, and I told her that those things were for babies.

## One Hundred Potatoes

The wind was blowing softly around the porch steps while Bedelia and her oldest granddaughter, Cassie sat outside her house in the city. Bedelia loved spending quality time with her grandchildren, something she didn't get a chance to do with her two daughters while they were growing up. She was seventy-five years old, and her life was full of rich and colorful tales of growing up in the south. She told them straight up and with no chaser. It was the like the older she got, the less time she had for filters and making things sound polite. Some of her tales were sorrowful and others comical, but Bedelia loved to tell them to anyone who would listen. They were her badge of honor, which she wore proudly; they represented her survival in a world that was complicated by the interruption of life.



Bedelia Mae Johnson Wilson Willoughby Burrows Jones had such a long name for a woman with short patience for men. However, she had patience for her grandchildren, and was always trying to teach them about the world and men by the stories she told them. Every story she told most times included a great deal of alcohol, some woman she couldn't stand, or a former husband. Well, they weren't legally all her husbands, she only had one of those, but she always took on their last name as some sort of trophy. The one legal husband she had was a drunk and left

her for her best friend. They never divorced, which turned out to be a good thing for Bedelia later, because when he died she collected his social security benefits.

“That no good drunken bastard turned out to be good for something,” she would laugh.

That was one the reasons Bedelia had no patience for the talk of love or passion. She loved each husband, she just never liked for any of them to touch her. She also seemed to pick some of the most brutal and troubled men, instead of gentle souls. The courtships would start out sweet and loving, until they realized she didn't like sex. Then it would get ugly, both in and out of the bedroom.



“Then, why get married so many times?” She had been asked. The truth of the matter was that Bedelia like most women just didn't want to be alone.



“You see, it's hard for me to get worked up for any man. Maybe, it had something to do with how I was raised down south on the Robert's farm, when I was a little girl. There was nothing passionate about my relations with Mister Robert or his son, RJ. Especially since they took what they thought was theirs,

every chance they got until, eventually, one of them may have fathered your mother.” She told Cassie.

In those days, "We were just nigger's, of no account to no one."



There was one boy, named Delton back in Bedelia's youthful days, she was eleven or twelve for sure, and far from being a virgin, but the ones who took, didn't count. Delton was tall and had a smooth chocolate complexion. Now, he was someone that Bedelia wanted to have touch her; so bad that she'd risk getting beaten by her sister or Mister Robert by going home late, just so she could meet him by the large old oak tree on Mister Robert's farm. There Delton would chase Bedelia around the tree, catch her, and then whisper gibberish in her ears. Sometimes, he would tickle her face with blades of grass or wild flowers that he had picked along the creek. They would lie down, count the stars, and plan their future far, far away from Sweet Springs, North Carolina. Together in their lover's daydreams, they would run away and go up north, and leave behind nasty old Mister Roberts and his mean old family. Their times together were sweet and innocent. He called her Bebe and never asked her for anything other than to be his wife, and to have his babies when they got older. He told her, then and only then, under God's blessings would he want to take her in a way that a man takes a woman. Delton was so sweet, and they were so young, but their dreams soon died on that patch of grass under the

white oak tree one night when Mister Robert's son saw them on his way back home, and told his daddy what he saw. Mister Robert beat them both, Delton more severely (white folks could beat you still, even if they didn't own you no more). He sent Delton to live on his brother's farm down the road, and Bebe never saw that sweet, young boy's face ever again.



One day while they were sitting outside, Cassie kept going on and on about the passion and lustful feeling that she had felt the first time she saw her husband, Bill. Bill worshipped the ground Cassie walked on and Bill was a decent hard working, and god-fearing man. Bedelia was never that lucky with love or men, unfortunately.



“Didn't you love anyone, Grandma? All the men in your life couldn't have all been bad.” Cassie said.

Bebe thought about that as she replied to Cassie, “Nah, they all weren't bad, but none of them were beaunts either. I think I just didn't have any type of feelings that way anymore — I was dead inside, I think. And, what the hell is romance, passion, or love? It must be a white folk's thing. The only so-called passion I can recall was having a man and his dirty, greedy fingers -- fingering me all rough, or

then there were “gentle ones” who would spit in their hand and call themselves getting me ready. It didn’t seem to matter to any of them -- if they hurt me or not. The more I said stop, the more he kept right on doing what he was doing with no care. It could have been any one of those devil of a men that I had been with in my lifetime, and lord knows I ain't ashamed to say they were aplenty, because I was searching hard looking and wanting some kind of love or passion, as you call it, Cassie. I was out there looking for it; don't get me wrong — I just never found it. Whether they took or I gave, made no difference at all, in how the deed went down. One or all, would proudly tell me that it was their God-given right for me to take care of their needs, then they would yank up my shift and our war of passion would begin.

“Goddamn it, woman shut up, before I slap you and open them legs wider.”

I often found myself fighting tooth and nail, and I would try crossing and squeezing my legs tight, but they all were always stronger than me, so in the end, I would just close my eyes and start counting from one to a hundred. One potato. Two potatoes. By three potatoes, I would feel the slap. Whop. Straight across the side of my face.

“Move them hips, woman. Damn it. Stop laying there like a damn dead fish.”

Nine potatoes. Ten. Bang. Another slap, this time harder. Then I could feel his stinky breath on my cheek while he cooed, “Ain't you glad, Daddy came home to give you this sweet thing? Huh? Then act like it, woman and move, goddamn it.” The whole time and every time afterwards, I thought that I would drown in this nasty river of passion as I could feel him slobbering all over me, with his liquored up breathe, all hot and smelly, giving me wet, sloppy kisses that kept sliding down the side of my face. Ninety-eight potatoes. One hundred.

Bedelia went on, "Chile, it sure wasn't ever any kind of pleasure for me, it was just pain, and I just can't see how these women get all worked up about having a man do those things to you. The only pleasure I ever had was after he was finished, for a brief moment when he fell back on the bed and stopped breathing, I would think, thank you, Jesus, there is a God. He's dead. But, then I would hear the slow rumbling of a roar and his chest would start heaving in and out, and I would think to myself, damn God has forsaken me again."



Bebe barely knew her ma who had died, maybe, when she was five or six— she thought, leaving her and her brothers and sisters, ten in all, scattered all over Sweet Springs. Dicey being the eldest took four of them in to keep, the rest of her brothers and sisters were on their own. Bebe was the youngest. Dicey's husband, Frank, introduced her to his version of so-called pleasure when she was only eight or nine at the time, or so they told her that's how old that she was 'cause nobody knew her real age, or even the day she was born. Back then, silent children were good children who respected their elders, worked hard, and never complained. So, what did she know about men and women things that they did late and in the dark of night? As a child, you couldn't ask those questions, otherwise; you'd be swallowing a mouthful of teeth if you'd ask a grown up a question about love. Some things just were never asked.

Bebe used to hear her sister, Dicey, making loud moaning noises in the night, as if someone was killing her, and their cot would be squeaking and making all kinds of racket, then she would hear Frank groaning and carrying on and sometimes he would growl and then she would hear a thud. There was only a thin piece of dirty linen covering their doorway, so some nights it sounded to Bebe like they had to be wrestling or something in there. To drown out the sounds she would pull a piece of rag that slept with over her head. Her brothers and sisters would act as if nothing was wrong and would shush her and tell her to mind her business and

go to sleep before she got whipped. However, no matter how hard she tried, she could still hear everything. Then, after a few minutes of that kind of racket, there would be total silence. The bed had stopped squeaking; the noises stopped, and you'd hear nothing but the snores and sighs of Dicey and Frank. The next morning, her sister would get up just as cheerful with a smile on her face. Bebe would look at her for signs of a fight, a puffy eye, or something, but there would be none. None at all. She'd just have her head rag cocked to the side and would be smiling while she sang as she fixed fatback bacon and biscuits for Frank.

Dicey's husband, Frank, was what old folks called a “good for nothing, no count niggra.” But, boy oh boy, Dicey sho' nuff loved him and his dirty drawers, and he could do no wrong in her eyes, even though he ran around with every loose woman up and down the road, and in town—some being her best friends. They lived in a little wooden shack on Mister Robert's farm that had two rooms, and no doors. Dicey and Frank slept in one room, and Bebe and her older brothers and sisters slept in the room that had the stove and wash bin. They'd roll out their pallets at night and sleep on the floor, which was some old splintered wood that was so close to the ground, they could feel every chill and piece of cold air coursing through their bodies while they slept.

Frank didn't work anywhere. He couldn't keep a job, mainly because he stayed drunk half the time and the other half he was being disrespectful to the white folks. It's a wonder that he was still alive, with all the ornery stuff he did. But, Bebe guessed some of the white folks took pity on him, 'cause to them, he was just another dumb, stupid nigger and since he stayed in his place, well, hell the nigger could just go ahead and kill himself or get killed, the dumb bastard. Therefore, Dicey was the one who had to support all of them. She took in washings and clean white folk's houses, cook, tended babies, pick tobacco, pick corn, or anything else that could be picked. In addition, she rented them out to Mister Robert's farm and had them all working from sun up to sundown, then she'd go and collect their pay. On some occasions, Mister Robert's would give them their pay, and Dicey knew exactly how much they were supposed to get, and if they came up short she would whip all of them senseless. Then she'd turn around and give their money to Frank.

Frank was never much for grooming and never combed his hair, so there would be all kind of peasy beads all over his head, which look right nappy and made him look like he was a grown up pickaninny. He was too nasty to shave, so he had this wiry beard with blubber lips that had turned black from the snuff he used to dip and spit. But, Dicey loved that Negro man, Bebe didn't know why — even to this very day, she never understood that kind of love. However, Dicey often said he made her feel good. So good, that after he'd beat her, she would still zig

with his zag. Sometimes maybe, she had no choice, but there had to be a time when she had to and just didn't. Many a night Bebe used to hear her sister begging Frank to stay after he finished knocking her around, and, of course, he stayed and then beat her some more. So, that's how Bebe came to figure that if a man says he loves you, it has to hurt you somehow, someway.

Dacey got sick with pains in her stomach (later, Bebe found out that Dacey had been pregnant, and lost the baby) and had to go to stay at midwife Essie's house to have something done, and for some reason she ended up staying more than a night. Frank was supposed to watch them since he wasn't working, but Bebe and her brothers and sisters watched him come and go, more than he minded them. They all were scared of Frank because he would get drunk and want to whip them for the simplest things. If the boys would whistle in the house, he'd beat them and tell them they was calling the devil. He would beat them, if Bebe and her sisters' sweep the floor and he still saw one speck of dirt, or if the hominy grits didn't cook long enough to come out smooth.

Bebe could remember that ever since they came to stay with Dacey and Frank after their ma died, he was always pulling on her and her sister's plaits and slapping them on their behinds, telling them they all had a lot of fatback there and be careful of fresh boys, who would want to touch them and stuff. Maybe her sisters

knew what he was talking about since they were older, Bebe didn't know because the only boys she was allowed to play with back then were her brothers and they never did try to touch her anywhere. Besides, they were always working on Mister Robert's farm either picking tobacco or trying to kill snakes with hoes for the older folks and they'd come home and be tired and hungry.



It was on the day that Bebe felt too poorly to chase snakes, and her brothers and sisters went to the fields and left her home with Frank, Uncle Frank, as he liked to be called. As Bebe recalls to Cassie about that day, “Well, Uncle Frank comes over to my pallet, lies down with me, and starts talking low and sweet like and telling me how I was the prettiest little colored gal, he'd ever seen, and it would be a doggone shame for some little boy to hurt me with his thing. I got scared because Uncle Frank never talked to me like this before and it reminded me of when I would overhear him and Dicey in their room. So, I told him. “Unck, I'm a good girl and I don't look to play with no boy's thing, ever.” He then said, "Listen, Bebe if I show you mine, you have to promise not to tell no one, it will be our secret, ok?”

I told him. “No, I don't think I want to see it, please I don't want to see it, I don't think this is right.” Uncle Frank then unloosed his trousers and pulled out his thing, it was long and sticking straight up, and I thought, "Oh lord, someone please

help me — his thing was so ugly." So, he told me "to touch it" and "Uh-uh, no Uncle Frank, please don't make me touch it, please..."

He said "Come on girl; touch it, before I give you a whooping." His voice changed and he was no longer talking low or sweet. He started breathing all hard, and his breath smelled. And, his eyes had this crazy look in them, like when he had too much to drink and Dicey would have said something he didn't like and I got scared, real scared. He said, "Listen girl, I want you to be still and I don't want to hear no noise from you, - hear, open them damn legs." And, I was shaking my head and crying, "No, please Uncle Frank, no, I don't wanna know how boys can hurt me— I'm scared. I'll be a good. Please let me keep my legs closed. Please." I begged.

He then told me to shut up, and I started crying and he slapped me so hard that the spittle from my mouth went flying and my ears started ringing.

"Be quiet — goddamn it," he said. The next thing I know he's on top of me, and the pain, oh God, the pain went searing through my body, and I screamed and screamed until I could feel him put his smelly hand over my mouth, and said, "Shut up". And, as I screamed inside his dirty hands, I tasted dirt and tobacco juice and I thought, God, please let me die right here and now, and the pain kept coming, up and down,

up and down — my body keep going up and down, and I wanted to throw up, his beard was scratching my face and he was telling me that this was all good, that I was being a good little girl, call him daddy, he was going to make me a woman, and the pain just kept getting worse until everything faded into blackness.

When I came to, Uncle Frank was drinking and dipping snuff on the porch, just rocking back and forth with not a care in the world. He told me to hurry and wash up, there was blood all over on my pallet, and my legs were so sore, I could hardly move. He said, I had better not leave one trace of blood on that pallet, and clean that mess up, and walk right.

I cleaned up the blood that was mingled with my tears and scrubbed between my legs, and thought this must have been what Dicey and Frank did in the dark. He slapped me again, and told me I'd better not tell nobody or he'd kill me for so' and then said, "Now you don't ever have to worry 'bout no man hurting you down there no more, I took care of that. I did you a favor always 'member that. I showed you what it's like to be loved by a man." Then he spit snuff, aiming for the can and missed.

“Yes, sir” I replied and walked away.

## Let Go and Let God

Cherry sat quietly, while she was under suicide watch in the psychiatric and protective custody unit, at the Riker's Island correctional facility in Queens, NY. Time dragged on even though she had only been there overnight. Cherry watched as the clock's minute hand slowly moved forward, second by second. She had been arraigned quickly and denied bail. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Those were the only sounds that Cherry heard. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. She was numb from the day's tragic events – and felt swallowed up by the approaching darkness. Off in the distance, Cherry thought she heard a baby crying. Maybe it was her beautiful baby girl, Fatima. Tick-tock. Cherry thoughts drifted to the fact that maybe she should have talked to someone when she first felt the demon slowly growing inside her, especially when it finally reared its ugly head and took over. She was too weak to deny the devil his due. Tick-tock. The clock's ticking grew louder as each second passed. When arrested, she laughed hysterically as the police officer told her, "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law." They didn't know that Cherry had remained silent her whole life.

Cherry stopped believing in God when she was a little girl and felt that God had failed to protect her. As she became older, it was hard for her to buy into the biblical sermons of "let go and let God," preached to her each Sunday. However,

the need for her to pray (right now) was so overwhelming that she kneeled by the side of her cot, clasped her hands, and started reciting the Lord's Prayer as the tears started streaming down her face.



The pastor opened his sermon with the following words “The Bible teaches us that God asks us to lay down our burdens at his door. He asks us to rely on him, to get us through the most trying and troubling moments in our lives — that, we (brothers and sisters) have to learn to let go — and just let God carry your burdens. Congregation — Can I get an Amen?”

“Amen.”

“Some of you here this morning, have already let go and let God be the rock on which you stand, and some of you will attempt to lean on this fact, but lose patience or faith in his ability to get you through your troubles. However, as I stand here today I want you to remember that God would never forsake you, and he forgives us for all our sins — while you trust in him. Can I get an Amen?”

“Amen.”

“Preach Pastor, preach.”

“Praise Jesus, yes, Lord.”

Cherry sat a few pews away from her aunt, Nellie, who always sat in the

front row. Aunt Nellie was one of the five church sisters that sat in the first row alongside the pastor's wife, the church first lady. They were the pastor's right-hand righteous warriors in his war on sin and Satan. The church sisters sat on the front row with well coordinated, large colorful hats, and tailored made ankle-length suits with matching purse and shoes, as they furiously fanned themselves to the rhythm of “Amen's” and “Thank you, Jesus” muttered throughout the church. The pastor would pause, smile, and gaze down at his female devotees and go back to his sermon. The sisters in the front row - would nod back with their wide brim hats, and smile in unison. After the service, Cherry's Aunt Nellie had no shame in enthusiastically showing her appreciation for the pastor's sermon and presence in the pulpit, by giving him a sly wink.

Cherry loved to go to church with Aunt Nellie every Sunday when she was little. It was a happy place for her, as Cherry sat in the back with the other small children. While there, she had plenty of food to eat and other kids to play with. After the services, they would play in the Sunday schoolroom that was fully stocked with books and toys. Meanwhile, Aunt Nellie would be milling outside the pastor's private offices jockeying for position with the other church sisters, while each tried to get pastor's hands-on re-dedication to Jesus baptisms.



Cherry was being used as a prop by her aunt; she wanted people to think that she was doing the Lord's work by trying to save her niece's young soul. Aunt Nellie was a force to be reckoned with now that she was in the soul saving business. Grandma Rose and Kiki were too smart for Aunt Nellie's manipulations and saw right through her hypocritical ways. However, Aunt Nellie knew that taking Cherry with her would piss off her sister, Rose. Yet, Rose never stopped her because it allowed her more time for her to spend with the bottle alone. Those two did not get along at all; there was some bad history between them made worse by the fact that every time Aunt Nellie came to Rose's house, she acted as if she was a holier than thou Christian woman.



New York City can be a cold place when you're poor and no one cares how you're treated. It was even colder growing up during the crack crazed eighties in the south Bronx projects. It seemed as if everyone in the projects had someone in their family plagued by drugs and alcohol. Cherry grew up in such a household, but now at seventeen, Cherry had no one to help her out of the darkness she found herself in at this time in her life. Grandma Rose, was in a nursing home with early onset Alzheimer's, unable to recognize anyone or even remember who she was. Cherry continued to live in her grandmother's apartment in the projects after they took Grandma Rose away. She lived there along with Kiki, who at thirty-one was still

out in the streets, and only around whenever she ran out of men or money.

Kiki had four other children besides Cherry, but they all ended up in foster care just like Aunt Nellie's because Grandma Rose couldn't care for them. They were scattered throughout New York City in different foster homes. Cherry never got a chance to meet any of her siblings. In fact, Kiki never bothered to bring any of them home; she just walked away and left them at the hospital.

After Grandma Rose left, Aunt Nellie was no help even with all her church going, charitable works, and wanting to save Cherry's soul. It was always boring to listen to her sermons about the sins of fornication, and about how Cherry was destined to go to hell, whenever Cherry saw her. On those rare occasions that Cherry did see her, she would stand in front of Cherry, and clutch her Bible so tightly to her chest that you would think that God's words were tattooed on her chest.



Cherry's, Aunt Nellie had become holy sanctified after several stints in court ordered rehab, seven bids in jail, two cracked ribs, and ten children all in foster care. Even after Aunt Nellie got right with the Lord - she never tried to get right with her kids. She never tried to look for them or get them back. The ones that did

look for her - she ignored. Grandma Rose used to make cracks about how Aunt Nellie had to be trying to create her own softball team for the United Nations. Her children were all different shades, had various hair textures and facial features. One of them even looked Asian. Grandma Rose told Cherry that Aunt Nellie was one of them “hotel hookers” over on Park Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> street. She said Aunt Nellie would be out there day and night selling her body to the highest bidder, just so she could get high, party, and keep her pimp daddy in fine suits, multi-color gator shoes, fur hats, diamond nugget rings, and a new red convertible caddy every year. By the time, Cherry turned six years old, Aunt Nellie in her mid-fifties, decided that Jesus would be her new pimp and her sole mission was to convert as many wayward souls as she could from their sinful ways.

The woman became a pain in the ass to everyone, and used the same smoke and mirrors from hooking to recruit church members and new souls for Jesus. She was running a race to collect more tithes for the church, so her pastor could drive a fancy car and wear Armani suits. Aunt Nellie’s visits became more about preaching about Jesus, and quoting scriptures than love of family. She would spend most of her time preaching and giving her high moral religious opinions to Grandma Rose, who could care less about anything Aunt Nellie had to say, and would look at the woman as if she was crazy. Nevertheless, that didn't stop her from raising the Bible in her left hand to prophesy that all of them were going to hell, if they didn't repent

and accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Grandma Rose would chuckle and say “in that case, my sister Nellie would be the first one on line for hell, for sure, 'cause she's just trifling; and Jesus should ask her not to use his name and salvation in the same sentence anymore.”

Grandma Rose could not stand her oldest sister, and always talked about how she had some damn nerve to be acting all high and holy, after all lowdown dirty things she had done to folks. Then, she'd take a couple swigs from her cup laced heavily with gin and a splash of juice, grumbling, as it appeared that another harsh memory had hit her about her sister.

"An' she needs to stop hiding behind that imaginary cloak of Jesus. Cherry, you know she has the nerve to come over here preaching all the time, and ain't even paid me back not one red cent of my money that she stole while she was a crack head (a forty-year old, one at that), and that trifling heifer slept with just about every man I had. Yeah she's Jesus' disciple alright, more like Satan's soldier."



It wasn't always hatred between the two sisters; at one time, they loved one another, as only two sisters who were only a few years apart in age should. Nellie was the oldest and always protective of Rose. Rose was the good child and the sensitive one; she always wanted her mother and Nellie to be proud of her. Nellie

could care less about being a good girl, was rebellious, would always challenge their mother, and received many a brutal beating to show for her disobedience. Their mother worked long hours as a domestic, and Nellie and Rose stayed at their Aunt Sassy's house most of the time along with her seven kids. Staying there was like being in a three ring circus, men were always coming in and out of the house and the children always fought over what little food that was there. Nellie, always quick with her fists made sure that she and Rose always ate.

Nellie and Rose's mother died when Rose was eleven, and Nellie was fourteen. They continued to live with Aunt Sassy in her overcrowded two bedroom apartments, overflowing with kids (ten in total), men, and whoever else would show up to the party. There never was enough food to eat and they wore rags for clothes. Nellie used to go out and get food for them. She also came home with nice clothes for the both of them and dared anyone to touch their stuff. Rose never knew or suspected at that time what Nellie did to take care of them. She would hear whispers from inside the house and on the streets, but Nellie had such a badass reputation, that's all you heard - whispers, no one dared to utter the words aloud, or to tell them face-to-face to Rose or Nellie. No one messed with Nellie, not even Aunt Sassy; she said Nellie was possessed by the devil, and an evil little thing. One time, she pulled a knife on one of their cousins, when they tried to steal Rose's tennis shoes, and stabbed one of Aunt Sassy's men folk when he tried to touch her.

Nellie started coming home less and less, but when she did come through - she always brought home pretty things for Rose.

The breakdown of love between the two sisters happened when Nellie had her first baby at seventeen by Rose's boyfriend. Rose was fourteen and he was fifteen. Rose forgave Nellie, but never forgot the betrayal. Nellie cried and begged Rose for forgiveness, and told her she would never betray her trust again. However, drugs and men have a strange effect on relationships; they can destroy thread by thread, the strongest fabric woven with love, family, and trust. So, by the time Cherry was born there was no love lost between the two sisters. Some might say they hated one another, yet, for one reason or another, they couldn't cut the other from each other's lives. They were still sisters and family no matter what.



Cherry never knew her grandmother any other way other than to be drunk and bitching about something or someone all the time. Nine times out of ten, she was bitching about Aunt Nellie, or her mom, Kiki and calling them every kind of trifling heifer that she could think of.

"Your damn mama puts her foolish foot in every damn pair of shoes Nellie steps out of. I hope by the time you grow up, Cherry, those goddamn shoes will be worn the hell out, so you can amount to something more than them two."



Grandma Rose started drinking heavily after the last man in her life; Buster Roscoe Jones was lured away by Aunt Nellie over fourteen years ago. Buster had all his women call him T-Bone because he said he was rare, tender and delicious, just like a sirloin T-bone steak. Grandma Rose always said, “The man never told a lie; as far as his looks were concerned.” With her cup in hand, Grandma Rose would lean back in her chair, and close her eyes, as she'd get caught up in the short sweet memories of her delicious T-Bone. It didn't take much for her to go to her “happy place” as Cherry would like to call it and briefly, for just one second, she'd looked young, beautiful, and innocent.

T-Bone was a handsome, tall, muscular man with smooth baby ass chocolate skin, and white dazzling teeth all capped in gold. He could sweet talk a woman out of her next week's pay and Rose worshipped every inch of ground that T-Bone walked on.

“Rose, you're a dumb ass, you act as if that nigga can walk on water and part the goddamn sea like Moses,” Nellie would tell her.

“You should be the one to talk when Mack Cee be whipping your ass all up and down the boulevard 'cause you ain't made enough money. At least I ain't got to sell my body for my man to love me” Rose would reply.

Rose worked two jobs on her knees scrubbing white folk's walls, toilet bowls, and washing their dirty drawers just to keep T-Bone dressed in fine clothes and for him to keep money in his pocket. She took good care of him and was proud of it. The man didn't have to want for nothing. But, Rose's biggest mistake was letting Nellie stay at her house one night, when Mack Cee had whipped her ass and put her out in the street naked again. Rose knew that she couldn't trust her sister, but she thought she could trust her man. She was wrong.

Nellie had lived with Rose and T-Bone for a month, and every day Rose asked her, “When the fuck — you plan on leaving?” Nellie's reply to her was always “Soon, bitch.” She told Rose she had a few things to get in place. However, soon turned out to be one month later, but this time not only did Nellie take her clothes, she took Rose's cookie jar with her savings, T-Bone, and left her a note that said, “Soon came today, bitch.”



Cherry's mom had her at 14, and promptly forgot about her. Karen or Kiki as Cherry's mom was called, came home from the hospital, deposited Cherry on her mother's bed, went into her room and closed the door. By the time she had healed from giving birth, she fretted more about losing her baby fat and squeezing into her

tight jeans to hang out, then whether Cherry ate. Kiki spent most of her time scheming on ways to get money for her hair, nails and designer clothes. How Kiki got her money, made Rose upset and she'd compare Kiki to Aunt Nellie. Kiki would come home with new clothes, the tightest braid hairstyles with hair hanging all the way down her back, rope gold chains around her neck, and big wide scalloped hoop earrings that had her name spelled out in the middle. Cherry would try to grab them, when and if her mom picked her up to show her off to her friends. Cherry would be so fascinated by the gold glittering on her mom; that she would reach and pull them. Kiki would slap her hard enough to make her cry and then throw her down.

For Kiki, having a baby in her world meant she was grown and could do as she pleased, she was a woman. Besides what was her mother going to do, she was drunk all the time and useless. Grandma Rose would curse at Cherry all night long until she fell into a drunken stupor. Sometimes, Cherry didn't eat unless her grandmother had cooked earlier, and she could snatch some food from off the stove, or when she played with the neighbor's kids and their mom's felt sorry for her and would feed her. Other than that, she was on her own. To amuse herself, Cherry would try to catch the roaches or follow the cracks in the walls, so she could block out her hunger, along with her grandmother's snoring and angry mumbling's.

"I wish I had gotten rid of you when I had the chance, or that God would have seen fit to take you!" Grandma Rose would scream at Kiki. Kiki was a constant painful reminder to Rose of T-Bone and his absence and her sister's betrayal. The more Rose looked at Kiki, the more she drank. Of course, Nellie had dropped him after she got him strung out on her and drugs.

"You need to be here to take care of this child, I didn't have no damn baby — you did, and all you do is 'ho around with them fast ass friends of yours, when you get in trouble don't be looking for me to help you" Rose would tell Kiki. Kiki would roll her eyes tell Rose to "shut the fuck up" then throw some money at her and walk out the door.

Kiki wore a lot of gold, gold hoops and chains, nugget rings and a diamond gold post in her nose. To Cherry when she was a little girl, Kiki was the most beautiful person in the world, even though her mom acted as if she didn't exist. Cherry didn't know who her father was and neither did Kiki. Cherry had learned later in her teens during one of Kiki's drug induced bragging sessions, that her daddy 'could be' one of the biggest dope dealers on the block, in jail or dead. She told the story like a badge of honor of how she had gotten high one night at a party, and she and her girls became the entertainment at Big Red's party. Big Red ran things in the neighborhood at the time; he made all the big time moves drug wise. He had fast cars and even faster women, and he liked them young, real young, like

fresh bud young. He was always in search of some pretty young thing, so that he and his boys could 'pop-pop that cherry'. That night, he was celebrating the fact that he had just beaten his case for murder, (the prosecutor's main witness against him was found dead) and there went his case. He sent his boys out to the projects to pick up the finest young fresh meat out there to party with them, and Kiki was one of them. She had gotten so high she passed out - when she came to, Big Red's boys starting singing "chuga-luga-chuga-luga-woo woo." Every time she saw one of Big Red's boys they would call her, Choo-Choo Chickie. Kiki didn't mind because after that night they all wanted a piece of her, and she rode hard with some of the best paid dope boys in the game. Two months after Big Red's night train ride, Kiki found out she was pregnant.



Cherry had learned very early not to have any respect for Aunt Nellie - who was always praising Jesus and her pastor. Aunt Nellie had been "saved" by the same pastor who once was her biggest client while he was a young pastor. She walked around with her nose turned up at anything she felt was distasteful — which was everything. So, every chance Aunt Nellie got, she'd cornered Cherry and start preaching about the Bible. "There's nothing too big or too small, you hear me. Thank you, Jesus." Aunt Nellie would testify. The only problem was Cherry did not think God, Jesus or the Lord could help her out of her current nightmare. God had

let her life happen, so therefore, how was she to trust that God would take care of it. When Cherry needed God or someone to take care of her, they were never there.



Aunt Nellie had stopped taking Cherry to church, when she was eight years old. She could have used some comforting words from the pulpit or her Aunt, when God let her be raped the first time by her mother's drug dealing boyfriend, PJ. Kiki and PJ were staying at Kiki mom's house so she could get Rose's check while she was in the hospital. PJ had taken over some of Big Red's territory in the projects, when he finally went to prison for messing around and getting pregnant a thirteen-year-old girl. PJ had slipped into Cherry's room while Kiki was nodding out in the kitchen. He raped her so violently that afterwards Cherry could hardly walk and was bleeding down there. At first, when Cherry told her mother what had happened, Kiki slapped her so hard her ears started ringing, and told her to stop lying on her man. PJ when confronted by Kiki, called Cherry a "fucking liar," and said that Cherry probably had a boyfriend and was trying to blame some ill shit on him.

"Fuck that bullshit, Kiki. I'm out, I don't need this shit," and he left. Cherry was moaning so loud because she was in so much pain that Kiki eventually took her to the hospital, and told her that she better not tell the police anything, otherwise, she was going to whip her ass. Cherry never said a thing, and remained silent. After that, Kiki beat the hell out of her anyway, and blamed Cherry for "losing her a good

hustling man” and in turn, Cherry blamed God.



It appeared that God continued to forsake her and at sixteen, she became pregnant. Cherry had no idea who the father was; she just gave herself to anyone that wanted it or said a kind word. She used to hang out with her cousins at Aunt Sassy’s house, and for those brief moments that a boy chased after her she felt loved. Around that time, Aunt Sassy’s project apartment had been taken over by her crack dealing grandkids — and the only thing they were about then — was getting money. Cherry had no one to guide her since Kiki was never around, Aunt Nelly was out looking for new tithes, and Grandma Rose had simply given up on living.

At first, when Cherry found out she was pregnant, she was happy. It meant that now she would have someone in this world to love her. She felt so special having this new life growing inside her. It didn't matter that she didn't know who the father was — this baby was hers, and only hers. As her stomach grew, she would lovingly rub her swollen belly and whisper gently to her growing child. She found herself praying to God and asking him to watch over her and her baby. All those times that Aunt Nellie took her church, she wanted God to protect them and give her strength. When she found out she was having a girl, she dreamed about how she would dress her in cute outfits and put colorful ribbons and bows in her

hair. She had even picked out a beautiful name for her baby girl, Fatima. Her name had Arabic origins and meant “she who weans an infant; she who abstains from forbidden things.”



When Fatima was born, Cherry was the happiest mother in the world. She didn't care that she had to take care of the baby all by herself. It was going to be Cherry and Fatima against the world. Fatima would give her strength and the will to do whatever it took to survive. However, when she came home with her new baby girl, reality set in real fast. Cherry had no one to help her and it all became too much, very quickly. She started pinching Teema for simple things when she was two months old. If she used too many Pampers, wanted a bottle or didn't go to sleep right away. One time, she pinched her just because she was quiet and breathing. She would pinch her real hard for imple little baby things. Cherry wanted to see her cry, she didn't know why. However, she just liked to see Teema's little face screw up in pain. Cherry enjoyed the look of shock at first on Teema's face before she would start crying. She would then walk away and close the door and get on the phone or watch TV – all the while Teema would be screaming the background. Then, there were those rare days when she would hug and kiss Teema. While singing lullabies, Cherry would rock her gently, while cooing, “Baby girl, Mommy loves you so much.”

On the dark days, then just to see her cry, Cherry would make Teema's bottle too hot and squirt the hot milk in her face. On the even darker days, Cherry wouldn't feed Teema for hours, and then just give her one bottle, no more. On the darkest days, pinching was not enough and she started twisting her limbs, but never enough to break them. Just enough to make her cry.

One time while Cherry was feeding Teema, the baby reached up and snatched off one of her favorite small gold hoop earrings. Cherry hit the one year old so hard that the child went flying out of her chair, and landed very hard on the floor screaming. Teema's screams just got louder and louder, until Cherry just couldn't take it anymore, and she hit the baby again and again — each time feeling angry and frustrated about why she was mad in the first place. After all was said and done – Cherry looked at Teema whimpering on the floor and wondered, what would Aunt Nellie say about this — could she be washed in the blood of Jesus and have all her sins forgiven now?



She realized when Fatima was a month old, that she should have never had a child. She should have never thought she could be a good mother with all the good examples of mothering she's been shown. However, here she was with this

little innocent thing that looked just like her. “God - she's just a little tiny thing,” Cherry thought. However, she was always crying and wanting something. And, on this day, she snapped. Just like that, in an instant, it was a moment that she wished she could return to and change. However, she can't and never will. What started out as her normal routine of making Teema cry turned into something uglier, as Teema lay on the floor quiet. Teema gave one last muffled cry – then silence. She looked down at the lifeless little body that had stopped crying, and was so still. The darkness had engulfed her completely, as Cherry looked down and saw at her baby girl lying on the kitchen floor, and Cherry just started screaming.

She screamed for herself and her dead child. She screamed for all the years that she had to act normal and be silent, after she had been raped, time and time again. She screamed at her mother for never apologizing for all the chaos she had brought into Cherry's life with drugs and men. She just started screaming, and never stopped. Not when the neighbors were knocking on the door. Not even after the police came to kick down her door. Not after, they lifted Teema's little tiny body and carried her out in a black bag. She stopped screaming and laughed hysterically, as the police put the handcuffs on her, read her rights, and led her down the same dingy hallway as her baby. When they reached outside, she looked up and saw that people had begun to gather outside her building. She hung her head down in shame, as she heard all of their whispers and taunts.

“Murderer”

“Damn baby killer”

“ Ain’t that's Miss Rose granddaughter, I'm not surprised ... her mama’s a goddamn piece of work... the apple damn sure don't fall far from the tree now do it?”

“Sure don't” someone would reply.

“You know I used to hear that baby hollering all the time ...” another one would say.

“She'd seemed so quiet and it seemed she loved her baby, oh well it just goes to show you – you never know what goes on behind closed doors...”

“Someone should kill her...”

“You gonna burn in hell, you murderous bitch” another shouted at her.

“Lord have mercy, Jesus... on that poor child” someone else said.

The police shielded her from the growing angry crowd as they became more vocal and unruly. People were crying, while others just lowered and shook their heads in pity. Someone spit in her face. Cherry remained silent and still, despite all the venom being spewed at her as she was placed in the back of the police car.

The crowd pounded on the police car and Cherry wondered,” Where’s God now? Could she really let go and let God be her rock to stand on this time — as

Aunt Nellie loved to tell her? Could she be bathed in the blood of Jesus, could he wash this sin away and bring Fatima back? Tell me, Aunt Nellie, can I ever be saved now?"