

**BOARD REMEMBANCES:
MY “VERY OWN MOTHER” AND ME**

by

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ABSTRACT

A wooden board plank placed over a gutter serves as an impetus to remembering my young years and the years following as they relate to my mother. Mother needed me, her only biological child, to become a newer her, with the same life's viewpoints. I decided to be me. When our perspectives did coincide, my way of payback for her verbal spankings was to deny her any affirmation. That situation caused me to live in two conflicting worlds.

Taking the form of an apostrophe, this memoir allows me to speak to my now deceased mother, recognize her achievements and to delineate the shortcomings within both of us. Spontaneously interjected but not necessarily in chronological order are memories to either reinforce an event, or to simply serve as relief. The fifties' and sixties' historical arc explicates much in both our lives. Readers who peruse this subtle, seasoned with the history of the times remembrance may decide to think back on their own lives to determine to what degree the actions of other people have affected them and if, for them, change is needed.

Chapter 1

KABOOM

Eight hours after your operation, they finally let me look in on you, Mother. An ominous dread gripped me as I neared the post-op stall. That relentlessly loud, deep sound, a rhythmic KaBoom! KaBoom! KaBoom! stymied my optimism as I walked toward your room. You were unrecognizable; this was my first time seeing a person's body swollen to twice its size. What bothered me even more was your lying on a board, a board reminiscent of a see-saw that was disguised as a hospital bed without its sides. Your head was on the down side, your feet on the upward slant. The post-op room felt more like a death room; gray, no chairs, windows or tables, just machines and tubes in and on every part of your swollen body. A nurse, with her back toward me, continuously touched machines, pushed buttons, checked tubes.

The machine banged incessantly, my knees felt numb. I stood mesmerized, one foot inside the room. Finally, shouting above the machine, I asked the nurse, "Why is she like that?" Startled, but with a professional, compassionate and slightly lowered voice, probably intended to lower my level of anxiety, the answer came, "So she can get blood and oxygen to her head; her heart is racing and her blood pressure is less than 70." Around three in the morning, they moved you from the stall to a bed in the intensive care unit, a sign that your condition was still very serious, but less so.

My husband, Wes and I decided it would be better if he stayed home the day after your operation because I envisioned a long, stressful day and at seventy-seven years old, it might be a bit much for him. Although he was not there, our children came for you; Keith, Leesa and Rylene arrived first. We talked for awhile while waiting for admittance to your room. Tracy was almost an hour away; I rose to go to the rest room. Terror struck suddenly—our hearts stopped momentarily as we heard a succession of Code Blues reverberating through the loud speakers. Each of the eight calls was followed by a different doctor's name. I paused and saw doctors running to the opposite side of the nurses' station from your room, Mother, but I hoped that I appeared calm as I turned to your grandchildren and assured them that they had no reason to be concerned; your room was on the other side.

Returning from the ladies' room, I settled back in the waiting room, picked up a magazine, and absent-mindedly shared how scary that auditory summons was. Your grandkids were relieved it wasn't their Mimi; we all began to relax a little.

About a half hour later, a white-coated patient care administrator approached; my heart sank. His first words were, "Did you hear the Code Blue? That was for Mrs. Young." They had resuscitated you. I missed the next few words, my mind rapidly fired off questions and self accusations. "How could that be; they ran down the wrong corridor. I knew your room was on the right, why would they have run down the left side? It would have been my fault if I had missed being beside you, Mother, had you died. The anguish

you may have been feeling, I should have shared that; tried to hold your hand. How could I have been concerned with being in a rest room? They ran down the wrong corridor! The nurses' station. They must have stopped there first. You're right again, Mother. Had you died, it would have been another proof of my lack of compassion. Wait! What's wrong with me – why do I beat myself up over what almost was? Stop it, Judy, pay attention.” We were allowed to stand at your side for a few minutes while one of the eight doctors acted as spokesperson to apprise us of your condition.

Twenty minutes later, Tracy, my most outwardly emotional child arrived. Naturally upset after hearing the news, she too wanted to see her Mimi. I walked her to the room; four doctors were still there, two of them sitting in *The Thinker's* position. The administrator, facing us, was on the opposite side of the bed. He was on his phone, “Yeah –well, we'll have this bed soon, this patient won't be here long – she's as good as dead.” Tracy's body straightened from her weeping position, she welled up, clenched her fist and, as the blood rushed to her head, she turned a purplish brown. With incredulity and anger she stepped forward and cried, “How dare you! How dare you!” As quickly as I could, I turned, faced her, gently grabbed her upraised arms and backed her out of the room. She collapsed into my arms for a few seconds more as I led her down the hall.

Unfortunately, the sepsis had taken a toll on your body from which you could not recover. Two weeks later and two weeks before your 90th birthday, in the year 2007, you passed from this life.

Mother, it's been a few years now. Your death has caused me to elucidate your life and redefine mine. As your only biological child, your oral history, formal papers, poems and prose became my possession. Almost all of your prose was written in a time of reflection for you, between the ages of forty and sixty. Now, your circle of life is complete. My concurrent circle is almost complete, but in clarifying your life I am urged to create straight lines into mine to give our newer circles, our children, a fresh handle on life-views.

Chapter 2

PERILS OF YOUTH

Images – by Rubye

Two icicles hanging high from the roof,

Were united in the warmth of the sun.

The sight of the board on which you lay in the hospital brought back a flood of memories. Most significantly was the weekly Sunday ritual of going to visit family gathered at Grandmom's and Grandpop's house. Situated about a quarter mile away, our little family occupied the first floor corner unit of a two story building in the newly built (1942) housing project called Lamokin Village in Chester, PA. I remember how we, leaving our house at 511 Wheatley Place, walked "up the hill" to Grandmom's. Short-cutting through Booker T. Washington's playground always stirred the desire in me to stop and play on their see-saw, monkey bars and spinner. That elementary school's playground was the most level terrain on the way to Grandmom's. It was quite a workout ascending the inclined streets until after we crossed West Ninth Street. As we walked down that street, we approached the path, a perpendicular, steeply inclined, well-worn dirt path with weeds flourishing on both sides. Because it was too steep and dirty for me, you always carried me up what was called Flower Hill. As we climbed it, the weeds stopped and it seemed we were in another world. The top of the hill placed us in the community gardening area; there were no trees, just gardens that bathed in the sun on that

entire city block. Spring brought the sight and smell of freshly-tilled, neatly patted mounds of soil. It seemed to my little self that the patted down neat rows on either side of the path went on forever. In summer, this gardening area placed me smack in the middle of a land of not too friendly giants. Corn, tomatoes and bean stalks, taller than my father, grew so dense that it became impossible to see anything except for the path.

Leaving the gardening spot and walking upon the paved street, my heart pounded as I caught a glimpse of my grandparents' gigantic, glistening, silver leaf maple tree that grew in their front yard. Walking nearer, we could see the gate and fence. There was always an obstacle getting through the gate. Unlike our new housing project, there were no sidewalks in your parents' part of the city. In front of these homes a ditch had been dug, an eighteen-inch deep, two-foot wide, rain gutter. It carried flowing rain water, but most of the time its water was still, stagnated, or dried up. Each homeowner's board led from the street to a connecting path, which was a dirt sidewalk. The most awkward for maneuverability were two parallel, thin boards that sometimes had an unpleasant give underfoot, not like the wooden planks that were almost as wide as modern treadmill runners. Almost all the important events that transpired in my life seem to have been initiated by the crossing of those boards.

Mother, I still think of how you guided me across it, walking close in back of me, holding onto my hands, carefully guiding me. The fun began afterwards as we went through the gate and entered the yard. Even today, I wish I had those Adirondack chairs

that graced their front porch. They were Grandpop's favorite place to sit while he "chewed tobacco" and ate peanuts. I can see his head resting on the sloping back, spittle can close as he enjoyed the shade tree.

My grandparents' chicken coop fascinated me but, against the light streaming from the kitchen door, the unlit outhouse, rising singularly, like a monolith monster, scared the living daylight out of me. You lovingly held me on the seat, but thoughts of falling into that deep, dark, unlit hole terrified me. Inside the house, the lights were on. Inside, the smell of roasted chicken, biscuits, greens, corn and sweet potatoes wafted to the outside. Inside, everyone talked, doing a kind of cross social-economic-political conversation where you join in on one conversation for a minute, then in the few seconds while you allowed yourself to let someone else speak, you catch another conversation or two, give them your two-cents worth like you were listening all the time, then make it back to your original conversation with a provocative comment as soon as you could interrupt. This mish-mash of words and thoughts went on for hours with the usual confusion that failure to listen presents.

You know, when I was young, it didn't bother me. I was busy with my older cousins playing *Hide and Seek*, *Simon Says*, *Red Light - Green Light* or sitting cross-legged on the floor playing the peanut game, *How Many*. In this game, each person started out with ten unshelled peanuts hidden behind our backs as we parceled any number of them into a fist. We showed our fist to all and the next player had to guess

how many. It was an addition/subtraction game that I loved and could play as a very young child. The only bad time I had at Grandmom's was during an air raid warning signal. I remember that screeching, piercing sound and being told to hide behind the big, winged, deep wine colored chair closest to the dining room. A house full of grownups hiding, and even then, I knew we were in no way playing *Hide and Seek*.

I imagine that many of the most important moments of your life were also predicated by crossing those boards, since you and your family were there when the house was built from scratch. At age five, you and your four siblings probably thought the train ride from Dixie, Georgia, to Chester, Pennsylvania, was a long one, but it was necessary. You recounted to me that your dad was a tenement farmer for his father, but he felt that his dad, in some cases, wasn't fair in his take and in his charges. In July of 1923, finding it difficult to make "ends meet" with the food he was allowed to keep, Grandpop gathered his family and worldly goods to move up north where some relatives had already settled. He found work quickly and built your family home with the help of those relatives. Grandpop, Walter James Brown, a man of medium stature, always managed to find some kind of work outside the home, even during the Depression. Born Amanda Rosa Goldenbird Spencer, Grandmom's carriage was tall, and straight, as I imagine her Native American grandmother, Goldenbird's, was. Mandy, as family and neighbors called her, or A. R., the name Grandpop used for her, also worked outside the

home. She cleaned and cooked for others. I remember Mother, how you always remarked, “Hard times or no, we never missed a meal.”

I can understand, because the availability of food makes sense, given the chickens and the garden and the now almost lost art of canning fruits and vegetables at home; but Mother, it seems that hard times were a reality in your personal life. Your writings, forty years later when you were in college, show that your struggle was always trying to prove your self worth to your family. Part of that must have stemmed from your complexion. Until your mid-twenties, you were a few shades lighter than other African Americans. That was bad enough, but you had bright red hair and some freckles, a rarity. Regularly, your siblings and schoolmates taunted you, “Red Fox, Red Fox, where did you come from?” I had problems in school, but I can’t imagine how much that hurt you. Changing skin pigmentation is not an option.

A few years after your December 18, 1917, birth, your last sister was born, designating you as the third in a family of six; all girls, except for the next to last, who was the only boy. Although you weren’t the only child in the middle, you felt less worthy of love than your siblings, a feeling you kept with you forever. Putting it into rhyme many years later, you wrote the poem, *In the Middle*:

One early Tuesday morning, with so much pain and groaning,

A little girl was born, on a frosty December morn.

When I was but a little lass, I looked into a looking glass,

*Wondering what the future held for me, for I was daughter number three.
The eldest daughter had her place; the second daughter was fair of face,
But by the time I came along, my parents wondered what was wrong.
For they had plans for a little boy, another girl had spoiled their joy.
So right away, as you can see, I had to find a place for me.
Then, to make matters even worse, I was replaced with a new birth.
I became so alone among the crowd that I began to pray long and loud. . .*

Self-aloneness didn't stop you from being a busy, industrious little girl. Like your siblings, at home you still had to beat rugs and wash clothes on a ribbed washboard situated in a large round, metal tub supported by two kitchen chairs. These tubs were also used for bathing. Working in the garden was a given, as was feeding chickens and collecting eggs. In late summer, there was the work of picking, peeling, snapping, shucking and cleaning vegetables to prepare them for canning. In your seventh year, you told me you babysat other relatives' children, indicating that you were very mature for your age. Around age thirteen, your income was from the labor of going with Grandmom to clean other people's houses on the weekends. But by sixteen, you had taught yourself the art and craft of hairdressing. In the 1920s and early 30s this became an entirely different route for a young black woman to earn a little money, unlike your sisters who worked for families, doing housework. Your passion from then on became your main occupation for much of your adult life. People needed you; under your hands they not

only became well-coiffed, they became a captive audience of your gift of gab, your opinions, your ability to not only sense what others were feeling, but to build upon that as they listened to you develop into a self-made problem-solver-style stylist.

There was this one story you always told about the day you played, and suffered from, playing hooky. Your high school Vice-Principal, Karl E. Agan, had warned you that there would be a suspension if you were late again, but this day the number of chores before school made it impossible for you to finish them fast enough. You tried to explain that to Grandmom, but she didn't care if you were late; as far as she was concerned you were going to school. You recalled that she said, "Rube Estelle, get your butt to school! When I come from the kitchen, don't be here." You weighed the alternatives, a whipping or a suspension. Choosing to avoid both, you made yourself comfortable in a closet and settled in to wile away the time until your siblings came home. Grandmom discovered you and said the words you dreaded: "You yella heifer! Git me that plaited switch off the porch!"

According to you, this was the worst whipping you had ever had. Branches, pulled from the massive, silver-leaf maple tree, were stripped of their beautiful, large, five-lobe leaves. These whipping switches were placed on a peg near the front door, like guns, poised and ready to inflict pain. The elements made them curve downward; omens of doom. There were three types of switches, the single, thin, leg stinging switch used for backtalk; a thicker branch served to lessen regular offenses like bad grades or undone

chores. The three-part plaited switch was supposed to reverse a moral or ethical offense; it could thrash deception and cunning out of children and morality and ethics into them. You got the plaited one.

That reminds me of the time you said that you almost killed me. The year before you died, as I was driving you home, you still seemed to savor the memory as you spun the story for the ninety-ninth time of the incident that wasn't completed. "I probably would have killed you if Momma hadn't pulled me off you." You continued, "Momma always thought I was too hard on you, but I wasn't. When you were about fifteen, I had you bent over backwards on Momma's dining room table with my arm strangle-holding your neck while I beat your legs. You had talked back to me; you had asked to go to a party at your cousin's Bobbie's house, I said 'no' and as usual, you asked 'why not?' "

"Judy," you continued as you turned to me in the car, pointing your menacing right index finger, waving it up and down in my direction, "You never could take no for an answer and leave it at that. When I say no, don't ask me again! So, anyway, as I continued my stranglehold while beating your legs, Mama came in from the store and pulled me off you or you would be dead today."

I don't remember that episode. I do remember another one around that time that disturbed me so much that I changed my name for you. Until that time, I called you Momma. This incident happened because when walking down Grandmom's street, somehow or another I neglected to speak to a neighbor who was a cousin. Whoever it

was, told you. After you hollered and screamed at me about not speaking to a relative and I looked at you incredulously, you decided that that deserved a whipping, and that you gave. To me, it was inconceivable that a missing *hello* could warrant a beating. With all that had happened in my life, I decided that birth didn't make a mom, and changed your name from Momma to Mother. You never even noticed, or if you did, you didn't care enough to ask me why.

“Why” wasn't a word that was allowed in our relationship. Your poem, *Why Ask Why* puts it maddeningly succinct:

Why do you ask *why*?

If you don't know why

Why ask *why*?

Why should I know why

You want to know why?

Ask someone else why.

But why ask them why,

They'll ask you why

You asked them why,

So why ask them why

If you don't know why,

Why ask *why*?

Who knows why you ask us why,

Why, we should ask you,

Why you want to know why,

If you don't know why,

Why ask *why*?

You probably didn't have much time to ask why because you loved to spend much of your free time in church, singing in the youth choir, participating in youth programs and in teaching Sunday school. You seldom got into trouble. Church was your primary social escape vehicle. Your work there gained that sorely needed appreciation and admiration from others that you felt was missing from your family. The inter-church fellowship of Baptist youth met periodically with others of the same denomination. Denomination, being with people of like faith, meant much to your family. None of you was allowed to visit or go near the "unseemly type worship" that came from a Pentecostal church located a block from your Calvary Baptist Church. Grandmom and Grandpop took "no stuff." They demanded and received proper ethics and decorum. This earned the Brown girls the reputation of being "good girls" even if people thought you all were a bit "siddity" and "uppity" and brought up as a kind of throwback to Victorian times.

Chapter 3

A TIE THAT BREAKS

I know it was hard on you when you were in your mid-fifties and I left a Presbyterian church and joined a Pentecostal one. That's what I was led in my being to do, not to hurt you, even though I knew it would. When I wanted to talk to you about my beliefs, actually I went into a hard proselytizing that no one, and especially a parent, would want to hear. I made some tremendously harsh statements about your beliefs; outwardly, that was not to hurt you, but inwardly, now, I'm not sure. I was pumped up on adrenaline and zeal, not knowledge. That rift between us lasted for about half a year, but a grandparent's need to see grandchildren has a way of masking or smoothing out even major rifts. It was years before I realized the error of my behavior, the hurt that my words imparted and inwardly, I calmed down and acknowledged that there are two sides to every coin. I asked for forgiveness, for us start anew and try to forget that incident. You flatly refused and made that foolish episode of my life the new foundation of our relationship and our lives for the rest of our years. The rift between us had fused. I understand. Years later, you and Daddy willed your home to Tracy, my only child who had children close enough to visit. Keith, your favorite, had moved to Alabama where he lived with his wife and children. Later, you willed the house to your church when Tracy and her husband purchased a new home. Either way was all right with me. A person's possession is personal and no one should have a right to interfere.

When Tracy's children came to my house for weekly visits, I scheduled it so she and her husband would have a date night on my Bible study night. I took the kids to my church; however, the children wanted to discontinue their gathering time there, because unlike our Sunday school, there was more singing and coloring than teaching during weeknight class. I let them discontinue going, for I knew that while singing and coloring are always fun, teaching was what they needed. When I told you they were no longer going, before I could tell you of my new plan, you came at me in a rage. "What do you mean, they don't want to go?! Children don't tell you what they want, you tell them!" Your verbal fury was daunting, and as usual, I let you continue. By then I had, in most cases, learned to fall silent once you started. What I didn't tell you is that I was teaching children's church in my home to my grandkids. They loved their Mom Mom's teaching and learned much; we followed lessons with reinforcing play afterwards.

That I didn't tell you can be called rebellion mixed with passive aggressive payback. Do I yet wish I had? Not really. Doing what you may have approved of, but letting you believe I was a willful, headstrong daughter, was my only way of letting you seethe in your self-inflicted internal conflict. This, over the years, became my way of dealing with you. The biggest drawback of my omissions was listening to you jump to incorrect conclusions and telling me of my wrongheadedness with hurtful words. Are games played with another's feelings okay? Do I believe it's easier to not argue and that passive aggressiveness actually pacified me? Had I told you, I really don't believe that

would have lessened your demands on the manner in which I ran my life. At best, I felt I was getting some self-satisfaction from these no-win situations.

Chapter 4

LOVE HATES

No demands are put upon falling in love—it just happens. You fell in love with the boy next door, Ernest Robbins. Unlike your five-foot three inch frame and light-skin tone, he was a six feet, one-inch tall, dark and handsome man. He stuttered. One day, before you graduated high school, he voiced his desire, “Ru-Ru-Ru-Ru, Rubye, l-l-l-l-let’s geh-geh-geh-geh, get m-m-married.” He was your true love and soon you were married in June of 1937, a week after your high school graduation. You two honeymooned in Atlantic City.

I suspect that on your honeymoon, you hoped to get pregnant. Almost all women of your time expected and wanted to have a baby immediately. You didn’t. Fear ensued. Many tears were shed and prayers prayed. The acute sting of barrenness flared each time you looked into the young faces of the children of your older sisters. Aunt Doris, the oldest, already had her two children, John (Jackie) and Gloria. Aunt May, the second sister, already had two children, Larry and Barbara. The sisters’ sneers, snide remarks and auras of one up-woman-ship were stabs to your very heart.

With your strong faith you pleaded with God using the words, “one child, just one, please, and let it be a girl.” Time and again you impressed upon me the words, “I prayed for you. Girls always stay close to their mothers, while boys, after taking a wife

can move away with nary a thought.” All my life, I’ve felt it was my destiny to be near you. And I was.

Love and Hate – by Rubye

I must go now, before it’s too late!

This new birth turns love into hate.

Finally, in January of 1939, your prayers were answered. You had me, your little girl. It must have been a beautiful time of life for you, carrying me during the same months as my Aunt May carried her third child, Ronald, who was born the month before I was. I smile every time I remember how I got my name. Several months before I was born, you read a story about a girl named Judy and fell in love with that name. That evening, when my father came through the door, he surprised you as he stuttered, “R-R-R-R-Ruby, if w-w-w-we have a g-ga-ga-ga girl, leh-leh-leh let’s n-n-n-name h-h-her Ju-Ju-Judy.” I can imagine the joy you felt as you held me close. You really loved me as you breastfed me for almost two years. As you rehearse stories over and over, you still repeat that I was “so fat that the fat rolled over itself on my arms and legs.” Although not uncommon for a mother to nurse for at least six months in that day and time, to prove your worth and your tenacity, you nursed longer than any other mother in our family. I have to tell you right now, Mother; it is my private opinion that you gave me an immune system that is second to none. Even now, my doctor has dubbed me her perfect patient

because of my test results. So I thank you, Mother—can't know your true reasons for doing it, but you did more than expected of anyone. My opinion.

It must have been very hard for you to cross that board to leave me with Grandmom when I was older. Your husband, the love of your life, had an excellent job as a welder at Sun Shipyard as war loomed across the world and the United States prepared. Stuttering kept him from being drafted. He worked faithfully during the week, but Fridays, payday, he didn't bother to come home until Sunday night. My father didn't drink at all because it made him sick, but at the end of the week, the cash in his pocket beckoned him to gamble. Women left at home because of the impending war, sought out men who had money. His first love became gambling—women, lots of women, became his second. One day, you realized that something was wrong with your body. The doctor diagnosed you with syphilis. The fury, the shame, the degradation you must have felt. That's when you asked Grandmom to keep me for those first contagious weeks. I can't *even* imagine what you went through, treated with a needle every week for more than a year; follow up visits after that; a husband who spent every weekend away, occasionally handing you his leftover winnings of more than his paycheck. But most of the time, there was barely enough to pay the iceman or the Abbots milkman who, every other day, left bottles of milk on our doorstep. My father's exploits continued for the rest of your married life. Each time you told me this story, you probably thought that through my silence, I was blaming you for my father's leaving. That's just not true. No woman

should live like that. But it was okay with me that you thought that. I could have told you, sympathized with you, cried with you, but I didn't. This could have been a fence mending moment, but I let you dwell in the imaginations of your mind because it made me feel better that it bothered you. How much better it is for our offspring if they don't knowingly hurt another, are confident in their own choices, and don't base their self approval on another.

Meanwhile, you were trying to do enough hair to make ends meet. Many neighborhood clients brought and carried rumors and tales and were fundamentally troublemakers with negative information. Coupled with what you told family, this fostered pity and led you and your family to engage in some arguments and blame sessions about your course of action. Barely having a husband, you taught yourself to knit and crochet and sold beautiful, stylish handbags, hats and scarves in a desperate attempt to relieve yourself of your pain and augment your hairdressing business.

Your misery was compounded by your in-laws. Aunt Be, (I don't know why we called my father's mother Aunt Be) and my great grandmother, Grandma Franklin, really couldn't straighten out a grown man, but you took your pain to them, time after time until they began to tire of your telling them all the bad about their offspring. While they were still listening, you, like a Christian, cared for Grandma Franklin for over two weeks when she had some ailment, and you frequently took them food. When you would continuously call them to tell them of yet another betrayal by your husband, you got very little

compassion from them. But I don't understand what they could do to a grown man to change him from a gambling-womanizer back into your prince charming. Years later, when I was eight, you finally asked my father to leave. As soon as Aunt Be heard the news she called you and gladly exclaimed, "Good, now I can have back my son that you stole from me." I guess that is what caused you to brand them as uncompassionate; when you looked at me, you saw them and you never let me forget it. All my grown life you'd say, "I don't know *how* I carried you in my belly for nine months and you're nothing like me." When I was graduated from college at sixty-seven years old, I sent you two pictures of me because you did not come to my graduation. When I called to see if you had received them, you told me you had showed them to a good church friend named Julia; she commented that they were great pictures. Then, the rest of your conversation with her was "I hate that one picture because she looks just like my ex-husband's mother, Aunt Be." Sorry, Mother. Sorry that you can hurt so completely, so in depth for over sixty years. Sorry that you decided to make me your constant reminder of the depth of your misery.

Those grandmothers, I only remember going to see once, even though they lived next door to Grandmom. But wait – I did see my grandmother again after I read of her death and attended her funeral with Tracy. She was in her late 80s, but looked to be in her mid 40s as she lay in her casket. So, if I stay true to her looks, I'll look young like she did. So, convolutedly, you've paid me a great compliment. Thanks, Mother.

No matter how as a child, I loved going to Grandmom's, crossing that plank to leave was always sad, because I had come to expect that before I left, I would inevitably have committed some "do not," which carried with it the suffering of the consequences. On the way there, you would list them: "Close your mouth; don't mess with your patent leather, Baby Jane shoes; don't let your panties show [in my Shirley Temple styled dress that ended at my upper thigh]; don't forget to be ladylike; don't interrupt; don't ask Momma for cake. Don't fidget. Do mind your manners. Say please and thank you." Rules are fine, but bound to be broken, especially by young kids. Like me. Later, it was, "Don't tell anyone anything that goes on in our house. My sisters talk too much; don't say a word."

How hard it must have been on you. Here you were with a husband who almost wasn't. You were living with the ridicule and pity of family and neighbors and the put down of in-laws. Here we were, every Sunday, walking home to the source of your unhappiness. A quiet, brooding and terrified young child, I tried to live by every word you said. You wouldn't whip me every week; you would threaten that when you did, it would be terrible. My life was overrun by fear. Most times, during the week, I would listen to a rehearsal of everything I did wrong. That was frightening, but there were two words that rippled through my being and kept me in a constant state of suspended turmoil – "just wait." Sometimes you would take a switch home with us. Sometimes you wouldn't.

In the bathroom. I've often wondered, why the bathroom, Mother? No matter what, there would have been no running into another room on my part. I could never even think of running from you when you'd use the switch or a belt and later, those plug-in, detachable ironing cords. Jumping on one leg to save the other, then vice versa, crouching down to save my behind, holding the back of my head to save my face, those were my best defenses; I knew running would only intensify the problem, Mother. Was it because there was no window, or a very small one, and you didn't want the neighbors hearing me scream my favorite cry that I wouldn't do it anymore – although, most of the time the cause of the beating was either unknown to me or I had forgotten what I did. The frustration you must have felt as you punished me, I now understand. I was your outlet. Soon, you found an additional answer to dull your pain.

“A little sister, little brother, or a little sumptin,” I began to ask for when I was very young. Shortly after that, in Georgia, a second cousin of yours was unmarried and pregnant. Because of the shame, her family and she asked that you take the child; she would come to get her in a year when the humiliation subsided. You, in the midst of your unhappy marriage, accepted and gladly took (Claudia) Dede in when she was a month old. Her mother went on to have eight more children, so Dede stayed. My fifth birthday was three days after she was born; I suspect my father went along with another baby. I cannot remember ever hearing you two argue. He probably didn't. How could he get a word in edgewise when he stuttered? If you were angry, in all likelihood, you would not

calmly wait for Daddy to begin to speak. Yet it seems just as defying on a daddy's part to do as some men do and just ignore their wives.

Having an infant sister who I could not share my thoughts with was a bit problematic. What could I do with an infant or even a two year old when I'm seven? I was never allowed to visit outside my yard, was never, ever allowed inside anyone's house. Although your older sister, with her four children, lived a few blocks from us, the only time I visited was when I was with you. Aunt May just "doesn't raise her children like I want you to be raised," you'd say. So I learned to play by myself. You allowed me one girl friend, Carol Kinslow, and you actually let her into the house. You kept me very close; I was always aware of the constraints placed upon me. Outside, Carol and I made mud pies and played house, using the weed that can be stripped of its petals in one fell swoop as my peas, the broadleaf weed as my greens and leaves or whatever was available became the food needed to round out the meal that I placed on the metal, decorated with painted roses, dishes that you bought for me. As I grew older, I amused myself by honing my expertise with one person amusements: Jacks, the bat and ball; reading books and comic books; writing stories and making up stories as I cut out or made clothes for paper dolls. Saturdays, I was allowed to go to the matinee at the Roxy Theater to see the serials and movies with my cousins as long as, you would say, they brought me "straight home."

Chapter 5

THE TATTLER

Remember when I was five years old, the day I started first grade? You dressed me in an itchy wool, tartan plaid skirt with straps that crisscrossed in the back and in a white, Argo-brand starched, scratchy blouse. I thought I was pretty, anyway. On our way, a little boy my age, George Raymond, came out of his house, pointed at me and hollered, “Look at the little blaaack girl with the red hair.” For the first time, that made me realize that there was color in people. I had no idea my hair was red and that meant different from most. I had no idea that I was darker than you, lighter than my father. Soon I learned that that little boy was much darker than I; it was the red hair on a black girl that probably caused his outcry. But for me, my red hair was not a detriment, at first it was an oddity, then an attractive feature.

With no kindergarten established in Chester at the time, kids went from home to first grade. My first few weeks of school must not have gone too well. Miss Plummer, my teacher, told you that although my birth date was one day before the cutoff date of January 31st for first graders to begin school, I wasn’t ready. But you insisted because Aunt May’s child, Ronny, the cousin born the month before I was, was admitted at five and three months; you insisted that I be admitted at five and four months. Thankfully, I did well and passed each level with no grading problem and certainly with no behavioral problems. Well, maybe except for one that you did not know about.

Tattletale-extraordinaire, that was me. After all, I knew what was always right and always wrong, you had taught me well, those other kids needed me to help correct them. Years later, I learned I must mask or give that up to survive in school, but while little, I already had the reputation. That, and my lack of coordination and lack of spatial perception, made me an outsider among my peers. I never even learned to jump double-dutch! I was too scared of getting my clothes dirty or that someone would see my panties to play on the monkey bars or the spinner. Of course, I was almost always the leftover for sides in school. At first I tried hard, then I would just let the dodge ball or whatever, take me out of the game. I did love school itself; that sufficed.

There were two pencil sagas after my father left. They played a large part in my life, maybe even larger than I'll ever know. In the third grade, the same year you and my father parted, I perfected the dubious art of balancing a pencil in the depression of the second joint of my index finger. For a few years, hours upon end I would amuse myself by carrying a pencil, balanced by my finger. Thirty years later, out of nowhere, I developed a small, permanent knot on that finger, nowhere else, as a reminder. My granddaughter, Alexis, Tracy's daughter, when she was about the same young age, out of nowhere at a gathering, showed us that she could do the exact same thing. Everyone oohed and aahed. I went to her, showed her the knot I had and asked if she wanted one when she was in her sixties. You know she's a smart girl, she stopped right away.

Then, there was the bike pencil. Riding my red Shelby two wheeler where allowed (the front and back sidewalk) I fell and the pedal left a deep wound on my lower left leg. As it began to heal and scab, I would constantly run my fingers over it during class. Then, to amuse myself, I used a lead (well, really graphite) pencil to color in this three-inch, trying-to-heal scar, therefore, keeping it open for months. If there were such a thing as graphite poisoning I could blame it on my memory loss then and now. I wonder what happened to my bicycle after you and my father got divorced and we moved away.

Chapter 6

THE GOOD ONE

I understand now that for your self esteem, I had to be better than my cousins. I had to stand out as the “best-kept” in my use of decorum, school, dress and in anything else at which you could make me/us better. You had such high hopes for me when I was young. When it came time for mandatory smallpox vaccinations, always given on the arm and which leave a noticeably round scar on the skin, you insisted that mine should be injected on my thigh. No lasting blotches on your perfect child that you could be held responsible for. Through me, you expected glory. More than a decade ago, when my children were approaching middle age and I was undeniably attractive, I finally told you how much it hurt that you would still tell me and anyone who would listen that I was “one ugly child,” but that you dressed me “better than any of your sisters dressed their children.” That day, I got up enough nerve to tell you how hurtful that statement was to me. You stopped saying it, but I’m not sure you understood why. It seemed to me that the only beauty I could have had, had to have come from you. My children and those who follow must know that while adornments certainly help, individual beauty comes from within, is not determined by another; neither does it come from anyone or anything else. Once you find your inner beauty, your inner self-esteem, allow it to spill over to your outer self. Then your demeanor and outside beauty will shine; that is the most important underlying factor in one’s self-esteem life’s issue.

Around the same time, you mentioned to my offspring that I never laughed, not as a child, not to that present, but remember how surprised you were when they faced you and told you that I laughed as much as any other person. There just wasn't reason to laugh when the two of us were in each other's presence; there was only room to listen as you rehearsed what your sisters had done to you, how you did more for your mother than anyone, how you had no friends and how each of your sisters' children were "bent on killing them" because they didn't show their mothers "enough attention." Yes, Mother, I know you required more attention, but I was obligated to my husband, children, full time employment, Brownie Girl Scout leadership, Jefferis School PTA president, and the Third Presbyterian Church as their youth leader when the children were young. At that time, I needed my sanity, space and peace.

It's not like I wasn't there every birthday, every Thanksgiving, every Mothers Day and at various times in between telephone calls. In fact, in the early years, you stayed in my home on Christmas Eve just to see your grandkids open their presents. Until they were grown, we always celebrated Thanksgiving at your house and my children have pleasant memories of the barbecues and other special occasions when they were young. Rylene told me that, as a young girl, she thought that you were rich because you had real butter—at the time, all I used was margarine. Many other major holidays you spent at my home, and always, cards were sent back and forth for other special occasions. Speaking of cards or presents, yours to me were always unique because they always

ended in the words, “Your very own Mother, Always. Love, Mother” or those to your grandchildren ended, “Your very own MiMi.” Perhaps I should have realized that that was not a “movie star closing” as Leesa commented, but a declaration of ownership.

When I asked you if we could go to Atlantic City for your 90th birthday, you were right to say that you wouldn’t go with me to your favorite place, because you wanted to laugh, and you couldn’t with me. We very seldom shared a laugh, but I was seriously hoping we could try. I decided that the best option for a celebration would be to have it close to your home in Lawnside, at your church. When I talked with a deacon at your church about having your celebration surrounded by people you knew, I asked him to keep it a secret. He told you, like people do. When I visited, early in the fall, you told me that I had better not do it. If I did, then everyone would think that you were “the bad one” and I “was the good one.” I started to ask you what that meant, but let it go, since I knew I wouldn’t get an answer. I mentioned your odd statement to Rylene and Leesa. Later, I was to learn its meaning.

Chapter 7

EXIT AND ENTER – ONE DADDY

I have no idea why I remember no family dinners or Christmas mornings or any other time spent face to face with my father, but I vividly remember two incidents before you asked him to leave. I cannot recall if it was sunny or cloudy, high noon or evening, hot or cold; all I remember is that it was the brightest day of my memory with him. He had brought home a shiny new pair of skates, the newest kind, completely made of metal, of course. This was my first pair of real skates, not the baby ones, but the ones with a real key! The key was used to loosen the metal slide plate placed under the ball of the separated heel and toe piece in order for the size to extend to accommodate a seven year old or a grown man. The key adjusted both the length of the skate and width of the toe piece to fit. My father sat on our single step in front of the kitchen door as he strapped my skates on himself, tightened them with the skate key, and then hoisted me onto his shoulders. Swiftly, he skated down the long sidewalk that ran the length of our block, moving, it seemed to me, a million miles a minute. He would grab the neighbors' clothesline pole at the end of the block then skate, skate, skate back to ours at the other end, grab hold to our pole and spin, spin, spin us both around it at tremendous speed. I felt on top of the world—this was my daddy.

The other time involved my going to the store to get bread. I think I was around the same age. The store was a little more than a block away, but was not located where

anyone in the house could see it or me as I walked through the train trestle underpass. Like every child in our neighborhood, back in that day, I had done so countless times, but always hesitated or ran like crazy if a train was passing overhead; the noise and the reverberations were unsettling, to say the least. This particular day it was almost dusk; you and my father were home and sent me to the store to buy bread. I had purchased it, but on the way home, under the shaded trestle, a large, daunting man came up to me and said, "Let me carry that for you" and took the bread out of my hand. I knew I wasn't supposed to speak to strangers, but what could I do; he was so overpoweringly tall and big. He had my bread. I walked alongside him; there was no one else under the trestle. When we were near the end of it, he bent over, put his face close mine, held the bread out as hostage and asked me to kiss him on his cheek. I did. He handed it to me and I ran home, shaken. Both of you asked me what was wrong and when I told you, my father jumped up (at that moment, he seemed ten feet tall) and flew out the house running to find the man. I remember him returning home saying that he was not successful. I don't think I was allowed to go to the store in the late afternoon ever again. You don't know this Mother, but I had dreams of a trestle collapsing on me for several years after that. Even today, every time I have to drive under one, as the rails rumble under the passing train, I think about my dream.

From the end of 1948 until January of the year 1950, life changed very quickly for both of us. Remember how there used to be a day called Children's Day? Before there

was ever a Fathers' or a Mothers' Day, it was celebrated the second Sunday in June. I understand that it's still around, but I know of no one that celebrates it as we did, when every mother dressed her girls in white and attended church. All children were reminded to become dedicated to Christian principles, as parents were reminded to teach them those principles. It was that Sunday in 1949 that I first believed in God with a zeal and a hunger that became permanent. Right on time, that melding of my life to His came as we walked home through Booker T. Washington's schoolyard from a particularly tumultuous rule violation at Grandmom's. Enough said.

During 1948, you asked me who you should marry, Mr. Bob or Cousin Buddy. I chose Mr. Bob. Even as a child, I felt there was something wrong with marrying one's cousin, even a distant one. Mr. Bob (Jimmie Russell Young) was a veteran of World War II, worked in Reading, Pennsylvania, as a dry cleaner's spotter and wanted to marry you. Your divorce from my father is dated toward the end of November of 1948; you and Mr. Bob (Daddy) were married on December 5th of the same year. This Daddy wanted to buy us a house using the GI Bill. He owned some land in Bridgeton, New Jersey, that could have been built upon, but learned of the four, newly built houses for sale in the little borough of Lawnside, New Jersey.

We both know the general history of Lawnside, but I delved into it a little more and visited the Peter Mott House there since your death. Lawnside is an historic New Jersey borough. From its beginning, some of the landowners from neighboring

Haddonfield who were mainly abolitionist Quakers, purchased and then sold land to free African Americans and freed slaves. An African American Philadelphia dentist purchased additional land there, enlarging the boundaries of the small village. The solidification of this small town rested in the knowledge that this land was theirs; it was more than a freedom marker; it was a symbol of independence for them and those non-free who passed through. The home most used to house the non-free was owned by Lawnside's Peter Mott, a farmer of some wealth, signified by his two-story home. He set up a place, called a station, in the basement of his home. Peter Mott is believed to be originally from Wilmington, Delaware, which I found interesting because, as you know, I live there. Also, Wilmington is the home of abolitionist Thomas Garrett Marker, a Quaker, an abolitionist and a contemporary of Peter Mott.

Through this network of Friends and freed people, Lawnside became part of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) and is listed as such in the New Jersey Historical Commission's publication, "Steal Away, Steal Away . . ." "I thought it remarkable that it writes concerning Lawnside and Peter Mott; "Not only is it one of the few extant UGRR stations that was owned and operated by a black American, but it is probably the only site of its kind in the nation: a black-owned and operated UGRR station in an all-black town." It is noteworthy that a town incorporated in 1926 by the state of New Jersey became the first independent, self-governing African American community north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Moving us into a closed community of descendants of a historic group is tantamount to being in the middle of a clique. That was part of the problem with Lawnside as far as my life there was concerned. But for you and Daddy, before moving there, you had to contend with both written and tacit problems.

New home mortgages, in 1949, were almost impossible to obtain by African Americans because of Jim Crow neighborhood redlining practices. Of course, it is my conjecture that your problems with obtaining a mortgage was because of redlining, because I would not have been privy to your grownup conversations on the subject. But I do know that redlining was born out of the 1934 National Housing Act, from which the Federal Home Loan Bank Board asked the Home Owner's Loan Corporation to map out 239 United States cities in 1935. This map would allow others (banks and home insurance lenders) to pick by sections on the map to whom they would lend money, finance or insure. This led to the practice of cities being color coded: Type A was light blue for the wealthy suburbs on the outskirts of cities; Type B was blue for those sections that were still desirable; Type C, yellow, was for declining neighborhoods. But Type D, red-lined, was considered hazardous or most risky. The significance of that is, lenders and mortgage insurers should stay away, which of course, led to the decay of many large cities.

Our future 1.4 square mile town was on the outskirts of Camden. Although Camden may or may not have been on the original list, lenders all over the country

adopted the lining practices. Lawnside's homes, built like Grandmom's and Grandpop's in the 20s and 30s, were built from the ground up with fireplace and pot belly stoves whose wooden windows had become drafty as wood decayed upon wood. As homeowners there struggled to keep themselves afloat, the unspoken practices of lenders must have had a damning and pernicious effect upon them. Redlining took nothing of a person's life into consideration, not ability to pay or station in life, except for the station of being a black American in a basically all black town. Those four new houses, separated from most others in Lawnside, would have been included under the label of Type D. All four were empty. A mortgage for an all-new structure is almost always essential.

At that time, I suspect that no white people, except maybe for a few Quakers, would have wanted to live there in the first self-governing, African American community north of the Mason Dixon Line, new house or no. Whatever measures Daddy had taken to obtain a mortgage obviously failed, but apparently he decided, as a World War II veteran, that he would write a letter to President Harry S. Truman to ask for his help to obtain it.

My biological father had, for my birthday that year, bought me a working toy Underwood typewriter. Although your penmanship was beautiful, you felt it more appropriate to send a typewritten letter to President Truman. I still smile to myself when I think of the agony of my hunt-and-peck system and the paper after paper discarded because of erasure holes. I pecked out the request. Perhaps you did not really mail my

letter. Perhaps you ended up writing the letter to the President, but I don't know that. As far as I know, it was my letter that opened up home ownership for us. You and Daddy obtained that mortgage and in rapid succession we moved from the projects in early January, 1950.

A smile crosses my face each time I remember Daddy buying us our first television before we moved. Actually, it was the first television that anyone in the projects had ever seen. Remember, after setting it up the first night with those rabbit ears (antenna) that summer? The windows were open; many kids and some adults stood outside our home trying to catch a glimpse of all those little automated people in that little box.

By that December in 1949, I had enjoyed every Christmas at Grandmom's. One negative and uncomfortable ritual was the kissing tradition. When any of us walked into the house, we had to kiss and to be kissed on the cheek by every adult person. Had to. A closely held tacit rule. Wet kisses were the worse. Even more uncomfortable was my feeling that I could not wipe the spittle off for fear of offending someone. As it began to dry, I had to find an almost hidden space in the house to get rid of it. Also unforgettable was the Santa Claus exchange of presents; but the Christmas program where each person got up and sang, prayed, acted, read or recited was my favorite. You and Aunt Zet (Marie), the sibling born soon after you, whom you most related to, recited two long poems from memory. Hers was *Guilty or Not Guilty* by Rose Hartwick Thorpe; yours

was the anonymous *Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight*. These burned within me and are with me still. When I invited fifty people to your eightieth birthday celebration dinner party at Charlie Brown's, your favorite restaurant, I asked Aunt Zet to recite it, but she declined. Now I'm so old I know the stress of trying to remember and to memorize. But the power of those words, the mind pictures they evoked and the passion in them led me to write skits for church, one skit for a school production and plays for pleasure.

Chapter 8

SUBURBIA

It was almost a story-land experience when we moved into our new house backed by undeveloped woodland; fronted and separated from most other houses in Lawnside by the White Horse Pike, a four-lane highway. Ours was a beautiful Cape Cod style house with warm hardwood floors throughout, fully electric, full basement, two unfinished dormers upstairs, central heat and whole house air conditioning. There was grass all around the house, front, back *and* sides. The last, and never to be forgotten biggest remembrance is that after we finished moving into our new home after Christmas, my “monthly” began ten days before I was eleven. I didn’t have a clue as to what was happening to me. I was just told by you that it would happen more and how to handle it. Handle it I did, but during those five days each month, I think the use of sanitary napkins caused me to have the oddest walk ever seen from an eleven year old.

You and Daddy finished both the bedrooms upstairs. I picked out the wallpaper from the selection you showed me, and you and Daddy papered my bedroom using that sepia colored paper. It portrayed a lovely bustled Victorian lady poised with her sun umbrella standing just outside a gazebo which was situated in back of a flowing fountain. She seemed engrossed in a conversation with a stately gentleman who held loosely the reign of his horse. I was beginning to feel as though my aloneness was good; I would be

perfect and pure, swept off my feet to marry a person like that stately gentleman and live happily ever after.

I know that Dede began kindergarten at five years old, but I have no idea how she got there or who cared for her on a daily basis. I do not remember ever having her with me as I, at eleven years old, crossed the highway to get to school. It was less than a quarter mile walk to the schoolhouse, a one-room-for-each-grade with grades from one through eighth. Each day, coming home for lunch, I let myself in and ate corn flakes and milk and much sugar. I am not complaining; you always had food there and I loved cornflakes. I felt that it was almost the norm for suburban children, soon to be labeled as latchkey kids, to let themselves in and out of the house to attend school.

Even before I began school there, I knew better than to correct or snitch on anyone. The kids in my class were unruly, but you were never going to stand for me to even think about being so, so I wasn't. Instead, I became more introverted. When the teacher said, "Hands on desk, every head down, eyes closed, or else you stay after school," I did as she said. How foolish of me, and of her. I was the only one she let leave on time, a few weeks before the end of the sixth grade school year. Bad mistake! New girl – in a closed community of people who felt they were better than others because their grandfathers were part of Lawnside's heritage and mine was not. To make matters worse, all the houses in Lawnside were old and left a good deal to be desired, kind of like my grandparents' home. Who was I to come there, live in a new house in a closed

community and mess with their code of behavior? As I gathered my books to leave, I felt every pair of eyes, filled with hate, staring at me. I remember thinking to myself on my way home, “What’s gonna happen to me? What was I supposed to do?” If I hadn’t obeyed, the teacher may have sent a note home and I would get a beating. I had never gotten a beating because of school, but I believed I would, had I misbehaved. Sure, I heard the kids’ rowdiness. I wish I had lifted my head from my desk and peeped to see that no one else obeyed. But, what then? Would I have joined in and let the teacher report me? No, I would not do that. Actually, my biggest problem was wondering what all those kids were going to do to me because I was allowed to leave while they were punished. Every day thereafter, I dodged them by running home and across the pike that separated me from most of Lawnside, but that’s not the worse of it. I was promoted out of the sixth grade, but in the beginning of the seventh, they called two other students, their parents, and you and me into the office and asked for permission for us, the children to skip the seventh grade. You did and they did. Mother, we know that I really wasn’t that smart. It may have been that the class, for the most part, didn’t apply themselves or that Chester schools were slightly ahead of Lawnside’s, but not a year ahead. Then again, since the borough had no high school and only one or two buses to bus children to Haddon Heights High School, I suspect that the seventh grade class had too many students to transport, while the eighth grade had room. No school district wants to buy a bus for three students.

I hoped that the eighth graders didn't know of my reputation, but no such luck. During an eighth grade recess, about a dozen kids began to taunt me, calling me smarty pants, brain, stuck up, weirdo, teacher's pet, to name a few. On the bright side, no one called me tattletale. They formed a circle around me trying to pick an argument. Instead of answering their goading taunts, thank God I knew enough about the things of God to mesmerize them with my tongue. Maybe I drew upon the poems I had heard and read to dramatize my monologue. As the crowd grew larger, the bell rang and I was saved.

Perhaps Elaine Whittington was there watching and took pity upon me, for shortly thereafter we became friends and I believe she was my buffer, my school savior. She even sat next to me on the bus for our eighth-grade trip to Washington, DC, when she could have chosen another seat. She was fifteen years old and I was eleven at the beginning of our last year at Lawnside Elementary. Our conversation revolved around God, the world as we knew it in our sheltered lives, and school. Don't worry, Mother, when she came over, we always sat outside; she neither saw the inside of our house, nor I hers. Elaine lived across the highway, about two blocks down from us. In high school, we had different tracks and rarely saw each other, but sometimes we called each other to talk, and sometimes she and I would sit on my steps in the spring and in the fall.

Besides, I don't know if I would let anyone in the house anyway, because I never understood our furniture. From wing back chairs and upholstered sofas in Chester, we went to thin metal legs fitted onto the bottom of cold plastic furniture in the living room.

No sofa, but a two-person seat instead. I knew stick furniture was all the rage in offices, but in our house, I just didn't get it and I didn't think a friend would understand it either. Another problem that I had trouble understanding was, in all the time I lived there, we never had a washing machine – clothes were washed in the bathtub, hung out on the backyard clothesline that stretched from tree to tree, or was laid across furniture throughout the house in bad weather.

Lawnside Elementary fed their one graduated eighth grade class into the completely upper middle class, nationally acclaimed Haddon Heights High School, which was all white except for a busload or two of black kids from Lawnside. So I went from a small group where I didn't fit in to being *the* outcasts' outcast, trying to survive in a totally different larger group. At lunchtime, I had my own table. That's when I began wearing my stylish burnt orange speckled coat all day, all the time. I became a before-my-time, what amounts to an all-black-wearing nerd, who dressed in orange. Fall, winter, spring, same coat. For two years. In all classes – except for gym, extracurricular archery and drama. I loved that coat. It became my shield against the world that I was in. Just as important, I was assigned to share a locker with another black girl who wore a very, very vintage smelling fur coat to school. The first time I opened the locker door and that smell permeated the air, I knew I was doomed to carry all my belongings with me all day, every day. In our bloomer-clad gym class, my highest grade was never higher than a 'D' for I could not summersault; that was required for a 'C' grade. Thankfully, you understood.

Those activities, coupled with my terrible acne that I continually picked, was my public life. That one semester I did take off my coat for the archery club, a club that didn't require social interaction. It did require coordination, but it was okay with me that I maybe hit the target board two or three times that entire semester. I also joined the drama club, but you quashed that when you found that I was to play a stereotypical southern maid who spoke unacceptable English.

It's easy for a child to have a private life when a strict parent isn't around. But breaking rules and paying the consequences was not what I did. Instead, I like to think I was a little ahead of my time as far as drugs were concerned. Although I'm not proud of it, I do like the deluded feeling of being, like, first in the world. Private conceit. You knew about part of it, I probably left signs around. It was only when drug issues received a good deal of press in society, more than twenty years later that you remarked that you realized what I was doing. Daddy smoked pipes and cigars and lit them with an automatic lighter. The lighter fluid that was required was left around the house. I began what is now termed *huffing*, using strips of napkins or tissues laid against my nose and upper lip. Huffing dries the skin out, so I always had your Ponds Cold Cream or Vaseline handy in case you came home early. From about age eleven to fourteen I did this, but after I saw myself levitate (not just your run-of-the-mill levitate) while I was standing upright, floating straight up almost to the ceiling, I stopped. I was afraid that if I did it again, I

would hit the ceiling or continue up into the stratosphere. Wait—people don't levitate. Okay, after I *thought* I saw myself levitate, I stopped. Much better.

But my self-abuse didn't stop there. Woods and Jersey sand bordered our property in the back; the rain on the sand released a familiar aroma, bringing back pleasant memories of walking to Grandmom's. I started my Pica (a disorder that began my practice of ingesting non-food items) phase: I began to eat the below-the-surface moist sand. I would casually dig, with one or two swipes with the heel of my shoe to almost an inch down, then casually scoop up a pinch or two of sand and take it inside to ingest. The swiping and the scooping were techniques I developed in case some neighbors were watching. They would think I had dropped something and was picking it up. How clever! Once inside, I would place the damp sand between a folded sheet of newspaper. As the sand dried, the newspaper smell infused the sand, adding pleasure to my consumption.

Working in Chester, you were doing your part in making a living for us, being there for clients' appointments a couple of days a week and completing a thousand hours of instruction in Philadelphia to, in April of 1951, receive a license as a Cosmetology Operator in the State of Pennsylvania, not the State of New Jersey. Most days, you came home when we were in bed asleep, except when I decided to stay up and watch television. I turned the lights out in the living room and kept an ear on the traffic that passed our house. As soon as I heard the bus whiz pass and it beginning to brake before coming to a complete stop about a block away, I would hurriedly turn off the television,

run up the steps and jump into bed. There was just enough time for my heart to stop beating fast before you walked in the door. You never caught me. As always, you checked on us and laid out our clothes for the next day. You even plaited our hair while we slept. In order for public transportation to get you to work or to your hair styling appointments, you had to leave before we awakened. Some evenings, usually early in the week, Daddy made the trip from Reading, Pennsylvania, to home, but mostly he stayed in Reading during the week, which meant I learned to do some simple cooking early.

Here we were in suburbia, doing things suburbanites do, like enjoying spending half a day Saturday on our hands and knees, Johnson Paste-waxing all the hardwood floors; or as you and Daddy did, using the half-lot sized space between our new house and the one next door where James and Ophelia Bryant lived, to plant corn and vegetables. How embarrassing! We lived on the pike. Cars from other towns whizzed by. Buses and trucks roared down the road. As they passed through Audubon, Barrington, Magnolia, Haddonfield and those other tiny boroughs with their nice houses and manicured lawns, and Lawnside with its lawns and wide open spaces on our side, unexpectedly they would pass four brand new houses with beautiful lawns, but in between two of those houses was ours. A beautiful new house, set back from the street, with corn growing high, spilling over the sidewalk! The only good I could find in that garden was that you never made me work in it.

But, flowers, you did love all flowers and they did flourish under your care. A profusion of plants adorned the front of the house and the little patch of land outside the kitchen door. I especially loved the tall Snapdragons; those individual flowers could be maneuvered to open and close, like small monsters snapping at and devouring their prey. The summer before you died, I came over to your home, which in the late 1960s was lifted from its foundation, put onto a carrier and moved two blocks away to make room for a shopping center. You may not agree with me, but I truly believe that that huge white metal stallion on a tall tower facing White Horse Pike, depicted as jumping over the obstacle placed below it, is in the exact spot that our house occupied. Since the horse, over what was my place, is stationary, its depiction does not show that it lands on the other side. Obstacles, for horses and people, are meant to be overcome. Our children must remember to keep their eyes on the end result. Leesa always denied, when I would remind her to *do what you want, as long as you are willing to pay the consequence* that there were no consequences to her actions, but I know she knows better. My *do what you want* was always meant to have my children live within safe parameters. I know mistakes happen. But, life threatening or the quality of life situations that carry with them the sting of reduced inner peace should never become part of doing what you want.

Back to the subject: I asked if I could pick some of your beautiful flowers, but was denied as you looked me in the eye and said, “No, don’t touch them, you have dead

hands; I'll pick some for you." Did I, as a child, once help you in the garden and kill something by accident? I sighed, but didn't ask why.

Daddy loved to hunt deer and pheasants in season; sometimes you went with him. .Daddy usually cooked them and they, along with your turkey, became a regular part of Thanksgiving, even though venison did not thrill anyone in the family. Regular barbeque fare on the weekend gave Daddy a well-known name because he rented a site in Lawnside Park (a park of barbeque and booze) that people came from miles around to eat and to party in. His space was called Jimmie's Barbeque; Jimmie was his given first name. I understand that even family came from Chester.

Daddy was a Daddy when he was around. Once, when I was around eleven, I figured out a puzzle or collected something and won a free coffeemaker. I was so excited – pickup of my prize was about an hour's drive away. I begged him to take me, even though he told me it was some kind of gimmick. But he did. Heart pounding, excited beyond belief, I jumped out the car as we ended the longest trip I felt I had ever taken. When the salesman gave me that little box, I knew it wasn't the coffeemaker I imagined it would be. This coffeemaker was a plastic holder that sits on a coffee cup. If you put a filter in the holder, then the coffee in the filter and poured the boiling water over the coffee, voila! You've made coffee! But, the point is, he took me.

With one television, I watched *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, *Howdy Doody* and *Willie the Worm*. Daddy watched the news and boxing and almost everyone watched Ed

Sullivan's variety show on Sunday night. Daddy became a deacon in our church, you, with your lovely alto, sang in the choir and I even taught a children's Sunday school class.

Our most memorable trips were to the Pennsylvania Dutch Country. We traveled there several times and almost never saw another black person. The place that awed me as an adolescent was Roadside America, a miniature city built around an elaborate miniature railway system. The Pennsylvania Dutch were awed by us. Apparently, most of them had never seen black people before; stares felt weird, but at least no one asked to touch our skin, or treated us differently. But then there was the ride home. A couple of times we saw a black person in a car, heading toward Dutch Country. You would stick your hand out the window, wave wildly and shout "Hey ya'll!" I'd just slink down in my seat; you were so loud and animated. We took trips around Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York and once, we enjoyed the *The King and I* on Broadway. In the summers, Daddy, the only driver in the family (for the most part, women didn't really drive in the 1950s), rented a tiny, cramped cabin in a place called Paradise Lakes for a week's stay each year. He loved deep sea fishing, and you both loved fishing in the brackish waters of Jersey's Pine Barrens. I'll never forget that canoe ride; the thought of it still makes me queasy. Daddy was rowing toward the shore, but what I saw was the shore closing in on us. I remember screaming and Daddy asking you "what's wrong with that girl?" Daddy never held or even touched me, except for one time.

I was responsible for feeding Dede and me, mostly the basics, leftovers, hot dogs, hamburgers or tuna casseroles; easily fixed food. Mother, the cooking of vegetables, roasts and whole chickens that you did on the weekend lasted as leftovers well into the week. However, one time I heated up the rice, burned it a little and it stuck to the pot, so I put a little water into it to soften the rice up and left the pot on the stove. As the week went on, instead of emptying the garbage outside, I just piled it into the pot. When Daddy came home after a few days, he looked into that pot. Maggots had begun growing. He was furious and told me to put my hand in it. Daddy spoke in an Ogeechee dialect, having lived in South Carolina. He, like my father, seldom got cross with me. If he did, it was because he was trying to tell me to do something and I had trouble understanding him. Not this time. I knew exactly what he wanted. Repulsed, I refused. He took my wrist and plunged my hand into the pot and immediately released his hand. That was cruel, but a quick, never to be forgotten, learning tool. That is the only skin-to-skin touch I remember from Daddy; nevertheless, he was my daddy.

Chapter 9

FLYING AWAY

Looking back, one enlightening moment of my life in New Jersey was the day Hurricane Charlie struck. With no early warning system, the driving rains pattered relentlessly on the school's windows, the trees bent low, the winds were very high. I had donned my raincoat in the morning and left for school because that is what I was supposed to do. Few children had come to school. Finally, we were dismissed; I fastened every button of my transparent green, hooded plastic raincoat. All plastic, back in that day, was about as stiff as the clear, pliable, plastic party cups are today. The hooded coat could stand on the floor on its own. If a body could flatten itself out, it could slither along the floor and into the coat, filling it out, sleeves included, without touching the plastic.

Keeping my footing all the way was a fight, even as I crossed the pike. The tighter I held onto the coat, the fiercer the wind swirled underneath and around it. I soon figured out that my seventy-five pound self was not going to be able to keep a foothold on the ground if I didn't do something. Finally, about forty feet from the house, I realized that holding onto something that doesn't want to be held onto could be a detriment to the holder. Unbuttoning my coat, I watched it swoop high into the sky, pass between the houses and float above the trees and into the woods, never to be seen again. This was altogether frightening and freeing. Freedom was beautiful. I no longer felt I would be swept away. Yet, it was frightening. What consequences would I and the freed raincoat,

suffer? You didn't holler at me because of the missing raincoat; I suppose you were very happy that I (like a lot of latchkey children) was still around. I had thrown off the button shackles of that coat. Freedom from the shackles we carry in life is a weightier problem. Life can never be free of those, but we can limit their effect by not dwelling in the hurt of them, but treating them as learning experiences that improve our lives in the future and help us to gain knowledge to handle the next problem that could shackle us to misery.

One fateful night in July of 1953, everything changed. That night, you and Daddy had an argument; I do not know about what and don't remember any previous arguments. I think I might black out what is unpleasant if I feel it does not concern me. You ran out the house and into the pike. I woke up when I heard the raised voices and the door open and slam shut, I jumped out of bed, looked out my dormer window, but, unable to see you, I ran into Dede's dormer bedroom for a clearer view. I saw you, in your black nightgown, frantically, standing in the middle of the pike, waving your arms. A car stopped and picked you up. Dede and I huddled together in her room. Daddy started up the steps, but after I heard his footfall on the first three steps, he descended. It seemed almost an hour until you returned with the police. They took Daddy in for what would be a thirty-day sentence for striking you.

That was the beginning of my last nights in Lawnside. We packed our clothes and crossed over the board to Grandmom's. The week before Daddy was released; we fled to a relative's house in Pittsburgh. I suppose talks resumed between the two of you, for two

weeks into my attending the eleventh grade there, we packed and crossed the board again to live with your parents, my grandparents.

Chapter 10

THE LAST CROSSOVER

Over the years, when I lived in New Jersey, many changes were made at my grandparents' place. The trees were still there, but this time, the place was different. There were two separate boards. Where the chicken coop was on the side of the house, they had built upon that land a mom and pop stucco grocery store, complete with its own board. On the other side of the house, they had knocked out a wall and built a bathroom for the house and a beauty shop for you. Everything was different. I guessed that you and Daddy were planning to get back together. So, for a few months while he re-wooded you, you went back and forth to Jersey and eventually, you moved back there. For the next few years, I saw you when you came to the shop, two or three days a week. I didn't and still don't understand why I was left in Chester. Didn't I help in getting that nice house? Did I do something wrong? I wish you could tell me.

In it the last few years of your life, you began to write in a journal. One entry notes that you asked me what you, the adult, should do about going back to Daddy. You wrote that I said "you should be with your husband." That sounds like something I would say if you asked, considering how I answered when you asked who you should marry. But, in my wildest thoughts, I did not know you meant without me.

We separated: where Dede, who would have been nine years old, lived, I have no idea, but she did not live at Grandmom's. I now lived in a house heated by a potbellied

coal stove in the dining room and the fireplace in the living room. No need to mention air conditioning. The bathroom had its trouble, so the outhouse was used frequently. On very cold nights, I would heat Grandmom's old-fashioned—still kept for the purpose—iron (one actually made of iron) on the coal stove, take it to my freezing bed and pass it over the almost frozen sheets to warm them, making it possible to sleep. Working in the store after finishing homework and on weekends, I did everything that needed to be done, except that I asked that I not clean chickens or scale and gut fish, to which Grandmom and Grandpop consented. Those previously devoured corn flakes, milk and sugar were exchanged for chocolate, cream-filled Tastykakes and cokes, a different sure-fire teeth killer.

It is impossible for me to think of one bad thing to say about Grandmom, except that you made the rules on my rearing and she followed them to a "T," never relenting or bending. She never even threatened to discipline me, because threat was not needed to get my obedience. In my head, I knew your rules and I kept them as my guide for right. I knew what I was supposed to do, and that is what I did, just like when I was with you. In recent years, you would remind me, "Momma always said I was too hard on you, but I wasn't." I wonder if she said that around the time that I had a bout with depression. You had left Chester for your home that day, the store had closed, both grandparents were in the dining room near the coal stove; I was in the living room near the door and I began to cry uncontrollably. I was unable to put the problem, if I knew it, into words. Grandmom

called your house and asked what should be done. Before I knew it, I was off to stay at Aunt Zet's (Marie) house. I lived with her for a month before returning to Grandmom's. It was good, but it was not my home.

Chester High School was gratifying: I was fourteen when I began the 11th grade; my cousins attended there. There was a better mix of blacks and whites; the school was about a quarter black. Basically, black kids and white kids acted like kids. I am not implying there was a mingling after school hours, but during school, everyone was a kid. We black students knew of the unspoken quotas, like only two black kids could become part of the cheerleading squad, but these were the 50s and we were content with the possibility of even being able to compete with each other. I realized in Pittsburgh that if no one knew me, I could reinvent myself. Since I was in a higher grade than when I left, Chester High students really did not know or remember me, or probably just could not care less. Young people seem to be more self-centered; for most of them, the rest of the world is generally a blur. My face, arms and back were still covered in a great deal of agitated acne, but I had great legs, a nice shape and my hair had an overall red hue and streaks of red. My scarred arms covered a much larger area than any vaccination ever would have, sorry Mother. As far as I knew, there here was no such potion as an acne cream, just fallacies and suppositions as to acne's cause. I think I became an almost normal bobby-soxer (a teen who wore white socks with high tops, pushed or turned down to the ankles) as far as the kids in school were concerned.

In retrospect, Haddon Heights showed me what school could be. Because it was an excellent school (there I had French in 10th grade, corresponded regularly with a pen pal from France and our class travelled to Philadelphia to see Moulin Rouge; contrast that to Chester High where I never had to have a year of any language) but overall, Chester High was better for my particular life. So, even though bittersweet, I thank you Mother; the change vitalized my life. Had I not left Lawnside, it is unimaginable how irreparably marred I might have been after living there an additional two years. I hope our offspring realize that sometimes the paths of our lives seem painful; although the pain is remembered, the gratitude for the release makes that pain worthwhile.

Good schools were uppermost in my mind after Wes and I had children. I wanted them to attend as excellent a school as I could find. That was one of the reasons why, in our fourth year of marriage, Wes and I purchased a house in what is now called a transitional neighborhood. At that time it was known as a white-flight neighborhood; but it was my hope that my children's elementary education would prove a good one for their duration of time in it. Besides, don't take this the wrong way, but I was very glad to move to the opposite end of Chester to avoid the sibling rivalry quarrels and family blame sessions of my early years. Shudders overtake me as I remember when you would take me to those sessions that seemed to last for hours. Even after they ended, someone was crying and to me it seemed that everyone was more wounded than when the "straighten things out" visits began.

Jefferis, the public school that served our neighborhood, seemed to be fine. I even served a year as the president of the PTA, but sometime after that year, I visited the building and there was trash strewn over the floor, not swept up, or in piles, but it seemed children had dropped wrappers, balled up notebook paper and packaging onto the floor for more than a day or two. Although Jefferis was a prominently white school, I immediately equated that mess to the attitude of the administration, teachers and staff. I felt the need to pass on the idea of better schools to my children so I sent Rylene to a Christian school for six years. Tracy followed and attended there for four years from pre-kindergarten until second grade. When the school launched an upper school, I happily enrolled the older two, Keith and Leesa. Unfortunately, the older two hated leaving public school and acted up; Keith let his grades drop, making him a borderline student; Leesa hiked up her skirt a few times before she got to school. They measured; she was reprimanded; I was notified. Still, I was willing to keep them there until I got the phone call. The call was not about those two; the administration used my youngest, Tracy to get their point across. Even though she had average grades, they proposed to hold her back a year because she was “less emotionally mature” than the other children in her grade. I felt that because of the issues they had with my older children, they wanted to purge them all. A lame reason to which no sane parent would acquiesce was invented. They suggested that Tracy repeat second grade; if her emotions developed to their level of normalcy, they would promote her to third; if not, she could repeat second grade a third time. The

suggestion seemed ludicrous to me. When the administrator finished his monologue with that ultimatum, he asked me if their solution was satisfactory. I smiled, said “no,” stood up and walked out. I withdrew all my children. In that day, there was no middle ground, no charter school to turn to, so they completed their education in public school.

I felt vindicated when, twenty years later, some grade school children in Tracy’s development were to be bused to a subpar school in an even less than subpar neighborhood. Tracy was devastated. This time I was able to supply the answer Tracy needed in order for her child, Stevie, to receive a quality third grade education. He lived with Wes and me during the week for the entire year and attended the Catholic school down the street from us. My reasoning behind this was, living at Grandmom’s and attending Chester High opened doors of societal living that I would not have received in Lawnside. The hurt I felt when my children had to leave a quality school was lessened by my ability to help Stevie. Here was my chance to pay back and help my grandson sidestep an unpleasant situation.

At Grandmom’s, I was allowed to have “company,” that is, a sitting in the living room with a boy caller, with an adult or two sitting in the dining room watching us, pretending to listen to the radio while playing Scrabble, or pretending to look at the ten-inch television which was in a position that was beyond the sofa that my company and I sat on. Little matter: I only “kept company” with two boys before meeting and marrying Wes. I met both boyfriends through the store. For a few months, I kept company with

James; he walked with a limp – we never discussed it, but I think he had polio as a child. He was fun to talk to, but I did not see myself with him as a real boyfriend. Dawson was a less than attractive fellow; perhaps I began seeing him because James seemed to become more serious. Dawson, like James never asked me to go out; a scenario that I did not want to think about. But the point is, I was able to talk to two boys before I married my husband.

Even as a senior in high school, weekend curfew was eleven o'clock. My interaction with people was in school and in the store, so I was not out of touch with people anymore. Remember how I begged you for a later curfew because a couple of boys from school had asked me to go on a date? This was the first time I was asked to go to the movies in town, the only recreation available to black kids, besides home parties and company; I had to make a choice. Choose the seven to nine o'clock show or nothing. Nine to eleven was teens' time; seven to nine was for what the teens called the baby crowd and consenting to that would have been worse than my burnt orange coat stage of life. After the movie, there was some place in town where kids could stop for sodas, then, take the bus home from "over Chester," but no matter; that put my arrival home long pass the deadline. It was easier to tease the boys in the hall at school by smiling at their "how about a date?" and answering with a coy, "well, we'll see," and then find a different route to that part of the corridor for the rest of the semester. Or I would go to the locker at a time different from before to alleviate my fear that I might be asked again. I did not

attend one movie from the time I left Chester until after I met my husband. A Victorian girl, living in the 20th Century was how I mentally branded myself.

Aunt May and her husband, Uncle Vernon had moved out of the Lamokin Village and purchased a house in Chester Township while we were in Lawnside. The Township line began on a street across from Flower Hill; Aunt May's house was six blocks from Grandmom's. Her house, I learned, was always full of her children and their friends; she loved to give great parties. She and her husband now had six children and one cousin/adoptee. There was no going to my cousins' parties or dance, except for one at her house; it may have been for a birthday party. I never had a key to Grandmom's house; someone was always home. I overstayed my time, but finally got a ride home around midnight, way pass my curfew. First time breaking curfew or just being out—I needed to think quickly! There had to be another way into the house other than knocking or turning the large, key-shaped latch that rang a loud bell on the other side of the door. Thankfully, in those days windows did not have to be locked. My bedroom was the one off the front porch. In fact, my anomaly of a three-quarter bed (larger than a single, smaller than a double) was next to the window. I remember waving goodbye to my ride, standing on the porch, waiting for those in the car to leave so I could slip the window up. Falling into bed, I was grateful that no one knew when I actually got in, but now, secret's out, Mother. While I am spilling, I'll also tell you that I stood by the fireplace (the fire was out, but I was certain my grandparents would not see any illumination from the small

light over the mantel) for about three hours one night as I read J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*; that searing, forbidden, dirty novel that is probably unable to cause a six-grader to blush in this decade.

Paradoxically, you arranged for me to have a Sweet Sixteen party at a recreation hall. I consented to this, but a few years before, I had refused to become part of the Lawnside Cotillion, a formal ball where young ladies are ceremonially presented to society, as Mr. James, who eventually became Lawnside's mayor, suggested. He and his wife, Ophelia had no children, but passed to you the necessary information to join. However, I knew that I did not have the people skills or the necessary friends, or even want to enter into any type of coalition with Lawnside's formal society. For you, this 16th birthday party must have been an, *I'm the best, no one else did this for their teen* affair, because I never had girls or anyone visit me at grandmother's house, other than the two boyfriends that I met in the store. My cousins made the party one of those word-of-mouth things that spread like wildfire, free food, music, girls and boys. Everyone was invited, kids that I had never seen before showed up. The hall was packed. I knew how to dance; American Bandstand began in 1952 while I still lived in Lawnside. I diligently practiced while holding onto doorknobs. Doorknobs were necessary because we actually held a partner's hand and had steps to our dances back then. Our main dance was called the Bop (a bit similar to the Jitterbug). The other popular dance danced toward the end of parties (I gathered, because that's what played at the end of my birthday bash) was the Slow

Drag, a full body contact dance that only required that the girl follow the guy, so I needed to learn no steps, just how to melt into a guy's arms, which I did not find difficult. Back to the doorknob: Grandmom laughed when I held onto one and danced. When I was younger, remember how she doubled up and laughed to tears when I sang (I am not a singer) and performed *Found a Peanut*, especially as the peanut was rotten, and the song became a swan song, killing me at the end. She also got pleasure as I practiced walking and entering rooms like the television actress Loretta Young did. I gracefully took hold of the doorknob, just so, while twirling around in my felt poodle skirt as my crinoline slip peeked tastefully from under it whenever I moved.

In Chester, as I heard the kids speak of the latest popular songs, I would run to the wooden Motorola floor cabinet, find the station on the radio that was set into it, and as I did chores, such as ironing, washing dishes or whatever, I would have my pen and paper out. I had to repeatedly listen to songs because my very being felt and still feels it necessary to understand every word in order to enjoy them. I have never been able to sing along with a song and make up words for the indistinguishable ones. Actually, I have never been able to remember all the words of any song even after I knew them all. It has been written that stuttering is not inherited by girls from fathers who stutter, but I am not satisfied that we do not have our subtly masked auditory and speech problems also.

While working in the store one day in the spring of my last year of school, I looked through the screen and saw a car stop out front. A tall man got out of the car,

crossed the board and came into the store. I did not recognize him until he spoke: “Ju, Ju, Judy, I ju, ju, just came in to s, s, say ga, ga, ga, goodbye. I’m m, m, moving away,” my father said. I’m sure I must have glared at him as I said the single word “goodbye.” He turned, went back across the board and that was it, the last time I ever saw or heard from my father.

Dede must have begun to question you as she was going through puberty, like young people do, because of curiosity and to try their wings. We both know that was the wrong stance to take with you. She was sent away to Downingtown School for [bad] Girls for a year since she was “hardheaded and did not mind” you. When she flew in from California for your funeral, she remarked that being in Downingtown was the best year of her young life. She could not remember where she lived while she went to elementary school, but remembered attending a junior high and high school in Chester. She ended up living at Grandmom’s during high school; that was after I had gotten married and left.

While in high school, I tried to talk to you while you were in your shop, but either I was interrupting your train of thought as you talked or you were too busy at the moment, so you would reply, “Later,” but a *later* was almost unattainable. If I insisted, you would remind me that “a hard head makes a soft behind;” or that “I do not know where you’re going when you turn eighteen, but you’re getting out of here.” That note of terror shut me up. It was a form of “just wait,” repeated. Usually, as I sat in the shop,

sitting on the stool next to you, waiting for my turn to speak; I was horrified because you told your customers confidential stories about everyone, including our family's personal business; private issues that I would never have shared with anyone. Instead of a talk with me at evening's end, you would run into the store, grab a half pint of tightly packed vanilla ice cream and then sit by the coal stove and talk to Grandmom about the people you had beautified; then you would hurry out to catch the bus and the two trains back to Lawnside.

In June of 1955, I was graduated from Chester High School. When the eighth grade counselor had tried to sign me up for a college prep track, I refused and you went along with that. I did not think I wanted to be a teacher (it would be necessary to deal with the same kids that I had shared a miserable first eight grades with) and the only other occupations open to women, especially for black women, was a choice of nurse, office worker or the newly opened occupation of airline stewardess. Office seemed best; accounting, perfect. Accountants have hardly any interaction with people. I could sit in a room, copy figures from original papers, input them into a journal and ledger, press numbers on a bookkeeping machine and pull a ker-plunk lever to input each one, each time, all day. Perfect.

Chapter 11

CULTURE SHOCK

That summer after high school, I began working as a Mother's Helper for Dr. and Mrs. Benjamin Balin in Eddystone, a small town near Chester. I was surprised that their home was in the middle of a row of row homes; townhouses, they're called in today's world. Even in my project house, we had an end unit. Besides, he was a doctor.

A Mother's Helper's job was kind of a junior Nanny, a leap up from maiddom. I took complete care of the two boys on weekends when their maid was off duty; and some evenings when their parents went out together; that included feeding them, and a few times their parents, in the morning. Mrs. Balin introduced me to the word *omelet*. She showed me the ingredients, told me how to cook it and requested that I make two for them. Afterwards, they said it was the best omelet they had ever eaten. The next weekend, my omelet was a complete flop, not because I wanted it to be; it is simply that I am not a good cook and need a written recipe to do even a fairly good job – still. Wish I could say that I can't imagine why they never asked for an omelet after that. Their maid once cooked chicken fricassee, a delicious dish that I had never heard of, so I tried it. Only problem was that I had grown into the position of thinking I was an only child; that came with the privilege of only eating white chicken meat, and the fricassee contained only dark meat, but the sauce was excellent.

There were two learning experiences that first year of working for them. Using a modern washer and dryer was new for me. The entire time that I lived at Grandmom's, we used an old fashioned wringer washer, an electric machine that agitated clothes and required the launderer to manually feed the soaped clothes through two powerful rollers, called a wringer. The wringer would slide the clothes into a large, round, people sized tub we had filled with clean water. The wringer could then be situated to swing from one rinse tub to the next to rinse clothes twice. After wringing most of the water from them, we took them outside, in the cold, in the hot, in the almost rain or snow; shake out the wrinkles and then clothespin them onto the clothesline. In the winter, if they froze solid, and there was no thaw in sight, we brought them in and hung them around the dining room so the heat from the pot-bellied stove could dry them. The last step was just as tedious, adding insult to injury. The rinse water had to be emptied by dipping both waters out until the volume of water left in each tub made them manageable to carry outside and empty.

I felt as though I had stepped through and into a new era of my life – the washer did that, but the dryer, that wonderful drier, it was more – the dryer was a piece of heaven. I vowed as soon as I could afford it, never would I dry clothes on a line again, and I almost never did. Big, poufy crinoline slips were not made for dryers, so as long as the trend of wearing them persisted, I hung them on the clothesline.

For a few weeks during summer, I stayed with the Balins at their vacation home, located on Long Beach Island in New Jersey. Before I left, you wanted to make sure that I had the right clothes. You sent me over Chester to pick out clothes at Weinberg's, a store that gave you credit. Problem was, I was probably a size five or seven and one dress that I fell in love with was a size ten. Since I was underage and black, the clerk allowed me to call you from the store to make sure trying it on was acceptable because any dress a black person tried on had to be purchased by them. You told me you would take it in; I tried it on; it was mine. Among the items I had picked out was a beautiful green swimsuit. When the first day came that I was to take the Balin boys to the beach, I donned my suit, had the kids in tow and went to play in the ocean with them. Problem was, I did not know that women and girls shaved. Through the stares and looks of *what's wrong with that girl* I figured it out. I was mortified. I pulled and tugged on that suit, ever mindful of my shame. Maybe, if I was aware that I saw women in swimsuits on television, or that I had missed the teaching of shaving in a 7th grade hygiene class, or maybe had I attended movies, or maybe if I had ever slept over or had a slumber party... maybe. I've always felt a little off center from other adults, always second guessing myself.

Summer breaks taught me two lessons of value. The Balins had moved from that row house into a designer home in Nether Providence that looked as if it were a throwback from the future. The house itself sat on top of a hill with its curved driveway

that drew your attention to the thirty-foot high windows in the living area. Inside was a sunken living room and everything modern. Saving and planning, I figured, was the key, a lesson that is with me today. The most amazing lesson I learned as a Mother's Helper was that I loved teaching those two boys, Arthur and Kenny. Mrs. Balin and the maid were solely in charge of her daughter, Nancy. As I read to the boys or taught them something new, or learned from them the ins and outs of children's minds, my desire to teach became real. That, I knew was my desire and my passion, now that I was sixteen years old. This realization came too late. Already, all systems were on *go* for my beginning Keystone Secretarial and Business Administration School. When I mentioned to you that I loved to teach, you dismissed that as an option, saying it was too late.

I accepted that, for already we had been through the scrutiny of Headmistress Green venturing from the posh Main Line to cross our board. After we had requested my admission to the school, a request came from them for a home visit. I remember my heart pounding as I peeked through Grandmom's starched, lace, Priscilla curtained window when Mrs. Green's car drove up. After seeing her cross our board, I hurriedly sat down. She was probably the first white person who had ever used that board. I do not know what she thought would go on in a black person's house, but you and Grandmom were ready for her. I am sure that the store next door and the beauty shop on the other side of the living room impressed her. Our living conditions had passed what I feel was a worthiness test for me to become the first full time African American to attend this two

year Main Line school. Jackie (John) my cousin, who is two years older than I, who was graduated with me and was also accepted into Keystone, did not warrant a visit from Mrs. Green. Apparently, she was satisfied that if my circumstances were acceptable, his would be also. Jackie drove us to school in his red convertible. Keystone began another world of personal freedom, eating great hamburgers at the Blue Bell greasy spoon with other students, having small, intimate classes; even attending their Halloween party, before that external building burned down, was great.

Naturally, accounting, in the Business Administration major was my choice, but that could not be. No girl was allowed to choose Business Administration, which was offered only to boys because they would, according to 1950s thinking, become breadwinners for the weaker sex. Jackie's major was Business Administration. Girls' highest major was Executive Secretarial. One of those courses in that major was bookkeeping, which, thankfully, was required for the entire two years. After the school day, I worked for the Balins part time. When I had put the children to bed, I went into their sunken living room, took out my double entry bookkeeping folders and hand inputted figures into my practice set, simply because that is what I loved to do. Saddened that I finished it three weeks ahead of the due date, I turned it in to my instructor who, in turn, asked me to help those who were having problems. Double-entry bookkeeping problems, before the advent of joy-stealing computers, stemmed from the bookkeeper not posting the exact same amount into two required places. Classmates in business school

did not deride me but seemed grateful for any help they could get. It may not have been teaching, but to me, that was a personal high.

Labor Day weekend of 1956, I left the Balin household to return to my grandparents' home. I noticed the "Gone Fishing" sign on the store, something they had never posted before, but surely that did not mean that everyone had gone, so I crossed the board, crossed the path in front of the gate, opened the gate and went up the steps to the porch and the front door. I knocked; I rang the bell, no answer. My bedroom window was locked; for the first time, truly, I was locked out. I left my suitcase on the back porch, crossed the board again to begin my six block trek to my aunt's house. Surely the entire family had not gone fishing. About a half block away, I heard some guy call out "Hey, girl," but since I did not know him or his car, I kept going, but not for long. A second cousin of mine, T.J., hollered out to me from the passenger's side of the car and asked where I was going. When I told T.J. that I was going to my aunt's house, he, voice lifted, told me that Wes (Wesley) the car's driver, would take us. I replied that getting into cars with strangers was not what I did, but the day was hot, I was tired and T.J. said that he and Wes had grown up together. While riding to my aunt's house, Wes asked if he could see me again; I told him "yes, meet me on Friday in the store," because I knew I would be working for the Balins and because at 17, I really was not interested in this man. He looked too old for me (although he was good looking) and his pick-up style was far beyond my scope of knowledge. Besides, he had a car and I had never really dated or

been out with a boy, never mind in a car or with a man. He had been in the army for over five years and was a staff sergeant, home on leave. I actually forgot about meeting him by the time that that date that I did not let happen was supposed to have taken place. The day after I left the Balins, there he was at the store; questioning why I had stood him up. I was definitely flattered, a good looking man who actually wanted to take me out on a date. He had a car, a new one; a Ford Crestline. I knew I had to hurry and talk to you, mother, for news spread like wildfire – my aunt had seen him look at me as I exited the car; she asked me who he was, and I replied, “Some old man named Wes.” That was the flame that started a tongue fire. He was well known by my family. When I told you that I wanted to go out with him, you said that I could. On our second date, he actually proposed and showed me rings that he had purchased overseas. The next day he returned to camp at Fort Knox, Kentucky. The thought that I had to be out of Grandmom’s house close to my eighteenth year lingered in my mind. Here was a man that you all knew; you knew that he was a steady worker before his army deployment and could support me. When I told you that he wanted to marry me, you asked “are you ready for sex?” I said “yes;” you said okay. We both knew that good girls did not have sex before marriage. Wes and I talked on the phone; in October I told him that I would marry him. He obtained a leave to come home for three days in December to see me and to give me the rings.

Okay, Mother. Here's a subject most parents, especially fathers, but even mothers do not want to broach with their children, but I'm on a roll.... Yes, I told you that I wanted to have sex, but I think that I had had a sort of sex. This may not be a Clintonesque case, but it is something to ponder. When Dawson and I kept company, there were moments that both grandparents were out of the house. Dawson never saw any portion of my body three inches above my knees or any part of my breasts that my clothes did not cover and I never removed a piece of clothing. No part of his body was ever uncovered. That said; his fingers did the walking.

As far as Wes was concerned, when he proposed and showed me the rings on our second date, I explained to him, even while my hormones were running rampant and my breath was hot and heavy, that I was a virgin, and that if he wanted sexual relations, he would have to go elsewhere until we were married. He was twenty-six, had had as many women as he wanted and I sensed he was beginning to look for, not necessarily a virgin, but a woman that he could not bed without the important ring, one he could trust, one with whom he could settle down.

After that proposal, my thoughts turned from Keystone to what would be my new life. I left school, searched for a job, and was hired near the end of November by the Presbyterian Board of Christian Education in the USA as a temporary worker because, they explained, they "had reached their quota of hiring Negroes." The money was good. Keystone taught that the starting rate for an executive secretary was \$56 a week; I made

fifty-four dollars. Their offices were located in the Witherspoon Building in Philadelphia, and if I remember correctly, I, their receptionist, was located on the seventh floor.

Traveling to Philadelphia from Chester on the train was rather exciting, but the cold wind whipping around the buildings in Philadelphia were not. Taking the short cut through John Wanamaker's Department Store during the Christmas holidays was a treat and relieved me of some wind, because one of their exits opened out onto Samson Street where my building was located. Eating lunch at Old Bookbinders and even Horn and Hardart's Automat was an adventure. After I had worked there for six weeks, my employers dissolved their self-imposed quota and asked me to become a full-time employee. I said yes even though I knew that I was getting married soon.

I do not have to remind you that Wes and I were married on Monday, March 4, 1957. We all crossed the board to get into Wes' car to drive to Elkton. We were under the mistaken impression that a person could still be married in one day in Maryland, so we traveled there on Friday, March 1, but we were only allowed to apply for our license. Monday, after the wedding, we had one night together before Wes had to return to camp. That morning, we went out to breakfast. When we returned to the hotel, the room had been cleaned by the maid. Wes' remark as he opened the door was, "Judy, I think we've been ripped off." I knew then that we were from different worlds. The next day, nervously, I told my employers that I was married, but they seemed happy for me. At the

beginning of April, I flew to Louisville to spend five days with my husband. The end of April, I resigned my job to be with him.

My steamer trunk and I crossed the board in May to travel by train to live in Louisville. Because you were not at Grandmom's when I returned from Kentucky and since my mind was on the marriage then and not on my trip, I'll tell you about it now. I was dressed in my secretarial best, complete with a white cloche hat and gloves. I boarded the train and was surprised and delighted that I was next to the food car. I had saved money and was so excited that, for the first time, I would eat on a train during this eighteen hour trip. I had already pictured how I would sit at the cloth dining table, demurely take off my white gloves, lay them in my lap and order my food. I had read that train meals were excellent. Keystone taught the whole spectrum of how a secretary and/or a 1950s lady should dress for the office and for travel. I was ready.

Not noticing that the conductor steered me to a certain car, I did notice that everyone in my car was black, not like when I traveled back and forth to Philly to work. Coincidence, thought I. Unbeknownst to me, the next day was Kentucky Derby Day. The people in the train had baskets of chicken and other food. I wondered why, but figured that they could not afford to eat in the dining car like I was going to do. I planned to partake of a luscious meal, probably in about four or five hours. Someone offered me food, but I politely refused. I was going to indulge in the good stuff. After our departure from Washington, DC, (Richmond, Virginia, I think) the train stopped for an hour or

more – there were noises, movement and crunching sounds; I assumed there was something wrong with the train and that was being fixed. I sat there patiently, wondering the reasons for the commotion. Finally we were on our way. Later, I got up to go to the dining car. I pulled on the handle; it would not budge. We were locked in. Finally, instead of supposing, I looked into the adjoining car, it was empty; they had inserted a non-accessible passenger car between the blacks and the whites. There would be no food for me. Stunned, I returned to my seat. In 1952, interstate segregation on railroads was abolished by the Supreme Court. I suppose that the railroad was well within compliance to the law, that is – no blacks were sitting in the back of the individual cars while whites sat in the front.

Because all the other people in our one car must have known these particular Jim Crow moves, they had eaten, been to the bathroom and were comfortable. Our one rest room smelled; I decided to wait. Fifteen hours later, we arrived in Louisville; I should say that we did a one-hour-backing into Louisville's station. Rushing inside to get to a ladies room, I stopped dead in my tracks in disbelief. There were two bathrooms. Since 1954 – definitely by 1956, US public facilities everywhere were supposed to be integrated, but there I was facing a flaking-off sign that read, "Colored Only" and another one that directed, "White Only." This scenario was not known to me in Chester. I had read about Jim Crow, but if our city practiced it that openly, I was not aware of it. I had no clue as to what an eighteen year old black girl was supposed to do. I knew there was no way I was

going to use the colored one and I was not brave enough to use the white one, so me and my passive aggressive self showed them. I held myself until Wes came and took me elsewhere to relieve myself, more than twenty one hours after crossing Grandmom's board.

Wes and I had found an apartment on my initial visit; the transition was not a difficult change. Naturally, we had had marital relations the night of our marriage. Marital relations continued non-stop the week that I visited Louisville. Starting with the night of the train ride day, we were intimate every night for two weeks. Suddenly, after two weeks and one day, relations stopped! When we went to bed, he turned over and began to snore. Tears streamed down my face, wetting the pillow. I pondered what it was that I did wrong – was my marriage over? I could not sleep for worry. I went into our modest living room, used a towel and muffled my crying. Finally, I reasoned, he would tell me if I was an unsatisfactory lover and wife and if he was finished with our marriage. I think those were the right thoughts for a 50s girl living in a 50s world. Calming myself down, I thought that I would be able to gauge his feelings the next day. He seemed the same as usual, but said nothing about the cutoff that day or the next. Did I think to ask *why*? Of course not. I read his body language. The night of the third day, he turned to me again with sensuous want in his eyes and we had relations as before. I surmised this was normalcy – I decided I was okay with being normal.

After my initial episode of experiencing Southern mores, I was almost sure the words “Equal Opportunity Employer” – the code under newspaper want ads in Philadelphia and Chester newspapers which meant, *it is possible that we may hire a colored person*, really did not mean the same for Louisville and the south. To save travel time, money and stinging disappointments, to ensure that my search for work would not be based upon the color of my skin, I skipped over all the newspaper ads and went directly to the Kentucky State Employment Office to apply for work. Surely a state agency would follow the code. Reality trampled hope. After filling out my application, noting my recent secretarial education and my experience in Center City Philadelphia, I just knew I would get some office job. The personnel officer called me in and told me “I’m sorry; we do not have any Negro state office workers in Kentucky.” Imagine my devastation upon hearing that; I asked myself, what I had done by moving here. Wes was at the beginning of his reenlistment. I would be an army wife, bound in the south.

My self-absorption was interrupted by the state personnel officer as she stated, “Mrs. Harper, I have two children. Perhaps you could babysit for me during the day.” Here I was sitting across from my dismal future; I acquiesced. The first time I took the children for haircuts, their mom had given me extra money to afterwards purchase ice cream at the drug store fountain. In anticipation, I plunked them onto their bar stools in front of the counter, sat on the stool next to them and ordered. A few minutes later, their ice cream sodas were prepared and delivered. No ice cream came out for me. I waited. In

a few minutes, the boys were well on their way to finishing their treat. I asked the young soda jerk when my order would be prepared. He went into the back – returned and told me that his employer said that I couldn't be served there, but that I could take my ice cream home in a carton. Like an idiot, I did. After riding the bus to the children's home; I poured the very-much-melted ice cream down the drain. This was the end of my true introduction to Southern living. I quickly learned what not to expect in the South in order to never experience distress. That episode reminds me of finding another way to get to my locker at school – avoiding situations that may have an unpleasant outcome. However, the dynamics of that situation affected my perception of the South and damaged my faith as it relates to fairness. When I think of you, Mother, having to go out to work for other people, I realize that I probably had it easy in my bout with inequity, but it still hurt. Your strength, the strength of my family, was that none of you expressed racial hatred or passed it down to us, the children; it was just a part of life, a part of people.

Months later, Wes decided that he would leave the Army after serving six years. Army manpower strength was being lessened to satisfy budgetary reductions. My staff sergeant husband, a tank commander, had decided because of that and the rumble of impending trouble in Viet Nam, he would not take the test to remain in the Armed Services. Early in December, pregnant with my first child, Wesley Keith, I flew home. Crossing the board to return home to Grandmom's was stressful. Struggling at eighteen

years old, in a marriage fraught with a large age difference, a gapping difference in education and an immediate pregnancy caused quite a bit of self-consternation. Baby on the way and learning to deal with my husband who barked orders to his new troops and could not (or did not see the need to) turn it off when he came home to me at the end of the day, was daunting. Come to think of it, did I ever tell you that we had to pay a whopping \$57.20 to have Keith born in the Veterans Administration Hospital in Philadelphia because under Wes' honorable discharge, his last day for fully paid medical coverage expired on January 31; Keith was born on February 3, 1958.

Because you had a grandchild, you invited us to stay with you until our public housing could come through. Finally, I crossed my grandparents' board for the last time as one who lived there. At the end of the sixties, the house, the store and the boards were part of the demolition of that entire section of the city to make way for the Commodore Barry Bridge. My grandparents were relocated a few blocks away. For that four weeks we stayed with you, Mother, and for the three months in 1962 that we again stayed with you to save money as a down payment on our first house, you know I appreciate and thank you.

As for the barking orders problem, Wes very seldom ordered our children and he definitely did not spank or beat them. But I did. The first time I saw Keith do anything that we told him not to do, he at three years old, decided to splash in a rain puddle. I called Wes to the window to watch this first act of disobedience, but marveled that he

was becoming his own person. Leesa, born during an extremely tumultuous time (Wes was unfaithful) in our marriage, was the child who cried continually and could not be quieted. By the time she was two years old, most certainly, she was getting swats on her behind for temper tantrums. Rylene was born during a time when our marriage was in transition from its most turbulent years; she was like a ray of sunshine.

One day, I took the three children to the park and when we returned, I bathed them. That was my first time seeing a knot in Leesa's abdominal wall area. She had a hernia. My contrition was great. I attributed her constant crying and defiance of everything to that hernia, of which I had no knowledge, not to her. But after the hernia was repaired, I attributed her continued defiance to learned behavior. Sad, but true; my personally learned behavior was perpetrated. Belts and hairbrushes were my major tools of correction. The older Leesa got, the more she ran, so I would have her lay on the carpet, on her stomach. Then I would kneel on the floor, straddle her waist so that I was facing her behind, and give her whacks. Keith rarely and Rylene almost never got spankings. Seven years after Rylene's birth, Tracy was born; she was never corrected like my other children were. Like almost everyone who gains wisdom over time, I learned. Still, none of my children ever heard, or was petrified by the words, "just wait."

Wes was always a good father and provider, although he refused to discipline. During their growing up years, he would usually take the children's side or hide behind a newspaper. But that was with his own children. He never liked other children, and

somewhere between our children and the years it took to have grandchildren, his annoyance with all children grew. Children anywhere are troublesome to him. He used his sergeant barking voice when our grandchildren walked through the door; his whole world became one of policing them. Even if the Super Bowl were on, his eyes would fixate on a two-year-old child who naturally used his or her feet to climb into a chair. Toys around, he would not tolerate and after the kids were seated, according to him, they had to remain perfectly still.

Your remember that, Mother. I had decided that the constant order barking was not how my grandchildren would remember Wes and me, so I turned one bedroom into an office/den/playroom for them and me. When you came to Wilmington and saw that I did that, you confronted me. As you told me how wrong I was to remove the children, your strongest argument was that; “Poppa was like that to us and we grew up just fine.” By then, I was a firm believer in working around saying *no* to small children unless the situation could potentially be harmful to them or was an inconsideration to others. Since the situation was not harmful to them, yet bothered Wes, my goal was to remove the cause of his consternation from the comfort of his living room. It was a good goal. By that time in life, I hardly thought of doing everything you wanted; I had learned to keep my world on an even keel. That even keel, for me, meant minimizing issues at home.

For a few seconds, I felt that keeping issues to a minimum might be a detriment to how people thought of me. Sometime in the 1980s, I was asked what I did for the black

movement. That person, an activist, started my thinking on the subject. Certainly, there were no riots, knocking on doors, or even marches in my life. I did not work with black women outside my home to prepare them for the world to come as you did, but I, in my own way, believe that I left an impression by my private life on the lives of those I worked with to open a door or two for black office workers. If I did not, I believe I did anyway.

After working at Cheyney State College, the nation's oldest historically Black institution of higher education for almost four years, I was instrumental in Wes getting a job there. When one person believes in arriving at work a half hour or forty-five minutes before the start time, and the other strongly believes that arriving five, maybe four minutes before start time is better, and those two people travel to work in the same car, something has to give—especially if they are married. I, the five or less minute person, left Cheyney. It was easier for me to find work elsewhere. Wes continued to work there for thirty-three years. All other positions, until the last twenty working years, as I worked for a black church, stand out as *first time a black person ever worked in that office position*, jobs. On my first day of work at American Viscose (now FMC) in their Research and Development Department in Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, I sat in the vestibule, waiting for my boss, Erick Hoegberg, to take me to my desk. Dressed in my blue worsted gabardine suit, I had donned white gloves and was ready to begin, when a tall, middle aged guard walked over to me and asked if it was my first day as a temporary

employee. When I replied *yes* to first day, but that I was a full time employee, his face drained of the little color he had in it; he remained speechless and moseyed away. If I didn't know that I was the first full-time black office employee (not a rayon processing factory worker) then I guessed as much when, once upstairs, I was told by another secretary that lunchtime had to be covered. Since I was the new girl, that covering would be performed by me. Lunchtime, the entire office emptied. A month later, Mr. Hoegberg told me that the lunchtime rule was abolished. There was no explanation or any need to ask *why*; it was a Headmistress Green's case of not understanding whether or not black people could fit in.

One little thing I did for women-kind, but it would have happened without me. Previously I mentioned a secretary's attire. It always included a skirt or a dress, never slacks or pants. During my time at American Viscose, women across the country were rebelling against the fact that office women were not allowed to wear pants. Viscose decided that they could sidestep the clamor of the day and mandated that all women employees partially pay for and wear suits that were beige, trimmed with brown; kind of like front desk hotel greeters and airline steward(esses) wore. Memory tells me that there were five pieces to buy, a vest and perhaps a tie, but definitely a pair of pants was among them. That rayon/polyester look lasted for less than three months. The women fussed, complained and revolted. I was the office person who went to the powers-that-be and

convinced them to just let the women buy their own clothes, including slacks. The company relented. I am almost a hero.

While working there, I had to love Edith Kamorowitz who had a Hungarian accent. I, personally, have never had a doubt that I have given any position my best. What's the point in doing anything, if not? Part of my job was to clean up her English written research. She was pleased, but after reviewing my work always said, "A new *baarrroom* [broom] always sweeps clean." Took me a few times to figure that one out, but years later, when I left, even though she had long before stopped using that sentence, my passive-aggressive self knew she was eating her words. Wait, now I'm confusing myself. What's the difference between passive aggressiveness and the redemptive power of retribution? If I secretly laugh as I carry out my job in an excellent manner and if she never inwardly recognizes that is what is happening, I have prevailed. Conversely, if I do not verbally refuse to do something, but do nothing against my personal preferences or convictions, is it my fault if you, Mother, decide to hurt because of that? Another saying of hers, which I kept and to this day remind my children of is, "Don't pee before the water comes." To me, that sentence says a mountain full about one's state of mind concerning the *what ifs* of future worryment. I consider it the flip side of *why cry over spilt milk?*

I only searched for jobs less than twenty minutes away from home. A position closer, that paid more than American Viscose, was offered to me. It was for Teledyne

Wirz, then the United States' largest manufacturer of collapsible metal tubing. J. Donald Sproul, the personnel manager, had a long talk with me before I began and asked me to let him know if I had any problems. Sometimes mental translation is required for black people. I started as a payroll employee, but soon the President of the East Coast Operations of Teledyne Wirz, Robert Mahan asked me to become his Executive Secretary, which I did.

Working as a payroll employee, I learned a valuable lesson. One day, a group of us went to lunch. Somehow, a disgruntled administrator who worked there mentioned what another administrative employee's salary was. I thought about that for a second, turned to him and asked him how he knew. I have forgotten his answer, but I knew that the amount was much overstated. This reiterated what I already knew; that if one lets his or her mind muddle in misinformation or perceived thoughts, that mind can drive itself into a state of disillusion, despair and self-inflicted pain. That pain can cause a person to leave a good position or end a relationship based on something that may or may not be true.

You know that after I worked at Teledyne Wirz for more than ten years, I left to become the executive secretary to the pastor at my church. His strength in pastoring is relationship teaching, which helped me immensely to remain married these fifty-five years. A peaceful life is built on a willingness to self-change while maintaining self and practicing the art of negotiation. His second greatest input into my life was through the

editing of his books. I realized that editing books at home, on the computer is my passion. I think it is a logical progression from tattletale to not being able to teach to substantive editing, don't you? It takes me on such a high that I feel empty when I'm finished. When I worked in the secular world, none of my jobs bothered you, but you raised the roof when I told you I was retiring from the church. Fury was in your eyes as you declared that "it's unheard of—no one ever retires from working for a church." What I never told you was that I continued to do their year-end bookkeeping work. When you realized I was going to retire anyway, to entice me to visit more often, you offered to purchase an EasyPass (sold at a reduced rate) in order for me to cross the Commodore Barry Bridge to visit you. I did not accept your gesture, for I knew my life was headed in a new direction.

I, at 63 years old, had applied to attend the University of Delaware. My lifelong dream of earning a college degree still burned within. After being married about ten years, while working, I applied to the new Penn Morton College, the civilian component for Pennsylvania Military College, which is the now Widener University, but after I began the qualifying math course, Wes decided he would not take care of the children during those few hours a week of class. I gave up. Thirty years later, I took a one-course class from an online accredited college in Trenton, New Jersey, which earned me three credits toward my university degree. I was not sure how long my brain would last, but I do not believe that it would have declined while I was in school for there was a tremendous amount of stimulation. On that beautiful campus, I explored an entirely

different world; a world of knowledge that excited every fiber of my being (except for four semesters of Spanish). I could have lived without the language stress, even though it never kept me from the Deans List. Let's see—the highest I ever went literally, was climbing a forty-foot vertical ladder in a drama production class. The twenty-somethings cheered as I exclaimed that I felt I had won Fear Factor. I do not think it was a passive aggressive move to let you fume until I knew I was accepted; I just did not know I would be accepted. By the way, the pastor's wife, who has worked at the church from its establishment thirty years ago, is retiring this year.

Looking back at the years 2003 through 2007, the four years I spent in full-time study without the weight of a job or children, were the four best years of my life (with the exception of your death in December of that last year). Finally, regardless of the test anxiety; the first and second year litany of –ology courses, I was surrounded by a thirst for knowledge and loved the challenges of drinking it in. Added benefit: my brain held out for that time and for my Masters degree.

Chapter 12

CHANGES THAT CHANGE US

By the mid nineteen-sixties, Dede was graduated from Chester High School; she returned to New Jersey and lived in her apartment in the tiny town of Magnolia for a while. As she began to sell magazines across the United States, she reached Los Angeles and settled there. You once flew to LA to see Dede's family. When you returned, you said you would never visit again because of your suffering through rides in her barely running vehicle and a no-food-in-the-house situation during your entire stay. I was thinking, Mother, that she may have visited you a half dozen times in the forty years that followed. At least half of those times you "sent for," translate that as *paid for* her in order to see her two girls and her late-in-life son, Christopher. These were fine gestures for a grandmother to make. You kept your vow and almost never did stay with her again, except for twice when you were angry with me.

Just as Dede had departed for an independent life of her own, you embarked upon new mid-life experiences of your own. What you accomplished in your life was remarkable. In the early 1960s, you began modeling classes at GeorgeAnn's Finishing and Modeling School. At the time, I thought to myself, "that's nice, she's always been a hairdresser, so if she wants to better herself, why not. After all, it is a *finishing* school." Mother, there was not doubt in my mind that you were not seeking to be a model; there was no black woman who wished to eat daily that would even think of trying to make a

living by modeling. In that decade, there were hardly any United States fashion models. Beverly Johnson, who paved our way in fashion, was the first black female model to appear on the cover of *Vogue* in America; that was in 1974. The only slightly possible outlets were the two African American Magazines, *Ebony* and *Jet*. Both were founded to give African Americans a sense of presence in this country, to praise black achievement and to boost our self-esteem. However, their covers and content were not graced with models, but with black politicians and celebrities. The exceptions were in their big name ads, such as Coke, Pepsi and car manufacturer spots as opposed to fashion models paid by magazines.

After graduating from GeorgeAnn's in 1964, you continued your beautician career, but that was not enough for you. You had a dream. You wanted to start a business in your field of knowledge. It was during that time that you learned of the new rulings passed by the Federal Communications Commission regarding equality in broadcasting. Grabbing the opportunity to use your knowledge and skill, you talked to the Camden County Council On Economic Opportunity (OEO) and was directed to the Campbell Soup Company. They sponsored a loan for you from a local bank. Wanting the best standards for your students and yourself, you were approved by the State of New Jersey, Department of Education, Division of Vocational Education to have met the standard that the State deemed necessary.

Although Lawnside was a tiny town, Camden was centrally located. However, like many cities in the United States in 1961, its tax base suffered from white flight. This left Camden a depressed city. Suburbanites needed a place to shop. Cherry Hill Mall, the first climate-controlled indoor shopping center east of the Mississippi, was opened. You searched Camden's depressed shopping district and found the perfect space in a vacant building that needed much work. Together, with Daddy's support, *Estelle's Charm and Modeling Studio* in Camden, New Jersey, eight miles from Lawnside, became a reality in 1966. As word got out, your business thrived. Even the daily newspaper, the Courier-Post published a four column article about you on Tuesday, December 3, 1968. The headline read *Charm-Modeling Studio Opened By Enterprising Local Model*. The article stated that you were "motivated to prepare . . . Negroes." That was before we became African Americans.

How you stayed there after the first Camden riots of 1969 is more than I would have been able to handle. The day after Labor Day, the turmoil began based on an unsupported rumor that a young girl was beaten by a police officer. That evening, hundreds gathered near a hospital where they believed she was admitted. While there, shots were fired; a police officer and a young girl were killed. For two days, people rioted in the business district. I remember how shaken you were, and how you stayed away from the studio for a few weeks during that time. When you returned, you were delighted to find your business was not in the district destroyed. The studio was in its third year of

success. Fashion show dinner graduations were held at Cherry Hill High School East and the Cherry Hill Lodge. Your purpose was being realized. You were bettering your part of the world.

Sadly, almost two years after the first riot, the second one took its toll. On July 30, 1971, a policeman beat a Hispanic motorist as another one stood by. Six days later, the Hispanic community leaders protested to the mayor, stating that the beating was without motivation. They asked that the two officers in question be suspended. The mayor did nothing; the police chief charged them with a lesser assault and they remained on their jobs. On August 20th, businesses in your district were looted; looters broke into the post office, shattered glass and set about seventeen fires, some of which were firebombs. Three people were shot and almost a hundred injured. Seventy-eight state troopers and seventy officers from the neighboring suburbs joined Camden's 328-member force to quell the riot. Your studio was looted. That was a loss from which you could not recover; your landlord would not make repairs to render the studio useable in the midst of the destruction. But, while in that endeavor, it was a pleasure for me to see you thrive, for me to handle your bookkeeping and secretarial duties and to watch my children attend and receive certificates from you during a graduation event.

One small detail that I did not tell anyone (for I could see no redeeming qualities in intervention) is that at one of the graduations, I was standing near one mother who mentioned to another that you not only played favorites, but that you talked about people

and children to other people. Mother, years before that time, I had been privy to that type of behavior from you. It never stopped. If I should slip and tell you anything about my husband and me or our children, I would be sure to hear of it if I happened to run into a family member a year later. I had learned years before to keep a tight lip as far as you were concerned. There are people who become very angry when a relative, or they themselves, are negatively mentioned by an outside of the family person, but that is not my reaction. Perhaps I'm wrong, but if what is said is true, there should be no discussion. Can truth be denied, change that truth into a lie? Conversely, if some personal statement is not true, what's the point in discussion? What I'm saying is: Can words make untruth, true; or truth untrue? Think not!

That riot was the end of Estelle's business, but even riots didn't stop you. A year or so before, you had completed a small business administration course at Rutgers University's extension. Next stop: higher education. Although 1971 brought the end of one dream, I occasionally flip through the pictures of my family and you and Daddy celebrating your graduating from Camden County College with an Associate in Arts Degree in 1974. As I look at your graded papers, I remember your story of the verbal confrontation with an instructor over an A versus an A+ grade. Nevertheless, soon you began working in a nursing home. The conditions there shocked you almost into depression, but you countered that with empathy as you related to me stories of residents who were the aged, the infirmed and the dying. You observed the lax treatment they

received from most of the staff and vowed you would give them your best care. Soon, looking at them and their needs, you recovered from your initial emotions and poured light and love into their lives.

A few years later, you passed the Corrections Officers Training Academy's Dynamics in Attitudes and Principles In the Use of Force course and accepted a position to work with young people at New Jersey's correctional facility for girls. All that you had learned, whether in modeling school or in your studio, must have been a joy to recall and to use. You now had hundreds of girls that needed your skills, your teachings on tolerance, your understanding or even deportment and social skills; those could be invaluable when the girls were released. The testimony of some of them, even after your retirement, gives me pleasure when I read them. Finally, Daddy and you retired—sort of. Years before, while driving through Philadelphia, you saw a big, oversized Victorian bed put out for trash pickup. I remember your telling me how hard it was to carry that bed on the top of the station wagon to your house. It took up most of the space in your master bedroom. By that time you probably knew of its worth because you had traveled the world.

I found your passport, inclusive from April 15, 1977, to April 14, 1982. In five years you traveled to: Aruba, Singapore, London, the Netherlands, Port Said, Madrid, Hong Kong, Rio Di Janeiro, France, Thailand, Bangkok, Egypt, Mexico, and Moscow. There's a good deal of foreign symbols on you passport that I cannot read, but I saw the

picture of you and Aunt Zet, your travelling buddy, standing on China's great wall. I still have the picture of you in a Venetian gondola with Keith when he was in the Armed Services there.

Me, I remember an article, headlined "See Europe on \$25 a Day" that outlined living in hostels across Europe. I kept that in my heart, for at the time, I believed doing something like that would be quite an adventure. When my traveling daughters and I decided we would experience a bed and breakfast in London and use the Tube (subway) and taxis to do it, I was grateful. Age and wisdom have taught me that sleeping on cots in large rooms with unknown people is now an anathema for me. Comfort and peace of mind come first. I've traveled to Israel and my slice of France (Quebec) also. I suppose that I am more of a homebody, visiting the States and cruising to the islands of the Caribbean with my older two girls who aren't encumbered by children. However, your love of travel, observing architecture and style fostered your interest in antiques. Retirement provided the perfect vehicle for your next venture as a flea marketer.

That antiquing and flea marketeering soon took over your home. Out went the plastic settee with the metal legs. In came the upholstered chaise lounge with ornate wood trim. In came the upholstered love seat. No sofa, ever. From a Victorian bed to oak furniture in the dining room, to the flip side where you adorned your lawn with flowers growing through old chimney posts and wagon wheels, you expressed what you loved. Since you bid on and bought boxes from estates, sight unseen, you purchased an

automatic washer to wash the linens. You were really proud of how gorgeous they and your glassware were and how you presented them to your buyers. When everyone remarked that Rubye's items were always so neat, clean and well-presented, I know that made you happy. Problem was, whatever you bought that did not sell ended up in your full size, finished basement. Remember how bad it had gotten after Daddy died. The enormity of non-valuable stuff left you only a small path to the broiler/air conditioner unit and enough clearance in the basement to place foot in front of foot. The spring after I graduated, my children and I paid to have over half the basement emptied.

Speaking of paying, with glee in your eyes, a few years before that, you mentioned that Dede had paid for you to get a new front storm door. I could hardly believe it, since she hadn't given anything to you other than cards throughout the years. No sibling rivalry here, I was only trying to disbelieve my disbelief. There was no reason for me to try to outdo her, which was indicative of the way you wanted me to feel. Frequently, you would mention that Mrs. Ophelia sent you a check for \$10 each month after Daddy died in 1999. I purposely let your one-upmanship desires, spoken for my benefit, fall upon unyielding ears. Worse was when your sisters began to pass from this life. When I asked the cause of death, your answer was, "She died of a broken heart because her son [in both cases] is not around" physically or in frequent telephone contact. Yes, I was right there for the sucker punch of unfounded reasoning. I should have known better than to ask *why*. About the door, I sometimes wonder if you realize that, years

later, you let slip that on a visit, Dede's young son, Chris, had damaged your old door and you had called her to demand a new one.

Chapter 13

HAD PHONES BEEN FEATHERS . . .

As to telephone contact, when 9/11 happened, it awakened me to the fact that my family rarely spoke the words, *I love you*. Those words were written, but not part of your or my vocabulary, but I determined to make them so. It actually sounded strange coming from my lips as I ended my calls to you. It felt awkward to hug you and my children at first, but became a spur of the moment indispensable need that I now love. During that rough time, I felt you were entering into depression. All your analog television stations discontinued regular programming to cover the devastatingly tragic events of the time. That's when I knew you needed the relief of cable television; you enjoyed that for five years until you asked me to stop paying for it because you wanted to begin paying. Telephone contact was always something of a chore for me. Fact is; the very telephone itself was a chore. If only speaker phones had been popular ten years before they were, I probably could have handled our usual one-and-a-half or two hour conversations better. In all probability they, contrasted with Grandmom's ultra heavy, black telephone, weighed less than a pound. Being imprisoned by that weight glued to an ear for even fifteen minutes while connected to a wall, drove and still drives my very psyche crazy. The same stories were repeated. The same blame was reiterated. Since I knew to tell you only the very good parts of my family's life, my delivering to you my family's state of being took only a minute or so, if that. An "un huh" on my part every fifteen or twenty

minutes during your monologue was sufficient. I'm sorry, Mother, but truth is truth. Apparently, it took Dede longer to learn. She told you of her losing two houses, she made promises which she did not keep, and I heard every word of all the bad she uttered along with your thoughts on the subject. From your campaign to oust the pastor at your church, to trying to get rid of the suburbanites you thought were into drug trafficking on the street cattycornered to yours, to the fact that your one girlfriend, Gloria, died of cancer without telling you she even had it; the droning on of dislikes was rehearsed.

I think you kind of realized that I was having a hard time dealing with long phone conversations when, in 1999, I purchased an I-Opener for you. It is an internet appliance designed for correspondence on a daily basis, alleviating our joint phone imprisonments. You refused to use it. The next time I came over, it was covered with a pillow case. Trapped. Our "un huh" monologue-driven calls continued.

Early in my life, in one of those calls, you asked me to never go out-of-town without letting you know ahead of time. I consented. About fifteen years ago, your granddaughter, Rylene was livid when she found out about the request I had lived under for years. My attending many conventions across the country and traveling to Israel did not bother you, for they were church excursions. But when my girls and I started going to the islands and across or out of the country together, you would always begin to feel "poorly" after I told you we were planning a trip. Leesa (who recently divorced after twenty-two years of marriage) and Rylene's main objection was that their Aunt De did

not have to tell you, why should I have to spend time on the phone to increase my guilt as I prepared to go on a fun trip? I quickly saw the reasoning (it was probably the impetus I secretly wanted) so I finally told you that you could no longer hold me to the promise because some of your grandchildren and my husband were always around if you needed help. The look on your face showed disappointment and anger, but I felt a release of bondage. Another button of the raincoat had been undone; I was learning that the process to this change was not easy to voice (instead of passive aggressively acting out) but it was worth it.

I understand now, how terribly unhappy my independent years were for you. Not because of me, but because you wanted to feel they were because of me. Also, I imagine this timing was particularly trying for you, for you were systematically weeding all your siblings out of your life. First, there was Aunt Doris. Your main objection to her, as long as I've known you was because you abhorred (or was jealous of) her "switching," provocative walk. For a while you were happy that her children lived in Florida and her son hardly corresponded with her. After he sent for her to live in that state, when she came up for Aunt Zet's funeral, she used a walker. To your surprise, even with a walker, she still had that walk that God gave her, the one that caused you to scorn her all your life. You finally relented as you told me on the phone, "I guess she couldn't help herself."

It's terrible to dwell in wrong beliefs. I remember when I was around forty years old, a horrible menstrual blood smell wafted through our small church. It bothered me so,

that I wished I knew from which teen it emanated; I wanted to educate her in hygiene. For two weeks, my futile primary church mission was to pinpoint the perpetrator. During the week after, my teen daughter Tracy, came home with some Musk perfume. That was the exact awful smell. Well, awful to me; new normal to them. While I held that bloody body smell against some unknown person (presumably a teen) and realized how wrong surmising can be, I thought to myself that I, too, carried the potential to believe a falsehood and allow myself to dwell on it. Eighty-five years is a long self-inflicted time to give something true, or untrue, the power over a person's personal peace of mind.

Personal peace is so important that I gambled once with mine, but as I gambled, I prayed silently that it wasn't one. I asked you if you would consent to live with Wes and me. Thankfully, you had mentioned once before that you could never live in Delaware because you believed, incorrectly, that the last recorded lynching in the States was recorded there. I was hoping that you still thought that. Had you said yes, I would have built an addition onto the back of our house for you, leaving me the sanctity of our upper floor. If that could not work, which I highly doubted it could, I would have moved you into the first floor of the apartment house that Rylene and I own. But thankfully, you refused.

Believing in your heart that your sisters had it in for you, to keep you on the outside looking in, one by one you broke off relations with them. You angrily stated to me that "after all the times I invited them to Jersey, how dare they not visit and rarely call

me!” Since your eightieth birthday, you were leery of Aunt May. For your surprise birthday dinner, I had months before, asked each of your sisters to send me pictures with names for their family trees. These would help me to complete an album I was compiling for you. Aunt May did not send any pictures (her album tree was empty, but so was Aunt Doris’) but she did come, celebrate and enjoy you like everyone else. You asked why her tree was empty, I told you that she hadn’t sent any pictures, and apparently that was a strike against her that you carried in your heart. Why you never mentioned Aunt Doris’ empty tree, I will never know.

If You Were Me – by Rubye

If I were you and you were me, then you would see the

Things I see; the things you did to me.

I can say things that you can’t say; I can do thing that you

Can’t do; since I am me, and you are you.

If I were you and you were me, life would be shared more equally.

I’d deal you all the deck straight back; making sure

All is even, I’d add a jack.

The worse sibling breakup began the day of a sister’s funeral. The sisters were leaving from Aunt May’s apartment in limousines to attend Aunt Zet’s funeral in Baltimore. You told Aunt May that you did not want to be in the car with a particular person that you did not like, but when time came to board, Aunt May did not think to

police the seating on the way to her sister's funeral. You happened to end up in the same car as that unliked person. Your fury was voiced by phone to Aunt May and over and over to any other sister who would listen. You told me that you and Aunt May talked on the telephone and that she tried to apologize, but you just knew she did that to hurt you. As the argument grew, Aunt May wrote you a letter of apology. You called me to talk about it and showed me the letter when I visited. Aunt May wrote that she did not even think about cars once she got on the elevator to leave the apartment. In an apology letter she wrote the words that rang a death knell for your relationship with her, "Please forgive me for everything I've ever done to you since you were a baby." The previous situation disintegrated. The newly formed snowball situation, you felt, was that Aunt May had done horrible things to you, even as a baby, that you did not know about. That day, and on the telephone countless times, as you reiterated the situation, I tried to explain that she was asking for forgiveness for everything that you *thought* she might have done in an effort to wipe out all bitterness toward her. When you would not let it go, I thought to myself, Mother is cutting off all her sibling relationships; better Aunt May than me. Deciding never to speak to her again, you did not, even after I called you to tell you that she had leukemia and had left the hospital in hospice's care. Not only did she recover, but she visited you while you were under sedation a week before your death. She lived on, almost a year more than you did.

That was around the time that your hearing was at its worse. Of course, you never wore your hearing aid. You gave the batteries to Wes, who never uses his. When either of you let some other person in the conversation speak, difficulty in understanding followed. I believe to compensate, you both continually talk, allowing hardly any other person's words to slide in edgewise. One funny case in point that I remember with you was, you were in your kitchen, facing the window as I sat in the dining room. I interjected something into the conversation. You hollered at me, "You know I can't hear you when my back is turned!" I thought that was so funny that I wanted to laugh out loud; instead, I ran into the living room and laughed myself to tears. However, I did not laugh when you were talking and I would have to excuse myself to use the bathroom. You would follow me to the door and continually talk to me, even while the door was closed and the waters were running.

Thinking about getting older, I sometimes wonder what happened to my biological father. In my early forties, I received a letter from a distant aunt, giving me a clue as to his whereabouts. I mentioned to you that I wanted to track him down. I remember how you actually cried, asking me how I could want to see him after all he had done to you. I let the matter drop. Twenty years later, I was there when you told the girls that you tried to get me to find my father. My puzzlement of that statement made me decide that you were reinventing history and actually did not realize it since you sounded so sincere. In the past few years, I tried to track down his brother who has an unusual

name—with no success; I have given up. However, I was not alone in having trouble with the way you remembered.

Your doctor, Dr. Cetel cared for you and I know you remember how happy you were with him. For the first fifteen years or so under his care; you were a good patient, taking care of yourself and following his orders. However, problems began with Dr. Cetel when he took you off Celebrex and prescribed an ibuprofen. Ibuprofens target both COX1 and 2 enzymes, while Celebrex targets only the COX2 enzyme, leaving unprotected the lining of the stomach that is protected by the COX-1 enzyme. You argued so with him to stay on the Celebrex that he begrudgingly renewed your prescriptions for it. This left the lining of your stomach unprotected. I suppose sepsis (a blood infection) was a logical step.

Anyway, a nurse from Dr. Cetel's office called me stating that he would not see you again unless I came with you to every visit because of the difficulty they had with your strong sense of self. You would talk; tell him what was wrong with you and how to heal it. Then, after each visit, you called the office to ask what he said. I doubt they were three-minute conversations. You allowed me to go with you twice. When you introduced me to Dr. Cetel, you told him that I was "really bright," but that I was "devoid of all common sense." That hurt a little, but he was a stranger to me and by now, I was used to the verbal abuse—just not publically.

The third time, after his nurse informed me of your appointment, I called you, told you that I was coming over, which caused you to shout, "I'm a grown woman and can take care of myself!" That day you told me that you canceled the appointment because diarrhea and vomiting had kept you up all night. Shortly thereafter, the doctor's office refused to take your calls or see you. Aetna, your healthcare provider, chastised them with loss of standing; the doctor relented. Instead of finding a new doctor, you were glad that you had won the battle. It seems that's when you became too scared to tell me or your doctor that you were still having trouble. Later that month, when I visited you and saw all those outdated jars (83) of salad dressing, I had no idea why you were sick, but asked you to throw them out, which you did not do. You never mentioned diarrhea and vomiting again until the day you went into the hospital.

It boggles the mind when I remember Rylene and me finding you and snapping pictures of you shopping in the supermarket two weeks before you went into the hospital. I was secretly trying to get a good picture of you to put on your birthday cake, for the birthday that you never had.

Because of your tenacity; because you were so physically strong that you still hauled topsoil for your flower gardens and since every few months you moved (walked, inch by inch) heavy furniture to different locations in your home and since you refused to give up your jeep and drove to Church's Chicken and bought potato salad, greens and chicken two days before you were hospitalized, it seemed you would be with us forever.

But, you weren't. Had phones been feathers, except for hot, sweaty ears, nothing would have changed.

Chapter 14

NO COMEDY, JUST ERRORS

Our children need to realize that they are what they were, unless a conscious decision is made to recognize and change the unhealthy stances in their lives. Just mulling over the ramifications of the past should goad all of us to change. The mistakes of our earlier lives, when the adrenaline boiled, the testosterone flowed over and uncertainties simmered, should, at some point, be assigned to their rightful place—the past. Those mistakes should become learning experiences, leading us not to bitterness and strife, but to a certain calm that passes our understanding.

Perhaps—or perhaps not, that is what entered Dede’s mind after she and her teenaged son, Chris, stayed with you for a week in 2004. It began on a calm note, ended tumultuously and continued in that vein until your death. During that week, you had also consented to have Tracy’s sixteen year old daughter, Mercedes, stay with you a few days as company for Chris. I was not there, but you did call me the day before they were to leave to tell me that all of them were getting on your nerves. I let you know that I understood that three extra people in your home with only one of them grown could make for a very taxing time for you because you were not used to it. Rylene and Leesa wanted to see Dede and Chris before they left. They were to bring Mercedes home with them, so they picked up Tracy’s other two children, Stevie and Alexis and took them to your house. Our whole family knew your rule of, when you paid for the California family’s

travel, we could not come over to take them out for a few hours; they were to remain in your presence. As a result, we always respected your order.

What I do know is; a fiasco occurred when Mercedes and Chris left the room where everyone was gathered and went into another room where Mercedes' suitcase was. I know that is true because you called me afterward. It seems that you went into a tirade about cousins (6th cousins) being alone for five minutes in a house full of people. Mercedes began to sob over your accusations and assumptions. You balled up your fist against her. Rylene quickly placed herself between you two; sent Mercedes into the bathroom and told her to stay there until you calmed down. You didn't, but did tell them to leave as they were escaping to the car.

What I also know is; that unpleasant situation, centered on two teens, became the responsibility of me and my two, non-parent offspring, Leesa and Rylene. Dede, Chris' mom and Chris had gone home; Tracy, Mercedes' mom was never involved, for I had brought Mercedes over to your house with your consent. During your long verbal outburst, I was miles away, yet your demanded purpose was for me to call a family meeting with the two non-mothers, Leesa and Rylene and no one else, to straighten out why the situation was a situation. I know you were concerned about Mercedes. She had used scraps of paper to write on while at your house. Tearing them up, she tried to flush them down the toilet. The flushing did not work in its entirety, so you fished them out of the toilet and dried them. When I visited, you wanted to give those pieces of toilet water

permeated papers to me, trying to tell me of the help you believed Mercedes needed because she was a teenager. I refused touching or carrying the papers. Because I could find no rationale in your argument, I let you vent, but told you I was not taking your fears to Tracy, either. That was your perfect time to berate my knowledge of my offspring, saying that you had helped hundreds of troubled teenaged girls for over ten years; and that I knew “nothing about raising children!”

My not calling a meeting was your most gnawing problem, almost obliterating all others in the years to follow. At one point, maybe a year later, you even threatened to call my pastor/boss to tell him how unhappy I was making you for disobeying a request. As you still came to my home for other occasions, all my children and grandchildren were there, but you never mentioned the “straighten out” sessions to anyone. Both of us knew that you had everyone’s telephone number and could call the two girls yourself and have your meeting without me, the third non-involved person. I suppose that you thought that since every time you wanted me to come over there, all you had to do was to call, so it would follow that if I told my children to do something they would, without a thought, obey. Our family’s relationship is different and I love the difference. The thought of being in the kind of family that I remembered as a child with the blame, with the blow ups, with the sobbing, with the pain of confusion—that could not become a part of my life and I would not force that on my children. It was months before I even told my girls

that you wanted that meeting; I was hoping your demands would fade; instead, they smoldered.

Your feelings seethed on, past March of 2005, when I had a class that required me to write a weekly journal. An excerpt from the day after I held the phone for a (*four hour, my not having a blame session*) call in which you told me that I was like my father's family and all my children and grandchildren were also, I wrote that the power of four hours controlled the forty hours afterward. If our offspring can, while alone in the car, learn to scream loudly, and, or, beat on the steering wheel while remembering that hurts only have to hurt as long as we dwell on them, that captive four hours was worth it. 'Course any secluded place can suffice. One major trick I learned is, while I'm hurting, walk away mentally and physically, thinking of a year into the future. That hurt will be just a blip in the scope of life. Hurry to let it go right then. Respect, the respect that you instilled in me is still there. Could I have hung up on you? Of course; but you are my mother.

A major mistake of mine was made Christmas, the year before you twice visited California. As usual, for the almost fifty years since I had been married, we had spent Christmas together. That year, we took you to Tracy's house for our gathering. You, at eighty-eight years old, had gotten tired after the giving of presents and the family talk and had fallen asleep. When time came to eat, I decided to let you continue sleeping. Big mistake! When I saw your negative reaction, I tried to tell you I was sorry and we all sat

and talked with you as you ate, but that wrong decision was never forgotten or forgiven. Now you had two situations to rehash; not having a meeting and my not waking you to eat with the family.

Those last few years must have been as terrible for you as our relationship had become for me as you carried your fury through my now, land speakerphone and in person. The words were filled with: the how-to's of rearing someone else's child; the thoughts of how I was dishonoring you by not demanding my forty-something year old children participate in a family blameworthiness session; my continued disobedience to and disrespect of you as I stood resisting your onslaught on your legacy. When a person decides to entertain confusion and strife, inner peace cannot be found. Your only option was to give me what amounted to verbal beatings. Since there was no correspondence with your sisters, Dede was a newfound sounding board. I do not know if you talked about your thoughts to your new church friends, Julia and Louise.

Those two incidents, the teen visit and the Christmas dinner, had the final devastating effects on our relationship, which resulted in your finding a new resource to hear you out. Exactly a year before I was graduated, you were invited to California. Dede's older daughter, Andrea, who had never visited you on her own (I'm in possession of letters where she gives you excuses as to why she cannot talk to you on the phone) invited you to her home to celebrate her receiving her Masters Degree. Andrea actually crisscrossed the country for her business and you learned that she was as close as

Philadelphia; she never stopped by, or met up with you. She and her husband paid for the ticket for you to fly to Los Angeles. However, the airport her husband chose for you did not offer the special services you wanted, like an escort and a wheelchair to keep you from a good deal of walking. You changed the ticket to another airport without telling him. When he picked you up, he was furious. Remember, you related to me the shouting match during the whole drive to his house. Because of the location and the traffic, it took him three extra hours of drive time. Once in their home, your luggage was brought inside to the room prepared, but five minutes later, Andrea ran up the stairs and asked you not to unpack; you were going to stay at Dede's house. So you visited with Andrea's children while her husband was not at home, but you were not allowed to stay. You mentioned that it was almost an euphoric experience to have those little ones you had never seen run up to you, adoringly calling you *Mimi*.

Only three of my six grandchildren live in Wilmington; Keith's three have always lived in Montgomery, Alabama where Keith lived until his divorce. Once, before his divorce, his entire family visited here. Once I visited there and once I picked up the children, took them on a cruise through the Caribbean and then to Disney World's resort for a week—a time I know they will never forget. Since the divorce, I see the children and the greats every few years. The proximity of my home to yours enabled you to see my Delaware grandchildren, your great grandchildren, often.

When you visited Andrea, your greats here were in middle and high school – beyond the age of initial wonderment or the enthusiasm of seeing a great grandmother they saw on a regular basis. Shucks, Mother, speaking for myself, when my grandchildren were young, as their parents’ car pulled up, I would run out the front door, meet them halfway down my walkway, pick each one up under his or her arms, swing them around and around while shouting, “Grandchildren, Grandchildren.” They laughed and enjoyed their legs taking flight beneath them. That was when they were young. Dynamics change, as does newness and age. Now a “Hello, my beautiful (or gorgeous, or handsome) granddaughter or grandson” suffices. A “Hi, Mom Mom,” and probably the thought of— *now, what was I doing before*—suffices back.

For your last Christmas, after forty-eight years, Dede actually sent for you. I do not begrudge her having you there for Christmas; what bothered me is that she did not call or write to tell me of her plans. Perhaps that was because you told her not to, knowing that that expectation negated, would be a fine slap in my face.

Those last years, you and I were still holding to our patterns; it was an exceedingly hard time. Come to think of it, that was the year you decided to pay for your own cable and then decided that you could do without cable; analog stations were still available. After receiving your call complaining that your television could not get the local Philadelphia stations, I drove over to try to fix it. That day was a *stay home and study for class* day. I thought it would be an easy feat to restore your television to a 1970s state of

operation, so I drove there in my housedress. Believe me, Mother, no housedress had ever been walked a foot outside my property line until that day. I prayed that nothing happened as I drove to your home. It didn't. But as I realized the old antenna (rabbit ears) you had were beyond repair, I actually went to Sears in my housedress. Now that is a feat above and beyond any call of duty. Before and after Sears, as I fiddled with the television, I listened to the constant barrage of insults that were hurled my way. I really feel blessed that I have always been able to immediately forget most of the actual words of hate. The feeling I was left with always took time to recover from, but knowing that that feeling could not last, was comforting. As fast as I could manage it, you soon had a working television and I was on my way. Once, when I came over with Rylene, you told her that you knew why she rode over to your house with me a lot; she was there for "protection." After Rylene heard that and heard the tone of voice in which it was delivered, she always rode with me. Because I never used my key to enter your home, you always got upset with me. Now, I'll tell you why. Remember your handgun, the one small enough to fit into your housecoat pocket that you kept handy, just in case. My reasoning was that since you could not hear me knock hard, even when my keys clinked loudly against the glass part of the door, only a cell phone call while standing at the door could get you to answer. Had I walked in on you unexpectedly, you may have shot me. My thoughts were that if you were physically ill, knowing that your rage is usually out of control, I would have gone into the house only with the police.

Chapter 15

DO NOT OPEN, DO NOT SHUT

However, that fateful day, your last day in your home, after Wes, Leesa and I visited you, I used my key to get into your house to wash your bedclothes. That morning, vomiting and diarrhea had made it impossible for you to get up. You called me; told me that Julia had gotten an ambulance to take you to the hospital. Remember, when we saw you there, you were talking up a storm, pleasant talk, to the point that you declared that you were better and wanted to go home to get something to eat. The next day, more tests were run; by the third day, they told you that if you did not have an operation, you would be dead in twenty-four hours. You consented and signed papers to that effect.

Ever since Grandpop died, you had envied his death. While he was adjusting his bowtie to go to church, he had a massive brain hemorrhage, dropped to the floor and died on the spot. I do not think it can be wrong to envy something that you have no control over, so I, too, envy that death. I imagined as I walked away from you as you entered the last door to the operating room that your lack of an “I love you, too” to mine was because you were beginning to feel the anesthesia. The operation was to take a little more than two hours. The nurse said it seemed intestines were tangled and that sometimes doctors could reach in and undo the crossings over with their fingers. Perhaps that would be your case. Instead, the doctors said that when they explored, it was as though superglue was used on your insides. The leaked sepsis was removable but they had to cut out five inches

and repair your intestines. I knew that this would leave you, a person who would be ninety years old in a few weeks, unable to return to your home and your flowers, deeply impeding your quality of life. After the operation, although the nurses urged you to, you refused to open your eyes. Tubes were in your throat, but when you heard my voice, you raged on the tubes. Crying, because I knew that if you could talk, you would say you would rather be dead than have this incapacitation happen to you, I had to leave the room, for I was disobeying one of your specific requests that I could have possibly granted according to that administrator's advice.

Shortly thereafter, there came a point where we were told that there was only a ten percent chance of your recovering. I had previously informed some of my children of what you wanted concerning death, but asked all of them what they thought. Dying is hard on those who are left behind. Their consensus was, we should try for the ten percent. Treatment continued.

When the administrator asked me to gather family to meet with him to make a decision after a week with no improvement, I brought along children, grandchildren and Tracy's husband, Steve. Dede was there: she had come from California and stayed in your house and had use of your car. The decision was made to take you off life supports, Mother. I told the administrator that it had to be the beginning of the next week, not later that week. He asked why. Tracy and her daughter, just like Grandmom, share the same December 2nd birth date. That year it fell on the coming Sunday. I would have fought the

administrator had he insisted on having the termination of your life days before my forty-year-old daughter's or my thirteen-year-old granddaughter's birthday. But, as soon as he knew my reasons, he quickly agreed. I remembered how you insisted that the funeral director have Daddy's funeral on my birthday in 1999, but, thankfully, he could not do it at that time. Leesa, Rylene and Keith returned that next Monday to sit with you as they removed tubes and slowly shut down machine after machine. Your life ended that day, December the third.

Looking Back – by Rubye

Looking back, what do I see

The other end of the line.

Life curves in big circles going round and round,

And all collapse at the end of time.

The line goes up – laughter is heard,

A child is born, first, second then third,

The line goes down, a cry is heard,

One goes to sleep without ev'n a word.

As you requested, the sealed envelope that read "Judy, do not open, give to Dede" was given to her. It was the deed to your house. In your Will, I was named as executor. Once the lawyer realized that she was my fourth cousin, never legally adopted, he wanted to step in. I did not let him; I had beforehand, years ago when you told me that you were

leaving the house to Tracy, decided that I would not have a problem with your wishes. I was now old enough to know that my desire was for people to respect my wishes as to the division of my property; that respect is due everyone. It was particularly difficult for my grandchildren to understand that inheritance decision. My explanation was simply that you liked Dede more than me. That lightened the mood, but perhaps it will cause a problem later in their lives because they verbally began to figure out who was going to inherit their parents' house. When I die, any tension that my statement may have created between them, hopefully, will be erased by my Will.

For your funeral, the girls, Dede and I went to purchase the accessories you were to wear for your viewing. Upon entering the store, Dede went elsewhere; after we had finished shopping for you, she joined us with her personal purchases for the ride home. Dede's daughter, Andrea represented the California great-grands at the funeral.

I followed every wish of yours that I could for your memorial service. I honored your request that you not have an obituary because you felt you were unloved by everyone. Well, I really didn't. After your funeral, when people were leaving, we gave the obituary out to those in attendance. I kind of sidestepped your request on that one. Funeral manners have changed. One of your great grandchildren from Alabama, unbeknownst to everyone, took a picture of you in your coffin. You looked beautiful; the rose that you requested that each child of your legacy place on your chest as they viewed the body was extremely touching.

The Will stated that the proceeds from the contents of the house would be equally shared. Since Dede had shipped many boxes to California without discussing it with me, I did ask her to relinquish her share of the contents; she agreed; a codicil was added to the Will. As you requested, I had your favorite auction house come and empty the house. The amount I received was satisfying.

Dede left the house within a few days after your funeral. Since then, she has gotten one of my cousins, who is close to her age, to have her son move in. After a trip to the Jersey shore one day, Leesa, Rylene and I drove by and saw the door open, but nothing else was changed. We knocked. The son opened the door, declared his love for memories and showed us the only dubious improvement he made to the house; he spottily painted the living room's golden hardwood floors, and splattered the woodwork, black. He was so proud of that horrible job. I could hardly wait to leave, to burst into laughter at the job he thought he had done. Months later, I sold your vehicle to the fireman who lives next door to your house and sent Dede half the money as you requested. While in Lawnside to have him sign the title, he told me he hates to look over toward your house, for his imagination runs wild when he sees different cars drive up, enter the house and leave soon thereafter.

The writings of your self-torture that began with the Mercedes incident were found by me when the auctioneer emptied the house. Its rambling accusations, I have no problem with; that was your nature. Your last written words, where you tell me that you

disown me; that I am no longer your daughter, explain a good deal. Of course you did not want me to throw a 90th birthday celebration for you at your church; of course, that's why none of your cards in those past few years were signed at all, why there was no "Your very own Mother, always. Love, Mother." I should think it difficult to make *always*, never.

I now understand why you refused to attend my graduation one year after and 2,300 miles closer to your home than to Andrea's. I now understand why the graduation card handed to me later, and all the cards given to me in the last years of your life contained no signature, no hand written words at all. As you gave them to me, your words were, "I forgot to sign it" or "I couldn't find a pen." My answer was "That's fine, Mother, the card is nice, thank you." Perhaps I should have offered you a pen. I always have one handy, but I surmised that perhaps this was just one of the signs of entering those elderly ages; I did not want to cause you distress over a small omission. It seems your mentally disowning me did present for you a, *how do I still give cards*, problem.

Well, I'm sorry, Mother. Life lived cannot be nullified, negated or undone. Can the omission of written words undo good and bad memories and hundreds of pictures and memorabilia? Can those unwritten words undo caring and listening and trying to abide within, even though it was sometimes easier to evade dictates? Can unwritten words undo your beautiful, precious, intelligent grandchildren and great-grandchildren? No; and neither will I be negated. As I see myself, I know that all that you and I went through

together was and is a learning, growing experience. You played an enormous part in what I am today and what I want to pass on as legacy, that is, what to deem important and unimportant to our offspring.

Lastly, our children must learn that if they choose to mull over what they consider a hurt for more than eighty-three minutes and try to scrutinize the *why* or formulate a payback, they have given and relinquished to the hurter, power over them, power over their minds. And that is true, whether the hurter knows it or not. A mind controlled by fantasies, falsity, fallacy and the imagination is as a mind super-glued, leaving little room for love and beauty. Your disowning me, Mother, had to be kept in the back of my thoughts until we finished this remembrance. That you tried, unsuccessfully, to disown me, I'll always remember. But tomorrow, since we are finished this memoir honoring you for your purpose in life, for your independence and for the goodness you did show to us and to others, I will recycle your journal and recycle any dross that might have lingered in my mind.

You are wrong. Yes, I say those words without trying to soften them. I reject your last edict. From the year that you prayed for me before I was born to the day I, too, will pass from this life, I will remain, *your very own daughter, always. Love, Judy.*