

The Torn Trilogy Chaplet One  
Free 100 Pages

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E-book edition Chaplet One

This is a work of Nonfiction  
(Names have been changed for the sake of privacy)

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The *TORN* Trilogy:

TORN FROM THE INSIDE OUT  
Book I

THE JOURNEY  
Book II

OUT OF THE MAELSTROM  
Book III

Book I  
'TORN' Trilogy

Torn From the Inside Out  
*Literary Narrative Memoir*

Compared to “The classic literary techniques used  
by Emily Bronte...Victor Hugo”  
Tisha Holiday (Retired News Writer/Editor)

Torn is a book that can be read more than once, as the levels of insight woven into the social realities are layered. The writing is an easy flow of classic style laced with metaphors, anchored with time-centered historical happenings, brought home to the reader by a powerful appeal to the heart and soul.

Sara Niles invites the reader to go on the literary and emotional journey that eventually covers five decades and culminates with the completion of the third part of the trilogy, *Out of the Maelstrom*.

With this book, let the journey begin, take the incredible journey of life into the depths of despair and the height of ecstasy, cross the valleys of human pain and climb mountains as we celebrate a power greater than death itself, the power of the human spirit under fire.

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## EXCERPT

“Thunder rattled the window- panes two stories high and lightning split the sky, it was as if the whole world was in turmoil that night. My nerves were keyed up as tight as piano strings and in a sudden moment of stillness and silence it felt as though my heartbeat was amplified ten times over. He was over a hundred pounds greater than I; nearly a foot taller and I knew he could move his muscled body into unbelievable sprints. Rain started falling in torrents, while the storm raged outside. I was not afraid of the storms of nature; it was the storm inside this night that I knew I might not survive”...February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1987, the night of Sara Niles’ flight with her five small children.

### ***SYNOPSIS:***

Given away to her aged Uncle Robert and Aunt Molly at age 3 ½, Sara spent ten years on the ‘flower bed of Eden’ being lavished with love and attention until death took its toll and Sara married an abusive man named Thomas Niles when she was only 16. Niles invites us to enter into her lifelong odyssey by the words: 'Let the journey begin', and so it does as the reader enters into a formerly forbidden zone.

The story of Sara Niles becomes more than a story of one woman's journey into pain, it resounds with the voices of the many veterans of domestic war. Torn From the Inside Out and its sibling books, celebrate a power greater than death itself, the power of the human spirit under fire.

## *CREDITS*

### *Torn From the Inside Out*

*The poem, The Incredible Journey Called Life* was written by the author, expressly for *Torn From the Inside Out*, for the incorporation of the beautiful and perilous parallels of life and nature.

All quotations and partial quotations are credited to original authors and artists. *No substantial text of any author has been quoted or used without permission, except as permitted by law.*

### *Special Thanks*

*To all who touched our lives, you know who you are. 'Thank you' for the kindness that you showed us, some were small, but it takes the many small kindnesses to make the world a wonderful place.*

*To special friends, you know who you are, you are each  
irreplaceable and one-of-a-kind in your own way.*

*And to those I met only briefly during some crisis of theirs  
or mine, whether I was the 'help-ee' or the helper; it does  
not matter, in either case we both found room to learn and  
to grow and to seek a new way to find happiness in that  
special place where happiness is always safely hidden  
away for emergencies.*

*The Incredulous Journey Called Life*

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*How grand you are like molten fire*

*Blazing a permanent path through a vast domain*

*Unspeakably beautiful scenic shocks of rock and stone*

*Jut out of the ground in sudden tragic uncertainty*

*Shake us free with your magnificent power*

*Awaken us with your horror and pain*

*Make our hearts scream loudly again*

*When our spirits are near broken in our last hour*

*Comfort us with lullabies of soft fields of flowers*

*Gentle colored sunrises and sunsets*

*And windblown ballets of feathered birds in flight*

*Make us thankful for the incredible journey called life*

*Sara Niles*

*Let the journey begin...*

*Torn From the Inside Out*

*Book I of Torn Trilogy*

*FROM THE AUTHOR*

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This is a book of nonfiction, a memoir of my life, wherein all of the characters existed and every part of the story is true. Unfortunately, there was no need to lie, for my life was in fact an exercise in tragedies common to the foolish, yet with challenge enough to prove an enigma for the wise, therefore the truth is enough.

Names have been altered, including my own. I found the need to make a composite of several people into one character that played a brief and minor role in my life; all of the others are replicated as closely as I perceived them.

## *PROLOGUE*

This book is for me and my children and all of the millions of veterans of domestic war.

In memory of the dead victims of domestic violence, I have retold stories of those who became casualties. The stories below are all true; I retold them from the perspective of my own visualizations in an effort to give some validation to lives wasted and mostly forgotten. Some things are too precious to forget, such as the lessons of history, and the deeds of unsung heroes, for if we stumble into the habit of forgetting, we lose both the value of life and the opportunity to become a wiser and stronger generation. If we forget, we lessen our children, therefore we can never forget.

The Viet Nam Memorial is a tribute to remembering those that should never be forgotten, and although we must never lessen the meaning of the ultimate sacrifice given by the Great War veterans of this country, there is also another group of veterans involved in a war they did not choose. These veterans come from all walks of life and conversely fill offices of high acclaim and the prisons, they are old and they are young, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, male and female: they are the victims of domestic violence. Many have died in domestic war and have been 'buried' in the unmarked grave of forgetfulness, therefore to keep their memory alive I present to you a few *silent witnesses* that you would never otherwise

meet.

I could hear the pleading guttural screams of the woman as she begged him to stop stabbing her, until her breath was too weak and her terror filled eyes took over. Twenty-nine times he brought up the kitchen knife designed to slice, and brought it down into her living flesh all over her body, perhaps sparing her heart intentionally, so that she lived long enough for him to snatch her dying, bleeding body up and drag her viciously to the bath tub, already drawn, possibly for him...and drown her. Only then, did the cursing, vicious animal of a man stop and stand back after his rage was spent, and admire his work. He showed her, all right. This husband and father performed for a small captive audience of his own terror stricken children, giving them fodder for nightmares, for the rest of their lives.

The next woman finally got the courage to leave, but she did not hide so he found her and their two children at her brother and sister-in-law's house. The man went fully armed with intent to murder; he killed his wife and her brother and sister-in-law. This father left his two little girls asleep in the back room, not concerned that his older daughter would have to clean up his mess and live with it the rest of her life. The older girl, not even in her teens, had to carry her little sister out past the carnage to go to the neighbor's to summon help. She covered her little sister's face when she passed the bodies of her dead mother and the others, because a child should not have to see such things. Everyone was dead because Daddy, the triple murderer, killed them all and created wounds two generations thick.

One after another, the victims told their stories without words by means of engraved plaques. There were over two hundred life sized cut- outs in red plywood that represented the recently dead victims; each had a name and the date and method of murder. The cut- outs were placed around the rotunda at the state Capitol as part of the annual Domestic

Violence Awareness campaign for the State Legislature. I came prepared for the cut-outs of murdered women, but I was not prepared for the number of cut-outs representative of the dead children and men; I was dramatically reminded that murder knows no age or gender. Many children died in violent homes, shaken to death, bashed against walls like mere flies and many died as secondary victims as an afterthought when controlling abusers lost the battle for their 'kingdoms' for the last time. Some of the deaths were the result of a last noble act of courage in a short lifetime, heroic sons and daughters who died in the line of 'duty' trying to protect a loved one, usually a little sister, brother, mother or father.

There was a plaque of a twenty three year old man who tried to protect his mother from his stepfather and for his bravery he was shot point blank in the chest with a shotgun. I see things in vivid imagery when I am particularly moved, so I envisioned the fight, the threats, the raised shotgun and the heroic son flying backwards as his mother gave a primal scream. Then time stood still for a frozen second, while death announced its victory. Death, with its black ugly soul, the final claimant and the last debt collector comes too often in homes ruled by violence.

I could picture all too well the months and years of pain before the deaths, because I had lived there too, in a violent home of pain and jeopardy, the difference was that I got away. Then again on second thought, perhaps I should say that I almost got away, because the harm of domestic violence in its worst form is almost never ending. The issues cut deep into your soul and deep into your family dynamics until it tears you inside out, then just when you think it is finally over, the ugly thing grows new roots, new manifestations, new issues and new pain.

I worked with abuse victims, and once a year I saw the hundreds of silent witnesses and read the plaques on their wooden chests and the tears flow from my eyes without my permission. I have to stop and wipe in order to see, because by the time I read the last inscription, I feel very tired and do not wish to talk for a while, because I have replayed the screams and the terrified faces, the sounds of bone cracking and guns firing, children screaming and climbing out windows, horrified neighbors calling the police and if the victims were lucky, the comforting sound of sirens when they are early and their mournful wailing sound when the saviors come too late.

Domestic Violence shelters from all over each state converge on the capitols for this event, with hundreds of workers dressed in red swarming quietly. Many of us read the plaques, some of us cry and most of us stop for a moment in time and reflect, and then we go home. If we are not vigilant, we may forget the mighty symbols of violent times that we were witness to. Worse yet, we must never forget the people behind the symbols, the lost mothers and daughters and sons and fathers who will never go home again. We must never forget, and we must not leave our lost dead unburied.

Many years after my own escape from a violent life, I started to work at a domestic violence and sexual assault shelter for abuse victims and embarked upon an education of exposure. I found that victims vary greatly, that 'one stereotype fits all', will not work. Victims come from all backgrounds, and in all types, ages and sizes. I once remember walking into a shelter at the beginning of my shift to find a new client sitting in front of the intake desk. I finished her intake and when I walked around to her, she stood. She caught me completely off guard so as she began to stand, it seemed it took minutes for her to unfold her

height, as she stood I had to back up to see all of her. This woman was taller than the average population, both male and female, I am sure she was around 6'4" and weighed a hefty amount. I waited for my state of shock to subside so that it could register that she was the victim of domestic assault. I had to wonder if the perpetrator was related to the giant Philistine, Goliath.

There were so many situations and types of people, and although I discovered victims were different in many ways, there were some common traits evidenced across all spectrums, one trait was certain: those who remained in seriously abusive homes left with scars.

They came with children in all stages of damage, and degrees of anger, the children were usually angry with their mother, seldom toward the abuser. Children find out early that anger toward a dictator is unsafe, so they find a safer target. I knew of many cases of verbally domineering and abusive mothers married to timid men and in those cases, the children are angry toward the father. Whoever is safe, whether they are innocent or not, receives the anger.

The male children, especially the ones in the mid teens are especially angry and in suppressed agony, because they were cheated-they deserved a father that they could admire and copy, like a model, but instead they got a tyrant that told them boys don't cry. The boys are cursed into maintaining an exterior of false peace while their insides are raging with the fires of pain. Children instinctively crave love from both parents, when it is not received, the loss should naturally be grieved.

Some of the women have up to seven or more small kids, some have emotionally disturbed kids and some are mentally ill themselves. Some of the victims have many

other problems, drug addictions, and a sense of hopelessness. We have gotten those who cut themselves and those who have lived abnormally all of their lives and have learned to expect crisis or life is not predictable. First a crisis, then there is peace. It is really the peace they want, but they only know one way to get it. Some were normal, came from good, 'normal' families and fell in love with a man who was good at mind games, by the time they caught onto them, it was too late, they had succumbed to a good brain washing. So we debrief, we educate, we direct, we advise and we do a lot of listening at all hours of day and night.

They come by all methods; one lady hitchhiked practically naked after being held by a man she started living with. He raped her and stabbed her, it excited him to stab her and have sex with her in a state of fear. She escaped by running out to the highway when he went to the bathroom and a kind man picked her up and took her to the hospital. They sent her to us via the police. She talked constantly of what he did to her over a matter of weeks, unbelievable things. Ministers, neighbors, friends and law enforcement bring them and they drive themselves, sometimes having to outrun the abuser with the kids screaming 'he's gonna ram us, Momma!' Some come in cars that cost more than my house; the men had total control of the finances, so they use the shelter and declare themselves homeless in spite of having left fancy homes. They are all homeless when they come to a shelter because you have to leave everything when the abuser is willing to kill. It's either your life or your stuff. I have been there too. It's like being in the middle of the ocean and being thrown off the ship without a life raft. How do you survive? You learn to really swim hard and long, because leaving is just a beginning.

It has been almost two decades since I fled my

home and disappeared with my five small children, all big eyed and terrified, trying hard to be brave. I can see all of it like it was yesterday. Since I have had to recount my past to teams of people, I have thought about my life in more detail than is common. I was told to tell the ugly truth because these people needed to know and feel what domestic violence does to humans. I don't think words were designed for the degree of pain I wish to convey, or perhaps the skill required to contort language to such a purpose is for a master of linguistics. In any case, it is my duty to report for the sake of the many who cannot speak for themselves, some of the dead victims and those who still live a walking death locked into mentally ill minds for life.

The room was small, the walls created a slight echo, or perhaps it was just my imagination. I had to go so far back into my mind that the present environment closed in on me. Of the five people in the room Kathryn Shipp was the most imposing: she was 6 feet tall, stood military straight with sharply cropped blue-black hair and blue eyes that were intense. She needed everything from me, she had to have the 'feel' of the whole story, not just the facts, so she demanded more than just a story, and she wanted a recreation of my life. Kathy Shipp was one of the best attorneys in the state and her client was a domestic abuse victim who had snapped and killed her abuser, so Kathy Shipp needed me to show her why a good little girl could empty a gun on a man with his back turned. I knew why she did it, I knew what she felt, and if it took revealing my soul to help, I would. So I went back to the images of my beginnings and the people and events that shaped my life to make me who I am. There were many forces that forged me, some gentle and kind and some harsh and violent; there

were also many people who contributed to the final product that I call *me*.

In the process of my evolution, I became a victim of domestic war, an emotional casualty for a major portion of my life, entwined, entrapped and emotionally involved until I learned how to become free. Freedom has never been easily gained and has often come at high cost throughout history, but one thing I will always know is freedom is worth every fight, and all pain.

In every life there is a timeless minute or day that will be forever etched into our mind's memory, they will be unforgettable. I have unforgettable memories that are so vivid that I see them in Technicolor and I hear them with surround sound. Long after I am dead, I believe, I will remember. Two of those memories were the days of my escape to freedom-*twice*.

## *PART I*

### *The Flower Bed of Eden*

#### Chapter 1

Thunder rattled the window- panes two stories high and lightning split the sky, it was as if the whole world was in turmoil that night. My nerves were keyed up as tight as piano strings and in a sudden moment of stillness and silence it felt as though my heartbeat was amplified ten times over. He was over a hundred pounds greater than I; nearly a foot taller and I knew he could move his muscled body into unbelievable sprints. Rain started falling in torrents, while the storm raged

outside. I was not afraid of the storms of nature; it was the storm inside this night that I knew I might not survive.

Anticipation was so great that I wanted to scream at him to get it over with and true to my expectation he lunged for me, my body did not disappoint me, I flew down the stairs two at a time in my bare-feet. He stalled for mere seconds to enjoy his pronouncement of a death sentence upon me: “*I AM GOING TO KILL YOU—YOU GOOD FOR NOTHING BITCH—STONE DEAD!!!!!!*” He screamed.

That was the night that I disappeared into a February rainstorm with five children and no place to go. I was twenty-nine years old.

Many people asked of me since that day many ‘whys’ and I gave many answers. It takes a lot of ‘why’s’ to make a life, mine being no exception. Maya Angelou said ‘you can’t know who I am until you know where I have been’; until you know the circumstances and people who contributed to the making of me, you cannot know me. We all are complicated mixes of many other people and life events. We are all of everything that has ever happened to us. If we suddenly got amnesia, we would cease to exist as who we were except in the memory of others. My pain is *me*, and thus my life that once was, is what made *me* now. I am the hungry little girl who sat in the sand over forty years ago waiting to be rescued by an ancient old man, I am Sara Niles and this is my story.

I was born in the bowels of the South where willow trees hang low over ponds and creeks surrounded by the

lush growth of woody fern. My beginnings were in a place where knotted old oaks twisted their knurled boughs upwards, their majestic leafage allowing slithers of light to penetrate the shadowy forest floors to lend peeks upon the backs of huge Diamondback rattlesnakes; their gargantuan size owing to seldom meeting the sight of the eyes of man, if ever at all. I was born where the bottomland hoarded teems of wild boars known to rip hunting dogs open from end to end and where the narrow little graveled roads twisted and wound their way past humble mail boxes, usually the only evidence of the habitations miles into the forest, accessed by dirt tire rutted roads with a strip of grass ribboned in the middle. This was oil country, oil wells were scattered every few miles, their slow prehistoric movements signaling that the owners were receiving money. Neighbors lived far apart on beautiful little farms or in ragged shacks, with a Cadillac and a television or neither plumbing nor electric power lines. Depending upon which neighbor you were, you had plenty or nothing at all.

My mother had nothing at all, except seven hungry mouths to feed. She was by everyone's opinion an exceptionally beautiful woman. Her mother before her was a French white woman from New York and her father was a black and Indian man; born, bred and still living in the same area. I never met my maternal grandmother, I strongly suspected that she mated with my grandfather on a purely business level. A business that is considered to be one the oldest vices, the one I have to thank for my very existence. My mother was a prostitute. I was an accident she had with a client, a rich white oilman who found her little shack a convenient stop on his trips from town and she found in him food for her children. Things may have been

different for my mother, if a white man, living in a racist time, had not shot her first husband in the back for the unforgivable crime of stealing gas- Gas that he swore to pay for that evening when he left the billet woods. It was a time when racism ruled, a 'cold war' between blacks and whites established the climate, and therefore no trial ever took place.

It was nineteen fifty seven, the Little Rock nine were escorted to school by Federal troops under the order of President Eisenhower to counteract the attempt of Arkansas Governor Faubus to prevent it. Southern racial tensions produced a supreme irony: Federal troops against the National Guard. This visible strife between state and nation was one of the evidences of the racial turmoil of the times. The line of demarcation between blacks and whites was decided by color and I was born on the centerline. My bright light skin marked me as a product of the enemy, the white man in the black community. Black women drawled sweetly to my mother that my long wavy brown hair was so pretty in tones meant to be a reproof to her. I was unacceptable, too white to be black... too black to be white.

We lived in what our relatives fondly called 'the old homestead'. It was the home built by my great-grandparents, a newly freed slave by the name of Henry Howell and his wife, a full-blooded Crow Indian bearing the European name Charlotte. Henry and Charlotte had twelve children, each born in the front room of this now dilapidated old house. Great old cottonwoods rattled their leaves noisily in the wind in front of the house and massive oaks guarded the back, dwarfing the little outhouse with its pitiful croker-sack door. The exterior of the house bore the aged gray look

of hardwood that had never been painted in its century of withstanding the pelting rains and the great extremes of heat and cold. It was a tough, neglected old house, abandoned to my mother to house us in rent-free. She could ill afford to care for the ancient structure that needed attention so badly, or us. The job of watching and caring for us fell to my oldest sister, Francine. She was thirteen years old at my earliest remembrance of her, my brother was twelve, and the rest of our ages ran closely behind. I was four years old.

The house had three entrances. The front and back doors we children were allowed to use freely, but the side door facing the setting sun was off limits to us. It was the ‘business’ door, the door that the strange men used; some used it so often they even knew our names. On a rare occasion when my mother was absent, I was molested by one of these men while the noon-ish sun shone through the window. I knew nothing of what he was doing, he sounded friendly. Something was wrong, I felt some odd shame and my heart pounded with relief when my tigress of a sister burst through the door demanding that the ‘no good son of a dog’ take his filthy hands off me in a voice strong with authority and rage that was strange to hear in the voice of a child. He unhanded me without a word and fled as all my siblings ran up to flank her in the ranks. I remembered that incident, though I never once mentioned it again until three decades passed. I merely held my head self-consciously tilted to one side when I walked.

Nothing stood out in my early childhood worth remembering until the fateful day when the world kindly changed for me. My great uncle and aunt lived on a farm a mile’s walk through a wooded trail. Robert Howell was born in eighteen eighty-three to Henry and

Charlotte Howell in the very same curtain-less room that my siblings and I slept in on the pallets and old mattresses. Although my mother was treated as an outcast in the family - never visited and quietly talked about by the conventional ones who may have feared their heavenly reservations may be cancelled if they dared come near her- my uncle Robert visited us daily. He cared little for convention and hated hypocrisy; he would not permit either to stifle his compassion for us. We looked for uncle's visits just as faithfully as we expected the sun to rise, and just as faithfully, he always came. I never remember his coming unheralded by our squeals of delight because we knew he had candy or fruit if not both. Our yard's stinging spattering of trampled grass wore a distinct trail that led to the East corner where a roofed water well crested the top of a steep red clay hill. Uncle Robert's head would always appear first, on hot days his hatless bald head would bloom at the top of that hill prettier to us than any flower, He not only brought us gifts, he luxuriated us in his time by talking with each one of us. We loved Uncle Robert dearly and any one of us would have been glad to be taken home by him. I was selected.

The monotony of our lives made the mentioning of the names of days unnecessary so I don't know what day it was when my uncle took me home, just that it was sunny and warm. I was sitting in front of the east steps in a pile of cream colored sand pouring its warmth across my legs when Uncle Robert came.

"I'm coming to take you home with me little Sara. Just let me talk with your mama for a minute. You're going to be me and Mollie's little girl" my uncle soothingly promised. I felt something that must have been excitement, although I had heard him say he

would take me home before, this time was different. My brother and sisters gathered around the front door trying to overhear the conversation from within. We could hear the muffled conversation getting louder as my mother and uncle walked down the hall to the front porch.

“I’ll find her birth certificate later Uncle Robert. You just take her on home now” adding to “Tell Aunt Mollie hello for me”. And just like that, as easily as one changes shoes, I was given away unceremoniously without tears or protest from my mother. She never hugged me good-bye, nor did she come outside to watch me leave. My brother and sisters gathered around me looking sad, their bubbly excitement died as they followed us down the steep hill all the way to the ravine. They yelled ‘good –bys’ until we were out of sight. My uncle let me climb upon a stump so I could ride astride his neck since I had no shoes. Uncle Robert talked excitedly, gesturing with his hat in his free hand while holding one of my ankles with the other. I was holding his baldhead with both my thin dirty arms. I don’t remember much of what he said, only something about how happy my aunt Mollie would be and all of the things they would buy me. These golden promises meant nothing to me yet as I had no prior means of comparison and I was too distracted by apprehension mixed with unformed expectations.

I knew we had almost arrived when we reached the spring at the bottom of the hill. The spring bubbled up fresh water continually, the overflow created a branch of water that was covered with a plank bridge. Two thick, smoky black water moccasins raised their ugly heads up from the water and opened their cottony mouths in silent threat. I tightened my grip on Uncle Robert’s head. The roof of the house

appeared first as we ascended the long incline. A large grayish brown farmhouse, surrounded by bright flowers, arose into view. My senses became acute, recording every minor detail, the smells of the flowers and fruit trees enchanted me as my uncle stooped to unlatch a peg lock on the back gate. My heart was beating faster and faster, my blood raced through my veins with such force that I became dizzy, my hearing muted and time slowed.

Fear ran through me as two large silky black Labradors ran toward us barking hysterically, the barking giving way to tail wagging and happy howls of joy at seeing my uncle. I could see an immense expanse of ordered property. There were pastures and barns, cows and a big-eared mule, chickens scattering across a fenced yard and New Guinea fowl shrieking in tropical song. There were huge tomcats sitting calmly upon fence posts. I was bedazzled. While my head whirled in excitement, I was gently stood upon the grounds on legs almost too weak to hold me. It was incomprehensible to my dazed senses that all of the commotion was over me.

My uncle yelled to my aunt to hurry out and see what he had and in an instant my aunt ran across the back yard with a spatula in one hand wearing a white apron across the front of the prettiest flowered dress I had ever seen. I was being smothered in hugs while my uncle and aunt both talked at once. The animals sensed the excitement and were howling in unison. I tried to see everything at once, such as the number three bathtubs hanging outside against the back porch wall, animals, a smokehouse and old farm buildings. I thought I had entered a new world when I smelled the most wonderful aroma of foods floating upon the breeze; my senses were overwhelmed as the hunger awakened in me compelled me to cry. I was fed while still caked with grime and dirt. “Robert, I’m afraid she’ll get sick. Don’t

you think we should stop her from eating now?" Aunt Mollie asked uncertainly. "Nah. This child probably has never eaten her fill. Let her eat till she bursts." He answered glad heartedly before they both melted into joyous laughter. For the first time in my life, I was home.

I was scrubbed in sudsy lather and wrapped in a towel. My only dress was so dirty that it was discarded. I stood behind my aunt holding the back of her chair while she sewed dresses and matching bloomers out of floral cotton flour sacks. She sang and talked as she wheedled her singer treadle sewing machine. I said nothing. I was happier than I had ever been. On Saturday, I remember because every day I was told to just wait until Saturday and we will go to town, we went to town. My aunt bought shoes, dresses, 'britches', baubles, and toys, everything that a little girl who had nothing would need. I remember the things I didn't need, the candles and soda pops of all varieties and colors. All of downtown was comprised of one street covering a couple of blocks, so in a town of that size everyone knew Aunt Mollie. My aunt told every listening ear, both white and black, that she and Uncle Robert were like Sarah and Abraham, blessed with a child in their old age.

Relatives were notified, they came by the carloads to see me and brought and sent gifts. My Aunt Fannie from California sent two huge packages of clothing and toys from J.C. Penny, a habit she continued for the duration of my early years. Physically, I went from nothing to everything in one week. From no attention to being squabbled over; my emotions knew no precedent, therefore I was overwhelmed in joy. I began to talk incessantly, 'like a jaybird' as Uncle Robert said. There was so much to see and do, to taste

and touch. I was experiencing the tastes of new foods almost daily. I became a whirlwind as I tried to enjoy everything at once in a frenzy of ecstasy.

My uncle took me with him to visit my brother and sisters each day, they were always so happy to see us, only now I knew that they did not have the good things I did. I used to ask Uncle Robert and Aunt Mollie to bring them home to live with us; I was too young to know what their sad faces revealed. It was impossible; they could only save one, the child most likely to suffer harm. My mother moved away when I was five years old without a word. We went for our daily visit and the house was vacant. A feeling of loss pervaded my happiness as we stood staring in disbelief. Years would pass between brief glimpses of any of them.

Nothing good was withheld from me, even moral guidance was provided as my uncle read to me nightly out of a King James red-letter edition Bible. "Them's the Good Lord's words in red," he would say reverently. These lessons installed in me a sense of moral propriety and spiritual obligation that I would later misconstrue to my own detriment. The strength of character I gleamed from them would enable me to survive myself and all lesser foes.

For the next half decade, I lived on the 'flower bed of Eden' as Cousin Andrew called it. The days were never long enough; perhaps that is why I hated to sleep. Seasons came and went in a panorama of delight. The record ice storm of the early sixties was a great memory to me as I watched through steam fogged windows, warm and snug as the loud popping of snapping pine trees screamed with the howling winds. Nothing caused me to fear those years, I felt perfectly safe as I expected I always would.

Those days will be forever frozen in my mind. I can still see my uncle and aunt standing among the prized garden vegetables, four-foot tall collard greens reaching my aunts shoulders. I can see the tanned sinewy frame of my uncle stretching his short frame proudly towards the sky as he brags on the size of his watermelons. I can hear their laughter coming from lungs almost a century old and I can see the twinkle in Uncle Robert's one good eye. I could never imagine him killing the man who gouged out his eye with a pool stick so many years before, though the relatives said that he did. I only knew that the blue glass eye looked odd with his one brown one set against his tawny gold skin. A semi circle of silky white hair matched his heavy white mustache. I can see the bright flash of his red plaid shirt through the school bus window years later as he walks hurriedly to the highway to escort me home the cold November day the house burned to the ground. Dirt and smut on his sad face. I can still see them. I will always be able to see them in the vivid imagery of my mind.

I used to wish with a fervor that I could have held on to the past and preserved all that was good about it, that I could have prevented my aunt the years of suffering as she lay dying bedridden with cancer. I used to wish that all the good years would have never ended; time cured the wishing as I realized that the fairy tale had to end. It was gone; I would never get it back. The sun would still rise, the seasons would still come, life would continue. I was thankful to have been a part of it; I would take the memories and savor them for the life ahead. I had been given the components that would comprise the fate of my destiny; they had aged into my soul so that part of the past would always remain with me. They would be there for me to draw strength from on days in my future when death would seem a triumph and life too hard to live any more.

It is strange how intricately life hangs in the scales, how unrelated events and single decisions alter the outcomes. Some remote land ten thousand miles from me, some land unfamiliar to me, held the key to my future. A foreign land of war, of helicopters, machine gunfire and mortars held a young man prisoner to its boundaries. A man I would never have met if my uncle had not become sick.

My uncle became acutely ill when I was fifteen years old and asked a young family that he was fond of to adopt me. Life had changed course for me again, the changes were becoming less kind as time wore on. I was about to be thrust into a situation where my lack of experience would affect my judgment and cause a permanent change in the person I would become. My future would become as uncertain and unstable as a howling wind in a wasteland.

## Chapter 2

My memories, both the common and the spectacular punctuated the stream of time during the brief blur of my formative years. Somehow, the colors, smells and sounds of childhood are like no other in life and can never be duplicated. I have seen orchards in bloom against sunsets so glorious as to move one from the realm of sensate appeal into the realm of enchantment, but I saw them only as a child. The intoxicating smell of gold and silver crayons, the trophies of the Crayola box, had the power to lure me into fanciful trances as I used the colored wax wands to weave magic upon mere paper. The comforting sounds of adult conversation as I eavesdropped cocooned away

behind cushions long after my bedtime, and. the rise and fall of soft laughter on summer nights, mingled with the rhythm of the lonely cry of the whip o will made my bedtime lullaby. These things were the milk and honey of my early history.

However good a life can be, there is never total absence of the dark side of the human experience. I remember the feel of falling in the pit of my mind when I heard of the ax murder of my dear cousin Willie who lived within walking distance of our farm. Poor, simple cousin Willie, who had raised children and grandchildren, Cousin Willie who had just barely survived a house fire and wore the burns that came at the cost of her survival: Willie, who bothered no one except to bring cheer by her presence. Her six-foot image graced the top of our hill at least monthly but I knew I would see her no more. She had recently married a man new to the area, some said he was a blessing to her in her loneliness; some said 'who is he? He doesn't tell anything about himself does he?' with heads cocked in suspicion. Cousin Willie married joke cracking Mr. Patrick with the red truck and they say he killed her with an ax and fled. We all got suspicious a little too late. Those were Black days. There was Mr. and Mrs. Morris who lived in a small house off the gravel road that we called the 'main highway', Uncle Robert always waved at them when we passed by on foot going to church on Sundays. Mr. Morris chased his diabetic wife around the table one day with a knife and she fell into the glass already scattered on the floor and got badly cut. Gangrene set in and she lost a leg. Death and tragedy do not discriminate. On a nearby farm, little Terry Hempstead's father bought a black stallion with eyes like a devil and willed to break him to prove his manhood. My aunt said 'that demon is gonna kill that boy' and her prediction came true. Terry's father

was found dead in the pasture with the horse trampling triumphantly around him. Deaths, funerals and the constant threat posed by the fragility of life, the imminent danger of our own mortality, were ever present. Harsh reality and black thoughts, I stored away with a shock of emotion and a dose of denial. Deep in the recess of selective amnesia, I vaguely recall the feeling of fear experienced as only a human in their smallest, most helpless state can feel and I carefully chose not to examine those memories, instead I will pull from my psyche's bouquet the jewels of my past. The jewels are my favorite- I will expose them to the light of my conscious recall and let them shine: the happy times remembered in all the colors of the rainbow, the sounds heard by a happy child in a living fairy tale world and one- of- a -kind people made of solid gold.

I did not intend to let the threat of death rob me of my life, nor allow the threats of life rob me of joy. I greedily enjoyed living in every respect, from the subtle small pleasures to the big victories.

I even loved school from the very first day, although it probably wasn't apparent from the fight it took to get me out of bed in the mornings. I remember exactly what I wore my first day of school as I was led by my grandmother's (my mother's stepmother) hand, after my uncle walked to their home to catch my first yellow school bus. I wore J.C. Penney's finest cotton in a red and blue tartan plaid pleated dress, little white socks and black patent leather shoes, compliments of my aunt Fannie in California. My hair was braided in two long braids that hung to my waist tied with red

ribbons. I stood a bit frightened for a few hours of the first day, and then the tomboy in me came out. After going home with the skirts of my dresses ripped half off from rough play, my uncle went to town and bought me some denim jeans and Buster Browns and said “NOW”, his one word for ‘problem solved’.

I must have been a sight to see in an all black school in the early sixties before integration trickled down to the rural south. No one told me I wasn’t black, in fact many of my relatives were the same shade as ‘white’ folks and they called themselves black, so I was shocked when someone yelled ‘look at the little white girl’ and discovered that ‘the little white girl’ was I. The advantage of innocence is that small children quickly adjust to one another, before the social etiquette of the times steeps into them, so I was accepted, after a minor initiation period and a few minor obstacles of little consequence. The only thing that seemed to really matter after the first few days, was that Sara was a lot of fun and the fastest runner from first through third grade, not excluding boys and the boys liked me because in a game of tug of war, I was the equivalent of three small boys. I had found my niche: it was being the *queen of the little people* in a world of play.

In order to insure my popularity, I obtained daily insurance by raiding my uncle’s shoe box of silver change and offered to buy the nickel pops and candy. It soon became known that the little pretty girl had a shoe full of money and was generous with it, so I was trailed from the minute I got off the school bus by children who saw me as the nice little girl who was a candy store

in patent leather shoes. Of course being nice to me was a prerequisite that needed no mention, I loved being a social creature, living a solitary life in the country with relatives who were all close to one hundred years old made me appreciate the value of being with other small people like me. School days were filled with glorious adventures of mischief and mayhem, with the necessary learning complete with daily recitals of the psalms in first grade and pledges of allegiance. We recited poems of great significance that we only knew as grand musical verses. I learned a valuable lesson and it was learning was sheer ecstasy; the stimulation of thought was chess for the mind and soul. There was a whole new world inside my own mind, worlds and universes so vast and limitless that I instinctively knew I would always venture into its realms for solace and for inspiration.

My exposure to the aged minds steeped in wisdom, led me into a new domain uncommon to children my age and my unconventional 'parents' brought me in contact with unconventional memories. Uncle Robert and Aunt Mollie were born in the 1800's and they lived as if the only difference between the era of their youth and the present they lived in was that you didn't have to light the coal oil lamps at night, there was 'lectric' lights, not that it made much actual difference to me since we had to 'go to bed with the chickens and get up with the chickens'. Those chickens were early risers, we had more than one rooster therefore, the dueling cocks crowed at about 5:30 every morning and we were up with breakfast served by 6:30 winter and summer.

One of my most precious memories was of the festivity Uncle Robert called the hog kills. On the first cold day of November of each year as dictated by the

Farmer's Almanac, Uncle Robert killed, butchered and hickory smoked three hogs. The occasion was marked by the attendance of hordes of friends and relatives accompanied by kids of all ages. The presence of the children was especially welcome as they brought multiple talents for play, such as games that I had never heard of before: Hide and Go Seek, King of the Hill, Ring Around the Roses, Simon Says and many other delectable children's habits and teases for the spirit.

The grownups had their games too, they just did not call them games, it was 'work', but I knew by the men's roaring laughter and the women's little chuckles they were having too much fun to call what they were doing 'work'.

The men would prepare large black cast iron kettles with fires blazing beneath them to boil water. A large barrel tilted in the ground was used to contain the delicious hog after their unfortunate demise by way of my uncle's 30-30 rifle.

Yelling men to the background sounds of ecstatic children squealing and giggling did all of the heavy preparation. A killed hog always weighed at least 200-300 pounds in order for the kill to be worth the effort, so the men worked hard before their fun began.

A huge oak tree held a system of pulleys sufficient to lift the weight of the hamstrung hog, de haired and ready for gutting. Perhaps it was the primitive instinct of the hunter in them, but by this time, the men were as excited as the children and Shorty Smith interpreted this as his cue to start the musical accompaniment on his banjo. Cousin Joe and Will would then howl together in their version of song and we kids would fall onto the

ground laughing. I think the dogs and farm animals all hid, thinking that the lovable humans had all lost their minds and they might be next to die. By dinnertime, if we did not know by then what the women had been doing all of this time, our noses and palettes would soon confirm it.

It seemed that the hog kills were opportunities for cook offs among the women, a sort of 'put up or shut up' invitational and we kids determined the winners because they would feed us spicy creamed potato soups and special fried chicken and corn bread until we almost burst and then stuff us with cakes until we begged for mercy. What was puzzling, were that these were the same women normally said 'that's enough' when we asked for seconds. Whatever insanity overcame them at hog kills was fine with us.

By the end of the day, everyone would be tired, full and happy. After hugs and farewells, it would all be over until the next season.

Uncle Robert stopped having the hog kills the year Aunt Mollie died and the house burning ended the country life for good. To me, it was more like the end of an era.

Social change has always been history's bookmarker. Changes occur in spurts like volcanic eruptions after long periods of calm, and then the chaos of change brings in a new calm. The social unrest in the south centered around integration, and like a slow child, the South was the last to catch up to the modern standard. The slow and painful integration of the south came to my small town and I remembered the changes only as they affected me.

The southern attitude toward change was demonstrated to me by interactions between my uncle and most memorably between Uncle Robert and the local storeowner from town by the name of Goldman. I never remembered my uncle calling him anything but his last name, so I never heard his first name spoken, but I remembered everything else about him, his prosperously round figure, soft hands and pink complexion.

Goldman had only one son that he dearly loved, and he told my uncle that he would shoot his only son, before he would see him go to school and 'set side by side with niggas'. I had no comprehension of the meaning of the word he used, but I could see the fire in my uncle's eyes quietly blaze when he replied that it was 'time to get your shotgun Goldman' because integration had come. Goldman was a conservative man with white hair and glittering blue eyes. Those eyes seemed to get big as watermelons, as Goldman took off his spectacles and stared at my uncle in shock and embarrassment as my uncle paid for his items, gave a cock sided smile and walked out, with me walking behind him and looking back at Mr. Goldman as he watched us leave.

The whole process in our rural area happened pretty quietly. Goldman held his head a little less arrogantly, but as far as we knew he didn't so much as slap his son after integration, in any case he certainly did him no serious harm. After a few rough days, we kids did what kids do. The race riots were on the news daily, bus over turnings fueled mostly by angry screaming parents who refused to accept progress. In my classroom I saw the white class clown vie with the black class clown and the white know-it-all vie with the

black until the group in silent unison said 'hey, we're not so different after all' and thus the slow death of an obsolete social taboo ushered us into a new era. We children learned to mix quietly while the adults took the battles to the streets and courts nationwide as they found change hard to adjust to.

Along with integration came better supplies and equipment. I was exposed to parallel bars, balance beams, trampolines and graded tracks and I began to love gymnastics, the beauty of artistic expression and grace of movement became addictive to me, as adrenalin highs exposed me to new heights of human appreciation. Neither the emotional changes in my life nor the geographic moves changed my love of athletics. By eighth grade, I could run the hundred-yard dash in near record time and by ninth, I could sail through a five mile run high on endorphins and adrenalin. I ran by day and read by night. Besides physical exertion, I loved to envision worlds never seen and to see things through the minds and eyes of others who lived long ago. I desired to achieve what a rare few achieved. I wanted to run like Babe Didrikson, to paint like Leonardo Da Vinci, and to fly like Amelia, and my dear uncle who convinced me that I could do all things, made a believer of me. I could do anything that my mind and body could fathom; each day was a challenge and a joy. I could not wait to grow, to achieve and to become. Life was a wonder and a precious gift from the greatest Artist of all.

I could leave the world of the book enthralled and inspired but the real world awaited me, to caress or to kick me; reality was a powerful force could not be ignored. In my sweet adolescent ignorance, I had no concept of the ugliness in the world; my optimism was a shield to me.

Internal growth and development was not entirely unaffected by my external environment. No amount of escapism through neither the physical nor the mental outlets could cushion me from the reality of what was taking place. Although I spent many nights making childish prayers to God that my uncle would never die or at least not until I was at least eighteen years old and could somehow bear it better...his death was coming unmistakably closer. I remember days when Uncle Robert appeared immortal, when he could plow fields with an old mule for entire days in the hot sun without stopping. He was fourscore and five years old then, an age that I had no real comprehension of, and an age of 'special mightiness'. My uncle was by now over ninety and his mightiness was rapidly failing him as his life was leaking away.

We were living in town in the lovely little house Aunt Fannie bought for my uncle to bribe him out from his isolation in the country. The fire had accomplished what neither the bribe nor tearful pleadings did, we moved to town. Uncle Robert tried desperately to convert the small town house into a country home complete with a farm in the back yard. The chickens were reduced in number, but we still had a few in coops in the back yard, along with a few caged rabbits. The ten dogs we had in the country were reduced to one and we had a cat, all of which became my uncle's new substitute for the missing farm.

I would come in from school and find Uncle Robert hoeing the yard. When we lived in the country, it was safer to have the immediate yard free of grass, because of the prevalence of snakes, so our town yard was subject to the same treatment. We were the only ones in the entire neighborhood with the smooth front yard, which of course became a muddy mess during the

rains, as the soft rich soil was unlike the hard sand and clay front yard we had in the country. Of course my uncle learned to adjust to growing grass only to have to cut it again, which he thought was ridiculous.

I had entered the age of worry, because each day I feared for my uncle. I knew time was against us, so the news of Uncle Robert's hospitalization delivered to me by a group of solemn faced relatives was expected. That which was feared was finally happening and slow breaking began as things fell apart. Yeats put it well: "Things fall apart: the center cannot hold".

### **Chapter 3**

Forced by failing health to deal directly with reassigning my guardianship, Uncle Robert asked a young couple with five children of their own, to adopt me. James and Clara Johnson was a mixed race couple that lost a beautiful young daughter shortly after birth. Because of their continually remarking to my uncle that they wished they could have me and how much I

looked like their daughter 'Cherie', so my uncle felt certain they would take me.

A few days after my uncle was released from the hospital, the Johnson's came by to check on us. Uncle Robert was weak from age and illness and was bedridden. The meeting was held at his bedside with the door closed. I was asked to leave the room as I awaited the decision that would determine my fate. The couple that was considering adopting me attended the same church as I did and had known me only one year. I wondered if they really knew what they were doing as I paced and sweated while the outside sounds of cars passing and dogs barking signaled that the external world continues to turn regardless of the tragedies and traumas of the individual.

After what seemed like hours the door finally opened, as I stood frozen in place, my eyes locked upon the three faces waiting to hear their verdict. I could tell by the looks on their faces what was decided: the Johnson's had agreed to adopt me. Through my relief I felt an overpowering fear that they had not counted the cost of loving someone for a lifetime without the bond of blood or shared time, but I honored their bravery and the value of their good intentions and I threw risk aside and hoped.

Even before Uncle Robert took steps to provide for my security, I had taken matters into my own hands. I left home on a mission, wearing the wardrobe of the times: bell-bottom jeans and a frilled leather vest, with the wind whipping my long brown hair across my face, I walked into town with a heavy heart. The public library was my first stop. My uncle had always taught me to respect my mother 'Child, don't ever say

anything bad about your mother, no matter what you hear', he had sternly told me when I was about five and curious. My uncle never elaborated enough to satisfy my curiosity, so for many years I did not understand the accusatory looks people gave me when they found out who my mother was. Sometimes I would grow uncomfortable under their fixed gazes and feel shame for reasons I did not comprehend. As time passed, I gained knowledge about life and the necessary functions that created it and I began to piece together meanings to the things I had witnessed as a small child in my mother's house. Sudden knowledge came on like a bright light, and then I knew what secret was hidden in my own personal history; in fact I was a living product of that shame and secrecy. My uncle attempted to prepare me for my day of sudden enlightenment and he nearly succeeded in cushioning me from feeling guilt and shame because of my family history. In actuality I never felt shame or disrespect for my mother, my shame was in being rejected by both my mother and my father, because somehow I felt they did not deem me good enough for their unconditional love. The two people that I needed emotional nurturing from most left me emotionally orphaned. As a child, I never meditated on the deep significance of what my empty feelings meant to me, in fact, I was incapable of such insight. I just felt a void when I saw what other children had and realized that my great uncle and aunt were stand-ins for missing parents. But substitutes can never entirely make up for the genuine article. The innate need for acceptance by the two people who created me was like a hunger denied and caused me to secretly feel defective.

Although I desired something from my mother, I knew she could not give it. In my confusion, I was

never uncertain of the need to stay out of my mother's environment. My mother's world was dark, harsh, uncertain and unsafe whereas my uncle and aunt lived in a bright, gentle, stable and safe world. My mother's emotions were insulated by denial and liquid anesthetics because of her unhealed wounds. It is difficult to impossible to venture into an insulated heart. Even as a small child upon my mother's rare visits, I could feel the distance between us, though I had no words to explain it and I always knew the distance would remain between us. My uncle and aunt suffered many pains in their long lifetime, yet their hearts were vast places that beckoned you to come in and rest. They had learned to face life and all it had to offer, both the good and bad in naked armor, unafraid and without the sedation of chemicals or soft lies of denial.

I never believed that my mother was anything less than a woman who was afraid of being hurt by life. The woman who was my mother was no less than me and I no greater than she, but I did not want to live in her world after having tasted normalcy. I never wanted to hurt her, condemn her, nor blame her. What I decided to do was simply a matter of survival, nothing more, and nothing less.

I knew that my mother might contest my adoption out of a sense of duty, or possibly even a selfish desire for gain, so I was aware of the likelihood of legal problems. And she was after all, my mother even though she never tried to hold onto me in fact and body, she might fight for the principle of the thing, because of her pride. Since there would be obstacles, I would prepare for them. My uncle's words rang in my ears 'when you don't know a thing, ask. If that doesn't work—look it up in a book', my uncle lived in my head

like a second conscience, always guiding and directing gently and calmly. 'Always tell the truth', 'don't be scared to speak up'. I researched volumes and cases of child custody and children's rights and after careful note taking and deliberation, I called the number of a local prominent attorney. I spoke with the secretary and explained in depth why my mother could not be allowed to get me, because her home was not conducive to my proper development and I cited my research data on case precedents. The secretary paused after I spoke and asked how old I was and I answered her that I was fourteen, after another pause she instructed me to tell the attorney exactly the same thing that I had told her and again he asked me how old I was. After their initial shock of redundancy, they both calmed down and had me come in so that they could begin to work on my case. Preliminary records were ordered and I was assured that something would be worked out.

My adoptive parents used the same attorney and took the case to court. I was told my presence was not required; this was a great relief to me, as I did not want say things that would hurt my mother.

After court proceedings were over, my new parents told me that my mother did show up but her contestation had little effect, that she lost her case. I pictured her, fighting strangers for custody of her own child and felt sorry for her 'Were the lawyers mean to her?' I asked. I was relieved to hear that it wasn't necessary to become explicit, that it was handled in a friendly way.

My adopted mother kept asking me about my uncle's land and what happened to his money. I wondered whether the possibility of my becoming the

heir to property could have been a motivating force in either my mother's attempt to get custody of me or my new parent's adoption of me. I don't think either of them knew that the property was entrusted to another relative and I am sure that my uncle's Great Depression era habit of burying his money under the house relieved all us of the worry of what to do with it. It is funny how a fire can un-complicate the distribution of money and possessions.

I did not hear from my mother for a long while after the adoption, since she did not appeal the decision. I spent the next few months adjusting to a new environment and a new family.

After spending the major portion of my life grounded to one location and one set of people, I had learned to expect predictable outcomes and to rely on dependability. A vague sense of 'uprooted-ness' was growing in me: I had felt so sure of life and now everything in the world I had known was changing. Beneath my polite poise and calm, I was scared as I boxed up my trinkets and collected my many self done paintings and relics of my hobbies, my writings and news clippings with pictures of me winning school essay contests. I remember my first essay contest was in sixth grade, students in the schools and colleges were encouraged to participate in the celebration of our planet by writing essays designed to build appreciation and respect for our planet Earth during the first annual Earth Day. I wrote of the magnificence and splendors of our vast planet, but the I only entered the contest because my science teacher required us to finish our writings before lunch, so I rushed through my paper and forgot about it, so the announcement of my winning first place and \$25 was a delightful shock, especially considering that was a week's pay for some.

Compliments failed to motivate me the way spending money did, so I entered every contest thereafter, and won either first or second prize.

I packed away the silver-plated Bundy flute that was the outlet for my blues and my joy. I had really wanted to play the alto saxophone, but when my uncle discovered how much one cost, he said ‘ain’t no way I’m gonna pay that much for a convoluted whistle’, so I was allowed a flute instead. I rubbed the sleek silver carefully with a cloth as I remembered what my Uncle Robert had said to me ‘you can do whatever you set your mind to’ and I had believed him all of my short life, but now I was beginning to doubt. I wanted to say to my uncle ‘*Uncle Robert, you have to have the ground beneath you first before you can stand*’.

My adoptive parents came for me and my collection of assorted belongings and we drove away from my humble wood frame home, covered in pink shingles, and locked up tightly with the shades drawn shut. Another part of my life was gone.

My new home was a small crowded frame house in an area called Rock Island and like other harsh names given to rough neighborhoods, the name fit. The area was built around a railroad terminal and named after it. The neighborhood was composed of the hardworking poor and derelicts and it became a subculture with unspoken rules: you were left alone if you fit in and you became the enemy if you didn’t. What did it take to not fit in? Appear or act like you were better than the group. Word quickly spread that I was the girl James and Clara adopted, so don’t ‘mess with her’.

The first few weeks were exciting as we kids

adjusted to the newness of our situation.

I felt like I usually did when staying at friend's houses for the first time, I was a visitor. My newly acquired siblings thought my visit was a lot of fun until it dawned upon them that I wasn't leaving. "Mama, why are we eating beans so often now- is it because of ya'll adopting *her*?" "Dad, do you have to work every Saturday now? We used to have fun on Saturdays", all remarks made in feigned innocence by two very impatient, mischievous little brothers. But adoption meant attorneys fees and a new mouth to feed and a new body to clothe, which were not anticipated by my siblings. The younger ones were unabashedly outspoken while the older ones just gave me evil looks behind their parents' backs. I had never vied for attention, either I was accustomed to virtually none at my mother's house or was the recipient of all of the attention with my uncle and aunt and their extended brood of family, so this was a very disturbing change for me. Although things settled after the passing of some time, I felt instinctively that my new parents felt they had made a mistake in taking me and would give me back if they could find a noble excuse to return me for a refund.

I liked my adoptive family and I wanted badly to be accepted by them. I secretly wanted people to see the handsome couple my new parents were and to think that I was their child. I wanted to belong to someone. My adoptive father looked like a green eyed Italian Mark Twain and my new mother was a liquid skinned mahogany beauty with silky black hair and big brown eyes. I wanted my new brothers to be proud of me so I attempted to please by cooking dinner and cleaning house. I impressed my brothers' friends by dead lifting a one hundred ten pound set of weights over my head,

while four or five muscled boys whistled and yelled in amazement that a mere girl could do such a thing. Getting the set down again was another story: while my brother Daryl accepted bet money in the front yard and slapped hands, I stood pop eyed with trembling arms and buckling knees afraid to exhale. They finally noticed my dilemma and helped me, fortunately or I could have acquired a permanent change in my walk.

My new family did not grow to love me unconditionally; instead I think they tolerated me out of kindness although I feared that they never developed parental love for me. Although the Johnson's did not fill the void in my heart borne out of longing to be loved, they did become my friends in a special way. I had a lot of fun with the Johnson Family; they were impetuous fun-lovers who loved to create simple adventures like unannounced trips and vacations as a surprise. I remember the whole household being awakened to go to Shreveport Louisiana early one Saturday morning for a surprise shopping trip, wherein the boys all received ten speed bicycles. I was allowed clothing, although the natural tomboy in me screamed for a ten-speed bicycle also. The boys were not used to having a competitive sister in the brood and I constantly tried to win their approval so, I wasted no time attempting to keep up with my brothers on a borrowed ten-speed and as a result, I acquired a scar for life as a memento. The three of my brothers went for a night race around the neighborhood and I was the tail of the speed train when we whipped around a curve and I missed the road entirely and my bike and I flew into a two foot ditch filled with barbed wire and broken glass. I screamed out as I saw the last of my brothers racing far ahead or no one would have noticed me. I suddenly became the center of attention as Duane, Larry and

Anthony dragged me out of the ditch, of course I was scratched up, scarred and bloodied by the barbed wire and broken glass. I was hailed as being tough and this moved me a little closer to being accepted by my siblings. My 'spill' off the raceway initiated me into the group, I was proud to be 'one of the boys'.

Activity was a trademark of the Johnson family as they were always involved doing things and going places, including regular religious attendance. If activity was a trademark, so was old- fashioned fun On Saturday mornings, when we were not traveling, the boys would often play their electric guitars and Daryl, who was close to my age, would accompany them on the drums. For self- taught amateurs, they sounded exceptionally good. Some Saturday mornings, the boys all played their electric guitars and rocked the house with sound. Sometimes they invited friends over who also played musical instruments to enlarge the sound.

A few months before my sixteenth birthday, we undertook a cross- country trip as a family that proved to be both memorable and our last trip as a family. The day before we left, my new father got off from work and bought a beautiful brand new Town and Country Station wagon and the next day we left traveling 'nine deep', with Henri Mancini playing in the tape deck.

We traveled from the border of Louisiana to the heart of Los Angeles, stopping along the way to climb mountains and ending our journey at the Pacific Ocean. The entire family went to Disney Land, we traveled under the sea in a Disney submarine and watched robotic pirates do battle and the 'small world' dance in

multinational costumes, ascended Magic Mountain and witnessed a vast army of Disney characters come to life.

As a little girl living in the heart of the woods, Disney was my escape into the larger world every Sunday night. The trip to the world envisioned by Walt Disney was of special significance to me as it was an indulgence in the comfort of fantasy and nostalgia.

While in California, I met many family members of both my adoptive mother and father, Clara and James. While all of the family was amused at my presence, they were also apparently a bit puzzled as to why James and Clara adopted another mouth to feed. James and Clara must have anticipated the question as they kept assuring everyone that I was 'just like' their dead daughter. I interpreted that to mean that I was a replacement, the substitute. You can never replace a person with another, they could not replace Cherie with me and I could not replace Uncle Robert and Aunt Mollie with them. Even though we know these things, it does not stop up from trying to stop our hearts from bleeding by finding placebos.

There is a certain amount of stress in continuous performance before an audience as is the case with new relationships even when one is certain of acceptance. The difference is notable when you are not sure of your acceptance and can be quite discomfoting to search out a new family and feel as if you are auditioning for a bit part that you feel you really will not get. I felt welcome

as a visitor in a foreign land, but did not feel the enduring bond brought about by time and blood.

In spite of my inner turmoil, there were many happy fun filled times with the Johnson's, but I never filled the void left by the lost daughter so emotional evolutions and re-adjustments took place, producing new stresses and changes. Even the best of change is stressful; sometimes so much so that it is like filling a cold container with too much hot water, the object or organism can endure only so much before it breaks.

The external breakings are easy to see, they are visual, loud, shattering and obvious. The internal breakings are harder to see and slower to heal, because it is the inner parts of self, the hope, security and sense of who you are that crash to the ground and lay in broken pieces. In the fuzzy pre-adult years when the self is undefined and few of us know who we are, life poses a dangerous uncertainty. This uncertainty emphasized itself upon me in my sixteenth year.

## **Chapter 4**

Sweet sixteen was the last age of innocence, the luminescent glass threshold between childhood and adulthood. I was now sweet sixteen, the age the writers and singers idealized as a zenith of happiness and growth and poets wrote about using flowery words dripping with promises. I anticipated glass slippers and princes with magical kisses but instead I found pumpkins and frogs and that the poets were all liars and the song- writers were masters of deception, if my sixteenth year was a measure of their truths.

The adjustments of the previous school year were behind me and a summer of freedom was ahead of me. Uncle Robert was living with two of my favorite relatives, Eddie and Dochie Howell, after a partial recovery and time spent in a nursing home. Cousin Eddie was Uncle Robert's oldest brother's son. Uncle Robert had eleven siblings all brothers except his two younger sisters and there was a special bond between Cousin Eddie and my uncle because he was the son of my uncle's dear oldest brother, Andrew. My cousin Eddie was almost as old as Uncle Robert, retired and in his mid seventies.

For me, summers began with the official last day of school. I remember since first grade how ecstatic I was each school year on the day we kids went home for the summer. The next school year I would be a sophomore, no longer the dreaded freshmen who were treated like babies by the upper grade students. I had no idea that I would not be a student in high school the next year, that the last day of school as a ninth grade student would be my last day of high school forever. I would become a 'high school drop-out', something I held contempt for before my sixteenth year, yet that is what I would willingly become.

I loved my sixteenth summer in particular because I felt like an adult and when I looked in the mirror, I saw an adult, so naturally I thought that was what I was. I had new privileges, freedoms and feelings. Wearing makeup was a new delight; the miraculous transformation from ordinary pretty to striking beauty needed only the artistic application of colors and paints sanctioned for women only. I loved to change clothes and hairstyles several times a day, from twisted braids and regal curls to simple ponytails, from shorts to summer sundresses and sandals and back again like a perpetual blooming process. I had the power to be beautiful, to become a chameleon in a state of metamorphosis from minute to minute and hour to hour. Oh what fun it was to be girl while the world stood still for a moment just for me.

I enjoyed my freedom to wear makeup, even though sparingly, to morph through several outfits and hairstyles in one day. Oh what fun it was to be a girl and even more so to be a teen-aged girl who could step into womanhood and back into childhood at a whim like Alice going through the looking glass.

When it came to hobbies and interests, I did not discriminate; I loved everything from a good book to long runs in the wind with my hair flying behind me and my well-practiced thigh muscles fanning out comfortably as I split the wind with my body. I absorbed sound through every sense, consuming the great artists such as Henri Mancini, George Gershwin and the Jackson Five's big hits: *ABC* and *Mama's Pearl*. Stevie Wonder's melodic interpretations, were like joy put to music created most remarkably

by a man who had never seen with his eyes, but oh how he saw with his heart. Simon and Garfunkel's philosophical greats like *Bridge over Troubled Water* and the *Sounds of Silence* made me reach for my flute to aid them in stirring the soul. I liked The Beatles with their 'long' hair (ear lobe length) and I loved Elvis Presley's immortal voice, Tina and Ike's *Proud Mary* and all that the local DJ played on the town's one radio station. I could be found briskly walking down the streets Saturday evenings with earphones in my ears and my little red transistor swinging at my side. I jogged up to five miles some days, lifted weights and practiced my gymnastics maneuvers. I expected summer this year would be great, especially with my new family, so I put my worries aside and faced the world unguarded.

The first day after school ended for the summer, while I was still in a state of eager excitement, my new mother approached me with a gathered look on her face. I entered the kitchen, which was the Mecca of the Johnson household as she called my name apprehensively.

"Sara honey" she said.

I smiled suspiciously and said "Yes?", as she paused while she stirred her special spicy chili bean soup. I knew that something important was about to be said, I wondered if she was going to tell me that things were not working out with my adoption into the Johnson family, and that I had to be returned like something bought at a department store in the wrong size.

My mother, Clara, asked me to have a seat, so with my hands drawn up to my side and with confusion on my face, I sat down slowly on the edge of the kitchen chair. I had my hair up in a long ponytail and was wearing shorts and tennis shoes. I had planned to ride my bike while it was still cool.

My mother looked at me and smiled, then instructed me to have a seat at the kitchen table and after wiping her face pensively; she told me there was something that she wanted to discuss with me.

“Sara, you know your uncle is very sick and since he is at your cousin’s home, ‘D.’ (adoptive father’s middle initial) and I thought that it would be a good thing if you spent the summer with them.” After a short pause, she asked what I thought and I told her the idea sounded good to me, after all, I wanted to see my family. My mother told me we would go the next morning. My mother was very relieved that I was agreeable, especially since they had planned to all leave on vacation a few days later. I remembered going on vacation with them before traveling across country for the first time in my life, wearing headphones and listening to radio as we crossed the red mountains of the Western plains. I remembered and knew how much fun they would all have. I guess that my fun would be my own responsibility this summer.

I accepted what my new mother told me graciously and with a smile, but I thought most of the day and night about it. I had no right to reject their terms, and my uncle did need me around him some this summer. I could not bear the thought of him being left behind while I scurry off across the country to have fun. That would not have been the right thing to do. I went to bed

early, but to sleep late and I was up early the next morning.

The hot orange sun came crashing through the east circle of the morning sky and I was the only one awake to greet it. I cradled my steaming coffee, listening to birdsong and thinking quietly. The hot coffee was like the one true comfort that I took with me everywhere. I remember when my uncle first allowed me to drink coffee with the grownups, coffee was initiation into the adult world as a child, and it was acceptance. I sipped my liquid solace and enjoyed the peace while the household silently slept.

The din of pre-breakfast chaos began with the usual ‘Mama, Dewayne peed the bed again!’ ‘Shut up!’, ‘Where’s my sox?, You –better- not -have –cleaned-the- dog –dish- with- them again- Delbert!’ and then the ones that insinuated me ‘I want my room back! I don’t see why I have to share a room with them—I had my own room *before...*’ followed by Mama cutting the remark off with a demand that the complainant start paying the rent and bills before demanding rooms.

Breakfast was always a big event at the Johnson house, twelve scrambled eggs, a huge pot of cheese grits and biscuits. Of course every meal was a big meal when you were feeding a family of eight. One thing Clara Johnson could do extremely well was to cook and it seemed her specialty was the humble items of the food group. My adopted mother could do things with the pinto bean that should have made the dishes illegal because they were to kill for. Mealtimes in the Johnson household were always a mixture of good tastes and memorable experiences, something that I would inculcate into my children if ever I had the privilege of raising a large family. There was something intangible

about how the ritual of meal- time cemented respect and family bonds. Perhaps it was more than the food alone that left such a strong impression, but the respect and love that existed between James and Clara was demonstrated in more than words. When the meal was over my borrowed father managed to engage full fledged cooperation with the chore of dishwashing, by saying to his boys:” Now boys, Mom here is a great cook isn’t she?” and smile “Yeah boy, Dad!” the boys would cry out in unison, then he would tell them if they want to eat again they needed to help Mom with the dishes and that was all it took from him to elicit the help of two or three sloppy, horse-playing dishwashers. I fancied the romantic thought of having a husband as considerate of his wife as my adoptive father, how nice it would be to have such appreciation and adoration for my culinary skills. I imagined myself having several children who would argue playfully around the table, yet be devotedly loyal to each other, what a wonderful life that would be.

The Johnson household had formed an attachment to me and I for them and I would miss them, I sincerely hoped they would miss me, though I vaguely feared they would not. I was not certain of my place with the Johnson’s, although I was satisfied as a guest in their home, I could feel the temporary nature of my tenure in their family.

My adoptive Mother persuaded me to call my relatives and make the arrangements to spend the summer with them; we were to leave after the breakfast dishes were done. With a heavy heart, I smiled and collected my luggage that I had packed the night before. The boys were instructed to pack for their vacation and I could hear the excitement in their voices as they horse played with each other, eagerly anticipating the fun of

the trip. I knew they would have a wonderful time and was happy for them.

The breeze blew in off pastures as we drove to Cousin Eddie's, bringing the scent of hay and bitter weed through the car windows as we cruised along. I loved the country smells, especially the hay and I reminisced the days I spent running out across pastures and fields in the summer time as a small child after school during summer breaks. I had no idea when I was growing up on a country farm that I was virtually isolated from all civilization, it seemed I had the whole world at my disposal as I played alone endlessly with my imagination as company. I spent days on end, chasing butterflies and bugs, climbing trees and fishing for minnows in the branch, while carefully avoiding the water snakes. My summer collection of tadpoles turned to frogs before my eyes sitting in a gallon jar on the front porch and I was familiar with many types of wildlife firsthand.

I was startled by my mother's clear voice "Sara! You're daydreaming again" and she went on about nothing in particular. She asked me if I would be happy to see my uncle and I told her I would. I was in constant fear that each time would be the last time that I would see him. I withheld my energy from the sadness that sought my heart, because my uncle was dying away, living on 'borrowed time' as my aunt used to say.

We were inside the city limits the small town that my relatives lived in and I recognized familiar homes along the way. Some of the larger structures once were stately mansions close to downtown and the property of the early rich who became old-monied and moved away from the town's dying core, to areas large enough to

support their ambitious craving for recognition. The scattered few who remained, built elaborate houses on prominent hills or by lakes. The neighborhood was now the pride of the working middle class and disproportionate numbers of retired schoolteachers, who were happy to achieve the crumbs of the rich. Some of the homes were too expensive for one family to maintain so they were split into duplexes. Lawns were well sculptured and immaculate, some bore decorations of the rare pink flamingo of the species *plastica*. I recognized the house of one of cousin Dochie's relatives by the contrasting pink flamingo birds against her large yellow house that sat at a right angle to Cousin Eddie's.

Eddie Howell built his house 'from the ground up' as Uncle Robert put it, a product of forty years labor at the local paper mill where he worked without missing a single day. Cousin Dochie was a pretty young schoolteacher when they married and she too had a near perfect work record. Both Eddie and Dochie put in a long life of hard paid dues to achieve a comfortable standard of living. The split-level house, brand new luxury car and cushy bank account were the concrete proof of how they spent their lives. Eddie and Dochie made it when the living was hard and opportunities were few, in a time when this country plunged dangerously close to third world living conditions for the unfortunate unemployed: it was the 'can you spare a dime mister' depression years. Perhaps the suffering caused by inadequate resources due to lack of work inspired terror in the Howells to never miss a day of work and to save, save, save. The nationally acclaimed author, James Michener called extreme lack of resources the 'terror of poverty', as it truly is to desperate people. Uncertain and insecure times must have had the ironic effect of impacting my cousin's

prosperity. Whatever the reason was for their modest affluence, I was glad to be able to share it with them for a summer and be lavished with attention.

“Oh Eddie, look who’s here! All of you get out and come inside!” There was Cousin Dochie, her six feet of height slightly stooped and Cousin Eddie who was half a foot shorter with his feet spread apart and shoulders back proudly stretching for height like a banty rooster. My cousin Dochie reminded of an ebony sculpture, her complexion looked like pure milk chocolate and the Native American ancestry in her blood gave her silky black hair gentle waves that she rolled into a 1940’s hair - style. Dressed in a print dress and adorned with a pearl necklace, she looked the picture of a classy, yet genteel school- teacher. Cousin Eddie was pale complexioned with straight black hair and eyes, he looked almost oriental, though he was part Native American. The Howells were a study in opposites who attracted to each other quite well, considering almost half a century of marriage backed their union.

After hugs and shrill greetings, I rushed to find my uncle Robert whom I met shuffling his way down the hall all excited to see me. “Uncle Robert, you should be resting,” I said while hugging him. “Ahh, Psshaw!” he said “Don’t wanna rest, that’s all I do nowadays,” he added with a wave of his hand in irritation. My mother had already gotten him by one arm and was easing him into a comfortable chair. Uncle Robert enjoyed pampering although he tried to gruffly push us away as I propped his feet on a pillow.

My little brothers were deep into Cousin Eddie's back yard garden, surely swiping fresh tomatoes because the salt and peppershaker that always rested on the kitchen table were missing. They would both come back with a stomachache later.

We all had a big dinner as two friendly families merged in over mutual interests, especially the good food. Laughter and storytelling sapped away the hours and before we were conscious of it, the sun had escaped from East to West bringing long shadows and cool breezes. My new family hugged me good-bye and left, anxious to begin their vacation. I waved after the station wagon until it disappeared from sight. The first day of my countdown had ended.

Since I could first remember, I had loved this neighborhood with its atmosphere of coziness and middle-class beauty, especially when nature put on her spring art show heavily dusted in shades of lime and Kelly green. Blue jays scattered throughout the tree tops, streaks of red left by red birds fleeing by and brown robins singing spring songs filled me with enthusiasm for life and joy and everything wonderful. Mrs. Hines, the next-door neighbor and retired school teacher did not dazzle me with her icy evaluative stares and frigid 'good mornings' but her azaleas and hydrangeas rich in bloom were indeed dazzling. I liked the mornings after having had breakfast when I could walk silently with my coffee in hand, meditating of imaginary trips into lush jungles and pretending my cousin's terraced walk with hanging vines was a South American jungle and I was a famous researcher on expedition for exotica.

I felt warm and safe here, it was one of the places

that I spent a secure childhood in. I spent a week or two each summer with my cousins Dochie and Eddie since I could remember. I knew that no matter what I did, I could not fall out of my relative's good graces; they would always love me. I did not value that feeling for what it was worth then, for I had not learned the depth of appreciation that one acquires for lost treasures.

I saw Mrs. Hines out in the yard checking her rose bushes and waved cautiously. Mrs. Hines was a retired high school teacher and she always made certain with over pronounced and 'proper' English that you knew it was high school she taught and not grade school as though that would be beneath her. Two summers before, I had spent part of the summer at Cousin Eddie's house and I met some kids while on an exploratory walk two blocks away. Mrs. Hines called Cousin Eddie before I could get back and told him I was seen with some decadent kids walking with an older boy, with hysterical emphasis on the word 'boy'. This information, compliments of Mrs. Hines had Cousin Eddie waiting at the door for me with a reproving scowl and set for a full-fledged interrogation. 'What is it? What did I do?' I kept asking. The stern look did not soften, instead I was told tersely to sit down, that we had to talk. My cousin Dochie was standing in her capacity as witness for the prosecution. 'Mrs. Hines saw you down the street gallivanting around with some boy. 'Oh. Is that all this is about?' I asked, relieved. I told them that it was just a kid and his sister and we were walking around the block in broad daylight. Cousin Eddie demanded to know the age of this alleged boy and I told him he was eighteen. My cousin's eyes got big and he seemed to back up and take a running jump to yell 'eighteen!' as if it were a crime to be that age. I was mildly amused, as I knew we

had no intent of doing anything but walking around the block and the boy was cracking us both up with jokes. I watched my cousin's hot temper rise and fall and I never worried that my position in my cousin's affections were jeopardized. After his fit of histrionics, my cousin was exhausted and I was ready for a good movie.

I had not terms to express meaning for unconditional love, nor could I tell you what it was then, but I knew what it felt like. I wanted to always have someone there who would love me for me, no matter what, no matter how old.

Uncle Robert ate with us and rested much of each day. I would often talk him to sleep then wander off to the local dollar store with my little red transistor radio blasting out Jackson Five and Stevie Wonder hits. Trips to the library in order to satisfy my appetite for books and long runs at the track filled my first week.

During one of my summer stays at my cousin's, I met a girl my age by the name of Kathy Mulhouse. We were two of a kind and struck an immediate friendship, calling each other several times a day in typical young girl fashion. I called Kathy to let her know I was back and we resumed our daily phoning with a new topic on the agenda: boys. We both had matured into curvy little 'pre' women, although we thought we were grown, we just were not bold enough to admit it.

It was amazing to me to look in the mirror and see a figure not so different from the ones that I had admired last year. I was consumed with the decoration of my new body, constantly arranging my hair and trying on 'wrappers' in the forms of dresses and shorts.

My uncle gave me plenty of cash, so I bought new clothes; the only problem was that I had no place to go. Kathy called me excitedly to inform me we had an event to go to.

There was a church barbeque and ballgame at the city park on Sunday and Kathy and I were welcome. There would be plenty kids our age for the ball game, especially the young athletes. I remembered Clarence, the star baseball player my Cousin Dochie used to cheer for when we would go to the local Tuesday night ball games. Clarence was the crowd favorite. Cousin Eddie usually managed the team for a youth group as a volunteer and even he like Clarence, so I figured he would be a safe choice to talk to.

Countdown to zero, 'D-Day' arrived. Some days in life flow by without any substantial difference between it and another and some days are always remembered, unforgettably marked in time. You record those days, because they change your life, whether for the good or for bad and you remember what you wore, what you ate and said.

Sunday afternoon was beautiful and breezy. Sunday morning was a pleasant renewal of our friendships with God, some of us slew the Devil and we wanted to celebrate the act of living. I was one of the first ones to arrive at the park, my impatience to get things going getting the best of me as I waited so I sat atop a picnic table and attempted to look nonchalant. Cars were coming into the park and unloading children and gear. Several teen-aged kids that I did not know invited me to join them. We had a mixed group of girls and boys, each trying hard to impress the other without appearing to, while gossiping and sipping Cokes in mock sophistication and unconcern.

Kathy's parents arrived in their old station wagon, with her younger siblings spilling out and hitting the ground running. Our group was getting bigger and older. A lot of young courting adults arrived, posing in unnatural stances trying to look casual. Young married couples, already past the pretense and with small children were 'honeying' and 'babying' each other so the world could see how happy they were, but by the end of day they would wilt under the pressure on energetic toddlers and call each other Jane and John again.

I saw a well-built man walk across the parking lot who seemed to exude confidence; he was wearing a burgundy sweater and was unloading the goods for the barbeque. This man attracted a considerable amount of attention, possibly because he was the man to do the barbequing. I heard some of the men ask this man if he was going to play in the game and he laughed and said he might. I was thinking Clarence might have some competition on the ball field.

Kathy was about my size; a little over five feet tall, blonde and blue eyed and well built. I was a natural tomboy and Kathy was feminine, I imagined that if a tiger were chasing her, she would have to make sure her slip wasn't showing before she ran. I loved sports of all kinds whether I was good at them or not, so I was anxious to play ball while Kathy would rather talk through the whole thing.

Seeing my impatience and picking up on my involuntary interest in the man in the burgundy shirt, Kathy got a mischievous twinkle in her eye and began to enlighten me on the man. "That happens to be

Thomas Niles,” She said and I pretended not to hear her, showing minimal interest.

“Oh” I said with a strategic pause. “How old is he?”

“Oh, I’m not certain, but he was in the Vietnam War. Hadn’t been back long, I heard”

I distractedly sipped my coke loudly, and then stirred the ice as if bored. My curiosity got the best of me and I plowed in “You’re kidding! He was really in that awful war? Wow!”

Kathy was excited by the game now, she had the information and I had to beg.

“Yeah, he was in that war and you know what? I betcha he killed somebody!”

Kathy had total control of me; I stared at her with big brown eyes. A real war hero was here with us, good looking and broad shouldered. His huge shoulders got wider and his waist got narrower right before my eyes. I think he even grew taller.

Kathy thought she had enough of my interest to keep me there with her gossiping, but she had only baited my interest in getting a closer look. The game was starting and I went down to take an active part.

All ages were invited to play, from the eight year olds to a few brave forty year olds although the bulk of the group was in their teens and twenties. When my turn to bat came up, I hit my usual specialty, a long foul. I couldn’t hit straight so I had to bunt and run really fast “Look at that girl run” I heard.

“Hey, you run track don’t you?” A big hand touched my shoulder from behind and a timbre of a baritone voice ran down my spine. It was he, the war vet standing within a few feet of me. My heart began to beat faster. The war vet asked if I would like for him to hit the ball for me next time, I eagerly agreed, staring into his eyes as I nodded.

The ball tore through the sky as the crowd of about one hundred stopped talking and froze for an instant, mesmerized by the trajectory of the ball. I stood still until the crowd yelled to run and I made it home easily. “Thomas, you play baseball almost as well as you quarterbacked” an older man yelled down from the bleachers. My imagination smote me with a handsome image of Thomas in football uniform, yelling out signals in baritone.

After the game, the older people gathered to talk in quiet circles and the young people built a campfire to illuminate the settling dusk. The loud laughter of the boys and giggles of the girls mingled with the conversations of adults and squeals of the smaller kids. I was nearly ignoring Kathy as I listened to Thomas. Some of the young women came over to our group to hear Thomas and it was easy to see they were interested in him too, yet he was talking mainly to me. The group thinned out and Thomas and I sat at a picnic bench getting deeper into personal revelations. Kathy must have left while I was envisioning the jungles of Vietnam according to Thomas’s very literary recreations. I could tell

Thomas Niles was a very articulate and intelligent man and I showed him I could match him conversation for conversation, like a vocal chess game.

“We landed in Cameron Bay. My first location was Lon Mai depot, I was moved to my permanent spot in a compound outside of Qui Nhon” Thomas recited the facts in rapid, energized detail, the locations, transfers, the heat and living conditions. Thomas asked if I could remember the heaviest rain I had seen and I told him of the rains in the country that flooded underneath the house and how I had to pry up some front porch planks to save drowning newborn puppies, the mother dog had been howling for help. Thomas told of the monsoon seasons in Viet Nam where sheets of rain came down in loud torrents for days until the barracks were flooded and you had to step out of the bunks into a foot of water. Thomas had a fungus on his left foot from the wet conditions. Thomas’s face changed almost imperceptibly when he said that after the rains stopped that ‘Charlie’ would be ready for you. Who was Charlie I asked him, it was the VC he said and I asked what VC meant: The Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese faction and I learned the pieces of the evening news that I usually ignored. The Vietnamese were embroiled in a civil war after many years of fighting with the French, they wanted independence and the problem arose when the South of Vietnam wanted a democratic form of government and the North wanted Communist rule. The United States got involved to enable the democratic faction to win and Russia was helping the North, so in effect Russia and the United States were at conflict in the Vietnam War.

Thomas declared historical facts without emotion

and I felt he purposely steered around all human connection. I wanted to know how things felt, what people thought and my curiosity compelled me to ask too many painful questions too fast. I asked if he had seen anyone killed and the answer became a portrait on his face, it was as if I had touched a nerve in a bad tooth and he visibly recoiled. It was too late to retract the questions, so I waited for him to regain his composure and find the energy to take command of his traumatic recollections. Thomas told of the common sight of dead VC, some with guts exposed and parts missing and sometimes the bodies would be hidden by brush and you would smell them before you saw them. Death and the imminence of it were continuous. I was shocked by what should have been obvious. I knew war as a word before talking to Thomas, now war was becoming more than a story in a book or part of the evening news of some far away place. I felt suddenly older and wiser, and I was one of the few who kept interest in Thomas's narrative. There had to be a lot of pain and strength in this man and it made him different than all of boys I had talked with. I was accustomed to listening to the wisdom of old people and the subjects of their conversations had meaning, so I was easily bored with child talk, yet this was a real man.

Thomas possessed knowledge that few men would ever access and he had seen things that an elect group would live to tell about. I felt a compulsion to unlock the inherent mystery in this man and developed greed to empty him of his secrets. I had been curious all of my life, I was the curious cat and like Pandora I wanted to know what was in the box.

The evening grew older as I saw through Thomas's eyes old Papa Sans and Mama Sans plowing flooded

rice paddies with ancient water buffalos and I saw beautiful slant eyed slender oriental women with silky black hair and quiet eyes filled with the sadness of many losses. I was an astute student of human nature and I could feel the pain of others by proxy. I could smell the tropical summer nights and sense the dangerous calm and stillness in the air that preceded attack. I took only the facts that Thomas gave and filled in the screams and terror on the faces because I was gifted with a tremendous imagination fueled by many books. I saw not only the enemy alienated by terminology like ‘gooks’ and ‘chinks’ but I saw people as people, we all live and die the same.

My uncle told me I did not know when to quit, ironically this same uncle who told me to never give up, so I pushed Thomas further than I ever intended. The probing questions seemed to escape my tongue before I could capture them and I saw Thomas’s face show the distance his mind had traveled. Thomas was back in Viet Nam reliving things he never wanted to think about again and he could not control himself once it had begun, the power compelling him was stronger than he. I heard storms of sound just as vividly as though the Viet Nam battles were being fought before me while Thomas recounted the counterattacks by the ominous Huey Cobras that roared overhead like huge clouds of war birds, manned with gunners firing M-60’s capable of razing walls. Mortar attacks left hot shrapnel in walls and sometimes still living bodies, the counterassault came afterwards, with first the Cobras, then the monster assault by the ships sitting ever present out in the South China Sea. The ground would rumble as tubes of death in the form of missiles was fired over the compound shaking the earth and filling comrades with fear that one miscalculation could be final for all. The missiles

were aimed into the mountain behind the barracks, where the VC was suspected of taking refuge after assault. Each day was possibly your last, so I imagined having a fear that never subsided dwelling inside your head with all systems stuck on 'emergency' status. My mind was racing on endorphins and my emotions were highly stimulated as I ran the entire gamut of human emotions while mentally assimilating the data.

Thomas had regained his objective stance and recounted facts about Qui Nhon, being under red alert after attack, having to sleep with your gun and even go to the latrine with your gun. A soldier's life was always in jeopardy and the only bulwark of protection was to keep one's gun with them at all times. The enemy found advantage in surprise attack, so there was no 'safe time' during night nor day, things happened without warning: walls could come crashing down in barracks upon sleeping soldiers or bodies could go flying apart on a sunny day as mortar rounds and gunfire exploded. I imagined the jungle life fleeing for cover and the beautiful birds scattering as nature screamed at the loss of her children. I listened to Thomas and imagined what it meant in human terms to be battling for your life in a war not of your own choosing and on foreign ground. Until I met Thomas, war was just another word, although Thomas skillfully veered away from the details of the unspeakable horrors, I instinctively filled in the blanks.

My mind would not limit itself to mere facts; I saw realities in the rank fear, putrid smells of vomit and blood. Reconnaissance (Recon) was when troops were sent out to find remaining enemy and were often caught in ambushes. There was a point man that walked a few feet ahead of the troops, the point man was the first to

either see danger or get shot to pieces in sacrifice to the safety of the group. I was gifted with the uncanny ability to place myself in another's experience, to translate what was told into feelings, sights and smells. It was as if I was present in Thomas's stories. I imagined the hands of time being frozen, as one stepped slowly half stooped with guns cocked, jumping at every sound, fearing your own death at every second. I could sense the pressure in your head until you felt like screaming then the eminent hail of bullets begins and you know you're dead when you see bullets the size of your thumb forced out of M-60's that could kill an elephant. The ultimate decision is forced out of you by the instinct of survival: sorry God, it's either him or me and he falls in a pool of blood that you created with your gun, because one split second's hesitation would make it you in the pool of blood. Then your mind shuts down from sheer overload, sound becomes muffled as if you are under water and if you are lucky, you go home. There was so much overwhelming data to absorb, but one of the most baffling was the fact that the soldiers were barely older than me, than the immature, playful boys in school who had been my classmates.

I traveled in my mind with Thomas to another world, pretending that I was there as a young soldier. The complexity of the age kept circling my thoughts; boys too young to drink or vote and who would be goofing off with the girls at hamburger stand back home were sent into foreign lands to fight.

I became an eighteen-year-old boy as I imagined the contents of his mind, what it would feel like to be there after coming out of the context of a safe normal home where you were told growing up not to hit your

brother. What was it like to kill at any age, but especially I wanted to know what would it be like for a young person like me to be forced to kill, I used my own sense of empathy to displace myself into-

*You are just out of high school and your victim has a mother like you, but you don't dare allow your conscience to interfere with survival, if you hesitated—you died in the jungle ten thousand miles from home, so it was either one mother's child or you.*

*I, as my imagined self, heard the horrific sounds of battle as rockets, missiles and mortars explode in my ears and resounded in my mind long after the silences ended. The powerful silence after death, made me want to scream out and run in my utter and absolute powerlessness, but I stood there and watched the dust settle over the dead and dying. I as a man-child watched the children of Viet Nam dying in their own back yards and I loathed what we had to do. Oh, how horrible war was becoming to my protected mind, my innocence was becoming exposed and dying in the face of reality.*

Until this night I had seen war through the antiseptic eyes of the press and it was far removed from me, it was getting too close, my mind made it far too real.

Through the words of Thomas, I had gained as much secondhand knowledge of war as any sixteen year old could possibly process. I was both in horror and in awe of what I had heard and pictured. War was horrible. I had read of war and heard it spoken of in historical terms and in terms of military strategy, but never before had I 'felt' war. This night, sitting by a campfire, I had felt the war of Viet Nam and I would never forget it. Thomas began the evening with a lilt in

his voice and a vibrancy that was now gone, his voice sounded weary, because I think that he had told all that he could endure to tell of Viet Nam.

Thomas said it was too dark for me to walk the few blocks home, that he would take me. I told Thomas that I had an older cousin who had gone to Viet Nam a few years before, around 1968. That was the time of 'Tet' Thomas said. I was silent a few minutes before I added that he never made it back, at least not alive. I had seen him hugging his girlfriend goodbye at the country church; he said they would get married when he came back. She was a very pretty girl. I watched her cry in loud sobs at his closed casket, falling all over the box until people had to pull her back. I remember the strange incongruity of the laughing young man and the closed box.

The night air was cool as we walked holding hands, quietly reflecting on all that was said. Like a true gentleman, Thomas kissed me gently on the cheek and bade me a good night's sleep. The sidewalk had steps from the home to the street and Thomas watched me enter the house before he turned and walked into the darkness quietly whistling.

## **Chapter 5**

It was a long while before I realized that I was daydreaming. The back porch rose up off the split-level property and formed an enclosed balcony almost even with the tree line. At night while my elders sat in their flannel nighties around the ten o'clock news, I listened

to the song of the crickets and katydids. Stars twinkled through the trees like the little diamond in the sky of my nursery prayer, dutifully taught to me by my aunt Mollie.

*Twinkle twinkle little star  
How I wonder what you are  
Up above the world so high  
Like a diamond in the sky*

Lost in a reverie of fantasy in a little girl's world, nothing at that moment could harm me, I was immune to life and all that it had in store for me. My mind kept lingering on Thomas Niles as though he was a pleasant drug and it would have taken minimal persuasion to convince me the sixteen-year-old child-woman that I was falling in love. Who was Thomas Niles? I answered that question with the limited assessment tools that were afforded to me in my sixteen summers and winters. The beauty of idealism raged within my young soul and my stubborn spirit had taken hold of something that I was not going to be willing to relinquish.

I relived the images of Thomas in war and glorified him in my heart. The overwhelming stimulation of my senses had pushed reason aside and I spent my days processing what was said repeatedly, stumbling through each day half aware of the world around me until bedtime arrived and I put my infatuated mind to sleep on my own self created dreams.

My relatives noticed that something was different about my behavior and kept teasing me with remarks like 'wake up jug head' and 'come back to us, child'. No one expected anything was seriously afoot as I'm

sure they knew how fleeting a young girl's mind could be until the phone rang and my cousin answered it. Cousin Eddie came to me with a puzzled look and told me there was a man on the phone for me. I could tell my cousin did not approve of the excitement that was evident in me when I rushed to answer the phone.

It was Thomas as I had hoped and my heart jumped when he told me how he could not stop thinking about me at work and at night. I told him that I too, could not get him off my mind and that our conversation was one of the most memorable I had ever had. With an intimate tone, Thomas said he would like to see me again. I blurted out that I was only sixteen years old and he said that the number didn't matter that the mind did and that I was mentally older than the twenty -year old women he knew. My relatives would not approve of him I warned him and he volunteered to come over and meet them and put their minds to rest. We agreed to meet that evening for a burger and I hung up with a sweet farewell.

“What the heck took so long? That was a grown man, what does he want with you?” My cousin accused adding “He's not trying to court you is he?” I told my cousin that there was nothing to worry about and that he just wanted to ask me something about the big church barbeque, subtly reminding my cousin where I met him.

My uncle was too old to maintain a vigilant watch over me and he willingly delegated that responsibility to Cousin Eddie. Although my cousin had the eyes of a hawk and the instincts of a mother lioness, he wasn't prepared for my stubbornness. I went out a few hours later telling everyone I was going around the corner for a burger with a friend. Cousin Eddie stood in the door

and watched me suspiciously.

The burger eatery was a daytime lunch site frequented by young people and it was a short walk from my cousin's house. I saw Thomas's hunter green SS Malibu Sport parked outside the restaurant and my heart leaped.

The streaming sun flashed off Thomas's gold-rimmed glasses and washed his skin in mahogany. Thomas was standing and flashing a set of even white teeth as his eyes scanned me approvingly. He was dressed immaculately in starched white jeans and a blue Bandy sweater. I was wearing my new tropical multicolored short set and wore my hair loose to my waist, accented by gold hoop earrings and coral lipstick.

After an initial clumsy beginning, we found a common frequency "You are so beautiful!" he said adding that I looked so different, that I looked as though I was mixed with many races. I told him I was white, part French, black and Indian. My father was white, my mother's mother was French and her father was half black and half Indian. Thomas said he was one-quarter Indian and three quarters black, which accounted for the velvet sheen to his hair and his reddish color. We told of our backgrounds in nutshell reflections. I heard how Thomas's mother ran his father away with a loaded shotgun and the last time he saw his father was the day he came only as far as the gate. His mother pointed the loaded gun at his father and told him to say his goodbyes and to 'git' as he and one of his brothers stood inside the gate watched him leave. His father moved to California and died in a house fire a few years later.

I told my story quickly and resumed my interrogation of Thomas. I was fascinated by the eerie way he transferred his emotional history to me, making my heart race and ache, making me anxious and relieved while he remained untouched and unshaken like a tree. I marveled at his strength. Thomas told of his boyhood days as a little fighting terror. Thomas said his mother tried to ‘beat the devil out of him’ and that she almost killed him trying, holding him down with a foot on his neck while lashing away with a belt. His mother would cry while she beat him saying “boy, you’re gonna end up in prison with all this devilment in you!” Most of the beatings were for fights that he would start daily.

By high school Thomas said the girls became more interesting than fights and that his mother used to take the phone to bed with her to keep the girls from calling. Thomas and two of his brothers was star athletes referred to as those Niles boys. Thomas graduated with a B average despite seldom studying and was a college prospect until he received his draft notice.

Thomas told of the day he checked the mail and received his draft notice and how induction and training quickly passed and he was on his way to the other side of the world one day. The emotional hues in Thomas’ eyes conveyed how the Viet Nam experience gripped him even as he selectively chose his memories. We knew not to go too deep, this time and our lunch was well enjoyed.

The orange setting sun and the closing of the burger house signaled time for me to go home, as it was understood that I would be home by dark. Thomas was taking me home when he looked into my eyes and

asked me to have dinner with his mother next Sunday. I agreed to try to comprehend what this meant. Thomas did not try to kiss me when he opened the car door for me and I recognized him as a gentleman.

Cousin Eddie was waiting for me and asked what I was doing going out to dinner with a grown man and I said that I ran into him and he took me home.

The days crept by in sustained slow motion as I reconsidered what form of execution I was going to; after all, this woman I was going to sit with and calmly ingest and imbibe with was the same one who allegedly beat a woman's sight out over her philandering husband before she forced him out of the home at gunpoint. This woman was a mother who could beat her son with one foot on his neck while reciting scriptures. What if she did not like me? My fears subsided when I considered how Thomas idealized her and she was a cripple from rheumatoid arthritis. She was also old, that had to count for something.

The dinner was to be after religious services attended by both Thomas and his mother on crutches. Thomas picked me up and I sat in the back as his mother was up front. I wore my full silk striped dress that my aunt Fannie sent me from JC Penney's in California. My hair was worn down and in large loopy curls and I wore makeup that made me look older. Thomas's mother said I looked like a Barbie doll.

Since his return from Viet Nam, Thomas had been living with his mother in a two story, three -bedroom apartment complex. The buildings were well kept and a large number of its occupants were the working class

poor and lower middle classes with two or three children, the tenants probably trying to earn enough for a home. Thomas's mother had moved there about thirteen years earlier as a single mother with four kids at home. Lexie Niles was crippled but you could see that the fire in her eyes had not gone out and even the stooped posture on crutches could not hide the remaining muscle tone that denoted that she had once been a physically strong woman in her young days. I could tell she had been very pretty as well.

At dinner, I told Mrs. Niles how pleased I was to meet her and she caressed my ego with her sweet honey toned compliments on my beauty and wit while her searching eyes scanned me reading my reactions to her words. I was not sure why I had an instinctive urge not to trust Mrs. Niles. I was raised by my uncle and primarily three aunts: Uncle Robert's wife –my aunt Mollie who believed that there was good in everyone and to give them the benefit of the doubt, then there was my Aunt Bessie (who was really a cousin that we all loved so much that we inducted her into our family by dubbing her an aunt), who 'read between the lines' with a touch of suspicion and Aunt Fannie, my uncle's sister. Aunt Fannie lived amid education and knew all people had flaws, some just managed to hide them well. I had all three aunts in my head and that was enough to make me suspicious of strangers who loved you too soon.

Dinner was a work of art: prime roast and milk creamed potatoes swimming in spicy gravy with greens and peppers, served with home-made rolls and butter. Dessert was hot apple pie with a scoop of ice cream. The meal was so appealing that I had trouble concentrating on the conversation; I almost wanted to

throw the cutlery down, forget who was watching and dig in with both hands. Whatever else Miss Lexie could do, one thing for certain was that she was an expert cook.

I did manage to absorb some pertinent details about Thomas's life between bites. According to his mother, Thomas had been a beautiful little boy, and she showed me a picture of a dark little boy that was solidly formed and grinning from ear to ear. The snapshot had been hidden away and I could tell Thomas was embarrassed for her to show it to me. Thomas was her last-born son of nine children and she fondly called him her baby to his obvious irritation. Mrs. Niles told of Thomas having come back from Viet Nam with a serious heroin addiction, describing how skinny he had become. Thomas showed the needle tracks in his thick arms as proof. I asked Thomas how he got off heroin and he said he took strong tranquilizers and slept through most of withdrawal, after that it was a matter of will power.

With a touch of regret, Mrs. Niles said Thomas had wanted to attend college and she had hoped to see one of her kids do so. Thomas's oldest sister had eight children and her husband was a hard working farmer who vowed that he would see all of his kids go to college and he fulfilled that vow, all seven girls graduated, one with a master's degree and the one son attained an associate's degree. All of Lydia Stone's daughters had successful careers as a result and I'm sure Miss Lexie longed to see her baby have an easier life than they all had.

With humor, Miss Lexie told of how Thomas was so pugnacious that the teachers had to bring him home to keep him from beating up kids in the evenings. With a look of worry she explained she did not know why he

fought like he did, that maybe he just had the ‘devil’ in him. “Thomas finally quit all that mess! He’s my baby, my boy!” she added, as if explaining away any reason for concern.

“Mama, how many times do I have to ask all of you to stop calling me that, I’m a grown man.” Thomas asked his mother with a frown.

“You’ll always be my baby.” She said smugly. I thought it was cute that his mother was so fond of him but he was showing genuine annoyance at her. I assumed the responsibility to change the subject by complimenting his mother’s for the beauty of her hair.

“Mrs. Niles you have the most beautiful hair—it’s so shiny and wavy”.

“Thank you, honey. People say I have pretty hair. My mother was half Indian, her name was Beatrice, they called her Bee,” she said, quite pleased.

“Where does she live?”

“She’s dead.” She paused “Been dead a long time,” she added staring off, signaling the end of subject. No one spoke for a few minutes, and then Thomas remembered something humorous to break the mood.

Thomas took me home and I felt I had both gained and lost this day, although I did not know why. Slow changes were taking place in me and in Thomas causing bonds to form between us, and as I began to feel I knew Thomas, I displaced the seed of worry in micro degrees, and allowed Thomas to give me my first gentle kiss on my lips. When he proposed to me at another church barbeque as though it was just a fact that should be stated, I accepted

immediately in my mind but pretended to think about it. I went through a few decent hours of formal resistance based on the idea of my age and the fact that I had an unfinished education. I presented the mature and logical reasons to Thomas as to why I could not marry him, secretly hoping that he would rip them into inconsequential shreds. Thomas countered my reasoning about my age and lack of education with the reply: "Age and education are temporary markers in time; an education can be attained at any time, and needn't be some predetermined ritual". The complication set of expectations melted away like butter under the sharp knives of his persuasive skill, cutting through my future as I ignorantly cheered him on.

Fifteen revolutions of the earth on its axis, enough time for a moon phase, barely enough time for seedlings to sprout, but plenty of time for Thomas to alter years of training. I was vulnerable and scared and Thomas was certain and stable and 'he loved me', as he told me. Those words 'I love you' brushed the air more and more often from Thomas's lips, they became the only fuel I needed to become determined and inflexible.

No sooner had I accepted Thomas's proposal than the fear of what I could tell my relatives hit me. How could I tell Cousin Eddie and Uncle Robert and even Cousin Dochie who seldom got involved would have a thing to say on this subject. My adoptive parents probably thought I was a bundle of trouble already, this

would just confirm it. I told Thomas I was worried about finishing my education because the idea of college was embedded in my mind since I was little. Cousin Eddie and Andrew bought me piggy banks and filled them with money 'for college' that Uncle Robert was to deposit into bank accounts for me.

Thomas said I was overreacting that he would send me to school after we settled down. Thomas called me by the sweet endearment that was to become his trademark name for me 'baby' and said not to worry. I had to translate Thomas to my relatives the way he presented himself to me.

The wonderful life that was so easy to see while talking to Thomas was evaporating as I rehearsed how to concoct just the right words to tell Cousin Eddie. No matter how it was said, I seriously doubted Eddie Howell would find them to be acceptable. The only acceptable thing to my Cousin Eddie was 'college degree', then maybe a husband with a college degree with marriage coming somewhere on the lower order of things. Uncle Robert wasn't as obsessed with college as Eddie but he would not be pleased with my marrying so young even if the man had two PhD's and owned the most valuable asset of them all: Land.

At the first sign of dusk, Thomas took me home and I stepped out of his car and bade him off. My curfew was imposed to include 'before the sun sets' because of the age of my escort.

I stood and looked at the house for a moment and listened to the cricket calls, the smell of the freshly watered warm lawn filled my nostrils. It could be a lovely summer night, depending upon how diplomatic a presentation I achieved: a good one and all would be fine but a bad one and I would be the center of family war. I inhaled deeply and charged onward.

I could see through the voile curtains the outline of all three of them posed before the television set totally unsuspecting and peaceful. Cousin Dochie was stopping to spit snuff while holding her knitting carefully. Dipping snuff was Cousin Dochie's one ugly vice and she looked humorous with her perfectly coiffed roll of silky black hair pulled back in a 'forties style, angel dust powder dusted lightly on her face and aiming trails of snuff spittle into a ringing spittoon. Uncle Robert was cushioned in his favorite big chair in front of the floor sized RCA television set. Cousin Eddie was simultaneously reading the paper and watching TV. Not a thought in the room was about me at the time as I walked in and cleared my throat. Cousin Eddie scowled his usual 'you been out with that old boy again' look and Uncle Robert gave me his smile of approval that said I could do no wrong. Cousin Dochie smiled, then saw into my eyes and gave me a wary look. Everyone was looking at me as I stood just inside the door.

I stood for seconds that seemed like hours trying to figure out how to say what was necessary. I could not think of just the right

words to say calmly, so nervous congestion caused all of my intentions to explode out of me uncensored. "I'm going to marry Thomas Niles!" I said with my heart pounding. For what seemed like a minute, everyone just stared at me as if their tongues were frozen, I even feared they did not comprehend what I had just said. Cousin Eddie was reddening and gathering momentum like a storm getting ready to wreak havoc on some unsuspecting mainland.

Snapping his recliner upright and slapping his newspaper onto the coffee table with near violent effort, he scooted onto the edge of his seat. I sat down quickly.

"What on earth do you think you're doing, don't you know how old you are, what about school?" All came out fired in rapid succession and I was not given response time. Cousin Dochie said, "Lord have mercy", an invocation used in black culture at the times of crises and catastrophes. Uncle Robert leaned back looking beaten, knowing in advance that I was too headstrong for reason. My dear cousin Eddie played a powerful role as a substitute father, good enough for the equivalent of an academy award, one that I would confer upon him posthumously in my heart in the years to come.

Taking a deep breath to settle him, my cousin started the process of reasoning with me.

"Sara, let's talk about this thing."

"Okay."

"Now tell me" He said with his hand on his chin "why do you want to marry Thomas?"

"Because I love him" I said evenly and stared at him.

My cousin stifled his impulse to get angry again.

“What do you know about love?” His voice was rising “you’re sixteen!”

“Well...I love all of you... and I’m sixteen!” I said resentfully.

“Quit playing games here, you know what I mean.” He said flatly.

“You have known this man for three weeks now, what can you say about what he really is—you can’t know enough about him to love him. You haven’t seen him over enough time!” He said with obvious irritation as he raked his hair.

“He has told me enough things about himself—why we’ve talked for hours” I said excitedly remembering our conversations. I could see this really upset my cousin’s enforced calm and that his quick temper was stirring again. I glanced at Uncle Robert and could see his displeasure in the whole situation; his posture was resigned as though the battle was lost. Cousin Dochie, seldom showed annoyance, so perhaps her expression shook me the most. My mind knew I was wrong but my heart held fast.

With another deep breath and swipe of his hair, Cousin Eddie removed his glasses and cleaned them, buying time while he thought. Cousin Eddie started to speak and stopped, and then an idea excited him.

“So, you said that he had told you so much about himself, right? Did he tell you about the fights he had as a boy, how teachers had to take the kid home to keep him off the others? I bet you he didn’t tell you that!” He said defiantly and leaned back.

“Yes he did.” I said proudly. “ His mother even told me that and besides the key is that he *used* to do these things. This was in the past, he’s not like that anymore.” I also told my cousin the good things about Thomas, like the fact that he was a good student who wanted to go to college and that he was a star quarterback and that he went to Viet Nam. I challenged that Mrs. Hines did not tell him that, I knew that was where he got his information. Thomas had a Purple Heart too, I added and was a designated sharpshooter.

My cousin raked his hand through his hair again, looking distressed, and then he stood up with his feet apart and lowered his head and pointed his finger at me as if he was enlightened.

“I will make a deal with you. Just make him mad one time and if he doesn’t lose his head, then I’ll believe you. Just make him mad, that’s all. What can it hurt?”

I did not like that idea. “I already did things that would make you mad, like scratch his car door and he didn’t get angry. In fact he looked at me calmly and said not to worry about it!”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it! I mean badger him, provoke him on purpose and see what he does,” He said hysterically, but I defended my position as the only fair one because he was advising me to trick him. I trusted him and I would not do it, after all he had overcome so many things and was religious and hardworking. The debate went back and forth until my cousin blew a fuse.

My cousin’s straight black hair was usually combed straight back neatly, it was now in every angle

of disarray upon his head, his glasses were crooked and his eyebrows were scattered wildly upon his forehead giving him the look of a wild man. The more my cousin argued, the more I was in favor of the idea. My uncle called me contrary, usually with a chuckle but he wasn't smiling today. All the usual assault was used on me, I was 'still a child' needing adult permission to marry and I was going to be a school drop-out. I countered that eighteen year olds got married all of the time and I was more mature than most of them. I was told they had finished school first; I will finish school I assured them. It went on until everyone tired out and declared an impasse.

During the next few days' calls back and forth between my adoptive parents and our household were daily and several times a day. People turned red in the face, voices were raised and I was called names apropos to my behavior such as 'wet behind the ears' (my adoptive father), 'baby' (Uncle Robert), 'a mere child' (adoptive mother) and none of it made any difference to me. All of the family grouped together and called Thomas' mother to talk some sense into me but to no avail because she said it was none of her business, her son was a grown man.

Gradually and reluctantly it was decided that I be allowed to marry Thomas before something drastic happened. So it was that I, the sixteen year old simple minded child decided my own best interests against the wisdom of generations.

My adopted mother arranged to have an antique satin wedding dress that had been made for her sister by four California tailors loaned to me for my wedding. My mother said if they could not stop the wedding they

would at least make it count. The wedding dress was made for an Aunt Bernice that I had met on our trip to California. The dress had been a gift from the whole family and had cost four hundred dollars and in the late sixties that was a large sum of money. The dress had an unforgiving empire waist (Aunt Bernice was petite with a twenty three inch waist; my waist was 24 inches so I would have to hold my breath). The front was hand beaded with faux pearls and trailed a nine-foot long heavy train, it was arranged for two children dressed in white to carry the train. I would have a beautiful church wedding.

Two hundred people were expected, so we rented a large hall in order to accommodate so many guests. Although, I never dreamed of weddings and marriage as a child, there was something of a fairy tale nature about such attention and fanfare. There was something familiar about the idea of brides and weddings and the fairy tales of children, Cinderella and the prince at the ball, the King and crowds of admirers and so many other bits and pieces of a children's stories and imagined grandeur that appeals to every child's need to identify with feeling special, loved and validated by others. I suppose all the mixed feeling that I was having was a combinations of all these imagined dreams and real feelings, which, together created the most intense excitement.

I spent time with my adoptive mother making arrangements and then went back to my cousin's home. My cousin was not satisfied with my dropping out of school; the marriage he could tolerate but he had a problem with the school situation. My cousin was a lot like me, he felt best when in action. My summer visit was quickly terminated when one of my cousin's

sneaky plans to trick me back into school backfired on him. I suppose he figured he could save my brain at least, if not the body, so he devised a little scheme. One day, while at dinner, Cousin Eddie asked if I needed a summer job to earn some money for my marriage and was predictable answer was 'yes'. If I wanted the job, his friend at the post office needed an errand girl. I agreed to go with him to the office to interview for the position and I should have been suspicious when I saw how excited my cousin was, he couldn't stand still in the elevator. I went dressed in my best and my cousin and I sat across the desk of his friend. The friend and my cousin exchanged glances and then the friend asked if I wanted the job, to which I eagerly answered 'yes!' This was the cue for him to launch into a well-rehearsed litany of reasons why one should stay in school because nothing in the world compares to a good education. People have died for the right to be educated he said (I began to notice through the thin veneer of vanilla tint, the man could be part black), he said we as a people must not lose that right and step backwards in our struggles. The man went on about the precious value of education until my heart felt sick and I wished that he would get to the part about the job. "And now as your cousin and I have discussed, if you want the job, you have to agree to stay in school" He then leaned back and smiled "the job is yours!" So! They had conspired together and tricked me.

Both of the men were proudly smiling at me. I stared at both of them. What a sneaky devious plot, I thought. "No. I don't think I'll be needing a summer job after all," I said with pseudo pride. Countenances fell and the men looked at each other in wilted disappointment and confusion. It took a minute for my cousin to regain conscious thought, he grabbed me by

the elbow and steered me out of the office. We were silent in the elevator and all the way home. My cousin waited for me to step inside the door and he said simply to pack my things. I packed and he said he was taking me back to my parents that maybe they could do something with me. My cousin screeched tires on the way out of the driveway and abruptly stopped at red lights, never looking at me again until we arrived and he deposited my stuff and told my mother to see if they could talk me back into school.

I spent the summer job hunting without success and making wedding preparations. Cousin Eddie called once a week to ask if I had changed my mind about school and hung up on me when I said no.

Thomas came faithfully every Sunday to take me out to dinner at a nice restaurant. Thomas was always a gentleman, opening my doors and he would never impose himself on me, I told him that kissing was all we could do until marriage and he complied. Thomas inspired confidence in a way common to men of hollow promises, with practiced charm that makes it seem a pleasure for you to allow them to step on your toe. Why, it's only a toe you say in time, here's another, you offer—I have plenty of them.

## Chapter 6

The wedding that I glorified in my romantic fantasies became the actual thing all too soon. I awakened in a heightened state of expectation on

Saturday morning the 20<sup>th</sup> day of October. The fall air was crisp and still warm with the last kiss of summer still on its breath. There was something about fall that always intrigued me with a sense of change; perhaps it was because nature seemed to be bedding down from vibrant activity to the stillness of rest and renewal. I awakened early and the day started like any other. I could not believe I would be married by this afternoon.

By late morning, helpful visitors came to fuss over preparations and to help out. We were to have the reception at our house, so there were women in every room making adjustments to the decorations. I was too excited to focus on anything but what was to happen at two o'clock this day; even my usually voracious appetite was gone.

In what seemed like minutes, the hours rushed by and I was standing outside two heavy oaken doors waiting to enter on cue from the music. The music began and I took the arm of my adoptive father, dressed in a black tuxedo and started to walk on wilted knees. I felt a mix of joy and apprehension as we split the silent audience, frozen in stares of admiration. Thomas was standing at the front waiting, handsome in black tuxedo. As a small child, I loved the princesses who stepped out of fairy tales and today I felt as though the princess was me, surrounded by adoring people and beautiful things as I stood beside my personal prince while ancient words were said in solemn promise before God and man. The ritual of the ring and the kiss sealed the ceremony and it was done. I was the wife of Thomas Niles and Thomas was the husband of Sarah, 'for as long as we both lived' was the deal. Love, surety and safety were now mine to keep forever.

There were so many people there that I could not be sure, but I thought that I saw my natural mother slip out of a side door, at least I hoped it was her. Uncle Robert, Cousin Eddie and Dochie were all rising from a front row. My uncle stood on trembling knees, holding his walking cane and smiling, as though grateful to have seen a milestone in my life before the closing of the cruel 'good night'. My uncle was wearing his 'Sunday best' his kangaroo leather high top boots and black suit and tie, he even had his new black hat that he only wore once or twice yearly and he was smiling at me, for a very old man, my uncle still cut an impressive figure. I hugged each of my dear relatives and my cousin Eddie smiled and gave me a thick envelope with a note 'not to open until departure'. I knew there was money inside, that was my cousin's way, and love and gifts of money were synonymous. With glittering eyes and an excited spirit, I experienced my wedding with joy and anticipation.

The reception and cake cutting was at my parents home. The flash of camera lights punctuated each change of posture, and pose of the cake, cutting through the noise of music and laughter as the sounds rose and fell until the celebrants tired and dispersed.

Thomas and I changed in separate rooms, I wore a brown sweater pantsuit and Thomas came out in khaki and black. Thomas pulled me to him by the curve of my waist with one hand and picked up my bags with the other as we made our parting promises to visit often. My youngest brothers followed me to the car. "Where are you going for your honeymoon, or is that a secret?" My mother asked teasingly. "We are going to save money and stay at Mama's, she's gone for the week." Thomas replied. My mother looked at me and I looked at her meekly. I knew there was money in the envelope

my cousin gave me and I wanted to spend it on a real honeymoon.

According to the minister, we were a cooperative unit now, twice as strong as one alone. I felt Thomas would be happy that both of our combined resources could provide for a honeymoon of at least this night, so I hurriedly opened the sealed envelope to find the money and it was a nice sum. “Thomas!” I squealed, “Cousin Eddie gave us cash! We can go on a honeymoon!” He looked at me and smiled “*No* Baby, Mama is gone so we have the whole house. Besides, I have a special surprise for you at home”. I did not notice the lack of debate, but somehow assumed that we could go on the honeymoon a few days later.

Thomas said we would only stay with his mother for the first few months of our marriage, because she was old and lonesome. I resented the idea of living with his mother, but I repressed the thought.

The house smelled of lemon oil and soap, this was Thomas’s surprise—he had cleaned the house for me and cooked a meal of steaks and salad, for later. Thomas pulled me to him and kissed me gently. “Wait right here” he said and produced a pink foil wrapped box as a gift. Inside was a pink sheer negligee. While I changed, he lighted candles and started the gentle nuptial process. I had not let him do no more than kiss me until now and I found some pain in the process.

I passed the week in a state of escalating ecstasy. The first few days, we did not answer knocks. We performed the minimal in daily chores and spent the remaining hours, cuddling, hugging and petting. We kept the shades drawn and shut the world out until our days of freedom expired. My mother in law was due to

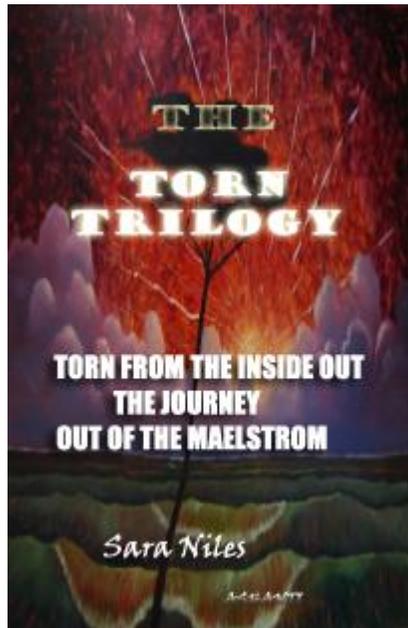
return and I quenched the resentment of Thomas putting me in this position. It was only temporary, I reassured myself.

*PART II*

*Descent Into: the Abyss of Hell*

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