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In the name of love

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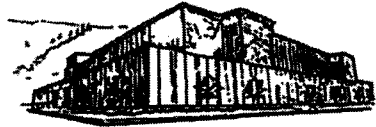
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IN THE NAME OF LOVE

by

Tamara Y. M. Love

B.S.W. Florida A & M University, 1994

M.S.S.W. Columbia University, 1996

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

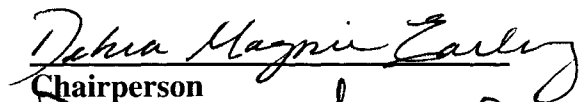
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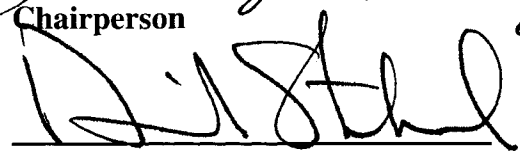
Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

December 2005

Approved by:


Chairperson


Dean, Graduate School

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Prologue

I come from a long line of resilient, if sometimes troubled, women. The men in their lives were significant, even necessary, providing protection, food and shelter, independence from family, and even love in the ways that they knew. But, it is to the women that I look now. Their stories echoing in the hollow of my bones, holding and sustaining me. I know that I can never fully understand or inhabit their lives, having been given a world of certain, if sometimes limited, privilege. I've not spent years stooped in a field picking cotton, nor have I had to clean houses for nickels a day, nor have I been without food because there was simply no money with which to purchase it. And, I've been afforded more than a reasonable amount of education, even earning a degree from an Ivy League university. So, again, I won't pretend to fully understand the depth of these women's hurts, fears, longings. Instead, I can only attempt to give them voice.

*Who's gonna sing that las' song?
Who's gonna sing that las' song?
Who's gonna sing that las' song,
 When I die, when I die?
Jesus gonna sing that las' song,
Jesus gonna sing that las' song;
Jesus gonna sing that las' song,
 When I die.*

“When I Die” (Author Unknown)

Christian Soldier

(1)

The waters poured onto the main floor now, the basement long flooded. Her pastor's photo, her father's pipe, the black transistor radio that brought her sermons each morning and the daily news each night, they were all floating, pushing through the basement windows, moving up through the stairwell as if someone were carrying them upstairs for her to see. An offering she'd rejected.

Standing at the top of the stairwell, Stella wanted to reach back and snatch them from the water's grasp. Instead, she picked up her bible off of the kitchen table, pressed the new white Sunday hat she'd just bought at the thrift shop onto her head, and waded toward the porch. A white man stood in the boat in front of her. His face stern.

Ready ma'am, he said.

His tone surprised her. The kindness in it. She turned and looked at the house, the ruins of the rugs, a red sandal dancing solo on the waves, the sepia photo of her parents. She felt queasy, and she wondered then what it had been like for her brother, Henry, all those years ago. The Arkansas River water pulling him under, tugging at his shoes, his shirt. Holding him finally, making him a part of its world.

We need to go, ma'am, the man said. He held onto a porch post and steadied the boat as she stepped inside.

She sat down and drew her bible toward her chest. It's in your hands Lord, she said. It's in your hands.

(2)

I was four years old the first time I stayed overnight in that house. It was a couple years before the Lansing Flood of 1975. My parents departed quickly that evening, handing my grandmother a small suitcase that held our church clothes. My grandmother led me into the basement after my parents were gone. Bulging from the stairwell walls were jackets and coats, dresses and skirts. Thin light filtered through the clothes, illuminating the narrow, uneven stairs. I pressed my palm against the beige trench coat on the wall, and felt my hand slip on the plastic that covered it. As I lost my footing, my grandmother reached back and caught my hand. In the basement, we went into a small back room that had a single bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and a small gas stove. The room smelled of moth balls, burnt hair and sulfur. Static and an old black man's gravel-filled voice spilled quietly from a small transistor radio next to the stove.

I wanted to go back upstairs, but Grandma sat down and placed a pressing comb on the flame.

Read this, she said, handing me a sheet of paper.

On the front of the paper, chocolate brown lines formed a man in sandals, draped in a loose cloth. I ran my fingers along the creases of the cloth. In one hand, the man held a long, wooden staff planted firmly on the ground; the other hand was turned palm side up, and reached out as he stood among a herd of sheep.

What is it? I asked, as I stared at the picture.

Your Sunday school lesson, she said. She sounded surprised and disappointed. I read the lesson, peaking up to watch the smoke rise from her hair as the grease sizzled

against the hot comb, my questions about Sunday school and Jesus mixing with the haze and the static and the gravel-filled voice on the radio.

(3)

Although she was only nine, Stella went to the church on her own. Each night that week, she, along with her sisters and her mother had been dropped off by her father in the carriage and picked up when the service finished. But this evening her mother was tired and stayed home to rest, and her sisters wanted to be with their mother. You sure you want to go? her father asked. Yes, Papa, she said. Stella climbed out of the carriage and ran her hands over the lower part of her dress, smoothing out the wrinkles. She checked to make sure the hem her mother had sewn into her slip hadn't come apart. Satisfied that she looked okay, Stella reached up and pulled her bible off the seat. Bye, Papa, she said. Her father nodded, more at the horses than at her, then shook the reins. She watched the carriage pull away.

Under the tent, nearly a hundred people had gathered already. Stella stood on her tiptoes and searched for a seat near the front, but an usher took her hand and escorted her toward the middle. Stella was surprised by the message. Instead of telling her that she was destined for hell, the preacher talked about Jesus being someone who would be a friend she could talk to about anything. He said that Jesus would love you no matter what. And it sounded like Jesus didn't care about what color you were either. Stella was tired being teased about how dark she was by her cousins and her siblings. Tired of being left at home when her mother and sisters went to town to sell the pancake make up because none of the ladies wanted to see her face, the color of toasted pecans.

Does anyone here tonight wish to give his life to Jesus? the preacher said.

Stella stood up slowly and pushed her hair, heavy with sweat, off of her face. As she climbed through the row, grabbing the back of one chair then another, she wondered what her parents would say, if her father would approve. Under the tent, the women began to sing in hushed voices, *I wanta live so God can use me, victorious, in this lan.* The women repeated the verse over and over, the voices absorbed by the metallic rattle of a cymbal the echo of a hand drum. The music and the heat and the voices caused Stella to swoon and she felt herself falling when a hand caught her from behind and pushed her forward, toward the preacher.

When it was quiet, the preacher kneeled beside her. Why do you want to give your life to God? he asked.

Jesus, she said. Jesus.

(4)

Years later as I set about cleaning my grandmother's home room by room, I came across several stacks of church bulletins that she'd saved from nearly 40 years earlier. In the programs, my grandmother is listed as the keynote speaker for women's day, the church anniversary, children's day. When I visited my grandmother's church, at the beginning and end of each service, people surrounded her. Young and old, singles and couples, all vying for her attention if just for a moment.

I listened as they thanked my grandmother for a lesson she'd taught in missionary class or Sunday school, or for a prayer she'd offered just for them. Often the comments were like this one I heard between my Grandmother and a woman whose mother had just

died. *My mother always told me how much it meant that you kept visiting. She'd been sick for so long, most people seemed to forget about her.* In her faith, my grandmother seemed to find something more than grace or healing or salvation. Evangelizing Jesus provided purpose, even validation.

(5)

I was eight years old when I made the journey down the aisle myself at Foss Avenue Baptist Church in Michigan. Until that moment, I'd been "saved" by virtue of my parents. But the minister never said at what age my parents' protection ended and so I worried that I might die unprotected and be forced to spend an eternity gnashing my teeth, even though I wasn't sure what that meant. Now, at eight, I'd be shielded, and redeemed, and responsible for all of my actions. From then on, I understood that it was really, really bad to punch Catherine Cooper in the nose so that it bled a river that forced her to lie down in the nurse's office. I had to stop sneaking my older brother's schoolbooks out of his bag so that I could read them because I had not been given permission to read them. I needed to be extra careful of my thoughts because Jesus could read those to.

You're part of the Christian Army now, the minister said, shaking my hand after my baptism.

Soon after my baptism, to help me with my transition into the "Christian Army," and to give me something else to read, my mother presented me with a copy of a novel from a Christian bookstore. I finished it in a couple of days and she bought me another book by the same author. They were part of a series. The reading reinforced much of what I already knew. Lying is wrong. Obey my parents. Pray everyday. The one new

addition was that I should touch my private parts only when I needed to bathe or after using the bathroom. I read the texts over and over, thrilled to have books that my mother had picked just for me, and eager to learn how to be a good Christian. But, even at a young age, I found that actualizing what I'd learned wasn't easy.

After I was saved, the fights with my classmates increased, escalating to the point that I pushed one girl off of a fortress-like wall in front of our elementary school in hopes that she'd break an arm or a leg. I stopped sneaking my brother's math and history books, but made my way to my mother's bookcase in the living room that held books with sex scenes and profanity. I found also that I was unable to stop my hands from finding their way between my legs, providing a pleasure that I could not yet name. I was a weak soldier, losing battles of the mind and body each day, praying for forgiveness and shiny new armor each night.

(6)

In later years, our faith would sometimes bind me and my grandmother together as we each sought familiar comfort in knowing that Jesus wouldn't abandon us as the men physically present in our lives were sometimes apt to do. More often, however as I came to equate Christianity with domination and repression, the Christian faith seemed to repel us like two north ends of a magnet pushed together.

Grandma believed that our lives were predestined by God.

I questioned why God would create beings predestined to go to hell.

Grandma believed that justice came at the hands of God.

I believed that justice was illusory at best unless taken into your own hands.

When my grandmother's only child, my mother, died suddenly at age 39, she decided that it was God's timing.

I could only see that my mother had died too soon and, in my grief, decided that God was, simply, cruel.

My grandmother believed that Jesus solved all.

I struggled to believe that Jesus existed at all.

Last year, I moved in with my grandmother to care for her when she became ill, my motives less altruistic than guilt-driven. One evening, as she sat on the edge of the bed dressed in baby blue flannel pajamas, my grandmother looked up at me.

You know, there may not even be a Jesus, she said.

She said it nonchalantly, as if she'd told me, *you know, there may not be any more skim milk*. Like she hadn't built the past 80 years of her life on Christian doctrine. Like Jesus wasn't her life.

I needed her to take the words back even as I was comforted to know that we shared similar doubts. Still, I needed her to believe.

There's a Jesus, right? I said, the words splintering against the roof of my mouth.

You just don't know do you? she said.

In the Name of Love

(1)

On my grandmother's coffee table, sitting among an assortment of porcelain and glass figurines, there is a picture of her father, Papa, standing next to her Grandpa Eli. Her father is dressed in a dark shirt tucked into pants that hang loose on his tall thin frame, while Grandpa Eli, is dressed in denim overalls and a long-sleeved shirt, which is rolled up to the elbow. Both men are wearing hats. They are similar in appearance, except, Grandpa Eli already shows the signs of age, his jaws sagging slightly, the crow's feet around his eyes more pronounced. But, the posture of both men is erect. Their unsmiling faces, determined.

I often stare at the photograph, taking in the men, the sun faded wooden shingles on the house behind them, Papa's house. The sturdy practicality of the men and the house. As I study the men's faces, I search for my grandmother's jaw line, the bridge of her nose, the arch of her eyebrows. I also study the hue of their skin--the significant difference between the two men. My grandmother's grandfather does not have the dark skin that she has sometimes lamented. My grandmother's grandfather is white.

(2)

I was in my thirties the first time I "officially" dated a white man. One evening, after having dinner with friends, we walked the short downtown strip window shopping and talking. A group of young men in their late teens and early twenties, all white, were just ahead of us, their energy raucous, menacing. One of the men glimpsed us, and my

boyfriend quickly released my hand. His words caught in the back of his throat, but he relayed the message. There was the possibility of danger here. I understood, having experienced several similar instances hanging out with another white male friend, Ken, in Manhattan.

After a late dinner, as Ken and I entered the subway station in Times Square, a black man, who appeared homeless, complimented me. When he realized that I was with the white man who entered the turnstile behind me, Ken having slipped his hand back into mine, his tone changed, and he launched a verbal assault. The man trailed us to the platform, aggressively hurling his words while we waited for the train. Then he said it: You ain't gonna do no better than the black man. He stared at me a long moment before walking away. Until then, even as I kept an eye on him, I'd been able to tune him out. Dismiss him as just another nameless, faceless, homeless man with issues. But with this proclamation, *You ain't gonna do no better than the black man*, I couldn't ignore him. His message for me seemed two-fold: one, that I believed Ken was better than black men; and two, that Ken could not love me the way a black man could. And it hurt, his words echoing my own questions and doubts.

Ken didn't seem nearly as unnerved as I was in that moment, and instead stared into the tunnel waiting for the train lights to round the bend. Months later, Ken and I would have a discussion--me asking him why we never officially dated, him telling me that we basically had. It's true that ours was an intimate relationship. He introduced me to his love of Italian Opera. He often cooked dinner for me, withholding recipes so that only he could cook them for me. When I couldn't sleep, it was Ken I called at one or two in the morning so that we could meet at my apartment building before walking to the 24

hour diner where we'd share stories and chocolate milkshakes. When we were apart for longer than a couple of weeks we wrote letters to each other and had lengthy telephone conversations that ended with each telling the other, *I love you*.

Ours was a mutual love built on trust, respect and honesty. But during this discussion that took place months after the incident with the black man in the subway station, after sharing a meal of broiled salmon, wild rice and, his favorite, French cut green beans, all prepared by me, Ken explained as delicately as he could that while he planned to adopt black children, he hadn't envisioned that his wife would be black.

Ken and I could meet at the color line, but we could not cross it.

(3)

When my grandmother and her sisters discuss their grandparents it is in quick clipped sentences that allow no questions. And the discussion is always about, Eli, my white great great grandfather. Grandpa Eli was a good man, they tell me. These words are followed quickly with the story of how he walked several miles several days a week to help his son build a home for him and his family. We'd see him coming down the road, and he'd have something on his back--a long piece of wood, or tools, or a plate of glass, my grandmother says. He'd carry it and he and Papa would work on that house from sunup to sundown, and then he'd walk all those miles back home, and he never complained, my aunt says. He didn't mind that we were black either, my grandmother adds, referring to her and her siblings.

Though I have not seen a photo of Carrie, Grandpa Eli's wife, it is her that I think about most often, awed by her union. Carrie would have married not long after the Emancipation Proclamation and ratification of the 13th Amendment, which freed the slaves. It was time of displacement and disquiet for blacks throughout the country, but especially in the south. Carrie would have been one of thousands of blacks leaving plantations in search of the better life that had been promised, or part of a family that hoped to stay on the plantation but to work under new rules as free men and women. Carrie was a young girl with little more than the clothes on her back and the domestic skills she'd learned. Her options would have been limited, and her best option would have been marriage.

I do not know how Carrie and Eli met, but I have imagined....

Lingering glances exchanged across a crowded room as they each leaned into the slow, steady lyric of a trumpet.

A fistful of daisies, orange and yellow and white, held loosely between Eli's fingers for Carrie but presented to Carrie's mother as Carrie stood off to the side while her parents escorted the young man into their home for coffee and hot-water biscuits.

A chain of love letters addressed to Carrie, but instead of a name at the bottom, a clue for where she would find the next letter.

But this was the late 19th Century. And he was white. And she was black, only recently determined to be a citizen of the United States. And Arkansas had a law, enacted in 1838, making marriage between blacks and whites a criminal offense punishable by law.

So, perhaps a look across the rows of cotton as Eli sat on a horse keeping watch over the slaves. Carrie catching his eye as she stooped, pulling the white bolls from the reddish brown nests, her skirt pinned up to keep from scraping the dirt, revealing the softness of her thighs, the curve of her legs.

Perhaps Eli was a wanderer traveling after the Civil War. Seeing Carrie as she and her family journeyed toward the South Carolina or Florida Coasts, toward the 40 acres and a mule deeded to them by General William T. Sherman's *Order No. 15* before President Andrew Johnson reversed the promise. Or maybe her family was headed toward some of the 45 million acres of public lands in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida and Arkansas that were opened by the Freedman's Bureau before President Andrew Johnson reversed the promise.

I am certain that she did not approach him. I am certain that his family was not happy, shunning him at best, declaring him dead at worst. I am certain that her parents were not happy. They had just been released from slavery, an institution that prevented blacks from marrying legally as the attitude of white plantation owners was, generally, "we're raising cotton, not niggers."

If you do this, you'll rue the day you were born, the words of both sets of parents. The fear for her. The fear for him. The fear for the unborn children to come.

Eli and Carrie would defy their families. Would defy the law. Would defy society. Eli and Carrie would build a home together in the name of love.

*The devil is a rider
In slouch hat and boots
Gun by his side,
Bull whip in his hand,
The devil is a rider;
The rider is a devil
Riding his buck stallion
Over the land.*

*The poor-white and nigger sinners
Are low-down in the valley,
The rider is a devil
And there's hell to pay;
The devil is a rider,
God may be the owner,
But he's rich and forgetful,
And far away.*

“Arkansas Chant” (Sterling A. Brown)

The Eldest Son

(1)

It took Stella and her siblings at least a half hour to get there. Instead of going to Uncle Eathe's house to play hide and seek with their cousins, they had walked the road past the Wilson Farm, through a field, up the hill, past two trestles and, finally, to the railroad tracks. The walk was long and Stella grew tired as they climbed, but each time she complained her brother, Henry, threatened to leave her behind. From where they stood, off to the right of the tracks, they could see the light swaying back and forth. The crisp radiance of it reminded her of lightning that, somehow, had been boxed and suspended in midair.

Each of them knew the legend--a railroad worker had fallen on the tracks into the path of an oncoming train, severing his head from his body. People in the town believed that the light was the lantern of the railroad worker who is searching for his missing head. As she stared at the light, Stella grabbed her brother's hand. Henry snatched it away, turned, planted both feet on the tracks, and started toward the light.

Henry, his sisters cried.

Henry ignored them and began a slow trot toward the light. The light remained where it was, unmoving but for its slight pendulum like motion. When he was a few feet away from the light, Henry, stopped. He cupped one of his hands over his eyes and took a quick leap forward. The light edged backward then.

What you see? Stella called.

Henry didn't respond. Instead, he took another step forward.

The light moved backward again.

Let's go, he said.

The five of them hustled down the hill and into the field. Stella was shaking now, unsure of what she'd seen. As she ran through the field she stumbled over a corn stalk, falling onto her stomach. She stood up, and looked over her shoulder expecting the light to be upon them, but saw only the faint shadow of the moon's rays seeping through the purple swell of clouds.

Wait, she said, running to catch up with her siblings.

At home, they collapsed under a pecan tree, out of breath.

Looks like ya'll been doing something you ain't had no business doing, their mother said.

They could hear the creaking wood as their mother swayed back and forth in her rocking chair on porch.

No, ma'am, they answered, each of them aware of the punishment for lying.

They were all quiet then. Stella lay on her back, taking in the warm damp air, the sweet smell of the hay, the occasional thumps of pecans dropping to the earth.

Go on and get ready for bed before your father comes in, their mother said.

Stella and her siblings heaved a collective sigh of relief.

(2)

It is in this haunted town, Gurdon, Arkansas, nearly 75 miles south of Little Rock, that Stella was born fourth of eight children, three of whom died in childhood. It is here that she learned how to cook cabbage and black-eyed peas with the occasional piece of fatback on a wood stove. It is here that Stella learned to plant, hoe and can tomatoes, corn and beans. It is here that she learned how to make dresses out of cow feed sacks--plain ones for everyday, floral patterned for Sunday. It is here that Stella learned how to survive.

(3)

Joseph was new to Carman High School. His parents, like mine more than a decade earlier, had moved from a predominantly black neighborhood in the city to a predominantly white neighborhood in the suburbs. Nearly all of the girls in the high school, including me, had a crush on him. Joseph could sing. He was well dressed. He was handsome with smooth, black coffee, blemish free skin, dimpled cheeks and perfect

muscular form. He was quiet and kind, and used to the attention. Most of us liked him immediately. The students who didn't like Joseph took exception to the color of his girlfriend. She was white.

My brother attended Carman for two years before I became a student there. During my brother's freshman year, after Alex Haley's *Roots* aired on television, fights broke out at the high school. Black and white students wrestled each other to the ground, bloodied each other's fists and noses, and bruised each other's eyes. The white students uttered only two words, *Kunta Kente*. Words that proved to be gasoline for an already burning fire. The school closed its doors for two days.

Now, two years later, in 1983, there were no race riots in the school. No direct confrontations. Instead, something more malevolent. A cross burned on the lawn of Joseph's family's new home. I never saw the burning cross, though I wanted to. After years of witnessing the pictures in books and movies and on television, I wanted to see first hand the orange and blue and yellow flames as they licked the wind illuminating the new, two-story brick home with the two car garage. I wanted to hear the smoldering wood, inhale the carbon smoke, smear the coal black soot left on the ground. I asked Joseph what it was like, having a cross burned on his lawn. He didn't answer, only cocked his head as he looked at me, puzzled.

Back then, when I envisioned the cross burning on Joseph's well-manicured lawn, I never thought about Joseph's family, never saw his father coming outside in his cotton blue pajamas and bathrobe, a bucket of water in his hand. Never thought about his mother dialing 911 for the police who would tell them that it was *just a teenage prank*.

Never considered the fear Joseph's parents must have felt for their son, for their other sons, for themselves.

Joseph did not break up with his girlfriend. At least not immediately. So, a second cross was burned in his family's lawn. The second cross was larger than the first. Maybe the builder's of the crosses thought Joseph's family hadn't seen the first one clearly. Or, perhaps they believed the family simply didn't get the message.

Joseph broke up with his girlfriend then. He made the breakup public, spreading the news like a bad rumor. But it was too late. Joseph's parents put their new house back on the market, sticking the sale sign post in the cavity left by the crosses. Before the house was sold, the quiet young man, with the dark skin and dimpled cheeks was gone. They had returned to the predominantly black neighborhood from which they had moved. The neighborhood wasn't as nice, with its cracked and crumbling sidewalks and significantly smaller homes. The high school wasn't as good, the number of students going to college after graduation, far fewer. But it was still better, because while the blacks in the neighborhood may not have been pleased with Joseph's choice of girlfriends, the family wouldn't have to worry about crosses being burned on their lawn in the pre-dawn hours or other teenage-pranks that served to remind them that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream was still just a dream.

(4)

Stella and her family were in the field picking cotton when they came. The three men, including Mr. Rivers, who owned the land they worked, beckoned Stella's father toward the rear of Mr. Rivers black Model T. The men surrounded her father, their pink

skin a stark contrast to her father's dark brown. Stella wondered who the other men were, and why her father wasn't looking Mr. Rivers in the eye like he'd taught her.

You better get your niggers in tonight, Lawrence, Stella heard one of the men say.

Stella dropped the white bolls into her bag and glanced at her father, his gaze still focused on the ground, his long fingers wrapped around the hoe he'd been using to loosen the dirt around the plants.

To Stella, her father's posture reminded her of when she'd snuck the last of the sugar from the sugar box and made herself sick, and was about to be punished. Stella had never seen her father scared and it made her tremble.

She turned her head back to her work, her small hands reaching.

The white men walked toward the car doors.

Get them in before nightfall, Lawrence, Mr. Rivers said. Get them in before nightfall.

A swirl of dust kicked up behind the car, bathing Stella's father in the red Arkansas clay.

Stella and her sisters slept in the bed with their mother that evening. Stella's father and brother, and the two men who worked in the fields had left the house before sundown.

In the middle of the night Stella heard the horses hooves beating the ground, saw the flickering brightness like sun shine through the bedroom window, the light stopping for a moment before leaving behind the sobering darkness.

Later, Henry showed Stella the hole in which he and the men had hid. It was just a couple hundred yards away from the barn, covered with a wooden board caked with dirt. A large gray rock with green growing on one side of it and a cluster of dead branches the only markers. Until then, Stella and her siblings knew the rock only as a spot they called “safe” when they played tag.

(5)

Stella could see her father in the distance. Uncle Eathe and Mr. Johnson were with him. The two men walked on either side of her father, her father’s steps slow and deliberate. As the men drew closer, Stella could see the body hanging over her father’s arms. When he reached the front of the house, a shrill cry went out of Stella’s mother. Up close, Stella recognized her lone brother, Henry, his slender body limp, his clothes damp.

Earlier, Henry had gone off with his best friend, Lou, to enjoy the hot, summer afternoon. It was Sunday, and he was done with church and chores. Lou showed up right after Henry had finished dinner, ready to go to the river. But Henry had been warned.

Don’t you go near that river, boy, his father said.

The two boys left, Henry wearing his Sunday shoes at his mother’s insistence. The boys were gone for an hour or two and then Uncle Eathe was at the door speaking too fast, blending his words, pleading for Stella’s father to come quick.

He was gone for a long time.

Stella’s father stretched Henry across the bed. He propped the boy’s head against the pillow, then began to undress him. He removed Henry’s Sunday shoes first, then his

plaid shirt, and finally his faded overalls, which were cut off above the knee. Lawrence took the soapy water his wife had prepared and the rag. He wiped Henry's arms first, and then the mud that had caked beneath the boy's fingernails. Lawrence washed his son's chest and stomach. He wiped the boy's legs, stopping to make a cotton bandage for the fresh gash cut into the backside of Henry's thigh. Lawrence asked his wife for a clean pot of water and then washed his son's face. After he bathed him, Lawrence stood up and left the room.

In the front of the house, Stella heard her father pacing even as Uncle Eathe and Mr. Johnson tried to console him, but her father kept repeating the words, *he had his shoes on*.

As Stella listened to her father and the muffled voices of the men, she tried to climb into her mother's lap. But her mother kept pushing her down and rubbing her belly. After a while, her father grew angrier and began to yell and cuss. Stella's mother went into their room then and dressed Henry in his Sunday suit. When she finished, Stella's mother sat at the kitchen table veiled in the dark blue light of the moon less, southern sky, wiping the corners of her eyes and rubbing her belly.

When he died, Henry was the only boy in the family. Six girls had been born after him. As the oldest child and the only son, it was he who helped his father plow the fields, he who milked the cow, he who fed the hogs and the mules and the chickens. It was he who had stopped going to school so his sisters could attend.

When Henry drowned, Stella, physically stronger than her older sister who later died of tuberculosis, stood behind the mule, guiding the plow, turning the red dirt and clay over in the heat of the day row after endless row. It was she who tugged at the teats of the milk cow. It was she who fed the hogs and the mules and the chickens. It was she who no longer attended school. It was Stella who became the eldest son.

Four or five months after Henry drowned, Stella's brother, James, was born. But it was too late, Stella says.

Grandpa

(1)

These are some of the things I remember from the fifth grade:

I learned about hexagons and octagons.

I didn't like weeding or planting the small garden in the rear corner of our back yard.

I learned about fungi and basic plant cell structures.

I rode my bicycle whenever I could--an orange ten-speed bought by my grandmother.

I did extra book reports on Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Booker T. Washington for my mother.

I took private piano lessons in our home.

I read by flashlight under the covers at night.

I learned the metric system for weight and volume.

I hated practicing the piano.

Mrs. Pirata, the school music teacher, prepared me to sing the female part of "Annie Get Your Gun."

I forgot part of "Annie Get Your Gun" during the school assembly.

I caught the school bus at 6:50 in the morning.

My grandmother never made it to fifth grade, which would be unremarkable for that time, except for the fact that her sisters did make it to fifth grade and beyond. One of

them even becoming an elementary school teacher who traveled during her time off, sending my grandmother postcards from Anchorage, Paris, and Seoul.

So, how does one build a life with only a fourth grade education? Certainly, my grandmother's plight was not so different from many black women in the south at that time. I've even had white women tell me that it was the same for their mothers. And, I understand their need to connect, as well as their need to note that blacks were not the only ones to suffer. But, if one considers literacy tests, poll taxes, and the lasting impact of the Jim Crow Laws--new chains shackled to the necks and ankles of blacks after they were *freed* from slavery-- it is impossible for me to conclude that the experiences were equal.

Like Grandma Carrie before her, my grandmother's options would have been limited, and her best option would have been marriage.

(2)

I pressed my grandmother one evening about the years before she married my grandfather. She was 29 or 30 when they married--well beyond the traditional age of marriage for young women at that time. When I asked, my grandmother described in cryptic language a man who was "interested" in her.

My grandmother was 17. I just didn't know anything about men, she says. Papa was like to have killed you if he thought you were just thinking about a man. He was just determined that we Wingfield Girls, that's what how everybody knew us, as the Wingfield Girls, would not be a disgrace to the family. I don't blame him.

My grandmother continues, this man came into my room... I didn't know what he wanted... I moved from one corner to the next... He just kept after me... He was too strong...his grip... I tried to get from underneath him... Too heavy... I tried to scream... And then, Papa...

The policeman came to their house that evening. The officer nodding in agreement with my grandmother's father when he said, barely above a whisper, I have the right to protect my girls. And then the police officer leaving.

My grandmother looks at the floor as she tells me this, blinking back tears. And I want to hold her then, to rock away the pain of all of the losses. The losses I know. The losses she will never speak on. The losses still to come.

More than ten years would pass before she would marry my grandfather, George Love.

(3)

I was in my mid-thirties the first time I saw a picture of my grandfather. I was writing checks for my grandmother's bills or clearing off the coffee table or eating a snack. I only remember that I was in my grandmother's living room when she slipped the picture in front of me the way a waiter might slip a plate in front of someone at a restaurant.

Do you know who that is? she asked, as she walked toward her bedroom.

Uncle Willie? I said, thinking it was my great aunt's husband.

That's George, she said.

My grandmother didn't say anything else, only went into her room and lay on her bed leaving me with more questions than answers. Until that moment, I didn't think any pictures of my grandfather existed. At least not in my grandmother's home.

To understand my thinking, one needs to know that in my grandmother's home there are hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures. They are piled high in boxes, arranged and spilling from photo albums, stuffed into scrap books, perched on tables and bookshelves the photos framed and frame less. Too many of them are pictures of us, her three grandchildren. Each one marking different moments of our lives from the time we were suckling the nipples of baby bottles to the present day. Several of the photos are of her only child, my mother. Countless others are of her friends and cousins and siblings. I've examined many of the photos, one spring, taking up a project with my great aunt to put more of the photos into scrapbooks, writing down names and dates when possible. But in all of my years, and even as I worked on the photo project with my great aunt, I never came upon a photograph of my grandfather.

In the photo my grandmother unveiled, my grandfather is dressed in his green army uniform. He is smiling, revealing perfect teeth for the camera. He is a tall, fit, muscular man. Handsome. In the army, he worked the mess. My grandmother has medals that he may have earned, but it is unclear whether my grandfather ever served in the general infantry. What is known is that my grandfather did at least two tours of duty, one in World War II, and the other in the Korean War.

One evening, before this picture was revealed, my great aunt asked my grandmother, Does Tamara know about her grandfather?

My grandmother said nothing, as if no question had been posed at all.

The bits I do know of my grandfather, I've learned in snatches--comments made by my grandmother and my mother through the years which, like a collage, don't provide the complete picture, but give just enough of a glimpse to give some semblance of who he was and what he meant to his family.

I was three or four when my grandfather called our house. My father took a message and relayed it to my mother, your father called. Before my mother came home, my father mentioned the call to my brother and me. I remember being curious about who he was, having only known one grandparent up to that point. My mother was less than happy about that call. She argued with my father well into the night. When he called again, my mother answered. I remember only one part of that conversation, Don't you ever call this house again, she said, her voice angry and high pitched. And then the telephone slammed on the hook.

To my knowledge, my grandfather never did call again.

The marriage between my mother's parent's was short. My grandfather was a violent man, whose rages when he was at home often left my grandmother in a heap on the floor, my mother, just a tiny girl unable to protect her mother.

Your grandfather hated church and anything to do with Jesus, my grandmother tells me year later. He said I'd filled my head with the white man's religion.

During his second tour of duty, my grandfather stopped calling, writing and sending money to my grandmother. My grandmother doesn't tell me this, instead, I learn this from letters and short notes addressed to her sent by my grandfather's commanding officer. The notes are compassionate and describe the officer's attempts to get my

grandfather to take care of his family. The captain also explains in one of the letters that the army cannot garnish her husband's wages nor can they force her husband to send funds. It seems that the man was successful in his first attempts to prod my grandfather to keep supporting his family. But then my grandfather stopped. The last letter from his commanding officer reads:

19 May 1955

Dear Mrs. Love,

I've talked to Sergeant Love, and urged him to be more considerate of your child's health and happiness, as well as your own. He promised me that he would write to you to make arrangements for your child to have better medical care.

*Yours Truly,
L. T. Capt. QMC*

These letters reveal some measure of the desperation my grandmother felt. The abandonment of her husband the father of her child. With no steady income, and a child to feed, my grandmother applied for public assistance. She was denied initially, because she was married and it was assumed that her husband was taking care of her and her child. They assumed that my grandmother was a fraud.

(4)

Their stories make sense to me now. The one of how my grandmother took spoiled meat from the garbage of one of the white families for whom she worked, boiling the meat until maggots oozed between the white strands, my grandmother scrapping away the maggots, eventually adding cabbage. The stories my mother told time and again of

eating mayonnaise sandwiches for lunch because there wasn't anything else to put in between the bread. I better understand why my mother insisted that I eat myself sick, so as not to waste the food I'd been given--piles of chicken, meat spaghetti, black eyes peas and corn bread and yams and beans and any of the other nourishing foods provided for me and my brothers.

I also understand the humor and the sadness in my grandmother's story of being outraged when her daughter found the cracker jacks or pieces of chocolate that she'd hidden as a treat for herself. The stories of my mother's enjoyment of the trips to Arkansas, when she would sit in her grandparent's yard scooping handfuls of red clay and dirt into her mouth, a sweet feast for her undernourished body.

My grandmother would have endured any amount of physical abuse my grandfather would give if it would have meant that he'd keep putting food on their table.

(5)

Years later, my grandfather would write to my grandmother in his beautiful and elegant penmanship. The letters always start with something about hoping that my grandmother is well. They ask if she is "still into that religion," and then end with him talking about the food he misses that my grandmother and the food she used to cook--meals of cornbread and fried chicken and cabbage. The letters ask also about my mother, and my grandfather begs my grandmother to pass along a message to their daughter: "tell LaVonne I love her."

In the letters there is no acknowledgment of the history of financial and physical abandonment. Nor is there any acknowledgment of his physical abuse. So, of course

there are no apologies. These letters came to my grandmother in the late sixties. Years after the ones sent by my grandfather's commanding officer, explaining that he'd done all he could. Letters that I discovered among the receipts and bills and clippings my grandmother had saved for more than 30 years. A record of their failed marriage.

By the time these letters arrived, my mother had already married her own military man and was well on her way to a new life and new, if familiar, heart aches.

Bridal Book

It was not until fifteen years after she died, that I set out pictures of my mother. Two framed black and white photos adorn my studio apartment now. In one picture, it is 1951 according to my grandmother's script on the back, and my mother is three years old. She is dressed in her Sunday best: a dark colored matching skirt and jacket, which are tad too small, along with white ankle socks and shoes. Her small, brown body leans back against a tall tree, the breadth of its trunk greater than my mother. The leaves on the ground hint of fall and, perhaps, the snowy Midwest winter that lay ahead. She is not looking at the camera, but down toward the right, her mouth open as though taking in a breath, her eyes closed. Bangs sit high on her forehead and a braid with a ribbon tied at the end peeks behind the back of her neck. My grandmother's scrawl tells me that my mother is counting; she's playing hide and seek with her cousins. In the other black and white, my mother leans forward, her large brown eyes directed at, but not focused on, the camera. She appears to be gazing. Her hair is styled in the look popularized by the Vandellas and other girl groups of the sixties. A necklace hangs delicately around her neck over a light colored, pullover sweater. It is my mother's senior picture, taken a couple months before she graduated from high school, a few months before she married my father.

Although I think about him often, I still have not set out a photograph of my father.

I am three or four and I am in bed. I hear yelling, my mother screaming, my father's voice loud and angry. I am scared. I hear bodies tumbling and my mother pleading. She runs into my room and closes the door. My father stands by the door and orders her to leave my room but she is crying and clinging to me and to the bed. I want to help her, protect her. But I am little, so my father enters my room, pries my mothers fingers off of me and my bed and drags her across the hardwood floor and into the hall. When I go to my doorway, I see my father hitting my mother with his thick, brown leather belt. He has her by one of her ankles and she keeps reaching up toward his hand, trying to free herself. I wonder what she did wrong. Through her tears, she tells me to go back to bed.

This violence is my earliest childhood memory.

My mother was smart. Once, in a moment of nostalgia, she took us to her old high school. We had been on our way to my grandmother's house. My mother was in good spirits and had been discussing her school with a sense of pride. At her high school, my mother ran into one of her teachers. Standing in an off-white hallway with its high ceilings, trophy cases, and old photographs of principals, founders and other important people, virtually all white and all male, this teacher went on about my mother's intelligence. He discussed my mother's command of science, recalled her ability to analyze and debate, and noted her interests in Latin and French. *She was one of the best,* he said. When he learned that she had not gone to college, he looked surprised and disappointed. My mother had been offered a college scholarship when she graduated from high school, but the funds were not enough to make school affordable. Her mother

scrubbed floors, ironed shirts, and cleaned toilets for well-to-do whites, and earned just enough to get by. My mother's father had long disappeared after a turbulent marriage to her mother; he would be of no help. By the time my mother was offered the scholarship, my dad, a cinnamon-brown, tall, handsome and respectful gentleman, had started to court her. Although he lived in Grand Rapids, Michigan, my father made the nearly two hour trip to Lansing on most Sundays to attend church and have dinner with my mother and grandmother. He talked about building a better life and raising a family. And, he had a job.

My grandmother, was against my mother's the marriage to my father. But my mother threatened to elope, so Grandma decided that it was better to have her daughter married in the company of her family and friends than to have her marry without their blessing. In later years, when Grandma would come over during my parents' fights, she would tell me, *I can say one thing for your father, he never tried any hanky panky with her before they got married.* She would nod as she sat listening to my parents argue. My mother married my father the same year she graduated from high school. My mother was 17. My father was 23.

Like my mother, I also graduated from high school at the age of 17. Up until that point, I'd never had a boyfriend. And my mother had made it clear since I was a small child that I was going to college, specifically, a black college. During my junior year of high school, I applied to three colleges, all of them historically black institutions, Howard University, Hampton University, and Florida A & M University. I was accepted into all

three. Because I had a brother in college, I knew that cost was a factor, so I chose Florida A & M.

The State Journal's "Bridal Book" section dated July 18, 1966, describes what my mother wore on the day of her wedding:

Her wedding gown was of organza and re-embroidered alencon lace fashioned with portrait neckline, long sleeves, bouffant skirt and chapel train. She carried white carnation atop a prayer book.

My mother's father was not at the church the day that she became Mrs. LaVonne Love. The role of her father, to give his daughter away, was filled by an uncle.

After a Canadian honeymoon, my parents made their home in Jackson, South Carolina, where my father was stationed with the U.S. Army, training for a tour in Viet Nam.

I sometimes wonder what went through my mother's mind the day she married my father. I wonder if she told herself that her marriage was going to be different from the volatile one she had witnessed between her parents. I wonder if she was certain that her man would rarely raise his voice and certainly never raise his hands to hit her. I could easily see my father making promises to her when they were dating, telling her that he was different from her dad as he stroked my mother's hair or massaged her feet. Willing her to believe him. Maybe even believing it himself.

Of course, maybe these thoughts never even entered her mind. Maybe the thought of her husband's fists pounding into her flesh never occurred to her. After all, she was just

17. And, while she'd seen the violence of her parents, her thoughts would have been more focused on her new love and the possibility of never having to be hungry again.

My parents were poor when they married. My mother often recounted the story of the first meal she ever cooked for my dad. She put some dry macaroni into a pan, added a little cheese on top and then put it in the oven, not realizing that the noodles needed to be boiled first. When she removed the dish from the oven, she called my grandmother to ask what happened to the noodles.

They have to be boiled first, my grandmother explained.

But my father ate the dried, hard, tasteless noodles and told my mother they were okay. My mother repeated this story often, smiling at my father as she told it, a sign of appreciation for the love he showed her in that moment.

I witnessed my parents' fights through the eyes of a small child, then as an adolescent, then as a young adult. This language, fists on flesh, glass on bodies, Drano into eyes, seemed to be the only way they could communicate. But when I dig deeper into my memory, I recall my mother laughing, my father speaking, moments when my father would reach for my mother to give her a hug or a sloppy, wet kiss on the cheek. One Saturday morning after breakfast, she started to dance to the music on "Soul Train." One by one, she got each of us to join her. I remember her grabbing my hips and twisting them as she tried to help me move with the rhythm. Mom's body swayed easily to the rhythms coming from the television, her mouth partially opened and smiling, her large brown eyes bright and alert. My father lacked my mother's rhythm but he laughed as he moved awkwardly to the beats and developed a shyness that stemmed from my mother's

advances. Afterward, my parents retreated upstairs leaving us to wash the dishes. Moments like this give me a glimpse of what they may have been like when they were dating.

In my grandmother's house is an old photo album hidden from view. My boyfriend at the time discovered it when he reached behind a chair in my grandmother's living room. In the album are my parents' wedding pictures and photos from their early years together. I was 32 and had never seen these pictures. As we flipped through the photos, my grandmother stood in the hallway shifting her weight from one foot to the other. She didn't stop us from perusing them, but the look on Grandma's face told me that she would rather forget that time, that she would have preferred that we not even know that these photos existed.

In one photograph, my father stands beside a green army truck, dressed in his pine green camouflage uniform and black army boots. He is smiling, almost laughing. The photo shows nothing of the brutality of war, nor any hint of the problems he would have on his return, only a young man smiling. When I study the picture, I wonder what he is thinking about--perhaps his new bride waiting for him on the other side of the ocean, or maybe one of his comrades has just told a joke; perhaps this picture was taken after he learned that he is going to be a father. Maybe that smile was how he always looked before the war.

In later years, when my parents argued, I heard Mom invoke the words Viet Nam...not the same...need to talk about it...Agent Orange.

When my father returned to the states, he took a factory job at General Motors (GM). He had never finished high school, and didn't consider college an option. I was born in 1969, so with two more mouths to feed, my father was glad to get a job that could, in his words, *keep a roof over our heads*. He worked 'the line', building parts for GM cars. After a day's work, he came home tired, hungry and covered with smut, the odor of oil and sweat rising from his skin. Factory work was hard, physical labor. My mother studied for a couple of years at the community college, and became a Licensed Practical Nurse. Her job at the local hospital left her tired and angry. She told stories of lifting heavy white men, changing their sheets, emptying their bedpans and giving them their medications only to have them call her a nigger. Sometimes she talked with my father about being passed over for promotions for which she knew she was qualified. Together, they worked to build a home.

It is nighttime. I have awakened to the sound of my mother screaming. Someone is running in the hallway. Shadows and light move under my door. Dad orders my mother to stay out of my room. She doesn't enter my room, but I want her to. I listen for a while, then I go to my door, twist the golden handle and open it. Mom is holding onto the red step stool. Dad has her by one of her legs again, and he is beating her with the same thick leather belt he used before. She cries and tries to get away, but the stool keeps moving. She needs to grab something that doesn't move, so she can pull herself from my father's grip. I shut the door, get back in bed, shaking, and fall asleep to the sounds of my parents.

After my parents fought my mother often called Grandma to talk. Salt from my mother's tears formed gray lines between her eyes and high cheek bones. Sometimes, my mother yelled at Grandma, angry at her lack of understanding. Other times she would only heave and cry. I don't know what Grandma said to her only child. I don't know how she tried to comfort my mother. Maybe she told her that it wouldn't happen again. That Dad was a good man. Maybe she told Mom that that's just how men are. The only thing I know for certain is that Grandma never encouraged my mother to leave my dad. After my mother died, she told me, *Maybe your mother needed some of those beatings.*

I never believed that my mother needed those beatings. But I do think that she, like me, came to expect them. Had learned to live with them.

My mother left my father when I was four. She moved into an apartment where my older brother and I shared a tiny bedroom. Grandma tried to convince her to stay with my father despite the violence. I later learned that Grandma was afraid that her only child would not be able to take care of herself, that she would fall into a life of partying and multiple boyfriends, all of whom would treat my mother worse than Dad did. Grandma was also concerned with how her daughter would appear to others, a single, black mother with two children. Children without a father.

I was four. I was glad that Dad wouldn't be able to hit Mom anymore.

Life without my father was different. I don't remember exactly how my days changed nor do I recall much of what I felt, but I do remember feeling like someone missing, like there was a hole in the family. One afternoon, my mother came into our bedroom to check on us after our nap. She asked my brother, who is just two years older

than me, to help her by watching over me. She assured us that everything would be fine and left the room. What stands out most about that time, though, is the absence of violence.

Nearly a year after we moved out, the house my father lived in, the same house we had all shared before my parents separated, was set on fire. My father called my mother in the middle of the night and told her what happened. When he walked into the apartment, his eyes were red and watery, his brow wrinkled. He could have died. He stood by the door and waited, unsure of what to do or say. Unsure of how Mom would respond. She invited him to sit down and sent us off to bed. The next day he spent the night, and then night after that and then the night after that.

Maybe it was recognition of how fragile life is; maybe it was the loss of the first important thing that they had bought together and shared; maybe it was a simple need to forget the past. Whatever it was, my parents ended their separation and chose to rebuild the house, but once it was finished we didn't stay. My mother wanted more--better schools, a better neighborhood and, perhaps, a fresh start.

We were the second black family to move into a neighborhood comprised of working middle-class families: school teachers, doctors, business executives, college professors, and factory workers. The houses were modest, some ranch style others two-story. Some of the homes had in ground pools and some above ground. There were no sidewalks. This omission, I learned, was part of the status of the neighborhood. We were not living in the city limits, but in a suburb. Ours was a two-story house with a single car garage and a decent-sized backyard. Lilac bushes, evergreens and a tall maple

tree dotted the landscape. A red-brick sidewalk led up to the porch that, later, held a wooden bench painted the same color as the shutters, usually a soft shade of peach or yellow. Inside, we had a working brick fireplace in the den, a living room, dining room, eat-in kitchen, four bedrooms and a basement. For my mother, the selling point was the white picket fence that lined one edge of the backyard. Growing up, all of the television shows she liked, where the families were happy, the parents were together and all was well, had a white picket fence. The white picket fence belonged to our next-door neighbors.

In our new home, my parents pieced together remnants of a better life. Both worked long hours at their respective jobs, and put in overtime when they could. There were family vacations to amusement parks and Canada. There were piano lessons and after school gymnastics. There were visits with relatives, and a family reunion for my father's side of the family, organized by my mother. There were cold, winter evenings when we gathered by the warmth radiating from the fireplace and my parents read while my brother and I did homework. We had sun-drenched days when my dad barbecued in the backyard and gave us barbecued wieners before dinner despite my mother's admonition. One year, my mother made each of us a homemade Valentine's Day Card. I still have mine made of pink construction paper with "Happy Valentine's Day" written with a red crayon in my mother's perfect penmanship. The physical fights between my parents subsided. Everything was perfect.

Ours was a matriarchal home, my mother the leader and disciplinarian. My father participated, but usually only after my mother ordered him too. My mother wanted good

children who were well mannered, respectful, mindful of their place and smart. When I was seven, she was pregnant with my younger brother. Once, as my older brother and I put away the laundry we talked and giggled about the size of her underwear. We were wrong to do this and my mother overheard us. She spanked my brother first, then me. In my attempt to escape the lashes, I accidentally kicked her stomach. Frightened that I may have hurt the baby, my mother beat me in a way that I would never forget, and in a way that would become more familiar over the years. As the belt came down over my head, arms, back and legs, I tried to crawl behind my bed, and, in the process, cut myself on a floor vent. The cut was deep. When she saw the blood, my mother stopped hitting me. At school the next day, the cut bled through the large bandage and I was sent to the school nurse. The nurse peeled away the bandage, examining the wound. When the nurse asked what happened, I hesitated, but then told her. The school called my mother. When I got home, my mother had several long, green switches and the belt waiting for me. She whipped me until she was tired. And when my father got home from work, he whipped me too. *What goes on in this house stays in this house*, my father said.

I don't know exactly when her health began to fail, when my mother's body began to betray her. As a child, I didn't even know what was wrong; I only knew that my mother didn't feel well and needed rest. I noticed that she worked fewer hours at the hospital and was home more. I was scared when she went into the hospital and came home several days later with stitches on her chest. I later learned that Mom had heart disease. Looking back, I wonder if she was scared, or if she knew how the disease would

change her life. After surgery, my mother would be unable to return to her job. My father would be the sole provider.

In my first and second grade years, our home was quiet and comfortable with the daily rhythms of life except for the occasional argument between my parents. I was in third grade when my parents had another fight. Because there had been a period without the physical fights, this encounter stands out. But it also has prominence because of what happened afterward. When they were done fighting, my parents called my older brother and me into the dining room and talked to us. They didn't want us to be scared, or to think that things were going to be the way they were before they separated. Both of them promised that things would be different. My father apologized to my brother and me, and to my mother. He said that it wouldn't happen again. As they cleaned up the broken plant and glass in the living room together, I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe their days of hitting and screaming and crying were over, but I knew he was wrong.

I don't remember how each of the fights between my parents started. What I do remember are the topics that came up. My parents argued about money. Once Mom stopped working, the mortgage payment, electric bill, phone bill, clothing and food all became sources of worry. They argued about my father's lack of education; my mother believed that my father resented her for having a high school diploma; my father believed that my mother wanted a husband with a high school diploma. They argued about their relationship. She found telephone numbers in his work clothes and decided that he was cheating on her; he got angry at her for going through his things and for her lack of trust

in him. Mom argued that Dad was lazy and unambitious; Dad argued that Mom didn't know how to relax. Most often, they argued about communication. My father was a man of few words; my mother liked to talk.

My mother was a woman of faith who was raised in the Baptist Church. Church for my mother's mother had been the place where she socialized, learned, and taught. My mother carried on this tradition in her own way. Our family participated in vacation bible school during the summers, attended Wednesday night bible studies, and my older brother and I sang in the youth choir for a time. Sunday mornings were for Sunday school and church service. But when I was nine years old, my parents got even more immersed in religion. My mother commenced regular bible studies in our home. Both of my parents began to study Hebrew. Maps of Jesus' travels hung on the wall of our den along with timetables speculating about when Jesus would return. There were long discussions about whether or not the antichrist was already on the earth. Eventually, with my mother's support, my father became a Baptist minister and preached at small churches around the city. Almost simultaneously, my parents relationship began to falter. First, there were more arguments and then there were more physical fights.

It is a beautiful, sun-filled summer day. There has been tension in the house for several weeks. My mother has decided that we need to leave our current church, and she is worried that my father may be having an affair.

We are all outside taking in the clean summer air. My father is doing lawn work while my mother, two brothers and I lean against the car, talking. Mostly, we are

listening to my mother and taking in the lightness of the moment. She notices the clouds and remarks that they resemble a chariot racing across the sky. After observing the clouds for a while longer, she concludes that it is a chariot and that this is the day that Jesus is coming back, the day of the rapture. My mother, grabs two lawn chairs and insists that we go up the street to a neighbor's house, sit on the corner of her lawn and wait for Jesus. For me, even at the age of 12, it is a joyous occasion. After nearly 2000 years Jesus is fulfilling his promise. The bright afternoon sun gives way to nightfall. Jesus doesn't come. The next day my mother, my four-year old brother and I wander through the neighborhood looking for Jesus. My mother is certain that this is the day; we just need to help Jesus find us. We don't find Jesus. Jesus doesn't find us. When we get home, my father convinces my mother to go to the hospital where she is committed.

I went with my parents to the hospital on the day my mother was admitted to the psychiatric ward. I don't know her clinical diagnosis, only that she was in the hospital for nearly a month. Later, she would say she had a nervous-breakdown. Forever changed.

In the years that followed, I watched my mother break or destroy nearly everything she cared about, everything that she and my father had worked for. My mother shattered several sliding glass patio doors, she backed through the garage door, she busted coffee tables, tipped over the entertainment center, busted the television set, and shattered dishes. She broke our fish tank and flung my brother's dog and my cat into the basement. During one fight, she lit my father's car on fire, rendering it unusable. In the basement, she used our incinerator to burn her clothes, her books, her pictures. Her bible.

The stereotype holds that families living with domestic violence are isolated, that they have minimal contact with the outside world. In a way, our family fit the stereotype. We had few telephone calls and few visitors. Every now and then my mother would visit with friends in the neighborhood. Sometimes one of them would stop by if they saw my mother working in the garden or sitting on our porch bench. While she often laughed when she was with her friends, even then I recognized the sadness in her laughter.

On a few occasions, a friend of mine came over so that I could help her with Algebra. During one of the visits, my parents got into a physical fight. At first, I sat at the dining room table, and hoped that they would stop. When it became clear that things were escalating, I tried to figure out how to tell my friend that she needed to leave. I didn't want her to know what was happening, and I wanted to believe that she couldn't hear them. Finally, I told her what was happening and she left.

My parents are arguing in the kitchen. It has escalated to the point that I have chosen to get between my parents. Dinner is being prepared; a skillet with hot grease and a boiling pot of water with a hot dog in it are on the stove. My mother yells at my father and picks up the hot dog pot and throws it in my father's direction. And I am running. But I don't move quick enough. The pot and the boiling water hit my back, scalding me. The fabric of my shirt and the metal clasps of my bra sear the skin in the middle of my back. I run toward the stairs, toward my room even as my mother reaches for me. She follows me upstairs. I take off my top and my bra which have stuck to my skin. The spot where the water hit is hot. My mother gets a cool rag and presses it

against the middle of my back. I am angry and grateful. Angry that my parents fight. Angry that I've been burned. Angry knowing that it won't be the last time. But grateful for this moment of kindness given to me by my mother.

Standing between my parents when they were fighting was nothing new. From the first time my mother entered my room in an effort to escape my father's violence, I wanted to protect her. I wasn't the only one. My older brother jumped in the between my parents and sometimes managed to pull my father off of my mother, or at least agitate him enough so that my father would stop pounding his fists into her flesh. As time went on, it became more and more difficult to do without risk of getting burned, hit or cut. Once my older brother left for college in another state, my illusions that I could stop what was happening between my parents diminished.

I am a junior in high school. My older brother is away at college. Mom and Dad are arguing. My mother is angry and defiant. She hits my dad. My father strikes her. There is shoving and more hitting. At some point, my father picks up the iron fireplace poker and begins to strike my mother with it. I try to stop him, but his arm keeps moving up and down, the iron poker landing on my mother's body. She slips and falls. "Is this what you want?" my father asks my mother as he hits her. "Is this what you want?" he asks again, the pitch of his voice high and tearful. Eventually, he stops and my mom stumbles out of the house and into the garage. My body trembles as I stand between them. There is more yelling. My mother threatens my father, saying that if he touches me she will kill him. I want him to hit me so that she can kill him.

My mother limped the next day, her honey colored skin covered with splotches of black, blue and purple, including a black and purple ring around one of her eyes. She made an appointment with a divorce lawyer that day. My grandmother came over, and she and my mother talked. Mom didn't want to go on welfare or lose the house or any of the things that she had acquired while living with my dad. Grandma agreed. Internally, I was furious because I wanted them to have a different conversation. I wanted my grandmother to tell her that she and her three children could come live with her until my mother figured out what to do. I wanted her to tell her that she didn't have to stay with someone who beat her. I wanted my grandmother to help my mother leave my father.

What I didn't understand then, was that my grandmother had experienced the cost of living without a husband, had seen her child suffer because of it, and didn't want my mother to experience the same.

The next day, my mother canceled the appointment with the divorce lawyer. A few days later, my father came back home. It was then that I realized that my mother would never leave my father.

It is several weeks after the iron poker beating. Mom sleeps on the couch in the den and my father sleeps in their bedroom, upstairs. It is late in the night when I hear my mother come upstairs. As she walks past my doorway I can see that she carrying something, but I don't know what it is. A few moments have passed and now I hear my father yelp. He sounds panicked. I have never heard these sounds before. I see his nude form run past my doorway and I hear him on the stairs. LaVonne, he calls my mother's

name through tears. LaVonne. I would have left, he says. I would have left. I hear my father leave the house.

The next day, my father called while my mother was out of the house. He told me that he had been admitted to the intensive care unit, and to let my mother know. My mother had boiled a large pot of water and poured it over my father's chest and arms. He was in intensive care for a week. In my mind, my father got what he deserved, so when my mother took care of my father when he was released from the hospital, I didn't understand. She poured all of her nursing knowledge into my father, bathing him, changing his dressings, purchasing Vitamin E and aloe. It didn't make sense. At the same time, a new fear settled into my stomach. For most of my life, my mother told me that I was just like my father. I worried that she would do the same thing to me.

My parents argued the night before I was to leave for college in Tallahassee, Florida. I remember how it started because they argued about me. My father didn't think I needed to attend college; my mother thought I did. I was anxious that evening. Afraid that I would not be allowed to go, afraid that I would be trapped in our household a while longer. I prayed that night. Not for my mother or father or even my younger brother who I would leave behind. I prayed for me. I prayed to be released from my world of violence and love. The next day we all piled into the truck borrowed from a family friend and started the two-day drive to Florida. As we pulled away from the house, the sun reflecting and refracting off the windows of our perfect suburban home, I told myself that I would never live with my parents again.

I went home for winter break during my freshman year of college. I would be there for three weeks before returning to school. A day or two after Christmas, my parents got into another fight. My father left the house during that fight. I expected him to return the next day, but he didn't. My older brother explained that it was not unusual for my father to leave for days at a time. A couple of days after that fight, I woke up to find my mother standing in my doorway, her arms crossed, watching me. She hadn't said a word. After I sat up, she told me to get my bags together so that I could leave. I was confused since I wasn't to return to school for another week or so, but I knew not to ask any questions. A few minutes later, I heard her call a family friend who came to pick me up. While I waited, my mother explained to me that she and my father had been fine until I came home. She figured that if I left my father would come back. Standing in our foyer, I moved to hug my mother before I left, but she stepped back out of my reach, so I said a soft good bye and then waved to her from the car. It was the day before New Year's Eve. It was the last time I saw my mother alive.

On Monday, April 25, 1988, I received a phone call from my family telling me that my mother was in the hospital and that I needed to come home right away. It was the first day of finals in the spring of my freshman year. The next day, I flew to Michigan. On the plane I pondered what I would say when I saw her. Full of too many movies and dramas, I imagined my mother in a coma, unable to speak, and me telling her that I loved her. My older brother picked me up from the airport and took me to his home. His strange behavior prompted me to guess that she was already dead. I was right. She was

dead when they called me at school the day before. There would be no last good byes. At least not the kind I had envisioned.

The circumstances around my mother's death remain unclear. What is known is that she was taking some new medication and the doctor who prescribed that medication vanished once my mother died. My grandmother wanted an autopsy, my father did not. My mother's death certificate states that she died of an adverse drug reaction. My younger brother, who was ten years old at the time, was the only other person in the house aside from my parents on the night of her death. He recalls hearing strange sounds, but nothing with much clarity. The only thing that is known is that my parents argued that night, and that my mother argued with my grandmother that evening too. Sometime during the night she drew her last breath. She was 39.

As I study the black and white photos of her, I like to think of my mother as a woman who didn't need my father. And I imagine her life without my dad. I see a woman in a cotton sun hat planting marigolds and petunias in the evening sun. I see a woman traveling to Paris to improve her French accent. I hear a woman laughing with her friends on the telephone as they discuss the 1940s film they watched the evening before. In my visions, my mother is untainted by belt or iron or unkind words. In my visions my mother is alive.

Black Hair

I stood in front of the mirror and stared at the outdated and worn, pageboy hair style I'd had since leaving my stylist in New York City a year earlier. Split ends. Uneven shape. Excessive shedding. I needed a change. A new look. Shorter. Jazzier. Anita Baker like. An actual style. And, although I'd endured the lack of a happening "do" for more than a year, the change needed to happen soon. The change needed to happen that day.

I called up Hair Galore. Do you take walk-ins? I asked.

Yes, she said.

I already knew that they took walk-in's because the shop's advertisement in the paper read, "We take walk-in's." It was a warm up question. I stalled. I asked about the hours the shop kept, their location, the price ranges of cuts and coloring, whether or not they did manicures and pedicures, and other nonessential information. Just before the receptionist hung up I asked, Do you do black hair?

We do all hair colors, she said.

No, I said. I mean, African American hair.

Oh, she said. I don't know. Hold on.

Her words, "hold on," surprised me. I figured, either you've seen black people come through the door or you haven't. But I waited thinking that perhaps she was new hire. I tilted my head toward the telephone, straining to hear what was being said. I could detect nothing. That there was any discussion at all surprised me since I had expected her to say, *No, we don't do black hair*, just like the two salons I'd called minutes before.

My hair was not the only thing on my mind when I moved to Missoula, Montana for graduate school. Before making my final decision, I went online and coupled the word *Montana*, with keywords like *militia* and *missing people*. As an African American and as a woman moving to Montana, I was nervous. Montana had the unfortunate fate of being home to the una bomber, Ted Kaczynski. Groups like the Militia of Montana and The Church of the Creator had gained notoriety for their connections to groups that believed in white supremacy.

In New York City, all of my friends, black, white, Puerto Rican, Chinese, *all* of them asked, "Why Montana?" Some insisted that I was running away from loneliness and excessive work hours; others decided that my choice was connected to September 11th. Still others concluded that I had gone mad. She's crazy, I overheard one friend say.

My decision to return to school didn't surprise my family, but they too were puzzled by my choice of locale. Why do you have to go to school over there? my grandmother asked. To her mind, Montana was in another country. My older brother was more direct. Are there any black people in Montana? he said.

The newspaper also indicated that Hair Galore was an international salon. Missoula was not New York City, but as I gripped the telephone in my hand, I was hoping that at least one person in this city of 60,000 had done black hair. Another woman got on the telephone.

How can I help you? she said.

Do you do black hair? I asked

What do you need done?

A cut? I said.

What sort of shape is it in? If you need a perm, I can't do that, but someone else here can. It's been about three or four years since she's done black hair, but she has experience, she paused, she can't cut black hair, so we'd work together.

I now had a team, albeit an inexperienced one. I'd had one disastrous perm in my life. A well meaning aunt and my indecisive mother teamed up to leave me with the pain and scars of a chemically burned scalp. Even Oprah, with her access to the best hair dressers in the world had a disastrous perm experience in France that left her bald and wearing wigs for months.

If my aunt, a professional beautician who had done black hair for years, and the French, known for their trend setting "dos" on a *true* international scale could screw up, what was I to expect from two Missoulians? Visions of a white lab rat came to mind.

I'll perm my own hair, I said. The process would render my hair straight, similar to that of her white customers. Manageable.

When do you want to come in? she said.

As soon as possible, I said.

When I decided to move west, I sent an e-mail to students in the program asking if I could sleep on someone's sofa while I hunted for housing. I received a response from a guy who informed me that I was welcome to his futon, but that there were lots of animals. Cats, birds, dogs, small goats. Goats I could handle, but the cats would shrink my airways and turn my eyes pink and watery. Someone else offered me the use of his tent at the local camp ground. Finally, I got a message from Luke, who said that he and his *wife*,

Anna, could put me up. A married couple. It was perfect. Married meant clean, stable, safe.

In my initial e-mail, I indicated that I was female and was allergic to most furry animals. I said nothing about my height, weight or race. I told myself it didn't matter. It wasn't a personal ad. Now, I had to think of a way to tell the couple I was black.

I attended predominantly white, suburban schools starting in first grade until I graduated from high school, so my mother was adamant that I attend a historically black college. I needed to be knowledgeable and proud of my heritage, she reasoned. I chose Florida A & M University, in Tallahassee. It was there that I first heard the expression *you sound white*. Sounding white, I learned, was not simply about my proper use of verbs and nouns, it was also about inflection and tone. It was as much what I said as how I said it. In Florida, my peers translated my speech to mean that I believed I was better than everyone else. Determined not to spend my college years in isolation, I set about changing. I attempted to mimic my friends, worked to develop a lazy tongue, and downplayed my use of proper English when ever possible. But once I finished school, this *challenge* followed me into the workplace.

For much of my career, I raised money for nonprofit organizations. This frequently involved meeting with funders. Once, I spoke with a potential donor about a new program we wanted to launch. As we talked on the telephone the man became more excited with what I described. He liked that it helped children, was impressed that it had a proven track record, and relished the thought of being the premiere funder. He was warm, friendly and open. I set up an appointment to meet him in person to discuss the

details. When he saw me his first words were, *you sounded white on the telephone*. The accusation in his voice and the look on his face conveyed a measure of disappointment. To him I was an impostor. I'd held back information. I had set about to deliberately deceive him.

I chose not to tell the Luke and Anna that I was black and reserved a hotel room instead.

Open spaces, small towns, whites and Indians. My vision of Montana, a thin mix of history culled from text books and novels, movies and newspaper clippings. I pictured white men in cowboy hats sitting in pick up trucks on sunny days, drinking beer, nodding their hellos. Watchmen for a small town. People pointing and gawking at me as I entered the drug store, curious. Suspicious. The possibility of never being able to forget who I was or where I was.

I desired the exact opposite. I wanted to blend in. Be accepted. My problem was that I had already assumed that I wouldn't be.

My fear was not completely unfounded. Growing up, I was called nigger and even spat on from a bus by a first grader. As I got older the terms changed to darkie, blackie, overcooked, all of them used to remind me of my place, or lack of place, in my schools, in my neighborhood, in my country.

Even in New York City, one of the most ethnically and racially diverse cities in the world, I was reminded that race matters. I lived in Manhattan, Queens, and finally the Bronx during my 10 years in the city. When I lived in the Bronx, the Upper East Side

became my stomping ground. My dry cleaners, gym, health food store were all between East 85th and East 95th streets. I frequented an inexpensive wine shop at 87th and Lexington. I shopped at the Banana Republic on East 84th and Madison Avenue. I was a regular at the Blockbuster Video on 85th & Lexington. I was in the neighborhood all the time, and I was always aware that I was an outsider. That my skin color mattered. The prejudice I encountered was less overt than what I experienced as a child, but more painful. White men and women quickened their steps if they saw me walking behind them. Others ducked into stores abruptly, and stood in the doorway watching me until I passed. The shunning didn't end there.

One Saturday morning, I entered a bicycle shop. I perused the bikes, taking my time. Even after several minutes, no one offered to assist me. I wondered at first, but decided that they didn't want to give a high pressure sales pitch. I began to appreciate being able to browse in peace. But then two other customers, both of them white, entered the store and also started looking at bikes. Two salesmen appeared promptly, and offered to help them. I walked out of the shop.

These phenomena were not unique to the Upper East Side. I experienced them as a student at Columbia and in other parts of the city. The messages were the same: I was something to fear; I didn't belong.

Along with Luke's, I received an e-mail from Jeremy. He knew that I'd be looking for a place, and that I didn't have a car. Jeremy offered his bike. After I checked into my Missoula hotel, I telephoned Jeremy and we agreed to meet near a set of railroad tracks.

I pictured Jeremy as a stocky guy in a tight-fitting t-shirt, cutoff blue jeans, and a cowboy hat for effect. A menacing figure. I was sure the tracks were in a secluded area, but Jeremy said the tracks were a good meeting spot because they were close to my hotel and near the swimming hole to which he and his friend were en route. Because I am black and female, knowing that another male was coming unnerved me. After we hung up, I considered calling Jeremy back and telling him I didn't need the bike. I could already hear a train sounding its whistle as it blew by providing the perfect cover for Jeremy and his friend to knock me out and drag me by my arms to my final resting place. But, I slipped my fear into my back pocket and walked to our meeting venue, determined that I could outrun them if need be.

The two men who approached me were nearly reed-thin. Jeremy was about 5'8, with a shock of black hair, black-rimmed glasses and a boyish face with a five o'clock shadow. His friend was nearly the same height, had brownish hair, and a soft face. We shook hands, exchanged pleasantries and continued to walk toward the swimming hole. They told me about their background. Neither were native Montanans. Jeremy had grown up in Chicago, attended college and moved west to write, knowing little about Missoula. His friend worked in public planning and traveled a lot. As we wandered deeper and deeper into the woods, I was aware that I hadn't seen or heard any people. No one could hear me if I screamed, nor could anyone see us through the dense mass of trees and shrubs. I was a dead woman.

Before I began to bargain with God, my escorts stopped walking. One of the men moved to get something out of his pocket. I took a step back and thought, here it is. He produced a knot of crumpled paper. A map. Jeremy and his friend sat on a tree stump and spread the map across their legs and looked up at me. Standing over them, I noticed their thin fingers, the delicate outline of their clavicles, and the blue green veins running through their sandaled feet. I could hurt them, I thought. I sat down and listened as they gave me their best directions to the local apartment rental agencies, the post office, key restaurants, and the University. They pointed to the city's significant landmarks, which included the Clark Fork River and lettered mountains, the "M" the "L". After my mini Missoula orientation they released me. Or, more accurately, I walked out of the park and boarded the bike Jeremy had loaned me. But not before I thanked them and shared my anxieties about our meeting. Both men laughed but said they understood my concerns.

I met Luke and Anna at my hotel the same evening I picked up the bike from Jeremy. They arrived at my door, Luke in khaki colored shorts and a t-shirt, Anna in black Capri's and a light short-sleeved, summer blouse. Both of them had long hair. Luke's, brownish blonde hair was pulled back into ponytail to reveal a long thin face, with a small hoop earring embedded in his right eyebrow. Anna's silky, dark brown hair hung straight, past her shoulders and stopped in middle of her back. Dinner, a brief tour of Missoula via car, and a "Meet the Author" party were the plans for the evening. As we talked, I learned that they had already known that I was black. Even before I sent my first e-mail. Faculty talk. Luke had had a hunch that my race might have been a concern of mine, but said that he too didn't know how to broach the subject. The next day I checked out of the hotel and into their home.

When I entered the Missoula hair shop, I was reminded of the first time I saw a white guy get his hair cut at the salon I frequented, an upscale black establishment in a trendy section of Manhattan. The man had thick, dark, shoulder-length hair and blemish free skin. His near six foot frame was muscular but not bulky. He was stylish but casual, handsome. His stylist, a black man who was the star stylist in the salon, and demanded twice the rates of his coworkers, washed the client's hair, cut it, dried it and styled it, if not necessarily in that order. The whole transaction took about a half hour. They didn't say much beyond small talk and the hairdresser didn't ask any questions until he was finished. The client took a quick glance in the mirror, said it was great and told him he'd be back at his usual time the following week. He was a regular.

As I sat in the waiting area of the Missoula salon I wondered what had that white guy felt? How many people had observed him with suspicion the way I had that day? Was he biracial? Why didn't he go to Pierre Michel's, Coiffeur Ahmets, or one of the other hundreds of New York City salons that did "his type" of hair? Was it atmosphere? Was it location? Or was the stylist just that good? To me he was an outsider. His presence an intrusion in the one space where blacks discussed politics, racism and community openly. His presence, a not so subtle reminder of the ways blacks and whites have been kept and kept themselves separate.

A small-framed woman, with hard skin and straw-blonde hair entered the waiting area. I'm Sam, she said.

She walked me to her work area. The shop, with its art-deco decor, was built so that a person couldn't see the customers in the stations, only hear them. Each station even had its own shampoo bowl. Sam's domain, in front of a large window, was clean and arranged for efficiency and ease of access. Curling irons, combs, mirrors, bobby pins, everything had its place. But to me her counter looked empty without the array of pressing combs, hair oils and the large heating element that were the staples in black salons.

As she talked, I learned that Sam had been doing hair for more than 30 years, and that she'd done black hair only once. A four year-old, biracial boy who, like most boys of that age, hated to get his hair cut. That's my only real experience with nappy hair, she said. I stiffened at the word *nappy*. Specifically, her use of the word nappy. Without realizing what she'd done, Sam had crossed an unspoken barrier. Blacks often joke among themselves about nappy hair, but hearing the term come from a white person, especially one that I'd just met, was disconcerting.

Once, I stood in the checkout line at a grocery store with my mom. After the woman rang up the total my mom held out her money to pay. The cashier didn't acknowledge that the money was in front of her. My mother thrust it forward again. Here, she said. The woman looked at my mother, then down at the conveyor belt. My mother laid the bills and the coins on the belt. The cashier scooped up the money, punched the numbers into the register and returned my mother's change to the same spot on the conveyor belt. My mother looked at the change then at the woman. She picked up our bag of groceries and walked out of the store, leaving the change behind.

As I sat in Sam's chair, I wondered if she too would be afraid. If she'd treat me the way the cashier had treated my mother. Sam swung a black smock over my clothes and fastened it at the neck while depressing the lever on the hydraulic chair to get me to the right height. She laid out a comb and a pair of scissors on the counter, then turned me toward the mirror.

So what do you want done? she asked. She smiled as she stood behind me, her face expectant. She ran her fingers and the comb through my hair, then placed the comb on the counter and scrunched a handful of my hair between her hands, feeling the texture.

Take it all off, I said, only half joking.

No, she said.

Since we both agreed that I shouldn't walk around with a buzz cut, and I was only her second black customer in 30 years, we decided to give my current style some shape and to add some layers.

Sam sectioned my hair into quadrants and picked up the scissors. She clasped a section of hair between her hands. I held my breath. A moment later I heard my hair crunch between the scissors as they cut through the strands. She picked up another section, then another, moving deliberately around my head. She asked questions, trying to make sure that she was getting it right. When I asked for more layers she began a process of nipping at my hair with the scissors. Texturizing, she called it. I'd never heard of it, but the effect seemed to work. She, then, curled it and styled it. When I looked in the mirror, my new hairdo was far from the drastic change I had envisioned nearly a week earlier, but more valuable than the cut was Sam's patience, her intention to do a good job, and her desire not to butcher my hair.

Call me if over the next few days if you find that something isn't working, 'cause then I can correct it, she offered. I told her I would.

Your hair looks nice, a friend of mine told me later that evening.

At my next appointment, Sam asked how the cut worked. It was fine, I said, but this time I was better prepared to explain what I needed and gave more clear directions. As she cut, she talked about her husband and children, and her longtime passion, gardening. Further into the cut, Sam also discussed her efforts to adopt a child from Haiti. It was meant for you and I to meet, she said.

I'm going to have another black customer, Sam announced when I saw her a few weeks later. I'll have to think of what to do, because you two can't walk around Missoula with the same haircut.

I laughed and wondered if the woman shared the same anxieties I had had.

A few weeks ago, I entered Sam's salon with a drastically different haircut. A cut that Sam hadn't given. It was the worst kind of insult. My hair had been permed and cut by an African American woman in Pontiac, when I visited my family in Michigan. Even after four months with Sam, I still felt like I had a hair emergency and she was still resistant to cutting, unsure of whether she'd get it right. You can always take more off, she'd say, but you can't put it back on so easily. I shared her concern.

The stylist in Michigan had similar issues. I'd never seen her before, so she was unfamiliar with my hair, and she too was a reluctant cutter. But I was done with blasé

hair, so when the Pontiac stylist finished cutting and there was still too much hair on my head, I simply said, take more off, please. After the third time, I could see that I'd taken her to the edge of her comfort zone. She didn't want to cut anymore. I let her off the hook, and when she finished we were both pleased. I had a fresh look and I was confident that Sam could help me maintain it once I returned home.

As Sam fingered my new hair style, I thought about Luke's question to me on one of my first days in Missoula. What's it like for you? he asked.

I don't know, I said. I don't know.

The Silence of Heaven

“Look,” my mother pointed toward the noontime, summer sky. “Doesn’t that look like a chariot?” she asked.

I stopped leaning against our Buick LeSabre, and looked in the direction she pointed. Above the 7-Eleven, against a pale blue sky, were large, billowy clouds, moving purposefully against the heavens.

“Yep,” Daniel, my older brother, agreed, “and it looks like there’s an angel.”

“He’s coming,” my mother said. Daniel and I glanced at each other. The angel charged across the heavens, pulled in its chariot by a large horse. Mom disappeared into the garage. When she emerged, she had two green and yellow nylon lawn chairs. She handed one to my four-year-old brother, Peter, then unfolded the other, and sat down at the end of the driveway.

An hour or so later, afraid that Jesus would pass over our house and leave us behind because my father lived there, too, my mother took us up the street to Mrs. Elders’ house. After standing on the corner of the lawn and surveying its proximity to the cloud activity, my mother marched up to the front of the house, opened the screen door and knocked. “Mrs. Elders,” she called.

No answer.

She rang the doorbell and called again, “Mrs. Elders.” Mother walked to the middle of the porch and looked into the large bay window to investigate, but found her view obstructed by curtains. “Michelle, go around the back and see if she’s there.”

Afraid to dispute my mother, but acutely aware that I was trespassing, I hesitated before I edged toward the back of the house. I walked onto the concrete patio, which was enclosed by a tall white picket fence, and peered through the glass door into the family room. With no lights on, the interior appeared gray, lifeless. I tapped lightly on the patio door, hoping she was a no show.

“Mrs. Elders,” I mumbled as I gazed into the house.

After a few more taps, the house remained dark and quiet. I made my way toward the front. “No one’s here,” I said.

My mother found a few chairs along the side of Mrs. Elder’s house. We brushed off the dead spiders and their webs entangled with lifeless flies and dried leaves, and eventually plopped the chairs on the left corner of the front lawn, where the four of us continued our daytime vigil.

We knew what to look for too, since Mom had received the message. Jesus is coming. Today. For my mother, and even for me as a young believer of 12, this was a joyous occasion. After nearly 2,000 years, Jesus was fulfilling his promise. More important, it meant no more school, no more chores, no more fights between Mom and Dad, and no more beatings at the hands of Mom or Dad. In a word, salvation.



The four of us waited. Once in a while, we would look up at the sky, and one of us would make comments about the clouds, their formations and movements. But, most of the time, taking our cues from Mom, we were silent.

Peter busied himself with his yellow truck, rolling it over the chair, across ant mounds and centipedes.

Careful not to look directly at her, I stole glimpses of my mother from the corner of my eye. *What's she thinking about?* I wondered. Her smooth, toffee colored hands rested on her lap. I thought about the times she would let me hold them.

"I wish I had hands like yours," I would tell her. "They're so pretty." She always looked surprised.

"You really think so?" she would ask.

"Yes," I would answer, pleased that I could bring a smile to her face.

Of course, those same beautiful hands would sometimes smash my head against a refrigerator door, or wrap their long, graceful fingers around a long, green switch of my father's thick, leather belt and slam it against some part of my body without warning, leaving welts that I hid under long sleeves and pants. Or worse, those hands would move themselves to a place where I could not touch them.

I wanted to touch them now.

"Hi," Mrs. Culquit called as she and Sal, her Pomeranian, approached us. "What are you guys up to?"

My mother ignored the question, but bent over to pet Sal. The dog sniffed Mom's fingers.

Mrs. Culquit lived up the street with her husband, an IBM executive, and their son, Eddy. Their house was always the first stop Daniel and I made when we rode our bikes. Eddy had video games, a pool table and one of the best basketball hoops in the neighborhood. And, his mother would always let him play. Although I usually was happy to see her, right now I just needed her to disappear.

"Isn't it a beautiful day?" Mrs. Culquit said. "Hey, guys," Mrs. Culquit called to Daniel and I, as she leaned her slender, milky white body against the stop sign, "we're taking Eddy to the beach tomorrow. You two are welcome to come, if that's okay with you, Zora." She looked at my Mom. "We're leaving around nine and should be back by seven."

I was too busy attempting magic to respond, hoping that if I focused hard enough, and wiggled my nose just the right way, Mrs. Culquit would vanish. Of course, this was a poor substitution for the black cloak usually needed to accomplish such a feat. I also knew that by resorting to magic, I was lessening my chances of going to heaven, since you can't believe in magic *and* God, as my father had made crystal clear during one of his recent church sermons. But I didn't want my mother to explain that we were waiting for Jesus. That God had used his "still small voice" to speak to her and her alone. I didn't want Mrs. Culquit to think we were crazy.

"How long will you be out here?" Mrs. Culquit asked, her voice cutting my concentration. "Ed and few other kids are playing 21. If you guys come, you could make it a game."

Since the magic thing wasn't working, I decided to try another tactic. "God, please make her disappear," I prayed.

My mother snatched her hand, causing Sal to bark. Thinking this was a game, he attempted to jump into my mother's lap.

"Down," Mom said.

"Come on Sal." Mrs. Culquit pulled gently on his leash.

"You guys should come by if you're not doing anything," she hollered as she walked off with Sal.

Other neighbors followed Mrs. Culquit to ask similar questions, wondering why this brown family was sitting on the corner when it had its own two-story colonial right down the street.

Most inquisitors were met with my mother's frosty expression. Those worthy of response were told the truth, "Waiting for Jesus." No one joined us.



Around four o'clock in the afternoon, my father started toward us. *It's about time*, I thought. *Where's your chair? Maybe he's going to sit on the lawn.* His deep cinnamon brown, six-foot frame with a small potbelly, chicken legs, and little muscle tone belied the physical strength he possessed. A Vietnam Veteran and a factory worker at General Motors, he once held up the rear of our car while my brother replaced the tire, because the jack wouldn't work. Although it was more than 80 degrees outside, he wore a tattered, long-sleeve plaid shirt, which was unbuttoned to reveal an oil-stained white T-shirt, and ragged painter pants and brown work boots.

"Zora, come on now," my father's eyes shifted between Peter and Mom. He smelled of sweat, dirt and grass, which overpowered Mrs. Elders' spruces. "Come home."

My mother held her gaze to the sky. As I looked at her, I noticed that she and my father made for an odd couple. My mother was graceful, shapely, and dainty. Today, her salt-and-pepper, shoulder length hair was pulled up with a decorative comb that allowed

some of her hair to frame her round face with its small, pouty nose. Although she had put on weight, she still kept herself up.

“At least let the kids come home.” My father lifted his fisherman’s cap, and wiped his brow.

My mother turned her back toward him.

My father turned around and walked back home.



An hour or so later, Daniel snatched up his chair and announced, “I’m going home.”

My mother waved her hand as though waving off a mosquito.

You can’t leave, I thought. He returned Mrs. Elder’s chair to the side of the house, and trotted toward our backyard. Later, my mother sent me to check up on him.

“Mom wants to know what you’re doing,” I said as I padded across the lawn, taking in the sweet smell of damp, fresh cut grass.

“You can tell her I’m helping Dad in the yard,” he said. “In fact you should do the same.” He wore a cloth diaper that covered his nose and mouth--a contraption that made it possible for him to do lawn work, despite bad allergies.

I shook my head. “Come on, Daniel. How can you come back here?” I followed him as he walked around the garden pulling up weeds.

“What? I’m supposed to sit there, while she has us waiting for something that’s not going to happen?”

“You don’t know that,” I said.

For the first time during our conversation, his eyes met mine. He yanked the cloth from his mouth. “He is not coming today. OK, Michelle. Jesus is not coming today.” His voice trembled. “All she's doing is embarrassing herself and us.”

I made a fist and considered charging him head on. Instead, hot tears poured out of my eyes and ran down my cheeks.

Daniel walked toward the house and picked up the water hose.

“I’m not going back out there,” he said as he pulled the hose toward the garden and put the cloth back over his nose and mouth.

Deserted, I turned around to go back to the corner. Back to waiting. Back to Mom. As I got to the edge of our lawn, I heard the water gushing through the spray nozzle. I felt conflicted. I longed to stay with my brother and Dad, surrounded by the familiar. At the same time, I thought, *If Jesus is coming, we don't need to water the garden.*



Joe Parker, a new neighbor who lived across the street from the corner where we were sitting, came out of his house. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him take us in, and then head in our direction. Joe was a tall, stout man with pink skin that was covered by an excessive amount of dirty blond hair. Because of his size, people called him Big Joe. Rumor was that he had settled here in Flint, Michigan after his wife died from cancer two years ago.

Big Joe looked like a giant as he stood in front of Mom. “Look, I know why y’all are out here,” he said as he wiped the back of his neck, “but he ain’t comin’ today. In fact, He probably ain’t comin’ no time soon. You understand ma’am?” He looked at my

mother for some sign of comprehension. "Do y'all want to come over, and have something to eat?" His voice had grown louder as if Mom was hard of hearing. He looked at me then at Mom. "We can talk about this. Ya' know, I'm a Christian, too."

My mother mumbled something in Big Joe's direction. What ever it was, he didn't respond. Instead, he walked back across the street, hopped into his red Chevy pickup and sped off.

The bright afternoon sun turned pale, then gave way to dusk. Still no Jesus.

Big Joe was right.



After the sun set, I looked up to see a tall, thin, brown figure approaching us. It was Mrs. Tyler, one of Mom's closest friends and one of the few people my mother would visit, even if the visits were infrequent. "I need somewhere to go so I can get away from you guys," Mom would say. Sometimes I would go over to hang out with her daughter, Ashley, and to grab a handful of watermelon Jolly Ranchers, which they kept on the kitchen table.

"Zora," Mrs. Tyler said when she reached the corner, "I know you have been out here all day. It's time to go home." She kneeled beside my mother and began to rub her back. My mother pulled away from her. The look on my mother's face reminded me of the time I lost Peter in the mall.

"It's OK," she said. "Has Peter eaten?" Mrs. Tyler asked, looking at me.

I shook my head, no.

"I'm going to take them home, Zora," she said.

Mrs. Tyler slipped her hand into mine and I took Peter's.

"The chairs," I said. I turned to see Mom with her head buried in her lap.

"Come on," Mrs. Tyler said, pulling me toward the house.

As we walked, questions flooded my mind. *What happened to Jesus? Did he come and leave us behind? What happens now? Is Dad mad at me for staying with Mom? Is Mom going to stay out there all night?* As we passed our next door neighbor's house, I saw the living room curtains move.

"Fix Peter something to eat," Mrs. Tyler said when we got to our front door. She reached into her pocket and handed me a couple of watermelon Jolly Rancher's. Then she turned around and walked back toward the corner.

"Thank you," I said.



7:20. That's what my clock said when I woke up the next morning. *Maybe it was just a dream*, I thought. But the candy Mrs. Tyler had given me was sitting next to the clock. I sat up and crooked my head toward the doorway to see if I could hear voices. Silence. I made up my bed, showered and dressed.

My father was standing in the foyer when I came down the stairs. "Do you know where your mother went?"

"No," I said as I walked into the den. The sun was beaming. The patio window, front door, and side door that opened to the garage were open. The garage door was up. The Buick was gone.

"She didn't say anything to you when you all were sitting out there?" Dad asked.

"No," I said.

"She didn't mention needing something or going to the doctor or anything?" he said.

"When did she leave?" I asked.

My father went into the basement.

Peter was in the den, sitting in our mother's beige rocker, watching cartoons.

"Where's Daniel?" I asked.

"Is mom coming home," Peter said.

"Did you eat?" I said.

"I don't think she's coming back," Peter said, his eyes still focused on the television.

"She's coming back," I said.

"She's not happy," Peter said.

I went into the kitchen and prepared a bowl of Apple Jacks and two slices of raisin toast.

"Peter, come eat," I said.

He let out a loud sigh and turned off the television.

"She's not coming back," Peter said as he entered the kitchen.

"Quit saying that," I said. "Say your grace and eat. You can go back to your cartoons when you finish."

"God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for our food, amen," he said.

"That's about to go off, then it's going to be Gumby," he said as he stuffed a spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

“Peter,” Mom called.

Our mother was standing at the side door in the garage. From there, she could see directly into the kitchen.

Peter looked up from his cereal.

“Zora.” Dad's voice rose from the basement.

“Peter, don't worry about your food. We need to go,” my mother said.

“Zora, where have you been?” Dad asked. He was now face to face with Mom, separated only by the screen door.

“Come on Peter,” she said.

“Honey,” my father said, “I'm asking you nicely now. Where are you going?”

“Peter,” my mother walked away from the screen.

Peter took a sip of orange juice to wash down the toast, then headed toward Mom's voice. I followed.

“Michelle, you don't need to come,” Mom said.

“I want to,” I said.

Once we were outside, my mother grabbed Peter's hand and ran down the street. She ran into the Grace's front yard, then into the back of the McKnights' house, over to the Halls' house, and in and out of yards of neighbors we didn't know.

I expected people or their dogs, to chase us off their lawns. But surprisingly, most people were not up or were not home. The few that were either waved at us or just stared.

“He's coming today,” my mother announced. “We have to find him, or help him find us. Michelle, let go of his hand.” She swiped at my hand and pulled Peter toward her.

Afraid to let go, but more afraid to hold on, I let his hand slip from mine.

“I know what you are trying to do, Michelle, you and your voodoo, and I will not let you turn Peter against me.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“You talking back?” she asked.

“You think he’ll come today?” I said.

“What? You’re gonna be like you father now?” she said.

“No,” I said. “I just--”

“You Judas,” she spat. “Come on Peter,” she said, and began to run again.

“I hate you,” I yelled.

My mother turned and ran at me then. And I started to run to. But instead of running away, I ran toward her. Our bodies collided and we fell to the ground. I wrapped my arms around her waist hoping to use them like a straight-jacket, but soon felt her fist land against the side of my head. Then her hands were ripping at my hair, pulling it out in small handfuls. When I didn’t let go, she punched me in the face, her wedding band catching my right eye. I wouldn’t hit back, but tried to burrow my body into hers, hoping to soften the blows.

She pried my arms from around her and stood up. I propped myself up on my knees, my eyes closed. A moment later I felt her foot move swift and hard into my side.

“Come on Peter,” she said. I opened my eyes then, and saw Peter glance back at me.

I stayed on my knees for a few minutes, my stomach wrenching, forcing up small bits of bile that I re-swallowed. Finally, I stood, my body wobbly and weak.

Through my left eye, I could see Mrs. Wiggins watching me from her kitchen window. Before I could think, I flipped her a birdie, then let out a laugh. The laugh sounded hollow, as if it had come from someone else. Mrs. Wiggins turned her head, but she didn't leave her window.

I took short steps, moving slowly through Mrs. Wiggins' small, but well tended flower garden. Everything was blooming. The majestic Purple Passion Hydrangeas, the red and gold Crocosmias, the towering white Pampas. I reached down and pinched off a bloom from a scarlet flower I didn't recognize and rubbed the thin red juice from its petals into my hands.

In the distance I heard my mother laugh. I stepped out of the garden and started toward home.



"Zora," my father called as I entered the house.

"It's just me dad," I said.

"Where's your mother?" he asked. He was wearing his beige, church slacks and a white, short sleeved, button-down shirt.

"Out there," I said, and pointed outside.

"What happened?" he said, reaching toward my eye.

Just then, my mother walked up the driveway. I watched my father head toward my mother and brother, and turned to go upstairs.

The screen door open and shut as my parents and little brother, entered the house.

"Zora, you can't keep doing this," my father said.

"We need to be baptized," she said.

"Come with me to the hospital," he said.

"It's probably cause we're not clean."

"Maybe they can give you something."

"We should get a pool," she said.

"You need help," he said.

"We could hold baptisms right here if we had a pool."

"Zora, I'm trying to help you."

"By sleeping with Mrs. Banks?"

"We've been through this. Come with me to the hospital."

"The Randall's have an indoor pool," she said. "We should talk to them."



The ride to the hospital seemed to take forever. My father drove, my mother rode shotgun and I sat in the back seat behind my mother. I was surprised that my father had asked me to come, and expected my mother to object to me being there, but she didn't. Now, she sat with her body squeezed against the door, her right hand on the door handle, while her left hand rested on her purse.

My father turned into St. John's Medical Center and drove past the emergency entrance toward the long-term parking area.

From the parking lot, we took the elevator to the second floor. Then we entered another elevator. My father had called ahead.

When we arrived at our floor, we were buzzed in through a set of peach and green automatic doors. My mother hesitated. "It's okay Zora," my father whispered. Once we walked through, the doors shut behind us automatically.

Two men met us near the entrance.

"Hi. You must be Zora," one of the men said as he stuck out his hand in Mom's direction. My mother left his hand hanging. "I'm Dr. Welsh," he lowered his hand, "and this is Dr. Clemens," he said, pointing his clipboard toward the other man.

"You can call me Tom," Dr. Clemens said.

"A fight?" Tom asked, looking at my eye.

"Basketball," I said.

"Tell them to go easy on you," Tom said.

I smiled and nodded.

"We're just going to go down here so we can ask you a few questions," Dr. Welsh and Tom led the three of us to a small conference room.

"Do you want me to stay?" my father asked my mother.

My mother shook her head, no.

"I'll leave," I said.

"Stay," she said.

Surprised, I went into the room behind my mother. The room was small, with most of its space taken up by a large table. Pictures of the trees and mountains lined the walls, which were a soft pastel green.

"What's your name?" Dr. Welsh asked.

"Her name is Zora," I said, unsure of why they were asking a question they already had the answer for.

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Who is the president of the United States?"

"Do you know where you are?"

"What is your address?"

The questions were fired rapidly. But my mother didn't bother to listen. Instead, she wandered around the room, her arms folded across her chest. Every now and then the men scribbled something on their clipboards.

"How old are you?"

"She's 33," I said.

"Are you on any medication?"

"She takes some pills," I said. "One of them is for water, but I don't know what the others are for."

I didn't know what all of the questions meant or why they were asking them, but I wanted to help my mother, especially since I knew it was at least partially my fault that we were here at all.

As we stepped out of the conference room, I saw my father leaning against the wall a couple doors down.

"Mr. Chambers," Dr. Clemens called to my father.

Dr. Clemens took us on a tour of the floor. That's when it sank in. Mom wasn't coming back home. Dr. Clemens showed us to the common room, a place where people could eat, watch television and play games he explained. The room, with its bright

fluorescent lighting and the scents of stale cigarette smoke and pine cleaner, was empty now. Gray chairs and brown tables were set against drab, white cinderblock walls. On one of the walls, thick lines in orange, purple, red, blue and yellow formed a large, faded rainbow. As I got closer, I could see brown stains splattered against the fading colors. At the end of the rainbow, instead of a pot of gold, there was a golden doorway. Along the wall were four floor-to-ceiling windows about four feet wide. A wooden, waste high banister seemed to hold the four walls together.

I tried to picture my mother hanging out in here, laughing, and playing games with people she didn't know.

"I'll show you her room," Dr. Clemens said. We walked up the hallway, past what the doctor referred to as the nurse's station, and around the corner to get to my mother's room. The room held two twin beds, night-stands and dressers. In front of two windows were a couple of wooden desks with straight-back chairs. On one of the beds were white sheets and a thin cotton blanket. The walls were bare. No color. No pictures. Not even a mirror for my mother to us to put on her make up. Underneath my mother's bed was a pair of slippers.

Dr. Clemens sat down on the unmade bed.

"I can't bring my own house shoes?" my mother asked.

"You can, and we'll keep them in your locker for you."

"She has to share a room?" Dad asked.

"Not initially," Dr. Clemens said as he adjusted his tie. "We'll see how she's doing and how she responds, and go from there."

"How she responds to what?" I asked.

"Michelle," my mother said.

My father looked at his hands. "What about television?" he asked.

"We want her to socialize," Dr. Clemens explained. "When she's here, we really want her to rest." Dr. Clemens stood up and walked toward the doorway. "This is where she can keep her stuff." He showed us a small, cement colored locker outside of her room. It could only be opened by the nurse. "To prevent theft," he explained. "She can keep her money, jewelry, cigarettes--"

"She doesn't smoke," I said.

She looked at me, then opened the locker. It was empty. She closed it, and walked back into her room.

"You should let her get settled in," Dr. Clemens said.

My father nodded. "Honey, I'm going to go get some of your stuff and I'll be right back."

My mother didn't respond.

"Honey," my father called again.

I walked over to the window where my mother stood looking out. A heavy screen was in front of the glass, which made the window look backward. I reached out to touch the top of my mother's shoulder, but drew my hand back just before I reached her.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Take care of Peter," she said, her eyes focused on something in the distance.

"I will," I said.