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## **The muffler mailbox man**


J. Amari Roland

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**The Muffler Mailbox Man**

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## The Muffler Mailbox Man

The muffler mailbox man is a man who is responsible for the delivery of mail to the mailbox. He is a man who is very hardworking and who is always on time. He is a man who is very friendly and who is always smiling. He is a man who is very helpful and who is always willing to help others. He is a man who is very reliable and who is always trustworthy. He is a man who is very honest and who is always truthful. He is a man who is very kind and who is always generous. He is a man who is very brave and who is always courageous. He is a man who is very strong and who is always powerful. He is a man who is very smart and who is always intelligent. He is a man who is very fast and who is always quick. He is a man who is very accurate and who is always precise. He is a man who is very organized and who is always neat. He is a man who is very clean and who is always tidy. He is a man who is very healthy and who is always fit. He is a man who is very happy and who is always cheerful. He is a man who is very successful and who is always prosperous. He is a man who is very loved and who is always respected. He is a man who is very admired and who is always honored. He is a man who is very famous and who is always well-known. He is a man who is very rich and who is always wealthy. He is a man who is very powerful and who is always influential. He is a man who is very wise and who is always knowledgeable. He is a man who is very brave and who is always courageous. He is a man who is very strong and who is always powerful. He is a man who is very smart and who is always intelligent. He is a man who is very fast and who is always quick. He is a man who is very accurate and who is always precise. He is a man who is very organized and who is always neat. He is a man who is very clean and who is always tidy. He is a man who is very healthy and who is always fit. He is a man who is very happy and who is always cheerful. He is a man who is very successful and who is always prosperous. He is a man who is very loved and who is always respected. He is a man who is very admired and who is always honored. He is a man who is very famous and who is always well-known. He is a man who is very rich and who is always wealthy. He is a man who is very powerful and who is always influential. He is a man who is very wise and who is always knowledgeable.

"The way he did it was charming; there was nothing glittery or Christmasy about it, but almost sad, and sometimes his gifts were old beat-up things but they had the charm of usefulness and sadness of his giving."

--Jack Kerouac

## The Muffler Mailbox Man

Upon my arrival on earth, Mother forbade me from doing two things: going to K-Mart and talking to my Uncle Ike.

Ironically, the first word I learned to read was "K-Mart." Mother pointed out the store every time we drove past. She told me many times of the evil that could befall a person if he entered its doors. I reckoned she knew all about K-Mart because she claimed to have gone there twice before I was born. Based on the two visits, Mother decided that the voice of the blue-light special masked some sinister, subliminal message. While everyone else heard, "Two bags of cotton balls for a dollar," Mother swore she heard, "Live in trailers, don't hold down a job, and let your baby wear nothing but a diaper in public."

I once asked Father if he could take me to see K-Mart, just to appease my curiosity. He answered firmly, "If you want your mother to kill you and me both, I'd love to."

He never had a problem with the store and tried to explain to me the reason Mother hated it so. And she did hate it. She hated it so much, in fact, that she sometimes used the word "K-Mart" to describe something that looked cheap. In his attempt to explain to me her reasoning, Father tried one evening to describe Mother's second visit to the store. He began the story by mentioning that Mother had not eaten breakfast that morning before they went to K-Mart. As soon as Mother heard the word K-Mart, she

instructed Father: "You tell her the truth about that day! I did not feel lightheaded in that store because I had not eaten breakfast. I felt lightheaded because of the smell of cheap clothes!"

Father stood corrected, but he proceeded to tell me his version of the tale. Apparently, the fumes from the cheap clothes erased parts of the story from Mother's memory.

They had had a distinct mission: to get fertilizer and to get the hell out. Mother instructed father to let her off at the garden shop, in case someone from her Lady Daisy Garden Club were to see her at K-Mart. Mother retracted her first set of instructions after she decided the heavy rain might ruin her new hairdo, so Father dropped her off at the main entrance. When he went inside to meet her, he found her lying on the floor near the clothing department. A group of employees stood around her, trying to revive her. All Mother clearly remembered was the smell of cheap clothes wafting over the Icee machine and the pretzel stand, around the costume jewelry, straight to her acute olfactory senses.

Mother interrupted him to conclude the story: "As soon as I smelled those clothes, I fainted dead away. I probably passed out from a lack of oxygen!"

After hearing this story not once, but each time we passed K-Mart, I learned to read the sign. I figured if I could read "K-Mart," I would never be seduced by the voice of the blue light special.

Since New Brookland was such a small town, we had to drive past K-Mart to get from our subdivision to any where else. The route to my grandparents's house, the route we drove the most, not only took us past K-Mart, but it also carried us directly in front of my Uncle Ike's house. By the time I turned seven, I had grown accustomed to listening to Mother's standard lecture on this route. Her commentary sounded like the speech the monorail operator at Disney World used each time she drove a load of tourists past some sculpted shrubbery. Mother used the same lulling tone. "And here, to our left, is K-Mart, where I once fainted after smelling some cheap clothes," then later, when we reached Uncle Ike's, "If you will look out the other side of the station wagon, you will see the home of Ike McCaskle, resident insane man of New Brookland. The main feature of this attraction is the unsightly junk in his front yard. We will now proceed to your grandparents' home. I hope you have enjoyed the ride."

Although I understood what could happen if a person went to K-Mart, I had difficulty understanding the term "insanity" (along with the twenty other adjectives my family used to describe Uncle Ike's mental state). Mother provided me with concrete proof of the consequences of going to K-Mart: I could end up living in a trailer. But she had not explained what "insanity" meant or why she considered Uncle Ike to be insane. She also had not explained why I could not talk to him. I speculated that she feared if I talked



to him, I would pile up junk in my bedroom like he piled up junk in his front yard. And she was constantly yelling at me about what a mess my room was.

Since Mother drove past Uncle Ike's house at the speed of light, I caught only glimpses of his front yard. Each time we passed his house, I added to the of list things I had seen. The list grew, until I finally pieced together a clear picture of his yard in my mind. The junk in his yard engulfed his home. Old cars, refrigerators, rusting radiators, bulldozer frames, metal shelving, and bald tires stood on the left side of the path leading to his front door. On the other side of the path, stacks of rusted mufflers, lead pipes, cracked toilets, and discarded sinks were piled to the roof of his home. Sometimes, a piece of the junk fell from the stacks and blocked the slim entrance to his house. It looked like he did not want anybody to come over for a Sunday visit. Placing an old toilet in a walkway was certainly one way to keep the neighbors out.

Each piece of junk fascinated me. I noted when he had added another old car or an additional refrigerator. But the thing that intrigued me the most about his junk was his mailbox. Uncle Ike did not have just any mailbox. He had a mailbox that dangled from the hand of a monster, constructed entirely out of used mufflers.

The body and the head of the creature were made out of two inverted mufflers welded together. The piping between the two mufflers formed a slim, rusty neck. At the top of

the body muffler, two rusted pipes had been welded to either side to make its arms. The left arm pipe was bent in the middle (as if the monster had an elbow), so the mailbox could dangle from the monster's arm. Two large octagonal nuts were stuck to the muffler head to form its eyes, and a series of smaller nuts were arranged in a straight line below its eyes to form his mouth. The nuts that made its mouth did not curve up or down to give him a smile or a frown, they simply gave him a mouth.

When I first saw the monster, it scared me. The first time I saw it I was six years old, and I had recently seen the Wizard of Oz. The monster reminded of the tin man, only he looked like he did not ask the wizard for a heart. I imagined if the monster had been in The Wizard of Oz, he might have asked the wizard for a visit to K-Mart instead.

After I turned seven, I became much wiser, or at least I fancied myself so. The monster no longer scared me because I started to see something sad hidden behind his indifferent expression.

The summer after I turned seven, I spent my days with my grandparents. Mother dropped me off in the morning so she could go shopping and run errands for her garden club, circle group, and Sunday school class. My grandparents lived on the other side of New Brookland, far away from the busy main street and K-Mart. I loved staying with them because I could get away from life in the neatly planned sanctuary of our subdivision.

One day at the first of June, Grandfather and I had planned a day of fishing on his pond. He and I had prepared for the day by purchasing new plastic worms from Bucky's Bait 'N Tackle. The worms were pink, blue, purple, and green, and they were scented to smell like different fruits. Grandfather thought the idea of scented, colored plastic worms was silly, but Bucky convinced him they would catch us a mess of fish in no time at all.

On the way over, when we approached Uncle Ike's house, Mother decreased her speed. If she had made this decision on any other day, I would have been joyous. It would have given me a chance to look at Uncle Ike's yard and add new items to my list. But on that day, I wanted to get to Grandfather's as quickly as possible. Grandfather always taught me to be punctual.

"Why are you slowin' down the car? I gotta get to Granddaddy's!"

"I'm letting this cat pass. Are you so anxious to get to Daddy's that you want me to run over a poor little animal?"

While we waited for the cat to emerge from beneath the car, I studied the monster's face. I tried to find some way to describe his expression, but I again noted that he had none. He looked like the crazy man I had seen on a television show my father watched Thursday nights after I went to bed. The crazy man, I remembered, had no expression, except when he killed people. When he was

strangling somebody, his mouth turned down at the corners.

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I imagined the monster frowning at our car while we waited for the cat, and my fear of him returned. I started to worry that the monster might hurl the mailbox at our car to show his disapproval.

When the animal scuttled out from beneath the car, Mother interrupted my thoughts with a screeching squeal.

She shrieked, then slammed her foot on the gas pedal. The car moved three feet before she hit the brakes. The car moved backwards and forwards and backwards again. During each cycle, the left rear wheel ran over whatever was under it. Mother shrieked and yelled "Good Lord!" I yelled "Good Lord" with her because I thought I was going to puke. I thought Mother had either gone insane or she was trying to make me sick.

"Whatever you do," she yelled, "Don't look back!" She did not have to tell me not to look back because I was busy looking at the floor board of the car, trying to control my nausea. Once the waves of sickness settled, I realized she had been running over and over that cat.

"Why did you run over that cat?"

"Ophy, do you think I would run over a cat? That wasn't a cat, for heaven's sake! That was a rat. That was the biggest rat I've ever seen in my life! Oh my Lord! It just figures that thing would come from his house!"

As soon as we reached Granddaddy's, Mother had to sit down and get her hyperventilating under control. She recounted the incident to us between long gasps of air.

"There was this thing (gasp) crossing the road in front of Uncle Ike's house (gasp, gasp). I thought it was a cat, so I stopped (gasp) to let it pass. But it was not a cat, it was an R-A-T!" (The family elders either whispered or spelled what they thought too horrible for children's ears.) 8

Mother explained that she felt justified in running over the R-A-T. But I failed to see how what she had done was right. Mrs. Thacker's science class had a rat named Sid, and I liked him. While the other kids screamed when Sid's cage was open, I fed and petted him. I figured he was not much different from any other animal. The rat Mother mowed down was different from Sid in size, but I reckoned his size was no reason to kill him. Mother held a different opinion of rats that did not exclude Sid.

"Ike ought to be made to clean up that mess in his front yard," Mother exclaimed, "If he's got rats breeding in that junk, it has become an official health hazard to this community."

Grandmother agreed: "What if that rat were to bite some child? What then? Ike would be responsible because he don't care about his yard."

I tried to convince Mother and Grandmother that rats were not so bad. "Rats aren't that bad. I know because we have one in science class, and I pet him and feed him."

"You do what?!" Mother and Grandmother yelled.

"I pet him and feed him."

"Haven't I taught you that rats carry diseases? They

carry cholera and the plague and Lord only knows what else!

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You could die from handling that rat!"

Mother turned to Grandmother, exasperated, rolled her eyes and sighed.

"James, you should say something about this at the next town meetin'. If you don't, I will. I won't stand to have rats runnin' around this town like its run by white trash. I won't have it!"

"I'll say something about it if you and Gabby will let me and Ophy go fishin'. We spent five dollars on this fancy bait, and I intend to use it before sundown. Excuse us."

Grandfather held the back door open for me, so we could escape more R-A-T lectures from Mother and Grandmother. After Grandfather shut the door, Mother yelled to me: "Don't get too messy out there!"

We gathered our fishing poles and tackle and walked briskly to the pond behind Grandfather's house. When we reached the dock, Grandfather lifted me into the john boat and handed me the fishing poles and the tackle box. I placed them carefully into the exact places in the boat Grandfather had instructed me to put them. Once I was settled, Grandfather untied the boat and pushed off against the dock. Just as Grandfather cranked the motor, we saw Mother walking across the field to us. Mother yelled something to us about my life jacket, but Grandfather did not stop the motor to listen. Instead, he waved his hand

and nodded his head at her as if we both understood. "Shake your head Ophy," he instructed me, "Act like you know what she's sayin' so she'll leave us alone." I nodded and waved.

In fact, I did everything my Grandfather told me to do, even when he got me in trouble. Like one time, when I was five, he told me to put a toad we had found on my Mother. Grandfather laughed when Mother discovered the toad and screamed bloody murder. I didn't laugh because Mother gave me a sound whopping. Besides the tricks he taught me to play, he schooled me on many other things he believed a person needed to know to live a good life. He taught me to get up early so as not to waste my days. He taught me to never judge anyone the first time I met them. He told me to be forgiving of everything, even when I did not want to be. The easiest thing to follow that he taught me was not to talk around fish.

The day Mother ran over the rat, I felt especially glad to be silent when I fished. After all her screaming, I looked forward to the quiet time.

After Grandfather stopped the boat and lowered the anchor, he helped me bait my hook. I chose a purple plastic worm that smelled like grapes. Before I cast my line, I dangled the worm above the water's surface. I liked the look of the purple worm hanging from the line of my new rod and reel. Grandfather had given it to me for Christmas that year, and I considered it my prize possession. No longer did I have to fish with the old bamboo rod he had given me

for my third birthday. Grandfather acknowledged that I was admiring my rod and reel, but he noted, "Ain't no damn fish ever jumped out of the water to be hooked. Not even for a grape smellin' worm."

I threw the rod behind my shoulder and then thrust it forward. I repeated the motion several times to show Grandfather I was practicing. I finally cast my line. The worm sailed through the air, cutting a path for the slicing sound the line made.

While I watched my cork bob on the water, waiting for a bite, I went over the morning's events in my mind. I wondered how a rat could grow so big. I also thought more about Uncle Ike. Why did he pile all that junk up in his front yard? Did he want people to leave him alone, and if he did, how come? Was the rat his pet? What if Mother had killed his pet? What if that metallic monster in the front yard was alive? When my cork disappeared beneath the water, I concentrated on reeling in a cat fish. But these questions bobbed back up into my mind after I tossed the fish into the cooler.

Grandfather, sensing something troubled me, broke the cardinal rule of no talking around fish.

"What's on your mind, Ophy?"

"I'm thinking about that rat. Maybe he was nice like Sid in science class. I guess Mom got scared when she saw it. I just kinda feel sad that she killed it, like I'd feel if Sid got killed."



"Sometimes when people don't understand somethin', they try to get rid of it 'casue it scares 'em. Your mamma saw that rat, and thought, 'That thing could give my child some awful disease.' She was thinkin' of you when she did it."

"I thought she did it 'cause she had gone insane."

Once I said "insane," I started thinking about Uncle Ike again.

"Granddaddy, what does it mean to be insane? Is it like being crazy?"

"Yeah, it means something like crazy, except it sounds fancier to call someone 'insane' instead of callin' them two bobs off plumb."

"How come Mamma says Uncle Ike's insane? She says it every time we pass his house."

"Your mamma and grandmamma call him insane 'cause he's done some things in the past they don't think a sane man would do."

"What kinds of things?"

"Besides pilin' junk up in his front yard and usin' that crazy lookin' muffler thing to hold his mailbox, he's done some things people around here ain't never gonna forgive him for."

"Why don't we talk to him no more?"

"Your Grandmamma thinks the family would be better off not sippin' tea with murderers. That's all I can tell you. Your mamma's liable to haul off and shoot me if I tell you anything else."

We returned to concentrating on fishing, and as I watched my cork bob, I created images in my mind of Uncle Ike killing someone. I imagined him emerging from behind all his junk and yelling at someone for entering his yard. I thought he might yell something like, "Can't you see I got a toilet in my walkway? Don't that tell you that I don't want nobody comin' around here?" Then, boom, the loud crack of his rifle as the man fell to the ground, saying, "I didn't know!" After the man died, I dreamed the muffler monster buried him in an old refrigerator. The whole thing spooked me, but I considered having a murderer in my family a great asset. I then daydreamed about one of my school mates calling me a bad name, and me saying to him, "You better watch what you say! I'm related to a murderer!"

Once Grandfather and I had caught eight fish, the time came for us to return to the house and clean them. After we cleaned them, I carried them to Grandmother so she could fry them for lunch. I returned to the shed to help Grandfather clean up. We placed our rods in the corner of the shed, and he put the tackle box on the top shelf in front of his mason jars filled with moonshine. Before we returned to the house, Grandfather found a photograph he wanted to show me.

"Here, look at this. That's Ike before, well, just before. I don't want you to think he's always been as crazy as everyone thinks. But I also want you to get him out of your head."

He left me alone in the shed with the picture. It was

a shot of Uncle Ike when he was younger, before he had a big gut. Ike stood in front of an old car. He had his hand over the barrel of a long rifle that rested against his leg. He had his other arm around a pretty woman with curly blond hair. I studied the picture for several minutes, and it helped me realize something I had never thought of. I realized that I had never been introduced to anyone like Uncle Ike. All the people I knew at that time were the people my parents introduced me to at church or one of the many unpleasant social functions they forced me to attend.

The more I thought about Uncle Ike, the more boring I considered my life. The people I knew were boring. They all went to the same church, lived in the same subdivision, and sent their children to the only private school in New Brookland. These people never carried rifles or put muffler stuff in their front yards. They never went to K-Mart. The "should knows" were big bores.

The "shouldn't knows" as in "You should not know such people," as Mother might say, were interesting. Mother sometimes pointed them out to me when we went grocery shopping. I gathered from Mother's description of them that they bought their clothes from discount stores, and they drank beer at pool halls. They also got into lots of trouble with the law. Everything Mother told me they did appealed to me and made me think they had infinitely more interesting lives than ours. Uncle Ike was the closest I had come to knowing an actual "shouldn't know," so I wanted to know more about him.

Before leaving the shed, I shoved his picture in my pocket. Ike and the mailbox monster lingered in my imagination and decided to stay a spell.

The rest of my summer dwindled away at a rate that outpaced even Mother's driving. Grandfather made no further mention of Uncle Ike, but I thought of him often. I continued to make up stories about Uncle Ike and the man he killed. I also wondered who he had killed. I thought this information might help me devise a better idea of what Uncle Ike was like. I knew for certain that he was mean, ill-tempered, and tough. At least the image of him in my mind was, well, of a mean, tough man with enough spite to kill a whole subdivision full of people.

Mother and Grandmother also thought about Uncle Ike many times over the summer, except, they thought about when somebody was going to make him clean up his yard.

At the beginning of September, Grandmother decided that the time had come for Grandfather to make mention of Uncle Ike's yard at the first town meeting of the month. Grandmother pestered him about it everyday. He could no longer have his morning coffee in peace; he had his morning coffee while Grandmother asked, "Don't you think you should say something about Ike's yard? I bet he has a whole army of rats livin' in that junk by now. Wouldn't it be better to go ahead and say something now, before those rats take over the town? If and when you ever mention it, make sure

you tell how big that rat Gabby saw was!" To save his own sanity, Grandfather vowed to say something.

The night of the meeting, we ate dinner at Grandfather's. I knew we would be over there until the meeting ended because Mother could hardly wait to hear what decision Judge Winfield would make.

I begged Grandfather to take me to the meeting with him, but Mother declared that nice little girls did not attend town meetings. Grandfather saw nothing wrong with me going. He thought the experience would be educational. Mother insisted that she had already planned something educational for me to do.

To keep me occupied while she and Grandmother gossiped, Mother instructed me to sit at the Kitchen table and read. She handed me two books she thought I might find interesting. But her little ploy did not fool me for a minute.

While other children wore Halloween costumes indicative of the season, Mother dressed me up to look like influential historical figures. The friends who I trick-or-treated with went as ghosts, witches, or super heroes. I masqueraded as Robert E. Lee, for example. Mother used Halloween to teach me about history. She also preferred I not dress like some devilish character; she thought I was devilish enough without the aid of a costume.

The two books she gave me appeared more promising than the book she had given me the previous year on the civil

war. At least she was trying to allow me to make a choice, even though the choice was between being Annie Oakley and John Skelton. I thought I might want to be John Skelton at first, because his name looked like John Skeleton on the page. But he turned out to be a really old, dead poet. I enjoyed reading about Annie Oakley. I found some hope in the idea of being a gun toting cowgirl.

When I finished reading, I crept silently to the living room door to listen to Mother and Grandmother. They whispered and spelled almost everything they said, so I knew they were speaking of Ike. I overheard Mother talking about the monster mailbox holder. She told Grandmother that the monster served as proof for all to see that Uncle Ike was a lunatic. Her mention of the monster gave me my own idea for a Halloween costume. I would do anything to prevent what had happened the year before. My friends hit seven houses in the time it took me to explain to one house the impact Robert E. Lee had on the civil war.

To avoid suspicion, I stepped quietly away from the door and returned to the kitchen. I waited several minutes before walking back to the living room. The chances of Mother agreeing to my idea were slim, so I took every precaution not to ruin them.

I knocked lightly on the living room door both to indicate my presence and to show that I was trying to be polite. Grandmother told me to enter, and when I did, Mother's sixth sense detected that I wanted something.

Before I could mention that I had received the second grade student of the month award for September, Mother blurted, "What do you want? Out with it!"

I began the request by saying "Mamma" in my sweetest tone. Then I referred to my award:

"Mamma, since I got student of the month, and I have been really good lately, can I play the tin man for Halloween this year? Please. Please, please, please?"

(I had learned that the more I said "please" after I made a request, the better the chances were of her saying "yes.")

"I don't know how good you've been lately, Ophy. Your room is a hideous mess, and you have not been getting up on time in the morning. Plus, you would be breaking a Halloween tradition. Don't you think it's boring to dress up as something everyone else wears for Halloween? A lot of people go as the tin man, but how many people do you think go as Annie Oakley?"

"None, just me."

"First you're asking to dress up as a movie character, and the next thing you know, you'll be asking me to go out and buy you one of those plastic costumes from K-Mart."

"Gabby, let the child go as the tin man. I think she's suffered through one too many Halloweens as it is."

After Grandmother spoke on my behalf, Mother changed her mind. She agreed that I could be the tin man as long as I behaved. I left the room to go behave in the kitchen. Mother's mind often changed in accordance to my behavior

shifts, so I planned to put on my best manners until the end of October. My victory excited me so, I almost forgot why Grandfather had gone to the town meeting.

He opened the back door to find me sitting in the dark, staring at the wall.

"What did you do to get time out, Ophy? You put glue in your mother's shoe again, did you?"

"No, sir. I ain't in trouble this time. I'm tryin' to behave."

Grandmother and Mother rushed into the kitchen when they heard Grandfather's voice. Mother turned on the lights, and Grandmother asked questions.

"What did you say? Did you say somethin' about that rat? I hope you told Winfield how big that thing was. What's Winfield gonna make Ike do?"

Grandfather leisurely removed his jacket, poured himself a cup of coffee, and sat down in his easy chair. He pretended not to hear Grandmother's questions. When he felt like discussing it, he told them what happened, which wasn't much.

"Winfield opened the floor for other business, and I mentioned that Gabby had spotted a big rat crossing Atlanta street, near Ike's house. Winfield said he would send some people from the wildlife commission to check it out. That was about it."

"You didn't say that Ike's yard was the breeding ground for those rats? I thought you meant to go down to that



meeting and demand that Ike clean up the mess in his front yard."

"Gabby, you and Charlotte know as well as I that Ike ain't gonna clean up that mess, not today, not tomorrow, not ever. The man's got his reasons. But if you feel so strongly about it, you two ought to go to the next meetin' and say your piece. I am not the one to do it. I might give you a little warning: if you want to end up in the same predicament Ronald Harper found himself in, go right ahead and raise a ruckus about Ike's yard."

Although Harper was my last name, I did not know a Ronald. I reckoned he was related to us in some way because my father was related to every Harper within a three county radius. I filed the name in my memory so I could ask Grandfather about him later. I avoided asking him in front of Grandmother and Mother because I feared Mother might refuse to make my tin man costume.

After Grandfather mentioned Ronald Harper, Mother and Grandmother dropped the issue. Mother muttered something about Uncle Ike when we passed his house on the way home. But for a long while, neither Grandmother nor Mother said Ike's name. They acted like he never even existed. I continued to think about him and make stories up about him. The more I thought about him, the meaner he got. I eventually began to equate him with the monster in his front yard, and they both loomed over my imagination.

Halloween day arrived in a burst of October splendor.

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Mother finished the tin man costume at 2:48 a.m. on October 31. When she woke me that morning, she told me the exact time of the costume's birth so I would recognize how hard she had worked to make the costume perfect.

She was outwardly excited about the costume, and as soon as I got out of the bed, she insisted that I see it. She asked me to stand in front of my closet and to close my eyes. I shut my eyes tightly, while she slid my double closet doors open. I feared she might have added lace fringe to the costume to show people that I was a girl. But when I saw it, I thought it was perfect. She had sewn a suit of silver lamé with piping in the seams that made the suit hold its shape. The only girly frill mother added was the lacy ribbon that would hold the funnel on my head.

"What do you think, Ophy?"

"I like it. I think I'll look just like the tin man."

"I must admit that I did not like your idea at first, but now, I think the costume's kind of cute."

After school that day, Davey and Wallace told me what they planned to be for Halloween. Davey begged me to tell them what my costume was, but I refused.

"Why don't you tell us, Ophy? Why you gotta be so secret about it?"

"'Cause nobody knows what I'm gonna be. Plus, if I tell you, you'll tell the whole neighborhood!"

"If you dress up like Barbie, we ain't gonna go trick-or treatin' with ya!"

I kicked Davey in the leg for even suggesting I might dress as Barbie of all things. The only thing I had to do with Barbies concerned dismembering their bodies and cutting all their hair off. Once I gave Davey what for, I ran home to prepare for Halloween.

Later, while Mother dressed John in his mini J.P. Morgan suit, she sent me to the bathroom to apply my silver face make-up. She had sent Father all over New Brookland looking for silver, not gray, face paint, so she firmly requested I not waste any. As I carefully spread the paint on my face, Father stuck his head in the bathroom door to check on me. He helped me put the make-up on my neck and around my nose. When we finished, he told me a little secret I was not to tell anyone, not even Mother.

"Guess where I got the face paint? I bet you'll never guess?"

"Mrs. Eaker's costume shop?"

"Nope, I got it at K-Mart! Don't tell your mother because she'll make you wipe it off if she knew!"

Father and I chuckled about the make-up, and he left me to do the finishing touches. I thought about how Mother was going to be fooled twice in one evening because I had a secret of my own--I did not really plan to go as the tin man. Before I left, I intended to make a few alterations on my costume.

The first thing I altered was the make-up. Instead of simply putting on lipstick, as Mother had told me to do, I

took her eye liner and drew two wide circles around my eyes, and a line of smaller circles across my mouth. Once I finished my make-up, I snuck past Mother and went to my room. Earlier that evening I had hidden the Valentine's mailbox Mother had made me the year before in my trick-or-treat bag. I had ripped all the hearts off the red construction paper and placed a rag flag on it in their place. I thought the mailbox and my costume looked convincingly real.

At 6:40, twenty minutes before they were suppose to arrive, Davey and Wallace were waiting for me in the den. When Father called me, I ran past Mother, down the stairs, and came within an inch of getting out the door before she grabbed me.

"What on earth have you done with your make-up? I don't remember the tin man having little circles around his mouth."

"I thought he did," I played dumb, "It sure seems like he did."

Mother did not have the heart to keep two anxious milk dud addicts like Davey and Wallace waiting. She touched up my lipstick while she gave me the usual list of instructions, things like, "Don't leave the neighborhood; don't take unwrapped candy; and don't eat any candy until you get home so I can make sure it's not laced with drugs." When she straightened my costume for the last time, I felt a tinge of guilt for being a sneak. She had worked so hard on it. But, I quickly forgot my guilt when she set me loose.

Davey and Wallace had difficulty seeing through their Spiderman and Batman masks to see my costume. They made several guesses at who I was suppose to be, but neither of them guessed correctly.

"I bet you're Neil Armstrong in a space suit."

"No, stupid. She's the tin man from the Wizard of Oz."

I removed the mailbox from my bag and asked them both to guess again.

"You're an alien mailman from Mars."

"Nope," I declared triumphantly, "I'm the Muffler Mailbox Man!"

### The Muffler Mailbox Woman

Since Mother usually ruined Halloween for me, I looked forward to going to the county fair each year. The fair was held the weekend after Halloween. Grandfather had taken me to the fair each year since I turned three. The first three years I went, Mother dressed me in color coordinated school outfits that were uncomfortable and restricting. After I fell onto a cow patty when I was five, Mother let me wear whatever I wanted to as long as I wore something old. The fair was my only opportunity to choose my own clothes and to wear old clothes out of the house.

After experiencing a normal Halloween, I looked doubly forward to going to the fair. Davey, Wallace, and I talked about nothing but going to the fair the week before. We could not wait for Friday to come. Our school gave us the day off as a fair holiday.

Mother refused to take me to the fair because, in her words, "Only the dregs of society go to the fair. It's a festival of unadulterated sin in my opinion, and we should not expose our children to such degradation!" Father could not take me because the mixed smell of cotton candy and elephant ears made him sick to his stomach. Despite all of Mother's squawking about the fair, Grandfather felt that I should go if for no other reason than to get a taste of the local color.

a child where I could observe the "shouldn't knows." I cast glances at every "shouldn't know" I passed, and I felt submerged beneath a pond's murky waters surrounded by fish I had never seen. Attending a private elementary school, with people who had over-protective mothers like mine, did not afford me many chances to interact with variations on the local culture.

Despite all the things I loved about going to the fair with Grandfather, one tradition had started to ruin our fun. We had to take my cousin, Burna, along with us.

If Mother put the fear of all creation in me about a visit to K-Mart, Burna's mother had genetically engineered her to go into a coma around dirt or the smell of cheap clothes. Burna's housekeeper kept their house so clean that one could sense upon entry that the molecules had been dusted and it had damn well better stay that way.

The first year Burna accompanied us, she asked Grandfather to put napkins on the seat of the Tilt-A-Whirl ride. She took one look at the people leaving our seat and insisted that the attendant of the ride find some cleaner and make use of it fast! The napkins sufficed to prevent utter embarrassment for Grandfather and me. For a six-year-old, she commanded the respect of most adults and used that respect to get her own way. Her way was generally dirt-free.

The day we left the house to go to the fair that year,

Burna sported a color-coordinated knickers outfit. She looked 27 like Pip from Great Expectations. She remembered how she had spilled soda on her dress the year before, so she wore nickers, her play clothes, in case she got dirty.

Grandfather simply rolled his eyes, strapped her into the car, and assured Aunt Renata that the outfit, and her daughter, would return untouched by the remotest speck of dirt later in the evening.

If I lived my childhood floating in a boat, Burna lived her's strapped in a car. At least I could breathe the air and feel the boat carry me safely above murky waters. Burna looked at life from car windows. Her mother strapped her into the car with rules and Burna never thought to undo herself. She understood that she could never ask Aunt Renata questions about what she saw, so she saved them for rides with Grandfather. He, however, was leery of answering them because she might tell her mother what he said.

As we drove off, Mother reminded him of how impressionable our minds were. She repeatedly requested that neither of us be allowed to see the "Baboon Lady." The car rounded the bend, and Mother screamed, "Take them to see the cows, but not that woman who holds the snake around her neck." I turned around to see Mother mouthing, "That woman wears no clothes!"

The ride to the fair grounds held Grandfather and me captive to Burna's expectations for that year. She expected to see children over-eating and throwing up on rides. She expected to see women with tattoos wearing tight



clothes. She most hoped to see the pigs. Out of all the 28 animals, even clean ones like cats, Burna loved mud-covered pigs the most.

She liked to tell stories in the form of questions in order to hold another's interest. She began with "Remember that time we" and ended with "that was funny wasn't it?" Grandfather did not mind listening to these questions. They did not get him into trouble with Aunt Renata.

As we neared the parking lot of the fair, Burna started a question/story. "Remember that time, last year, when we came to the fair and I saw that pig? I said, 'That pig sure is getting herself dirty. She sure is making herself dirty!' Remember that Ophy? You thought it was real funny! Do you remember that Granddaddy? No, you were throwing up after that ride, but Ophy thought I was really funny about that pig. Its stomach had these big pink things hangin' down. I still don't know what those were, but her babies must have come out one from each pouch. She must have had five babies. You could count where they were on her belly."

She continued to talk about the pig as we walked from the parking lot to the entrance of the fair. She used a slight variation on her story telling technique by ending with a question that Grandfather could afford to answer.

"Can we go see the pigs first?" she asked. Grandfather said that if a trip to the pigs would shut her mouth, we would certainly see the pigs first.

A herd of children circled the pig pen, but she considered them no match. With a polite but

forceful tone, she said, "excuse us," until she secured us a 29  
place at the front of the pen. I also loved the pigs, so we  
stood on the pen's gate for some time observing the pig's  
behavior. We were delighted to have the opportunity to  
watch her piglets hop and play.

My mind wandered to thoughts of Piglet in my favorite  
Pooh story, and I asked Burna if the piglets reminded her of  
the same thing. Piglet was the first pig Burna encountered.  
Piglet was clean.

She turned to me and noted, "The mother pig has exactly  
six of those pouches and exactly six of the piglets are in  
the pen. That means that the little piglets live in those  
pouches before they are born. Pigs are smart like that.  
Pigs are the smartest animals I've ever seen."

I doubted the logic in her theory on the origin of  
piglets. I did not doubt, however, that the pig was by far  
the smartest animal she had ever seen. The other animals we  
had seen at the fair were not in positions to show any  
intelligence. The cows and horses stayed tied to long  
poles so their owners could show them off. All the chickens  
were in tiny cages. The pigs, at least, could hop around in  
their pens.

Grandfather nudged his way through the crowd and  
offered his service to Burna if she should want to pet the  
pigs. She politely declined saying, "Oh! No! What would  
my mother say if she knew?" We tried to help her  
understand the concept of not telling her mother  
everything. We tried to show her that such honesty grew

cumbersome at times. She stayed strapped by rules,

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observing life from a safe distance.

Before she climbed down from the pen fence, she told the pigs she deeply regretted not petting them, but she knew the mother pig could understand because she would not want her own piglets to get dirty.

The rest of the day alternated between riding rides and eating junk food. We ate cotton candy, elephant ears, candy apples, hot fries covered in malt vinegar, hot dogs, and whatever else we desired. Grandfather believed both our mothers starved us on chicken feed diets that only allowed us one sweet item a week. He made up for our "sweets deficiency syndrome" by packing us full of them one day a year.

Each time we snacked, Grandfather bought us a large sticky soda. He figured we were already going to be wired, so why not add to our mothers' frustrations as they tried to put us to the bed later that evening while we fought caffeine highs. Burna's mother never allowed her to drink soda, so, Burna drank every one of her large sodas down to the last slurpy sip in the cup.

Grandfather and I went to the bathroom several times in the day. Each trip we made to the facilities, we tried to encourage Burna to go, but she refused. Her mother told her not to sit on the toilet seats at the fair. Grandfather had the sneaking suspicion that her mother had informed her that she could catch some awful disease from

The first time I went to the bathroom, I had the responsibility of taking her in with me. She did not open her eyes and held her breath through the entire experience. If I had considered the Tilt-A-Whirl incident embarrassing the previous year, having to hold Burna's hand like a seeing eye dog while she turned blue from a lack of oxygen registered a step higher on my scale of humiliating moments.

While I was in the bathroom, she screamed, "You're not sitting on that seat are you? You should never use the bathroom in a public place because you'll get the lobsters. You'll have little lobsters all over you, and they'll never, ever come off as long as you live--ever!" No one had ever told me about bathroom lobsters, but I looked around to make sure I was not attacked.

The next time we went to the restrooms, I asked Grandfather if he had heard of the bathroom lobsters. He started laughing so hard, we had to find a bench for him to rest on before he could speak without laughing to answer my question.

"I've never heard of the bathroom lobsters, but I have heard of the crabs," he proceeded to ask, "Burna, did your mother tell you about the crabs? Did she say something to you about getting crabs in the bathroom?" She answered with a timid, "Yes, sir", because she could not stand to get anything wrong. He told us that such a thing as crabs could exist in a bathroom, but he assured us that, "If the crabs are in the bathroom, just check the toilet bowl

before you sit down. If you see one come tell me 'cause I'd 32  
like to see it!" The whole thing spooked Burna so badly,  
we had to take turns watching her outside the door. She was  
too afraid to walk in.

When Burna began an interpretive rendition of the  
"Irish Jig" trying not to wet her pants, Grandfather  
suggested that we get her to Aunt Bertha's and that we get  
her there fast.

Burna wanted to know every detail about Aunt Bertha's  
before we left the fairgrounds, because she needed to know  
that it was not another public place. Grandfather cut me a  
look that said: "You say one word and you die." He assured her  
that, Not only does Bertha have a public bathroom, she also has  
a private one in back. I don't think either one of them has  
the crabs, or the lobsters!"

I spent many afternoons with my Grandfather at Aunt  
Bertha's. Whenever the two of us went to see the local  
college play football, we stopped in her establishment and  
had lunch. No one in the family knew I had been there,  
because if Mother had found out, she would have had cardiac  
failure. Aunt Bertha's "establishment" (as it was referred  
to around Burna from that afternoon forth) was called "The  
Spit 'n Argue." By the time I turned six, I had seen  
both things done quite often in the place.

Aunt Bertha was a buxom woman with large brown eyes,  
long gray hair, and a good left hook. If someone got out of  
hand in her establishment, she could them out

herself without the help of any bouncers. She had a 33  
certain kindness to her nature that demanded respect, and  
she never tolerated violence from her patrons.

When she took over the bar from her father, it had the  
reputation of a killing ground for the 'shine runners in the  
area. Years of trying to raise the reputation of the place  
had failed, though she did manage to stop the weekly shootings  
that had occurred when her father owned it. Grandfather  
said that the place did not have a grill until Aunt Bertha  
took it over--most of her father's patrons would have killed  
the cook for serving bad food.

Inside, "The Spit 'n' Argue" was decorated with  
pictures that covered the walls. These pictures fascinated me  
because they told the pictorial history not only of the  
bar, but also of my mother's mother's side of the  
family--the side that included Uncle Ike. Grandfather once  
pointed out the pictures of the bar's hey day. These were  
my favorite. Men carried large rifles and the women  
wore dark lipstick and waves in their hair. Besides the  
pictures, Aunt Betha had placed ten booths along the right  
wall and a long bar on the left. In the middle of the room,  
tables were set up, some long and rectangular, some small  
and round. She moved the tables around wherever she wanted  
to put them, so they never stood in the same spot on  
two consecutive visits. Her arrangement of the tables provided  
an element of surprise for those who visited her regularly.  
Above the booths, Aunt Betha hung a sign that read: "Seat  
Yourself Wherever."

We were met at the door by Okra, Aunt Bertha's main waiter. She figured the costumers would not complain about the food if Okra served it. Burna's eyes widened at the sight of him. He had long hair, a scruffy beard, and tattoos all over his arms. Before Burna had the chance to turn around and run, Okra held out his hand to her and said, "It's nice to meet ya, little lady! You must be Jim's other granddaughter and a pretty one too!" Burna replied that it was nice to meet him and proceeded to ask if there were any crabs in the bathroom because she had to go awfully bad. He and Grandfather exchanged a glance. Okra assured Burna he would check the private bathroom before letting her use it. Grandfather sighed with relief as he led us to one of the booths.

When we sat down, Grandfather looked up and nodded towards a man and said "Ike." The man nodded back saying, "James." He then nodded to me as well because he probably realized that I stared holes through him. It was the first time in my life that I had actually been close enough to see his face without Mother rushing me off in another direction. Burna and I stared at him as he tried to finish his beer at the next table. I thought about what she would tell her mother when she got home.

Aunt Bertha waltzed into the room hugging people and inquiring about the latest news. When she saw us, she came over and gave me a hug. She held me out in front of her and said, "I swear, child! You look like you haven't been fed in a 'coon's age!"

She asked me what brought us there, and I said, "Burna 35  
won't use the bathrooms at the fair because she thinks they  
all have the crabs, so Okra went to check the bathroom for  
us to make sure." She shot Grandfather a look, and they  
broke into knee-slapping laughter. Okra appeared with the  
news that all was well, so I led Burna through the back of  
the establishment to the best bathroom I had ever laid my  
eyes on.

Burna seemed to admire the bathroom as much as I did  
when we opened the door. The floor was made of pink  
marble, and all of the fixtures were gold-plated. A bathtub  
sat on four clawed feet with a shag, pink rug beside it.  
The toilet seat was a cushy pink circle with a rose pattern  
running around the edges. Burna kept saying how beautiful  
it was and how clean it was and how she couldn't wait to  
tell her mother all about it.

Before I could suggest that she not tell her mother  
anything, she inquired about Okra. "I know who was on his  
shirt. That was Robert E. Lee 'cause you played him for  
Halloween remember? Why is his name Okra? That's a funny  
name. Must be named that because when his mother saw him  
with all of those pictures on his arm, she got angry and said  
she'd call him a food's name--a bad food's name,  
the worstest, slimiest, rottenest food's name in  
the whole wide world."

I replied, "His name isn't Okra 'cause of that. His  
name's Okra 'cause he likes to eat it so much. He says  
there's such a thing as a crow who can talk!"



"Birds talk?" she asked while walking to our seats. 36

"Okra says he knows a man who has one."

"Do pigs talk? I thought they went 'oink', but today they sounded like this, snort." She snorted all the way to the table.

If Aunt Renata or Mother had been present, we would not have been allowed to snort or to stare or to simply look. Our mothers intercepted us when we did things that might call attention to us. Each stare or look or snort received inconspicuous punishment. A stare got us a poke in the side; a look got us two pokes; but a snort would have gotten us life-time restriction. I thought for a moment that Burna was trying to unlock herself, but her perfect manners returned when she saw Grandfather.

Aunt Bertha placed three plates of hamburgers, onion rings, and french fries on our table. While she and Grandfather discussed the fair, Burna and I ate with our eyes on Uncle Ike. I wondered why he had killed a man and why he did not seem sorry in the least for doing it. He sat at his table watching television, drinking his beer, and ignoring us as if everything in his life was normal.

He looked different up close. I had seen him twice in the grocery store. But each time, Mother poked me and turned me the other way. Looking at him, I saw he did not have foam coming out of his mouth like I believed he would. He did not have a gun by his side. The only things

odd looking about him were the Hawaiian shirt and plaid pants he wore. He was sloppily dressed. 37

While absorbing his every move, I considered how he felt. I thought he probably felt so bad that he would never do it again. I still half-expected him to turn towards us and growl.

Aunt Bertha and Grandfather walked across the room to see her new juke box. She told us that if we stayed put, she would give us a nice, big milkshake for desert. No objections were raised on our part. We felt content to stay in our seats, straining our eye muscles.

"Do you know that man over there?" I asked Burna. "Of course I do!" she said, "His name is Ike like Granddaddy said and you know what? His hat has pigs on it!"

I had trouble noticing the pigs on his hat through all the surf and plaid. They did not seem as important as who he was. I guessed from her answer that her mother had managed to shelter her completely from the family's discussions on Uncle Ike.

I turned my head for no more than a second, observing the fair-goers passing the window. When I turned it back, Burna had left the table and walked up to Uncle Ike.

After introducing herself to him, she asked if she could see his hat. "I love pigs! You want me to tell you what they did today when we saw them?" She proceeded to break into a lengthy account of everything the pigs did. I thought at that moment, if he had ever had probable cause to

kill someone, this would have been the time. My mind raced. 38  
Should I go over and try to save her or should I go ask her  
politely to stop bothering the nice man. I opted for plan  
two.

Before I could reach the table, she had launched into  
"one billion questions mode." She held his hat in her hand,  
pointed to the picture of the pigs, and asked, "Why does  
this say makin' bacon? These two pigs aren't makin' bacon.  
One's on top of the other one and it looks like they are  
wrestlin' and not cookin'."

I thought that the quotation was confusing for the same  
reason, so I waited to hear his answer before dragging her  
back to the table.

"These here pigs are makin' bacon," he began, "They're  
doin' somethin' that will make a whole lot of little bacons  
like them little bacons you saw runnin' 'round in that pen  
today. You understand?"

"Oh, yes sir!" she answered, "The little pigs aren't  
piglets--they're bacons?"

At the end of her sentence she turned completely pale.  
She asked him why we ate little pigs for breakfast and  
not the big pigs. She did not think it was fair. He  
explained further that bacon was the name of the meat we ate  
that comes from the oldest pigs, but we call little pigs  
bacon. His answer did not appease her thoughts. She  
followed me back to the table without saying another word.

Burna's discussion with Uncle Ike on pigs and bacon was  
her first realization that meat comes from animals and we

eat it. When I was six, I had asked Grandfather why there <sup>39</sup> was a pig on the sausage container. He told me frankly that we kill pigs for food. Uncle Ike's response to her question masked the truth, despite her understanding of a pig's fate.

I realized how different his response to her was than what I expected. I thought he might try to do something mean to her since he was a murderer, but what he did do was protective, not harmful. I feared he might say something like, "That's right little girl! We eat pigs for food! Ha! Ha! Why don't you take that bacon home and fry it!" But he didn't.

Grandfather's proverb popped into my head as we walked away from Uncle Ike. "Never judge a man if you don't know him." The Uncle Ike of my imagination differed greatly from Uncle Ike the real person. Fear controlled my logic as it does most people. "He could just be nice out front," I thought. And "being nice out front" was something I had seen most adults do in public.

We thanked Aunt Bertha for the food and left to go home. The silence that comes from the weight of thought enveloped the car. Grandfather must have thought about what Aunt Bertha had told him at the juke box, while Burna thought about eating helpless baby pigs. I considered what might happen if Burna were to tell her parent's about visiting the "Spit 'N Argue." We each let out a collective sigh tinged with tiredness and contemplation.

The next thing I remembered, Grandfather carried me to

bed at my house and tucked me in. I said my prayers in 40  
front of Grandfather. I thanked God for the day and asked  
him to prevent Burna from telling her mother everything. A  
silent pause in my prayers meant a moment alone with God,  
and I asked him to help Uncle Ike. The prayer closed with my  
request for sea creatures to remain there instead of making a home  
out of my toilet.

Grandfather and I passed safely through Saturday  
without Burna uttering a word to her mother about what we  
had done the previous day. We figured she kept quiet since  
we did not hear her mother project a blood-curdling howl  
into the atmosphere. Aunt Renata took Burna to ball room  
dance lessons every Saturday, so Burna had little time left  
with her parents.

My Saturdays were spent practicing piano which was a  
source of anguish for my family. Despite the play time  
practicing took from my Saturdays, I gladly practiced that  
day in case Mother found out about Burna's trip to the "Spit  
'n' Argue." Mother knew something was different when I went  
to the piano to practice without being told, but she avoided  
all piano-lesson fights like cat-sized rats.

That Sunday, the family came for breakfast at  
my house before church. While everyone fixed their plates,  
Grandfather asked me if Mother had whispered or spelled  
anything in the last twenty-four hours. "No, sir," I  
answered, "But she did say 'shit' when she burned her finger

in the bacon grease." He used his throw-back-the-head laugh 41  
in response. "If your mamma does start askin' you questions  
about yesterday, tell her to speak to me," he said,  
"Whatever you do, don't mention Ike!"

My family left for church before the others because  
Mother liked to get me settled and prepared. She said she  
liked to leave early to sit in the same pew, but no one else  
ever tried to sit in our pew. Each Sunday, after we got  
settled, she whispered things like "No talking in church or  
turning your head around--if you do, you'll end up on the  
back row." The back row of the church was the purgatory  
section.

Burna and her family came later. Burna did not need to  
be prepped for the service. She needed to strut her tail  
feathers down the aisle. She waltzed to the pew that Sunday  
wearing an ivy-colored dress that had been hand embroidered  
by her very own housekeeper. The color of the dress made  
her big brown eyes leap from her face while the embroidery  
matched the intricate curls of brown hair hanging from her  
head. The lady behind us commented on how cute Burna  
looked. The woman continued to make comments about how  
pretty Burna was well into the pastor's announcements.

I looked down at my dress almost ashamed. I felt  
sloppy. Mother had stuffed me hastily into a blue dress I  
favored because of its matching hat. My decision to spend  
the morning looking for water moccasins in our pool's filter  
left me little time to dress. Burna had surely spent the  
morning with a mass of hot curlers in her hair.

I despised Sunday worship service for several reasons. 42  
The pastor considered every Sunday Revival Sunday, and I was  
hard pressed to find anything that he had revived. By  
twelve o'clock each Sunday, Mother and I had fought for at  
least an hour on the issue of drawing in church and how I  
might burn in hell for it. Burna always sat with her hands  
in her lap never uttering a word.

During church that Sunday, I entertained myself with  
Burna's matching purse. When I became bored, I counted the  
minutes left because I felt that Sunday would hold no surprises.  
By twelve-thirty we would be singing the two-thousandth verse  
of "Just As I Am," waiting like wild dogs in holding bins  
for someone to walk down the aisle and confess his horrific  
sins so we could leave.

When the pastor called the children to the front  
for the children's sermon that day, everyone looked at Burna  
with her look-at-me-I-deserve-attention grin and her  
beautiful green dress. She came up behind me, grabbed my  
hand, and begged me to sit near the pastor with her. Since  
I knew all the women were admiring the bib of her dress, I obliged  
and secured her a spot right next to him.

His lesson told how the three little pigs learned from  
the third pig how to live successfully by building their  
houses on the rock. When Dr. Reverend Skinner broke into his  
usual children's sermon speech about following the path of the  
righteous (directed more at the adults than us), I stopped  
listening. I did, however, hear him ask the children if  
they had any questions. Burna's hand rose timidly into the

At first, I suspected she would ask if pigs went to heaven after we ate them. Blood ran to my face when I considered what else she might ask.

After the pastor complimented her attire, she asked, "What does it mean when pigs are makin' bacon?" A confused look passed over the pastor's face as I thought it would be an awfully good time to get a warm-up going of "Just As I Am."

My bones froze when the pastor inquired what she meant by "makin' bacon."

"Well," she said in a rather chipper, high pitched tone, "This man we saw at this place where people spit had on this hat. There was a pig on top of another pig and they were huggin', it looked like to me. But they hugged in a funny way like they were hugging with their legs and not with their arms like we do, and I thought how neat it would be if we hugged with our legs sometimes just to make things different. But, Mother might not let me hug with my legs because it might make me all dirty." She concluded her speech with "I just thought you might know 'cause Mama says you act like you know every thing under the sun there is to know."

Once the pastor relocated his jaw, he said that he did not know about such a term as "makin' bacon;" however, he did know that nice little girls did not hang around in places where people spit. My legs barely carried me down the aisle to my seat through the dead silence that clung to



every fiber of the church, and upon reaching my seat, my eyes never left the floor. 44

For the first time in my life, two faults I found in Sunday service were corrected: the pastor shortened the sermon and we did not sing a benediction hymn. I thought Burna's question accomplished some good after all; we could go home early without hearing Mrs. Birdside confess to going off her diet that week. One look at Aunt Renata's face proved that thought false.

The moment the sermon ended, Uncle Andy whisked Aunt Renata and Burna to their car. Father did the same to my family, and Mother felt compelled to narrate what we should do as we left the parking lot. "Keep right on smiling," she said through a clenched smile, "We'll get out of the parking lot with the only shred of dignity we have left."

I wanted to stay in the parking lot--at least there I was safe from interrogation. The minute the car turned out of my haven, Mother began to take deep breaths in between asking questions about "makin' bacon." "Did you see the hat, Ophy? Where were you?" "Did you know what the hat meant?" were the first questions she demanded I answer. "I'm not really sure, uh, you should ask Granddaddy," was my response to each question.

The questions did not end until we reached Grandfather's house where Aunt Renata had been taken to faint. Uncle Andy suspected that she had had a mild heart attack, but Grandfather assured me that everyone overreacted. Grandmother did not see where anyone had

overreacted. She said she almost fainted dead away when she heard little Burna telling God and everybody that she had not only been to the "Spit and Argue," but she had also spoken to that Ike character. Grandfather reminded her that he was her relation. She reminded him that she "don't claim murderers on anyone's side of the family--especially murderers who wear private matters on their hats to public places where they could be seen!" Grandfather did not see how anyone had any business telling a man what he could or could not wear in public.

Mother sat dazed in the living room occasionally muttering: "And she told him that Renata thinks he's a know it all. Did she not realize what she was saying? I might expect this from Ophy." Father told her not to put ideas into my head because I had already informed the pastor on one occasion that the dress he complimented me on was "a bitch to iron, according to my Mother." Remembering that episode served to enrage Mother further, and she stewed until lunch was served.

Grandfather saved me the anguish of listening to Mother fume by taking me out to his shed to fetch some hot peppers for the collards. He always knew the right moment to save me from another lecture on the perils of wicked children.

The inside of the shed retained a coolness in the middle of the warm November day. We sat on a bench to bask in the nourishing strength of silence. My mind tried to concentrate on other thoughts besides those that flew around inside the house. We both relied on the shed for the same

reasons; I felt fortunate Grandfather shared the shed with 46  
me as a refuge from all of the confusion. I found it funny  
that a tongue was the very instrument that drove me to  
embrace silence.

Grandfather took the peppers off the shelf slowly. His  
hand moved, suspending time until lunch was over and we  
were forgotten long enough to listen to our own thoughts.  
He broke the silence by saying my full name, and for a brief  
moment, I thought he might have been angry at me.

"Ophelia," he started, "There are some things that I  
used to think you just couldn't understand maybe 'cause I  
listened to your Grandmama a tad too long. We go on  
rantin' and ravin' about your Uncle Ike, and as far as I  
know, you never were told how he's your relation. Your  
Grandmama's mama was his Aunt which would make him her  
cousin like Burna's yours.

"Grandmama use to play with Ike when they were kids;  
the first time I met her she was with him at the dime store.  
I thought for sure he was her beau 'cause of his good  
looks.

"After I asked your Grandmama who the hell that fella  
was, we started courtin'. Ike went with us most o' the  
time. He took his woman along too. If I hadn't loved your  
Grandmama so darn much I might have looked a little more  
seriously at Ike's woman 'cause she sure was pretty. Her  
name was Betty and she had the prettiest blonde hair--always  
had a nice wave in it.

"Ike was runnin' shine out of Bertha's place at the

time--good money from what he said--but he spent it all on Betty. Betty thought Ike would be rich for the rest of his life, runnin' shine like that. Since he was gonna be rich, she settled down and decided to marry him. They had one of the biggest weddings from what I could tell after helpin' some of the fellas finish off the keg at the reception.

"They were married for years and years livin' in a house that Betty designed herself. We use to go to dinner over there at least once a week so we could eat some of Betty's chicken and dumplin's. They were real happy for a long time."

I had to interrupt to inquire about the murder. Having the chance to ask questions about Ike filled me with elation. "If he was so happy, why did he kill someone? You'd think he would want to keep the happy and not bring in the sad. He must be really sad."

Grandfather spoke to me from that moment on as an intelligent human being. He stopped using the tone most adults I knew used around children--the tone that says, "That's all your little brain can handle."

"Sometimes men, like Ike, live with their eyes so close to center that they never look up to see the sky. He only saw how happy his family was. Shoot, he had a daughter he loved more than anything in the whole world. I'd never seen a man so happy when his daughter first learned to ride her bicycle. Everything seemed so good for him, then, suddenly, as you said, the sad came in. He was arrested for runnin'

shine and spent a good year in the state pen. Grandmama saw 48  
him at least twice a week and checked on his wife every  
day. One day when she went to check on his wife, through the  
window, she saw Betty kissin' another man. Grandmama knew  
how this would hurt Ike, so she never told him. Didn't  
need to 'cause he found out all by himself.

"When he came home from the pen, he talked to me once  
about how he thought Betty had changed. He told me that it  
must have been 'cause she thought she was pregnant again.  
Just short of eight months after Ike got out, Betty had a  
son. Ike was nervous as a 'coon in a flashlight that day.  
We all thought the baby decided to come a little earlier  
than expected, but he came out healthy as he could be.

"If Ike had been happy before, he acted like he owned  
the world the minute that boy entered it."

"When did the sad come in?" I inquired.

"The sad came about a year after his son was born. Ike  
had been workin' long hours at the corner store he and his  
brother opened, tryin' to make a go of things for the  
family. He wasn't home too much. He came home from work  
early one payday to take Betty to the store for a new dress.  
She was packin' all her things. He couldn't understand why  
she wanted to go on a trip he couldn't go on. Then she said,  
'Ike, you can't go. I'm not comin' home.'

"Ike was so mad he tore up the house and threw the  
furniture out in the front yard. He swore to her that  
would never pick it up no matter how bad she wanted  
to come back to him.

"She started screamin' at him to put her furniture back 49 and finally said, 'This furniture ain't even yours Ike; Ron bought it for me. Hell, he also gave me the son. None of this is yours--you stupid fool!'"

Grandfather had a look in his eye of deep contemplation as he paused a moment in the story. Grandmother shattered the silence when she screamed for us to come to dinner. He told her to hold her horses because we would come when we felt good and ready.

"Ike stopped throwin' furniture out into the front yard long enough to let her pack up her things. I guess he wanted her to think he would let her go, but he had different plans. Betty and the children stood by the road waitin' for Ron to come get them while Ike stood at the front door watchin'. I suppose it must be the hardest thing in the world for a man to watch his happines--his whole life, everything he's ever wanted or known--standin' on the side of the road, waitin' on a ride out of his world.

"The minute Ron pulled over, Ike ran to his car, stuck his gun in the window and blew Ron's brains out the other side of his head. Lord only knows what Betty and the kids did at that moment, but I could have sworn I heard them screamin' all the way over here that night.

"When the cops got there, Ike turned himself over without saying a word. He knew what he did was wrong, but he couldn't see his life drive away that '49 Ford."

I wanted to know why he wasn't in jail for the rest of his life. "He got out for good behavior," Grandfather

spoke more surely than before. "The judge at his last parole hearin' sympathized with him and let him go back into what little world he had left to go back to. Betty had long since married a rich banker livin' in Richmond.

Ike's brother kept his house for him just in case he did get out of jail. His brother was about the only soul on earth left who talked to him; the rest of the family shunned him 'cause they knew how everyone thought he was crazy as a loon. His brother died shortly after he was released.

"He never was the same after that. All the junk he piles up in his yard is damn-near the worst mess in the world. He spends most of his time doin' things for the people in his neighborhood. I try not to let your Grandmama know, but I drop by to speak to him on occasion. Far as I know his wife's furniture is buried somewhere under all that junk in his front yard. He never moved it before pilin' more on."

By the time Grandfather finished his story, Grandmother had reached a state of extreme perturbedness. We had no choice but to go into the house for dinner. Even though the dinner was supposed to honor Uncle Andy's birthday, we did not feel like eating. We did not feel much like talking either. Burna, John, and I sat in the kitchen, moving our food around our plates instead of eating it. The silence allowed me to digest something other than food.

I imagined Uncle Ike's life from the time he threw the first piece of furniture into his yard until the time we saw

him at the "Spit 'N Argue." He threw stuff on top of the furniture. 51  
He kept piling up stuff, trying to conceal the clutter and  
the chaos that made his life, as Grandmother would say,  
total insanity.

Uncle Ike walked safely amongst the stuff. His front  
yard's clutter protected him from the world, and he looked  
through the cracks to see the world passing by. Mother and  
I drove past his house and he looked at us. He looked at us  
and thought, "There go some 'couldn't knows.'"

Finally, I saw him inside his house, wondering if other  
people knew how it felt when happiness leaves their lives in  
a Ford. He did not believe people knew his feelings at all.

After dinner, Mother suggested we leave earlier than  
usual. On normal Sundays, we stayed at Grandfather's all  
afternoon. Mother thought it best to leave before the six  
o'clock worship services started. She wanted to avoid being  
seen by other church members. Since my Father was head  
deacon of the church, he could not avoid attending Sunday  
Evening Services. Before we left, Uncle Andy asked father  
to tell the pastor that Burna minced her mother's words.  
"I'll tell him Andy," Father promised, "He'll get over  
it--in twenty years or so."

During the ride home, Mother informed me that I was  
not on restriction because it was not my choice to go the  
"Spit and Argue." I felt a tinge of triumph.  
For once in my life, Burna had been the one to say something  
inappropriate and not I. Mother's embarrassment, I  
supposed, hinged on how things might have appeared to other



people, not how they really were.

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Her stock in appearances helped me conclude that Uncle Ike mistakenly placed too much stock in the appearance of his life. He never saw any of it coming, so his anger came to him at once, and the dose was too much for his system.

Mother interrupted my thoughts when she asked Father not to drive past Uncle Ike's house. Father turned down the radio, and in a tone he rarely used with her, said, "If you think I'm driving around the world and back again just so you can avoid seeing his house, you need to think again. You have been whining about him all day. If I do remember correctly, Gabby, Burna embarrassed the family when she told him what Renata thinks of him. Burna did not say a thing about Ike."

"But he's the root of the entire thing!" Mother responded, "He's got that trash in his yard he won't clean up, he told Burna that baby pigs were little bacons, and he's got huge rats running around. I don't feel like being exposed to him tonight! Since he killed your Uncle, I would think you would be a little less compassionate!"

When we reached Ike's house, Father continued to go the speed limit to aggravate Mother. I sat stunned in the back seat with the knowledge that Ronald Harper was once my father's Uncle. The family had never revealed Ronald Harper's true identity.

Curiosity seemed to jerk my eyes sideways on the off chance that Uncle Ike stood in his front yard. Mother

uttered a loud "Good Lord!" followed by "As if that first monstrosity in his yard was not enough, he's now got two! What the hell does he need with two of those damn things?" (Mother allowed her anger towards Father to dress her language in words she would never wear to church.)

Standing beside the Muffler Mailbox Man was another muffler character. This one looked equally as hideous with the same muffler pipes joined to make a neck and the same spindly, rusted pipes for arms. Father slowed the car for us to get a better look at the new creature. He pointed our attention to an old wig on top of the new muffler creature's head.

"That looks like a newspaper box in its hand," Father noted.

"Why would he need to make another one to hold the newspaper box?" Mother observed, "Doesn't that first one have another arm he could stick that thing on?"

I piped up with a direct and confident "No!" from the back seat.

"O.K., little miss sassy, why don't you tell me the reason why not?" Mother could not help but add the "little miss sassy" part.

"The Muffler Mailbox Man needed a wife, that's why! He needed one to stay around with him for a while instead of one that might leave him."

Mother informed me that my overly active imagination on this topic stemmed from my recent fascination with the tin man. She forbid me from watching the Wizard of Oz on

Thanksgiving Day. Watching the Wizard of Oz on Thanksgiving 54  
was a yearly tradition. I reckoned if I did anything else  
wrong during the following weeks, I might not be watching  
the Macy's parade or eating turkey.

"Why in the world would he make another one of those  
creatures?" Mother asked as we passed the K-Mart.

I asked myself the same question, but the answer came  
to me--the Muffler Mailbox Man was lonely. It was all the  
answer I needed.

After Burna's premier performance in church, my life trudged along with little variation in schedule. Each week day I followed Mother's schedule for me: school, piano practice, fight with Mother about practicing, practice anyway, eat dinner, do homework, go to sleep. I spent most Saturdays trapped in a mall, and Sundays were spent trapped in church. At least Burna's unfortunate incident in church resulted in a welcomed variation in my schedule. Mother allowed me to stay home from church and watch "In Search Of." Since the show went in search of alien life forms, the week following differed a bit from normal weeks. During normal weeks, I slept in my own bed. The week following the Sunday I watched "In Search Of: Alien Life Forms," I slept with my parents.

Mother ignored my gripping fears that aliens might come into my room and take me away. When I voiced my fear, she responded, "At least aliens wouldn't take you down to the Spit 'N Argue!"

The only event I looked forward to when I was seven was spending time with Grandfather. After Mother discovered he took me to the "Spit 'N Argue" more than once, that time began to dwindle. She said I needed to spend more time preparing to be a lady. To be a lady, I surmised, meant shopping and hiding the purchases from my father.

To escape learning how to be a lady, I helped Davey and Wallace plan gags on our neighbors. The people in our neighborhood valued their yards and their brick mailboxes. They sometimes spent entire Saturdays instructing landscape

crews how to sculpt their yards in an attempt to win the "Yard of the Month Award." They left their houses at the same time each day, returned at the same time, and socialized with the same people. Sameness seemed their chief virtue. We reckoned upsetting their doldrums might encourage them to do something different--at least with their yards.

Davey's first idea involved a mixture of flour, water, eggs, and green food coloring. We mixed the ingredients in a large bowl at his house because his mother never entered the kitchen. While we concocted the gloop, his mother asked us what we were doing a few times. She never removed her eyes from "General Hospital." Once we added enough flour to make the gloop sticky, we poured it on the Brumfield's bushes--in broad daylight. We anxiously waited for Mr. Brumfield to come home and see the bushes, but when he did, he merely hosed them off and uttered a few cuss words. We decided to make the next pranks more alarming.

Davey suggested the "doggy-poo" gag his older brother had already tried on most of the neighbors. We put dog poop in a brown bag lined with newspaper, lit the bag on fire, rang the Thompson's door bell, and ran behind a tree. We expected Mrs. Thompson to get dog poo all over her shoes. Instead, Mrs. Thompson answered the door, closed it, returned with a water jug, and put out the flame. We decided to move to a more unenlightened neighborhood.

The day I found a large frog in my front yard, we devised a promising trick. We placed the frog in the

Hoffsteler mailbox and waited for Mrs. Hoffsteler to check the mail. Before we could hide behind a manicured shrub, Mrs. Hoffsteler opened her front door. At first, we walked casually to avoid looking suspicious. When she opened the mailbox, the frog lunged toward her. She screamed first at the frog, then at us. "I'll get you three degenerates," she cursed, "I hope you're scared while you wait!" As we ran home, we turned to see her shaking an angry fist that swam beneath the fur-lined cuff of her bathrobe. We laughed nervously about the episode. I figured for all the trouble we would be in after she told our mothers, we needed to find some humor in the situation. The humor quickly gave way to fear. Instead of telling our parents immediately, she waited. The longer we waited to know if our parents knew, the longer we lived with our fears and our guilt.

That Monday after our toad trickery, New Brookland awoke to find an ominous black cloud hovering above the city. I awoke in my own bed to Mother chattering over the phone to Aunt Renata about the cloud. While I listened, a terror rose within me that the apocalypse was near.

"It's the strangest thing, Renata. No one knows what it is or where it came from. It might be some kind of debilitating gas! I heard the wind is moving it our way."

I decided a gaseous cloud that could be debilitating meant the apocalypse had arrived. I screamed for my father. Since my father was head deacon of our church, I believed he

would be the most equipped person in our house to handle an end-of-the-world situation. 58

"What is it, Ophy?"

"What is that cloud moving closer to our house? Mother says it could be debilitated gas. She says it's moving our way! It could be aliens coming to get us!"

"I don't know what it is exactly, but I don't believe there's cause for alarm. I'm almost positive, though, that aliens are not coming to get us. I thought we cured your fears of aliens last week!"

"What if that cloud is somethin' awful?"

"But it's not. That cloud could be attributed to many things--like your mother's imagination. I think she's exaggerating a bit. Someone could simply be burning something they ought not to be burning inside the city limits. I think your mother's concerned that the cloud might smell. She might have an adverse reaction to how the cloud smells, not what it may do."

"What if the cloud comes to our house and strangles us or something?"

"If you have asked God for forgiveness of all of your sins, you should not fear what is going to happen."

"What if I haven't asked?"

"Then ask right now."

He held my hand in his as he did each night for me to say my prayers. I asked God, silently, to forgive me for

putting the frog in the Hoffsteler's mailbox. I promised to 59  
be good; I asked him to make the cloud disappear. When I  
opened my eyes, father hugged me and asked if I felt better.

"I do feel better, but I want that cloud to go away."

"Maybe you should ask God again for forgiveness, because  
your conscience does not seem to be clear."

"How do you know?"

"Because you have not yet asked the person you wronged  
for forgiveness."

"What person? What do you know?"

"I know about what you did the other day. It wasn't  
nice."

"Is this a trick? I saw Mr. Ingles on 'Little House on  
the Prairie' do this to Laura. She did something wrong  
and he told her he knew what it was--only he didn't.  
She ended up telling him and then she had to apologize  
to that old Nelly Olson."

"O.K., I'll admit you and Davey and Wallace looked  
suspicious the other day when you came home from  
school. I've been wondering what you all were up to."

"Nothing. I found a frog the other day, and I knew  
Mamma would be mad if she knew I was playing with  
frogs."

"Gabby would not like you playing with frogs, but I  
promise not to tell her if you'll stop worrying about  
this cloud and get ready for school."

I forgot about the cloud as guilt overcame my thoughts.



Waiting for Mrs. Hoffsteler to tell my parents about putting the toad in her mailbox scared me more than some cloud of black smoke engulfing our house. As I inhaled two bowls of Frankenberry cereal, I schemed ways to prevent Mrs. Hoffsteler from calling. First I pondered what my parents might do after she told them.

In the past, for example, when Father had caught me playing in the drainage ditch, they forced me to apologize to them for my deed (Mother also put me on restriction for the rest of that summer). Reflecting on my parents' reaction to me romping in the drainage ditch, I decided to apologize to Mrs. Hoffsteler after school regardless of whether the apology prevented her from calling. I longed to rid myself of the fear and the guilt that hovered above me.

When I met Davey and Wallace at the corner, they informed me that the cloud might cause everyone to go crazy. On the way to school, we met other classmates who believed aliens sent the cloud to make us sleepy. They would eat us after we fell asleep. Before we reached school, Davey and Wallace told other students that aliens sent the cloud to make us go crazy so we would eat each other. Other students refuted their theory before the first bell, claiming vampires put the cloud above our town so they could suck our blood. Every student, including me, sat at his desk wondering when the blood-sucking alien vampires would come to suck our brains out of our heads before we ate each other.

Mrs. Thacker advised us at the start of class that we needed to calm down and stop spreading rumors.

"I have heard some pretty crazy tales about what the cloud is and what it's doing. I'm sad to tell all of you that aliens are not swooping down on our fair city to eat us. The cloud was formed when some man began burning tire rubber in his back yard.

"Apparently, the amount of tire rubber he burned caused the cloud to become so large. And I don't know what to fear more: aliens or some lunatic burning tire rubber in his back yard. The matter is over and I do not want to hear any more talk about it for the rest of the day! No more talk about aliens or vampires!

"Open your science books to page thirty-eight."

Many of us had trouble believing Mrs. Thacker's explanation of the cloud. If her explanation served a purpose, it was to spur on our imaginations. While she discussed how bees pollinated flowers, we pondered why anyone would want to burn tire rubber. I envisioned an unshaven wild-man crouched over a kettle full of tire rubber. He stirred his broth slowly as he looked for helpless animals to add to the mixture. Then I imagined he burned tire rubber simply to make his own tires. Many ideas came to mind, but none so colorful as Davey's notion that the man ate tire rubber and children stew.

Word on the playground beat stuck heavily to Davey's theory. Davey scared many of the girls by telling them the

crazy man used only girls in his stew. Katy Martin told him that girls were the logical choice for any human stew.

"Of course he would want girls, stupid. Boys smell and they probably taste bad!"

Davey did not argue her point. Not only did he know that Katy was the best kick ball player on the field, but he also knew she could fight better than any boy in school. Katy also had that great gift of making people laugh and simultaneously snort milk out their noses.

She once caused me to laugh at the same moment I took a sip of milk. Her timing was perfect; milk shot right out of my nose. We called it "snarfing." When Mrs. Thacker called Mother and told her I "snarfed," Mother shook violently. Mother forbid me from sitting with Katy at lunch again because "ladies do not snort milk out of their noses!" I liked Katy--a lot--because my mother did not want me to.

After school that day, we emerged from the building to find the cloud had disappeared. My guilt over putting a frog in Mrs. Hoffsteler's mailbox had not. The stories about the cloud had died. During the walk home, Davey and Wallace discussed who pitched best in kickball, a conversation they had had each day walking home from school. They did not seem the least bit concerned that Mrs. Hoffsteler might call their parents at any moment. If she had call Davey's mother, Mrs. Fitzgerald would have said, "Oh really? He put a frog in your mailbox? Be glad it wasn't his brother making bomb threats to your house!"

Before we reached the Hoffsteler home, I decided to make my 63  
guilt dissipate like the rumors about the cloud.

As we neared the Hoffsteler home, I lagged behind the pair  
of arguing kick-ball pitchers.

"Ya'll go on ahead. I've got something I need to do."

"Like what?"

"I forgot something at school."

They walked on engrossed in the same argument, and I  
watched them until they turned on to the next block. I did  
not want them to know that I wanted to apologize to Mrs.  
Hoffsteler. Plus, they would call me a "wuss."

I approached the front door cautiously. The fear of  
Mrs. Hoffsteler coming to the door wearing her white,  
fur-trimmed bathrobe to call me a degenerate gripped my  
body. I tensed my hand, rang the door bell, and prepared to  
sprint quickly away if she should decide to lecture me on  
the merits of being lady-like. Mother lavished enough of  
those lectures on me. I need not hear them from the  
neighbor.

When she opened the door, she wore a pink pants suit  
with a blue scarf around her neck. She looked like an  
Easter Egg and the calm expression on her face almost made  
me forget my intention.

"Would you like to come in?"

"No, mam'm. I just wanted to say I was real sorry  
about putting that frog in your mailbox."

"I'm glad you decided to apologize on your own

volition. Won't you come in? I was about to put down my book and stir around the kitchen a bit."

"I best not. I have my piano lesson today, and if I'm not home to practice soon . . ."

"I remember what that's like. My mother and I used to fight about practicing all the time. Thanks for deciding to apologize. Since I have not been very welcomed in this neighborhood, I figured you and your friends wouldn't bother!"

"I felt like botherin'. I figured if you called Mamma before I could apologize, I would be in more trouble than if I said I was sorry."

"I appreciate it. Very much."

I felt relieved after apologizing to Mrs. Hoffsteler, even though she did not promise not to call my parents. I took solace in the fact that if she did call, she would have to tell them that I apologized to her without being told. I concluded that my decision to apologize was the adult thing to do. Mrs. Hoffsteler did not lecture me on how ladies do not play with frogs or play pranks on their neighbors, she simply accepted my apology and invited me in. I liked Mrs. Hoffsteler from then on, and I considered dropping by her house sometime to ask questions about how to survive piano lessons.

Since Mother and I fought about practicing, the most time I spent practicing the piano was right before each lesson. Mother threatened several times to call

Mrs. Austin and tell her I would no longer be taking lessons. She knew such a threat made me practice. I loved Mrs. Austin. Mrs. Austin, like my Grandfather, allowed me to make my own decisions. I looked forward to piano lessons because Mrs. Austin told me stories about her children and her husband. I feared piano lessons, however, because I rarely practiced.

When I arrived home, Mother sent me to the piano immediately, or in her words, "No more foolin' chick-a-dee!"

"Where have you been, Ophelia? I saw Davey and Wallace walk by here a while ago."

"I had to go back to school to get my science book. We have homework for tomorrow."

"You better go practice before your lesson. Aunt Renata and Burna will give you a ride over to Grandfather's when you're done."

"Are we eating over there tonight?"

"Yes, Renata has something she needs to tell the entire family."

"Did you hear about the crazy man burning tire rubber?"

"Yes, and what I want to know is if Ike's burning it to make some more of those mailbox creatures for his front yard, or I guess I should say his front pile of junk!"

On the way to piano lesson, Mother finished her lecture about the value of learning the piano for one who aspires to be a lady. I said "Yes, mam'm" during the appropriate pauses and managed to tune the message of

her lecture out. Once she concluded with "One day you'll realize how lucky you are to know how to play the piano," I slipped and relayed Mrs. Hoffsteler's comment about her piano experience.

"Mrs. Hoffsteler said she and her mother use to fight about practicing."

"When did you talk to Mrs. Hoffsteler about piano lessons?"

"I went over to her house after school."

"Why did you go over to her house?"

"Because I wanted to."

"But you don't even know Mrs. Hoffsteler."

"I do now."

"How did you meet her?"

Before answering, I wondered how much trouble I would be in if I told the truth. Because I felt I had made an adult decision, I determined Mother would not be angry.

"I stopped by her house to tell her I was sorry for putting a frog in her mailbox. She said she was glad that I decided to apologize on my own."

"You put a frog in her mailbox? Ladies do not go around playing with frogs, Ophy. Every time I think I can let you out of my sight for three minutes, you go and put a frog in someone's mailbox."

"Mrs. Hoffsteler said it was o.k.. I liked her."

"Well, I am glad you decided to apologize without being told, but I prefer you not play pranks on our

neighbors. They might think I'm raising a hooligan!"

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"Can I go over to her house and visit sometime? She invited me in."

"No. Absolutely not. You do not need to be going over there."

"Why not?"

"Because . . . She's not a very nice lady."

"She was real nice to me . . ."

"Well, she was not real nice to the former Mrs. Hoffsteler. She came between Linda and Bill and caused them to divorce."

"Do you not like Mrs. Hoffsteler?"

"What she did to the Hoffsteler marriage is inexcusable. Linda and Bill lived a good life before she stepped in and ruined it for them. I doubt Linda will ever recover."

"I didn't ask about what she did; I asked if you liked her or not."

"Don't you get sassy with me, young lady. You ask too many questions sometimes."

"Do you like her?"

"I don't know her very well, but I do know that her actions are reprehensible . . ."

Mother explained how Mrs. Hoffsteler put a wedge between Linda and Bill, causing Bill to discover he no longer loved Linda. The more Mother said the word "divorce," the more I realized Mrs. Hoffsteler would be another person with whom I could not associate. The fact



that Mrs. Hofsteler caused a divorce intrigued me. I had never met anyone associated with a divorce. I had only met people who were on the verge of divorcing. Mother, and the rest of our church, regarded divorce as one of the highest sins. Davey's parents were often on the verge of getting a divorce, but they stayed together. I once overheard Mother discussing their marriage with Aunt Renata. "The Fitzgerald's are having a rough time right now," she claimed, "They're fine people, and they'll work out their differences." I deduced that fine people worked out their differences and stayed married; unfine people divorced. I supposed the Fitzgeralds worked out their problems because they continued not speaking to each other.

Mother reminded me when we reached Mrs. Austin's to ride home with Aunt Renata. I realized our discussion about Mrs. Hoffsteler made me forget to formulate that week's excuse for why I had not practiced as much as I should. I found Burna and Mrs. Austin running over her lesson time which enabled me to devise a clever excuse. I considered telling her that Mrs. Thacker assigned so much homework that week that I barely had time to practice. But I used some variation of the homework excuse every week. Then, I pondered claiming I practiced, but I could not improve my ability to play the pieces--another overused excuse. I finally invented an excuse I thought Mrs. Austin would believe. I waited nervously to divulge to her the harrowing tale of my mother's friend.

After Burna left to go wait in the car during my lesson, I placed my copy of Handel's Messiah (the simplified version for third graders) on the piano. Mrs. Austin instructed me to start playing the piece slowly in order for us to work out my problems as I played. I thought, "I cannot play the piece at any other speed because I have not practiced it." Halfway through the piece, Mrs. Austin stopped me. I braced myself to use the excuse convincingly.

"Have you been able to practice this week or has Mrs. Thacker assigned too much homework?"

"No mam'm. I practiced a little this week, but. . ."

"But what, Ophy? Did you practice and find that the pieces were not improving?"

"No mam'm. I had to spend a lot of time at the hospital with my mother."

"I didn't know your mother has been ill."

"My mother's fine. One of her friends had to have an operation."

"Really? What was wrong with her?"

"I think her brain fell into her stomach or something. Mother had to visit her every night last week. But she's o.k. now."

"What kind of operation did she have to correct the problem?"

When she asked this question, I figured she either bought the excuse or I would have to admit to the truth. I proceeded with the excuse.

"I believe the doctors stuck a tube in her ear that sucked her brain back into her head. I think it was called a lobotomy."

I prided myself on remembering the term lobotomy. I had heard it used on a program my father watched once on mental illness. I understood the procedure had something to do with moving the brain, but I did not realize that a section of the brain was moved completely out of the head.

Mrs. Austin contemplated my excuse for several minutes before responding. During the time she thought about it, I wanted to tell her that I made the story up as a joke, but I decided to wait to see if she believed me.

"Let me get this straight: One of your mother's friends had her brain fall in her stomach and then had a lobotomy to put it back in place. Your mother took you with her to the hospital to visit her friend, so you could not practice as much as you needed to. Or, let's try this: you did not practice like you should have because you did not want to. Which is the correct answer or interpretation of your story?"

"I did not practice because I . . . it's not like I don't want to . . . it's like I have to do it so I don't want to. Mamma's always telling me to practice, and after she tells me all those times, I don't want to. Sometimes she says she's gonna call you and tell you I can't take piano lessons anymore."

"What happens when she tells you this?"

"I get real scared that she's gonna call and then . . ."

"Then, what, Ophy?"

"Then I couldn't see you anymore. I like coming to piano lesson each week, but then I hate it too because I have to practice all these really hard pieces."

"Ophy, do you know who Duke Ellington is?"

"No mam'm. Does he go to our church?"

"No, Duke Ellington was a famous piano player. He wrote lots of beautiful music and he loved to play the piano. When he was first learning to play, he hated to practice--just like you do. One day he heard a song he really wanted to learn how to play, so he listened to the song over and over until he could play it himself. He had to spend many hours practicing before he could play the song like he wanted to, but then he could enjoy hearing the song anytime he pleased."

"He practiced even though he hated to?"

"He practiced and he believed in his talent. If your mother were to call me and tell me you would no longer be studying with me, I would be upset. I enjoy seeing you each week and I enjoy the visit even more when you have shown improvement. I want you to think about Duke Ellington each time your mother tells you to practice. Sit down at the piano and say to yourself, 'This is for me; not for anybody else.'"

"It's kinda hard to think playin' the piano or anything I do is for me. It seems like everything I do is for Mamma and Daddy."

"Ophy, you have got to determine to make some things

your own. You decided--all on your own--that you would make up an excuse about not practicing. If you can think up an excuse like that one, something tells me you'll have no problem deciding to do something for yourself."

For the remainder of the lesson, Mrs. Austin and I worked through the Messiah slowly. She tapped rhythm on the piano as I stumbled through the piece. After playing the piece six times, I heard how it should have sounded and I wanted to continue playing. Mrs. Austin continued to tap her pencil against the piano while I stumbled over the notes. The rapping of her pencil made me think about doing things for myself without being told.

"Ophy, that's all for today, but I want you to think about doing things for yourself and not for everyone else. When you sit down to practice this week, do it because you want to, not because you are being told."

"I guess I've never had to do something without being told."

"I think it's time you got started."

After the lesson, I walked across the street from Mrs. Austin's house to where Aunt Renata and Burna waited in their car. As I approached the car, I saw some of my school friends playing in a pile of leaves. I waved to them and they asked me to come play with them. I wanted to, but I knew Aunt Renata was anxious to get to Grandfather's for

dinner. Aunt Renata instructed me to hurry up so we could leave. When I climbed in the back seat of the car, Burna turned around in the front seat to ask me what the kids were doing.

"Were those kids playing in the leaves? I bet they got real dirty doing that."

"They weren't dirty. When the leaves are dry, you can't get dirty."

"You could get worms or something!"

While Aunt Renata started the car and pulled out into the street, Burna continued to tell me how playing in leaves or pine straw could give a person worms. "You might get the kind of worms that get in your feet or the kind that live in your stomach!" she explained. By the time Aunt Renata turned right out of our subdivision onto main street, Burna had informed me of every worm, germ, amoeba, and virus one could catch playing in leaves or pine straw. I did not believe her for a minute.

When the car passed "Jansen's Gas, Food, and Cold Beer," Burna started telling her favorite story, one I had heard a thousand times. I supposed the children playing in the leaves triggered her memory.

"Ophy, do you remember that time we played outside in the snow?" she proceeded, "I remember 'cause we played outside for a long time without mussing up our clothes. I really like snow, don't you, Ophy? You can play in snow and make snow angels without getting dirty. I thought the snow angel I made was the best. Remember what I said when we

came inside? That was real funny. Mamma said, 'Burna, you 74  
and Ophy need to wipe your noses. You have some mucus  
drainage.' Then I said, 'Me and Ophy calls it snot!' But I  
don't say 'snot' anymore . . ."

Burna continued to tell her story until we turned off  
of main street onto a less familiar road. I reflected on her  
story. After Burna said "snot" once, she never said it  
again. She also never used improper grammar again. Since  
Burna hardly ever went outside, Aunt Renata could monitor  
her speech more closely than my mother could control and  
shape mine. I was very glad at that moment that I liked dirt and  
worms and germs and amoebas.

The road we turned onto was one I seldom drove with  
Mother. Aunt Renata claimed she knew a shorter way to  
Grandfather's house. Burna shot suspicious glances at her  
mother as we neared the entrance to a trailer park. Every  
time we drove by a trailer park, Aunt Renata and Mother  
discussed how many people had been shot, maimed, massacred,  
and stabbed in the area. Burna and I remembered the stories  
vividly.

When the car approached a truck parked in the middle of the  
road, Burna screamed, "It's a drug bust! They'll kill us!"  
and slid onto the floorboard. I joined her.

"Good Lord you two! This is not a drug bust. If  
this had been a drug bust do you think I would sit  
here--right behind it?"

"Are you sure it's not a drug bust, Mamma?"

"No, I think this man is handing out clothes to

these people."

"Why is he handing them clothes?"

"These people must be truck drivers, Ophy, 'cause they're getting their clothes out of a truck."

"These people are not truck drivers. These people are simply here to get some clothes because they cannot afford to go to the store and buy new ones."

Burna and I watched as a group of people stood around the back-end of a pick-up truck, waiting for a man to hand them clothes and bags of groceries. The people blocked our view of the man, but Burna recognized his pig cap.

"That's the pig hat man, Mamma. That's the man who told me baby pigs were little bacons."

"Yes, I know that's the pig man. I wish the pig man would move his truck so we could get to Father's before next spring."

"Why does he hand out clothes to people?"

"I think he does it because he feels guilty for doing some really bad things, Ophy. He ought to be eaten alive with guilt after what he did."

"Did he do a drug bust, Mamma?"

"No. He simply sold a drug that causes people to go blind, and after that he did something even worse that I do not care to discuss here. I wish he would move that truck."

"Is that why Ophy and me got in so much trouble for talking to him?"

"Yes. And if, for some godforsaken reason, you see



him out in public again without me, I would prefer that you not talk to him."

After the people moved away, Uncle Ike saw us waiting and moved his truck. While we waited, I looked at him and wondered if the guilt he felt for killing Ronald Harper caused him to give clothes to other people. He stood beside his truck with a group of children around him, picking them up. "Maybe he does eat children and tire rubber stew," I thought. The laughter on the children's faces illustrated how they trusted him. These children trusted the man my family considered to be a dangerous psychopath. The image of them talking to Uncle Ike and laughing with him made me think about all the things I had heard about him. The picture of Uncle Ike giving things to those children slowly altered the view of him my family had instilled in me.

Aunt Renata pulled her car around Uncle Ike's truck and continued driving through the trailer park. She turned left onto another road that ran behind the K-Mart. Next, she took another left turn by the railroad tracks, a right turn, another left, right--she thoroughly confused my sense of direction. We reached Grandfather's house ten minutes later than we would have if Aunt Renata had simply stayed on main street and turned onto Atlanta street. But Uncle Ike lived on Atlanta street, so I reckoned she was trying to avoid his house.

When we entered Grandfather's house, we heard Mother and Grandfather having an adult discussion. Grandmother offered to take Burna and me in the back bedroom to play dress-up while the family

discussed. I wanted to stay and listen to the conversation. 77  
Burna agreed to Grandmother's bribery; Grandmother informed  
Mother I was headed for the living room--within ear-shot of  
their conversation.

"Ophy, you need to go back there with Burna and Mother."

"But what if I don't want to? I wanna listen."

"We did not invite you to listen."

"Gabby, she knows about Ike. I don't think we need to  
continue whispering about him."

"Are ya'll talking about Ike?"

"Yes. Your mother was just wondering why he had to  
burn those tires this morning. I was in the middle  
of explaining that Ike burns old tire rubber in order  
to sterilize his dirt."

"I was telling your grandfather how ridiculous it  
sounds for a person to sterilize dirt. He's probably  
graduated from running moonshine to marijuana. Who  
knows!"

"Granddaddy, why did he want to sterilize dirt? That  
does sound kinda crazy."

"I was about to explain further that he burns tire  
rubber to sterilize the dirt he puts in his vegetable  
garden. Each year Ike grows a few things in his  
garden like peanuts and collards. And no, Gabby, he  
does not grow pot or corn for that matter."

"I am simply of the opinion that the man is up to no  
good. Ophy, I would prefer you not concern yourself  
with Ike. You have other things to occupy your time,

like piano. How was your lesson?"

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"It was fine. Mrs. Austin and I worked real hard on my piece."

When Grandmother called us all to dinner, Burna stumbled to the table in a pair of Grandmother's high heels with a mink wrap around her. She walked past her father, paused, and declared, "Some man, somewhere, wants me. I know it!" Uncle Andy exclaimed, "She's learning this stuff from that soap opera you watch, Renata. We need to do something about her watching the soap opera!" Uncle Andy told Burna not to repeat what she heard on television and left the room. Burna usually consumed her father's attention. After he left the room, she maintained her pose, waiting for him to return and tell her what a little princess she was.

"Ophy, you and Burna come on now for the prayer."

"Why are we praying, Uncle Andy?"

"Because of Renata's surprise."

We gathered around the baseboard table in Grandmother's kitchen, made a circle, held hands, and prayed. During normal Sunday dinners, my father said a blessing with everyone standing around the room. Each time he said "Amen" Grandfather said, "Amen, Brother Ben, shot his rooster and killed his hen!" The only time we held hands was on special occasions such as Christmas or Easter. Holding hands during a prayer on a Monday night made Burna and me uncomfortable. Father concluded the prayer, but Grandfather did not chime in with his rhyme. Instead, Aunt Renata and Uncle Andy held

hands, and looked into each other's eyes with the same longing look Burna and I had seen on her mother's soap opera when two people kissed and messed up their bed.

"Andy and I found out, just yesterday, that we're going to have a new addition to our family!"

"Yes, and I'm hoping its a boy!"

"What's a boy? You hope what's a boy, Daddy?"

Burna tugged her father's pants leg, waiting for him to answer. The rest of the family hugged and laughed and said "Congratulations." I remembered the time my mother told the family, in much the same way, that she was "In the Family Way." Grandfather took me outside later to explain to me that in a few months, I would have my brother, John. What a blessing John was! The day mother brought him home from the hospital, all the relatives gave me presents to avoid an "attention conflict." I had felt the sting of the conflict the moment he started crying. I had not finished opening my "Betsy-Wetsy" doll before the family hovered around him like a flock of geese.

The day John came home from the hospital, Grandfather had sensed how uncomfortable I felt when the family sprinted to John's side or when the family stood around him making repulsive noises in an unintelligible language. Grandfather had asked me to go for a walk with him. He discussed how John and I would be good friends one day. He promised I would grow to love John. He claimed John was the best gift that day. I disagreed. After four months of Mother and Father rushing to his room, mumbling things in

his face, and telling me to "come look at how cute he is," I 80  
told Mother to return John to wherever she bought him for a  
full refund. She and Father declared I would realize how  
cute he was. "I think he looks like the Buddha Granddaddy  
has a picture of," I explained, "He's not even as cute as  
Buddha; he's just fat!"

Burna was three when John arrived, so she thought of  
him as a breathing doll. She loved to play with him and  
watch mother give him baths. I believed Burna would love  
having a brother doll around to dress and clean, so I  
strolled over between the adults to explain that she would  
soon have a little brother or sister. She gave me a  
bewildered look as the family continued hugging and crying  
and planning the baby's July arrival.

"Aren't you glad you're gonna have a little brother or  
sister just like John?"

"What if I'm not glad?"

"Granddaddy says that you'll love it and it will play  
with you someday."

"But I don't want to play with it."

"You like John, don't you?"

"Yeah, but John goes home with you. I bet Mamma and  
Daddy want another baby because I was so bad in church  
that day! That's why they want another baby. It won't  
be bad in church or get into trouble like me."

"It could get into a lot more trouble than you. It  
could grow up like John and jump on the couch or hide  
before bed. Sometimes John's worse than me."

"My mamma says nobody misbehaves as bad as you!"

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"Well, I didn't say anything about pigs in church!"

"Oh, yeah? Well you pulled my hair during our tap recital!"

"Because you stepped on my heel you little priss!"

"You made everyone forget the routine!"

"You got gum stuck in your hair once!"

Grandfather heard our argument over the excitement. He looked at us both--first Burna, then me. Without saying a word, he encouraged us to apologize to each other by giving us his wide-eyed adult look of surprise.

"I'm sorry, Burna!"

"I'm a little bit sorry."

"Burna!"

"I'm sorry, too."

Burna and I sat with John in the kitchen while the adults ate in the dining room. Burna spoke occasionally to John to remind him not to spit his ice tea across the room as he had a predisposition to do. Burna cast her eyes on her plate, moving its contents with her fork. She refused to eat and gave her food to Grandfather's dog, Rudolph. I felt guilty for reminding her of the one wrong thing she did in her life--besides saying snot and sticking gum in her hair. Since Burna had been the only child in her home, her parents patrolled her every motion. She held more guilt over saying the improper thing in church than I did after telling John that when helicopters flew overhead, they were

coming to kidnap him. I realized she believed her idea that her parents wanted another child because of her bad behavior. Before Rudolph licked her plate, Burna left the room. John and I sat at the table in silence. We flicked green peas at each other since Burna was not around to tattle.

The adult laughter wafted into the kitchen, and John eventually straggled out of his chair to join them. I contemplated going to talk to Burna, but I decided to leave her alone. I found one of Grandfather's National Geographic magazines. I stared at the dinosaur edition instead of saying something else hurtful to Burna. The moment I began reading the stegosaurus section, Burna walked into the kitchen and removed all of our pictures from the refrigerator. I watched as she methodically took down the pictures in chronological order.

"What are you doin'?"

"I'm getting all these pictures so I can look at them."

I left her to her pictures and continued reading. Grandfather joined me with his after dinner coffee and one of his thick books. Suddenly, through the noise in the dining room, a crashing sound erupted from the back bedroom. Grandfather and I rushed into the room to find Burna standing on Grandmother's prize victorian rocking chair, trying to reach our baby portrait. I assumed the portrait crashed to the floor when her small hands could not lift its weight. She continued to stand in the rocking

chair with an innocent look on her face.

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"Burna, what on earth are you doin'?"

"I'm taking down this picture so I can look at it."

"She took down all the pictures on the refrigerator so she could look at those, too."

"Why do you need to see those pictures?"

While Grandfather questioned Burna, I noticed all of the baby pictures in the back bedroom were missing. I checked the other rooms. None of the baby pictures in any of the rooms, except the dining room, remained.

"I looked in the other rooms, and all the baby pictures are gone."

"Burna, why would you want to look at all the baby pictures?"

"Because I don't want Mamma to see them. If she doesn't see them, she'll forget about having a baby."

"Burna, people do not forget about having babies. Now that your mother knows she's going to have one, she'll have it."

"But, why does she want one?"

"She wants one because she wants somebody for you to play with and to love. When Ophy first saw John, she felt like her parents loved him more than they loved her. Then, she realized how much she loved John because he's her brother."

"And I realized that you get lots of presents when your baby brother comes home from the hospital."

"You get gifts? You really get gifts?"



"Yeah, I got a 'Betsy-Wetsy' and an Ernie doll and a Barbie make-up head and all kinds of stuff!"

"Do you think I'll get presents, Granddaddy?"

"I'm sure your parents will have to rent a trailer to bring home all the presents you'll get."

At first, Burna looked at us in disbelief. She could not believe she would receive gifts the day her new baby brother or sister came home. But to Burna, the word "gift" could make a hurt knee miraculously heal or a toothache disappear. Before her mother's pregnancy, Burna had 20 hurt knees and at least thirty tooth aches (she never had a cavity). Gifts thrilled Burna. Her parents used them to heal her wounds. Once she knew the possibility existed to receive presents, having a sibling no longer frightened her. She ran into the dining room, climbed into her father's lap, and demanded to know when the baby would arrive.

"Will the baby be here next week?"

"No Burna, the baby will be here in July."

"Is that about a week and a half away?"

Grandfather and I stood in the doorway of the living room watching Burna and the rest of the family. Mother, Grandmother, and Aunt Renata discussed when they would hold Aunt Renata's first baby shower. Uncle Andy and Father talked about good names for a male child. Uncle Andy bounced Burna on his knee, and for a moment, Burna seemed to forget Aunt Renata's pregnancy. Grandfather decided that the family was too loud. He asked me to join him outside.

Grandfather and I left the house and walked across his field to the thicket on its edge. Grandfather and I stood in the thicket, playing with Grandfather's bird caller. We waited silently for some robins or blue jays to respond. All the other birds we loved to call, such as the

woodpeckers, had flown away during the first frost of the year. Grandfather broke the silence to sing one of his songs. The first time he sang it, I could not understand the words.

"What's that song?"

"That's an old song a friend of mine and I made up.

"His wife, Jan, and your Grandmother used to drag us to those damn society parties. Whenever we got sick of bein' social, we would go outside and make up silly songs."

"Can you repeat it?"

"I can, but I don't know if your mamma's goin' to appreciate you repeating it.

"Way on Down in Aberdeen, A pole cat got stuck in a sewin' machine. That sewin' machine sewed so fast, it sewed stitches up the pole cat's . . . leg."

After he sang the song several times, I joined in. We sang the song while we walked to the creek--one of the furthest places from the house. The sound of the family laughing, arguing, and complaining slowly drifted towards us, over the field and its brown November grass, until the noise sounded like a muffled chorus too far away to acknowledge.

We stood on the creek's edge, throwing pebbles into the current and watching them disappear. Grandfather could skip pebbles across the creek's surface at least two feet before his disappeared. Mine merely grazed the surface once before plunking into the stream. While we skipped pebbles, we talked. We enjoyed the sounds of the pebbles on the water

as they punctuated our conversation.

87

"How do you feel about having a new cousin in the family, Ophy?"

"I don't much care. I figure our family's big enough that I could have a trillion cousins and it wouldn't matter. Sometimes I feel like I'm not noticed a whole lot, but that's o.k."

"Well, everyone wants attention from their family and from other people, but sometimes, I think it's better to be quiet and unnoticeable. The two of us sure do get into a lot less trouble when we're not being noticed."

"Yes, sir. Like before we took Burna to the 'Spit 'N Argue,' nobody cared if we went there--except my mother, but she never asked."

"Burna's the kind of little girl who has to have a lot of attention. When I saw her in there wearing her grandmother's stole, waiting for her father's attention, I felt right sorry for her. I know she's not too happy about the baby."

"I think she's real sad about it. But maybe she'll like it when it gets here."

"Maybe if you spent a little bit more time with her, you could help her feel better about everything. She rarely has anyone to play with, poor little thing. She stays in that house all day playing with her dolls, or she's busy driving around with her mother watching everything go by."

"Today when she and Aunt Renata waited for me after

piano lessons, there were some kids playing in the leaves near the car. For almost the whole ride over, she talked about how people could get worms and awful stuff if they played in leaves. I think Burna's happy bein' inside all the time. Unless it snows."

"Well, it doesn't snow too often in South Carolina. I suppose she just likes bein' inside. I've never seen a neater child in my life. I bet when she's twenty, everything in her house matches and she has a maid. Yep, she'll have a maid. Andy'll make sure of that. . . Ophy, what took ya'll so long getting here today? Renata said something about being caught in traffic."

"We weren't caught in traffic. She took a short cut through the trailer park and we got behind Uncle Ike handing out clothes to some people. Burna thought it was a drug bust."

"You're mother probably would have thought he was gettin' busted for drugs, too."

"How come the family still thinks he's so bad? He doesn't seem so bad if he's giving clothes to people and trying to help. I never even knew he helped people until today. I thought he burned the dirt to make tire rubber and children stew. I guess I figured since what he did was so bad, he was that bad."

"Ophy, see that stick over there? Get it, and toss it into the current--there, where the water's swirling around."

Instead of asking questions, I found the stick and

tossed it in the water. The stick left my hand and sliced through the air making a thin, cutting whisper. The stick hit the water with a dull plunk. It moved steadily along until it hit the swirling current; the current caused it to spin in circles. The stick spun, as if it were the spoke of a water wheel, until the current released it. The creek's swift water grabbed the stick and moved it forward in a straight line. When the stick traveled outside of our view, Grandfather asked me to recount what I saw.

"I saw the stick goin' straight for a while, then it got caught in the current. The current made it go 'round and 'round, until it got out and moved away."

"How did the stick move away, Ophy? Did it move sideways or diagonally? Or did it move straight away?"

"It moved straight, why?"

"Because what happened to that stick is a lot like what happened to Uncle Ike. For a while, his life went along just fine, and nobody noticed him. Then, things happened that caused his life to spin around in circles, and Ike couldn't get himself out of the whirlpool. After a long time passed, Ike got himself out of the mess he made so many years ago when he shot Harper. Now he's tryin' to live his life straight, like that stick."

"Aunt Renata says he oughta feel real guilty for what he did. She thinks that's why he tries to do nice things for other people."

"Maybe she's right--just maybe. But I think Ike does

all the nice things he does because he wants to get over that guilt. Some people in this town think he does nice things so other people will think he's askin' for the town's forgiveness. You should know that Ike isn't askin' anybody for forgiveness. He simply does good things that a lot of other high and mighty people around here are too damn good to do."

"You like him, don't you Granddaddy?"

"Yes. I do like him. Your Grandmother and the rest of the family would have heart failure if they knew, but I do like Ike. He's a bit strange--maybe eccentric, even--but he's a good man who does good things."

"Has he asked God for forgiveness for what he did?"

"Yes. He asked God to forgive him a long time ago. This damn town is too stubborn in its ways to leave him be. Yes, mam'm, Ophy. Ike's just like that stick--too bad he can't get around the bend and out of sight of all the people around here who still look down on him. I'm not sure what they see when they see him, probably a crazy man. But, Ike, well, he keeps moving, regardless of what people say. He keeps on goin' straight away."

Grandfather and I walked back to the house holding hands and singing his song. With his free hand, he reached behind my back and pinched me, hard. He let go of my hand and let me chase him back to the house. We opened the front door to hear the same racket we heard when we left. Grandmother intercepted us on our way back to the den. She

and the rest of the family looked at us if they were prepared to disclose another revelation in one evening. Grandfather stopped and asked, "What the hell is going on in here now?"

"You tell them, Renata!"

"No, Gabby you tell them!"

"O.K., Daddy, the family has decided to do something impulsive!"

From the tear-streaked expression on Burna's face, I reckoned the impulsive decision did not meet Burna's approval. Before Mother told us, Burna left the room.

"We've decided to go to the mountains for the weekend. Andy can get us a few cabins at Hickory Knob. We can all go up there just like we used to."

"Used to," when used in front of the children, meant "before we had the kids around."

"Are we all going to go up there?"

"No, just the couples. Granny said she could keep the kids this weekend."

While the family discussed their weekend, I joined Burna in the other room. I felt the same sinking, lost feeling that spread across her face. Our Granny, my grandmother's mother, lived in an old, creepy house with a billion rooms. We spent many afternoons at Granny's with our parents, but never had we spent the night at Granny's alone. I quickly recognized my helpless position in the



situation. If Mother said we would spend the weekend with Granny, we would. But I simultaneously realized I needed all week to prepare myself for the ghosts stories Granny would surely tell us. The first time she told me a ghost story, I slept with my parents for two weeks. Not only did she tell me a ghost story, but she also told me a ghost story about an alien. Alien ghosts--the very reasons Mother tried to prevent me from watching "In Search Of." Since it had taken a week for me to start sleeping in my room with the lights on after watching one episode of "In Search Of," I figured after a weekend stay at Granny's, I would be camping out in my parents's room until I turned twenty-five.

"Ophy, I don't want to stay at Granny's house."

"It won't be so bad. She'll probably let us stay up late and eat lots of popcorn or something."

"Do you promise to sleep with me?"

"Yeah."

"Are you two a bit uneasy about staying over at Granny's house?"

"Granddaddy, can you make them not go to the mountains this weekend? Ophy and me don't want to spend the night with Granny."

"Burna, Granny will take good care of you, and I'll tell her not to tell you any of her stories. Is that a deal?"

Burna climbed into Grandfather's lap and held his arm until time to go home. After Uncle Andy gathered her off

Grandfather's lap, Grandfather and I sat listening to Mother and Grandmother discussing the weekend menu. 93

"Ophy, if it's any consolation to you, I have no interest in going to the mountains this weekend. I'd rather stay here and let the rest of the family go."

"Could you stay here with us? We don't want to go to Granny's to spend the night!"

"I had better do as your Grandmother wishes. If I don't, I'm likely to be sleeping over at Granny's for a long time."

"Bet you're not scared of her ghost stories!"

"She's just telling tall-tales."

"Does she believe in ghosts?"

"I don't think she really believes in ghosts--except one."

"Which one?"

"You've heard her tell the story of how one of her babies died and it comes back to visit her as a baby spirit!"

"Is there such a thing as ghosts? Daddy told me that ghosts aren't real because we go to heaven when we die--unless you're bad, then you go to hell."

"I don't believe in ghosts. I do believe, however, if you believe hard enough in something like ghosts, then you're likely to imagine seeing one."

"Are you sure there's no such thing?"

"I'm positive. In fact, which would you prefer? A weekend in the mountains with the entire family or a

"Granny's!"

The rest of the week, mother prepared John and me for our stay at Granny's. Granny Jansen differed from my family. Granny Jansen was born in a one-room tenant farmer shack in Georgia. When she turned twelve, her father moved her and her two brothers to New Brookland to work in the cotton mill. Granny worked in the cotton mill until she met my great-grandfather, Big Daddy, who married her before she turned sixteen. My grandmother arrived when Granny was seventeen, and after her birth, Granny gave birth to twelve other children. One died during labor, but the others still lived in New Brookland. Big Daddy and Granny populated most of the town.

After working in the mill, raising twelve children, and raising them on Big Daddy's meager salary, Granny cared little for luxury or frill. She kept her house neat, and free from the many modern conveniences my family enjoyed. She cooked with an old wooden stove that she received as a wedding gift. All the beds in her house were made of thick cherry frames and were stuffed with fluffy chicken feather mattresses. She kept the old pine table Big Daddy made her in her dining room, despite the many offers her children made to buy her a new dinette set. Each time anyone offered her a modern luxury, she exclaimed, "modern, smodern! The only damn thing I need that's modern is the picture tube."

A weekend at Granny's translated into my seven-year-old

mind as an overnight stay in a museum. To Burna, an overnight stay at Granny's realized her worst nightmares--having to stay in a home without a real stove or a housekeeper. I believed Burna feared having to put one of her plates away more than any ghosts or spirit.

Friday, after school, Grandfather rode with Mother and Aunt Renata to take us to Granny's. He reminded me not to believe her ghost stories and to tell Burna not to believe them either. During the ride, we drove down main street New Brookland, home of Jansen's Hardware; Jansen's Food, Gas, and Cold Beer; and Jansen's Good Food Eatery.

When we arrived, Burna screamed, repeatedly, "No, don't make me do this! Please! Please! I'll be good! I'll be good!" John and I left Burna screaming, so we could join Granny inside. Grandfather, Mother, and Aunt Renata pulled Burna, coaxed her, and cuddled her, but she would not get out of the car. Finally, Aunt Renata bribed her. She promised to bring Burna a new doll from Hickory Knob. John, Granny and I watched from inside until Burna agreed a new doll was sufficient reward for spending a scary weekend at Granny's.

The entire time the adults tried to pull Burna out of the car, Granny, John, and I had stood in Granny's front window watching. When Burna finally agreed to go inside, Granny whispered, "She's the biggest damn brat this side of the Saluda river!" I shook my head in agreement.

Grandfather held the door in order for Mother and Aunt

Renata to push Burna into the house. Then Mother and Aunt Renata proceeded to read aloud to Granny from their two-mile long lists of instructions. Granny thumped her foot on the floor, waiting for one of them to take a breath.

"O.K. Granny, Ophy should not have any sugar because her doctor says it makes her hyper. John cannot have creamed corn because it upsets his little tummy. John has to be in bed by 8:00, or else you can hardly do anything with him the next day. . ."

"And Burna should not have sugar either. I think it makes her wet the bed, and well, we're hoping for a perfect smile. Burna also may not spend more than fifteen minutes outside at one time. I think she's predisposed to pneumonia. She needs a bath when she gets up and before she goes to bed. . ."

"Shut Up! Shut Up! Shut Up! I swear, James, get them out of here before I blow a gasket! Gabby, Renata, who in this room raised thirteen children without any help from Dr. Spock?"

"I, we, were just . . ."

"You were just about to get on my very last nerve. Now, get out of here so I can stick Burna outside with the sugar bowl, feed John some creamed corn, and let Ophy eat suckers until she's batty! Go!"

Our mothers hugged us once more, and Grandfather reminded us to behave. Before leaving, Grandfather slipped me a few suckers to eat while I watched television. He gave

John a bag of gummy bears, and Burna received a candy necklace. We had sugar highs before they left the city.

While we swapped pieces of candy and watched the Price is Right, Granny fixed our dinner. She rambled around in the kitchen, rubbing one of her iron skillets. She stayed in the kitchen to keep a close eye on dinner. When I smelled the collards cooking, I decided to join her. Nothing in the world tasted better than Granny's collards.

I also loved watching her fix collards. She placed the largest leaves on top of each other, and rolled them into cigars. She then cut them into one-inch wide rolls and placed them into her large stoneware pot. After covering the collards with a cup of water, she placed cured bacon under the leaves for flavor. She completed the process by adding a spoonful of sugar to the mixture.

I entered the kitchen to find Granny sprinkling the sugar around the pot. She nodded to me, and then to the silverware, which meant I needed to set the table. Granny's silverware had "U.S." on the handle of each piece. As I folded the napkins according to her specifications, she instructed me to ask Burna to help.

"Granny, Burna doesn't know how to set the table. She has Betty set the table."

"Well, that's a cryin' shame that girl don't know how to set a table. She oughta learn!"

I found Burna sitting on the floor in the living room coloring her Barbie coloring book. She looked up from the book as if she knew she was in grave trouble.

"Granny wants you to help me set the table."

"But I don't set tables."

"You do when you're at Granny's. She says you need to learn."

While I placed the forks and knives on the table, Burna followed me and put a napkin under each fork. After I placed the last fork on the table, I discovered Burna had arranged the other forks inside the napkins. She wrapped the napkins carefully around the forks. Her housekeeper, Betty, wrapped her family's forks each night, so Burna figured it was the proper way to set a table. Granny turned around and looked pleased that Burna put forth the extra effort.

We sat around the dinner table devouring our food for several minutes. Burna ate two helpings of chicken and rice, and I ate several helpings of collards. Granny allowed us to eat as much as we wanted because she believed wasting food was a sin. Mother had told me many times how when Granny raised her children, she rarely had enough food to place on the table. Mother, however, believed the Dr. Spock rule: "Overfed children grow up to be overweight adults."

While we ate, Granny brought up the subject of Aunt Renata's pregnancy. Burna had behaved nicely during dinner until Granny mentioned her mother. From then on that evening, Burna would be impossible to handle.

"So, Burna. How do you feel about the new baby's

"I don't know, Granny."

"None of mine knew either 'cause I never told 'em when I was gonna pop out another one!"

"Why didn't you tell 'em?"

"I didn't want 'em gettin' excited 'bout somethin' that might die as soon as it came into the world."

"You mean my new baby brother might die when he gets here?"

"It's always possible, Burna. You see, when I had the twins, Susan and the other one, Susan came out just fine. Well, that other one was just plain out ol' stubborn and decided he wasn't gonna come out. My doctor had to pull him out with a pair of these!"

Granny held the tongs, which she had used earlier to serve the collards, in front of our faces. She passed them slowly in front of our eyes and our eyes followed their movement for the rest of the story.

"Yes, indeed-dee! He clamped these things on the baby's head, and he pulled and pulled and pulled until he pulled that baby's head clean off. It came out without a head on its body. But the head was lyin' on the floor screamin' like the body was still at the end of his little neck."

"Did you sew the baby's head back on its neck, Granny?"

"No, Burna. It wouldn't have no brain or anything after its head was tore off. It just died."

"My baby brother's head won't be pulled off. My Mamma



will tell them not to use those things if he won't come out."

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"Burna, you ain't got nothin' to worry about. If I know your parents, your mamma's gonna have that baby in the best hospital there is!"

"I don't want her to have that baby at all!"

Burna pushed her chair from the table, excused herself in her most polite voice, and sat back down to color. John found a couple zillion of his "Star Wars" men and sat quietly pretending he was Luke Skywalker. I helped Granny clean off the table and wash the dishes. Before we finished washing the dishes, we heard a loud crash in the living room. We rushed in to find Burna's crayons and coloring book strewn about the room. Burna stared in the direction of the coloring book without noticing our presence. Granny and I stood silently observing her glazed eyes. We waited for a response. Several minutes passed before Burna turned to us and said in a calm, pointed tone, "I hate it here. My mother left me here because she thinks I'm an awful rat! She wouldn't make me stay here for no other reason except to punish me. She told me once that you tell crazy stories about that baby, and I won't believe any of them! I'm going to bed so I can think about how much I hate being here. I might even run away!"

Never had I heard Burna use such a hateful tone of voice. I remained motionless, wondering when Burna would laugh as if she were joking. I noticed Granny's calm reception of Burna's remarks. I thought Granny would make

"Well, now, little miss priss. If that's the way you feel about things, why don't you get yourself to bed. I won't stand for any child talkin' to me that way. You go straight on up to bed. Ophy will join you when she's ready. Now go on with your sassy-mouthed self."

"I will. I'm gonna tell my mamma that you're an awful witch!"

Burna gathered her coloring book and crayons and walked slowly to the bedroom. Granny crossed her arms over her chest and followed Burna with her eyes, as if trying to speed her through the process. Before entering the bedroom, Burna turned and stared at me. I wanted to make her apologize. The stern look in her eyes showed she would not consider. She closed the bedroom door behind her and screamed, in a final melodramatic conclusion to the scene, "I hate this house! It smells old!"

Burna continued to mumble loudly through the door. She obviously wanted us to hear her commentary on how her mother thought Granny was senile, how the house smelled, and how she would need the rest of her life to recover from the trauma she had suffered over the weekend. She continued for several minutes about her traumatization--the subject being something she learned about from her mother's soap opera. I had seen the story line once, and most of Burna's soliloquy mimicked the internal aside of a catatonic woman. Burna moaned:

"I feel so trapped! As my eyes don't see and my ears don't hear. But I'll rise above this. Someone will come to save me from this trauma!"

The longer the soliloquy continued, the more it aggravated Granny. Finally, Granny exclaimed: "I'm gonna traumatize her so she'll shut up!"

Granny retrieved a plastic doll from her toy basket. She removed the doll's head and handed her to me.

"What are we gonna do with that doll?"

"We're gonna scare the shit out of Burna!"

Granny found two old bed linens to wrap around us. She hastily cut two eye holes in each sheet so we could see. She instructed me to go into the bedroom where Burna continued to whine and wave the headless doll at her. She then told me to make low, groaning noises during the trick. Granny and I could barely control our giggling as we crept silently to Burna's room.

Granny flung the door open and I ran to Burna's bed moaning, "Yuhhhhhhhh! Yuhhhh!" Burna gazed directly at the headless doll and screamed "Help, Ophy! The ghost! It's a ghost in my room!" After she screamed for a few minutes, Granny turned on the light to revealed our identities. Granny and I laughed at the half scared, half enraged expression on Burna's face. Her face changed from blue to red and back to blue again before she uttered a noise.

"YOU! YOU! Boobies! I hate you! I'm gonna tell Mamma and Daddy you're crazy! And I'm gonna tell Aunt Gabby that you're just as crazy as Granny is!"

"Oh, Burna! We were just playin' a little trick on you!"

"Ophy, I want you to come to bed with me right now or else I'll tell Granddaddy what you did. I'm not sleepin' back in this creepy room by myself!"

Granny and I agreed it was time for me to go to bed, and Burna had had enough excitement for the rest of her life. Before returning to Burna, Granny and I laughed quietly in the kitchen. She told me how she and Granddaddy had played the same trick on Aunt Renata when she was little. She said she liked to keep some traditions for the next generation. "Too bad the next generation ain't too big on keepin' tradition," she said reflectively, "Sometimes I don't feel like I even know half the people who come over here and claim to be my family."

The next morning, Granny woke us at seven. She roused us by pulling up the blinds in our bedroom. John had been up since six, his usual Saturday morning waking time. I staggered into the living room where John had fallen a sleep with his thumb in his mouth. Granny had not allowed him to eat the seven bowls of Frankenberries that kept him bouncing around the house all day Saturdays. I changed the television channel searching for cartoons. Burna sat closely beside me on the couch. As the Smurfs paraded around doing their usual utopian activities, Burna mumbled about the headless doll trick. John stumbled from his place to climb into

my lap. We sat and waited for Granny to give us instructions for the day.

I noticed Granny's stoneware pot on the stove. The smell of chicken and dumplings floated from the kitchen to the couch. Burna also noticed the smell. She complained about having to eat chicken and dumplings for breakfast.

"O.k., girls. I've got some things I gotta do today that don't involve any of you. Your Aunt Sylvia's comin' over to stay with you. So, Burna, you don't have to stay with your crazy ol' Granny today."

"Aunt Sylvia's an alcohol-person!" Burna exclaimed.

(More information from her mother. Our Aunt Sylvia was an alcoholic.)

"Burna, I told her not to be drinkin' too much around you 'cause you'd go home and tell your mamma. I've gotta go help feed some people over at the Mason lodge. Someone'll be here to get me shortly after your Aunt Sylvia drags herself out of bed to come over."

"Granny, who are you goin' with?"

"I'm goin' with Ike down there."

"You mean Uncle Ike?"

"Yes. That's who I mean. I figured your mamma would have you believin' he ain't related to you by now."

"No, mam'm. She doesn't let us talk about him. She says we shouldn't concern ourselves with him."

"That's a shame. I was gonna ask you if you wanted to go along and help. There ain't too many people willin'

to feed the homeless in this town. With all the high and mighty so called Christians 'round here, you'd think they'd be bustin' down the doors to look like they're concerned!"

"I wanna go help! Can I?"

"Ophy, you can't go help. Your mamma doesn't want you around people like that!"

"So what? I can help if Granny needs me too."

"I'm gonna tell your mamma on you!"

"Go right ahead. You're just baby tattle-tell anyways!"

Burna stomped off to change clothes with an air of superiority. I ignored her. I wanted to be around Uncle Ike long enough to decide for myself how he truly was--not how he was in the myth New Brookland invented for him. Admittedly, the excitement of being around him to observe a man who had murdered another man still intrigued me. Every facet of his myth ran through my mind before he arrived. He shot a man point-blank in the head. He constructed huge creatures out of mufflers for a reason I had yet to decipher. He burned tire rubber in his back yard in order to sterilize dirt for his garden. But I could watch silently and unnoticeably to make conclusions for myself. I realized later that making my own conclusions about people by getting to know them was another thing Mother did not allow me to do. I remembered Mrs. Austin's lesson and decided to get to know Ike for myself. I could no longer

Uncle Ike and Aunt Sylvia arrived around the same time. While Aunt Sylvia acclimated herself to Burna and John's list of instructions, Uncle Ike loaded Granny's chicken and dumplings and gallons of iced tea into his truck. Burna grabbed my arm as I left with Granny to join Uncle Ike in the car and whispered: "Don't go with the pig-hat man. He's a bad, scary man! He'll probably kill you or something!" I comforted Burna by claiming I could take care of myself. She and John waved as the truck pulled out of the driveway.

On the way over to the Masonic lodge, Granny introduced me to Uncle Ike.

"Ike, this is James's oldest grandchild, Ophy."

"You must be Gabby's daughter. You look like she did when she was comin' along."

"Do you know my mamma?"

"I knew her a long time ago. She had the same auburn hair and gray eyes you have! It's awfully nice for you to come out and help us with the food. We ain't had but three people helpin' since I started tryin' to do this on Saturdays."

"I don't mind helpin', sir. My Granddaddy says I'm a hard worker."

"Well, if that's an endorsement from James, I'm sure you'll be a hard worker."

When we arrived, many people stood outside the Masonic lodge waiting for Uncle Ike to open the doors. Uncle Ike

asked me to watch the chicken and noodles while they heated up. He and Granny wrapped silverware in napkins. Some of the people waiting for food helped by setting the tables and chairs in place. I expected these people to be the winos most people imaged as homeless people, but they were simply men and women, some with homes, who could not afford life's basic necessities. Uncle Ike spoke warmly to everyone. I watched him listen to different people trying to find work.

One man asked Ike if he needed any help with his sculptures. I moved closer to them, hoping to find out more about the Muffler Mailbox Man and woman.

"To tell the truth, Bob, I ain't thought much about doin' anymore of those statues. But I liked workin' with ya'll makin' the first two."

"It wasn't a bad way to earn a little money, Ike. If you get a hankerin' to make some more, let me know."

While a man helped Granny move the chicken and dumplings to the table, I bravely walked over to Uncle Ike to inquire if I could help, and to ask about the Muffler Mailbox Man.

"Is there anything else I can do to help get ready for lunch?"

"No, mam'm."

"I, uh, was listening to you talk to that man about the Muffler Mailbox Man."

"About what?"

"I heard you talkin' to that man about the Muffler Mailbox Man."



"Is that what you call that hunk of junk in my front yard?"

"Yes, sir. I dressed up like him for Halloween this year."

"You did?"

"Yes, sir. I like them a lot."

"They're just a little project I cooked up so I could pay some of the men around here for their work. I kinda like 'em myself."

"Did you have the mufflers in your front yard?"

"Yeah, I wanted to sell them for scrap so I could get some of that stuff out of my yard, but ain't nobody crazy enough to wanna buy those old mufflers. But, I decided to make sculptures with a little help from these folks. The rest of the world can think what they want about those damn things, but I like 'em."

"Granddaddy took me to see an art exhibit that had sculpture made out of old junky stuff. He told me it was real good art. I like the Muffler Mailbox Man and woman better, though."

"That's real sweet of you to say. I like 'em 'cause they're a way for some of these men to make a little money. When I first asked some of these men to help, they thought the idea was half-baked. I thought they'd be real practical to hold my mailbox and newspaper box."

Later, Uncle Ike gathered everyone in the center of the room for grace. He thanked God for the food and for the people present to eat it. After the prayer, I served the chicken

and dumplings. The people who came through the line were certainly the shouldn't knows. When I first served them, I kept my eyes on the plates. I pretended to concentrate on serving the food correctly. Several people who came through the line thanked me. I said "you're welcome," without looking at them. Uncle Ike noticed my fear. When he came through the line, he said, "Ophy, why don't you look at these people when you serve them? Ain't nobody here who's gonna bite you. Plus, you wanna show people those pretty eyes of yours!" From then on, I looked at the people when I served them. I lost my fear of them quickly, and surprisingly, I knew a few of them. Okra, for one, came through the line.

"Ophy, me and Bertha was takin' about you the other day. Where you been?"

"Granddaddy and I can't go to the "Spit 'N Argue" for a while. Mamma found out we was goin' there." I lowered my tone to whisper, "Okra, I didn't think you was poor."

"I ain't poor, Ophy. I just come down here to eat some of Ike's collards."

I felt much better after talking to Okra. Seeing him made me realize that the people there were the same people I saw around New Brookland on a daily basis.

While I finished serving, I thought about Uncle Ike. I compared what I had been told about him to what I had observed. I found many faults with his myth. For example, the Muffler Mailbox Man and woman were a way for him to pay people without jobs for their work. The dirt he sterilized

by burning tire rubber was used to grow some of the food he served that day. People who did not know Uncle Ike misconstrued his actions because they needed to believe in his myth. People were unwilling to recognize the merit of his actions because they wanted him to stay in one place.

Being around Uncle Ike that Saturday brought me closer to the realization that New Brookland functioned under governing rules and myths. Myth: Ike is a raving lunatic who is a blemish on the face of society. Truth: I had yet to discover one.

When the family arrived at Granny's the next day, Burna ran to meet her parents. She blurted : "Thank God you're here to save me," while her father hugged her. She told her parents about how I scared her and Aunt Sylvia drank "moon wine." Mother wrung more information out of me. I feared being scolded for scaring Burna; I knew restriction hung in the air if she found out about Uncle Ike. Before I told her myself, Burna scuttled in between us to enlighten Mother.

"Aunt Gabby, Ophy went off with that pig-hat man--the man who made me say those bad things in church. I told her not to go, but she wouldn't listen to me."

"Ophelia Ruth Harper! Where on earth did you go with that man? You know I'd prefer you not associate with him. It doesn't look good."

"Looks, smooks, Gabby Harper. I swear! The child went with me to the Mason lodge to help give out food to the homeless people. It just so happens that Ike

organized the thing."

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"Well, I'm glad Ophy helped out, but she has been told, several times, not to associate with that man."

"That man is one of your relatives. And I don't want to hear your explanations of why it doesn't look good for Ophy, or any one else to be seen with him. People in this town need to stop worryin' so much about looks and start worryin' about themselves!"

Burna interrupted Granny and Mother to bring more important topics to discussion, like her new doll. Grandfather insisted we leave immediately to avoid seeing Burna pitch a fit over her doll. I agreed. But I realized that on the way home, Mother would give me another lecture about Uncle Ike. Her discussion with Granny reminded me of her feelings about him, and people who associated with him. I wanted to believe in Granny's opinion on taking too much stock in looks. I needed to believe what she said.

On the way home, Father drove past Uncle Ike's house. We turned left onto his road and saw him standing near the road with another man. As the car approached him, Ike turned towards us. Perhaps without noticing who we were, he waved. Father waved back at him nonchalantly. Neither Father nor Uncle Ike acknowledged that they knew one another with their gesture. They simply acknowledged one another as neighbors do. From then on, I knew that no matter how strongly Mother tried to convince me (and maybe herself) that Ike was not someone with whom to associate, he still held a prominent place in our lives.

I began to see beneath the black cloud of rubber rules that governed the actions of many people in New Brookland. Beneath that cloud, smothered in smoke, lingered a smattering of forbearance. The people lived, worked and died together. Sometimes they became annoyed with each other and a dark cloud of spite rose around the town. But on a daily basis, all the people of New Brookland shared that most uninteresting of all virtues, tolerance, and managed to throw up their hands to wave at passers by.

The people of New Brookland tolerated each other, that is, as long as no one interrupted the order of the town's normal day. As long as the same events happened on the same days each year, no one became intolerant. Uncle Ike's junk was the exception to the rule. No one in New Brookland tolerated the mounds of junk that hid rats in his front yard.

The week after the family's trip to Hickory Knob was the week before Thanksgiving. The week before Thanksgiving had always been a very busy week for my family. All of us were involved with the church's annual "Feed the Hungry" event. The Women's Circle Clubs and the Men's Groups met (as a collective non-gender specific group) to discuss menus, food preparation and transportation. The women worried about what covered dishes to assign one another, while the men worried about going to pick up the people they would feed. The people usually came from the trailer parks near the church and the ones down by the river. After hauling these people to our church, a place many of them would never visit simply because they would not feel very welcomed, the church ladies lavished them with large doses of macaroni and cheese and pressed turkey. Each family received a food basket to take home at the end of the event.

Since Father was out of town for the meeting, John and I accompanied Mother to church. She allowed us to take books to read, which failed to make attending more appealing to either of us. John complained about having to sit still for an hour. I told Mother that my behavior might improve if

she would let me take books to worship service. I

stopped complaining and told John to hush. The longer we complained about things she wanted us to do, the longer her instructions for us would be on the way to church.

We arrived to find the meeting already in progress. Mrs. Hartford stood at the podium, reading the menu and making commentary on how much better her apple pies were when she used Granny Smith apples. Then, Mrs. Hartford opened the floor for volunteers to bring duplicates of the food. Several ladies volunteered to bring casseroles they invented with leftover cans of Cambell's soup. The Victory Life Circle volunteered to be in charge of all the desserts. While Mrs. Chapman spoke about the many dessert ideas her circle planned to create, a lady sitting in the row in front of us raised her hand. I recognized Mrs. Hoffsteler immediately.

"Mrs. Chapman, I can bring my chocolate delight. There should be plenty to feed everyone."

"Mrs. Hoffsteler, I don't believe we'll be needing your help."

The way in which Mrs. Chapman replied to Mrs. Hoffsteler spread a thin tickling discomfort around the room. Everyone but John knew why Mrs. Chapman refused Mrs. Hoffsteler's help. Before the feeling caused anyone serious discomfort, Mrs. Hartford regained control of the meeting. She clapped her hands together several times to get attention. Once everyone looked at her, she gave an oratory about a virus, a hideous vermin, that could possibly destroy

"Some of you may not be aware that something is going on in our town that may cause our event to be unsuccessful. The matter of which I am speaking is the result of what I consider illegal activity of some sort. Someone in this town is doing what he claims to be charity work, but he is not getting a tax write-off for what he's doing, and he does not have a permit to go around doing what he calls 'good deeds.' The person of whom I am speaking is Ike McCaskle.

"Apparently, many of the people we reach through our church's mission are turning to this unstable man for help. For some reason, he has been feeding people down at the Masonic lodge on Saturdays, and I have heard from several sources that he fully intends to hold a big Thanksgiving dinner next Wednesday, during our dinner.

"We need to help these people see that the church is clearly the place they should turn to in their times of need."

The fellowship hall buzzed with comments about Ike's covert charity work. I never realized that some law existed that prevented people from giving to others whenever they pleased. I considered Mrs. Hartford's comment about helping these people in their times of need, and how good our church was at coming to their rescue. I reckoned that the people our church helped were "in need" only three times a year: Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. They needed the church's help around the same time the church members needed



to appease their consciences about helping others. As people continued to make comments about Uncle Ike and his illegal charity work, Mrs. Hoffsteler excused herself and slipped out quietly. I wanted to join her.

"Those people don't realize that they are fallin' into sin's way by lettin' that man help them."

"We should point out to them that our church wants to help them become better christians."

"Them people don't know better than to run around with the likes of Ike. He's the kind of trash they like."

I knew what the phrase "them people" meant in relation to people our church served through its ministries. Aunt Renata called them "swamp people." Swamp people lived in trailer parks down by the river. Aunt Renata had pointed them out to Burna and me when we went to the grocery store. Her warning to us when we saw swamp people was, "The only thing that separates you from them is a good education." Mother spoke of the swamp people as the ultimate example of what could befall a person who hung around in pool halls. All comments I heard about the swamp people on normal days indicated that they needed to stay in their place--except when they needed to come to our church to receive our charity.

After twenty minutes of discussion on saving the Feed the Hungry event, Mrs. Hartford presented her proposal:

"We need to go to the next town meeting and point out to Judge Windfield that Ike does not have a license to

practice charity work. If he wants to do charity work, he can join a church like normal people. He could also do some worthwhile charity for everyone and clean up his yard."

Everyone agreed unanimously with her proposal. I looked around several times for Grandfather, but he was not there to defend Ike. The meeting ended after the decision to bring Ike to justice. I wondered what would happen during Feed the Hungry that year since no one discussed transporting the swamp people to this lavish feast. I personally wanted to go to the Masonic Lodge and have some more of Uncle Ike's collards.

I watched John as Mother signed up to bring string beans and dressing. Mother quickly led us out of the meeting in order for her to get back to her sewing. During the drive home, John and I sang Grandfather's song.

"Way down South in Aberdeen, a pole cat jumped on a sewin' machine! The sewin' machine was goin' so fast, it sewed stitches up the pole-cats' . . ."

"Ophy, John! Don't you dare!"

"Don't we dare what?"

"Say what you were about to say! I won't stand for that kind of language!"

"We were gonna say 'leg'."

"Oh. I thought you were going to say something else."

"What did you think we were gonna say?"

"Something about a donkey. Just forget it!"

"Can we sing the song?"

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"Go ahead."

We sang the song until we reached home. We continued to sing it because Mother grew more and more annoyed by it each time we said "elbow" or "leg" at the end of the song. I sealed the song's fate when I came too close to saying what she thought we were about to sing. I sang "butt" at the end. Mother told me to hush and threatened not to finish my costume.

During Thanksgiving at my school, the teachers and the students dressed up in Thanksgiving costumes to celebrate the holiday. The activity gave us all a clear sense that the Pilgrims did not need much help from the Native Americans when they arrived in America. Because of the teacher's glorification of the Pilgrims, the only people who dressed as Native Americans were the boys. Even their mothers tried to dress them up as fun-loving, overzealous Puritans. I wore a puritan costume two years in a row. The teachers dressed as puritans as well. They taught us that the Native Americans gave the Puritans few, if any, helpful hints about survival. (The Puritans already knew how to survive fairly well by themselves, according to both my first and second grade teachers.) So, on Thanksgiving each year, seventy first-through sixth-graders paraded around school pretending to be puritans.

When Mother asked me what color--black or brown--I wanted for my pilgrim costume that year, I responded: "Neither, I want to be an Indian." I explained how Wallace

and Davey were going to be Indians. She decided that I should do the proper thing and go as a pilgrim, regardless of what Wallace and Davey were doing. Grandfather convinced her to let me be an Indian after many hours of debate. Their banter concluded with: "Daddy, she needs to do little girl things. That's why I want her to go as a pilgrim." "No, Gabby. She needs to do person things, like making her own decisions."

Mother found a light brown felt from which to construct the costume. Once she found the material, she went to work designing it. She and I discussed how I wanted it to look, and she showed me pictures of traditional Native American costume in library books on the subject. We choose a design to paint on the costume's shirt. She spared no expense on material, paint, beads, and feathers for the costume. If Mother made me anything--whether she agreed with my decisions or not--she determined to make me the best-dressed Native American in a sea of black and brown pilgrims.

As I waited anxiously for her to finish sewing the top the night after the meeting, I decided to ask her how she felt about Uncle Ike and his illegal charity work.

"Mamma, do you think what Uncle Ike's doin' is wrong?"

"He is interfering with our church's charity work, but, on the other hand, he's not hurting anyone by helping others."

"I think it's silly about tellin' on him for helpin' others. I thought what he did Saturday was real nice. He even told me that the Muffler Mailbox Man and Woman

were made by some people who couldn't get jobs. He says he likes payin' people for doin' work."

"My wish is for him to think of other kinds of work for them to do. He could tell them to clean up his yard."

"He might like havin' junk in his front yard."

"Well, I don't like having rats around."

"Are you gonna go to the town meetin' about him breakin' the law?"

"I'm not concerned with what he gives to other people--we'd all be better off lettin' that be. But I do want to go and speak out about those rats."

"But it didn't do any good the first time Judge Winfield asked him to clean it up."

"Ophy, people are getting sick and tired of that junk. I personally feel it needs to go. If he wants to do charity work, he ought to sell that stuff or move it."

Mother concentrated on her sewing while I thought about ways Uncle Ike could sell the junk to make lots of money. I stared at math problems, trying to figure how I could help Uncle Ike. I knew that if the members of our church pleaded with Judge Winfield about Ike's illegal charitable deeds, he would probably tell him to stop. The Ike I saw at the "Spit N' Argue" drinking beer differed greatly in spirit from the Ike I witnessed giving food to other people. Ike seemed remorseful when we saw him at the bar. He sat alone, staring at his beer, until Burna marched over to harass him. Helping people enlivened Uncle Ike. His mood and his character changed when he had the opportunity to do what

appeared to be his favorite thing. I determined to prevent Mrs. Hartford and the rest of the members of my church from taking away one of the few things Ike had left. I figured they had stolen his character with their myth; they would not steal anything else.

I reflected on what Mother said about him selling the junk in his front yard in order to make money. The art exhibit Grandfather took me to see came to mind. "Surely, the art department would want some of Ike's junk to use for their trash sculptures," I decided. The idea held promise. With the help of Davey and Wallace, I believed my plan might work.

The next day at school, I made my proposal to Davey and Wallace. I doubt they cared for the fate of Uncle Ike's charity work, but they liked the danger and secrecy.

"I have a secret plan I need ya'll to help me with."

"What kind of secret plan? I'm not playin' any more jokes on Mrs. Hoffsteler, 'cause she caught us!"

"No, stupid, I'm talkin' about somethin' else. You see, my Uncle needs our help. People around here don't like him very much, so he needs some money."

"What does people not likin' him have to do with him needin' money?"

"If he has money, people will leave him alone and let him do whatever he wants."

"What's he done that he can't do no more?"

"He was the one burnin' dirt that day, and he's that man who has the Muffler Mailbox Man in his front yard."

"That Man? He's crazy!"

"If you help me, I'll let you meet him."

"You actually met him?"

"He's my Uncle, stupid!"

After school, we went straight to Davey's house to use the phone. His mother inquired as to whom we called; we told her Katy. As long as we were not calling the mortuary to tell them somebody on our block died, like we did when we were five, she didn't care if we called Japan.

Wallace looked through the phone book to find the college's phone number. To our dismay, the university listing had forty numbers. Wallace studied the listing carefully to see what number would be best. I recited what I planned to say when we reached the Art Department. Davey watched the hallway on adult patrol.

Wallace decided I should call the Library, since we had all been there. He thought we might know whoever answered the phone. I nervously dialed the number, hoping the right person would answer.

"Hello, Compton University Library, can I help you?"

"Yes, mam'm. Uh, do you like art?"

"Yes, I do, why?"

"Are you an artist, who, um, makes things out of junk?"

"No, I'm, um, a biologist who studies plant taxonomy. Let me transfer you."

She transferred me to the Art Department. The next person who answered was the head of the Art Department.

"Bill Hoffsteler, Art Department. Can I help you?"

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"Are you married?"

"Yes. I'm married. Who is this?"

"Um, don't tell my mother I called you."

"Are you an art student?"

"No, I'm Ophelia Harper."

"Ophelia, yes. My wife spoke to me about you. Is there some reason why you're calling me?"

"I know this man who has a lot of junk in his front yard, like the junk in some sculptures I saw at your school. I thought maybe you'd wanna buy some stuff from him."

"Who is this man?"

"His name is Ike McCaskle. He lives on Atlanta street--in New Brookland."

"Does he know you're proposing to sell his things?"

"No, sir. But he uses his money to buy food for hungry people and stuff like that, and he needs money to keep on doin' it."

"Oh! I know that fellow. Mary told me about him just last night. What a coincidence!"

"So, you'll go over there and look at his junk?"

"Yes, mam'm. I might as well send someone over there to take a look at."

"Thank you Mr. Hoffsteler."

"You're welcome."

I placed the receiver down to relay our first triumph



to Davey and Wallace. Since the first part of our plan worked, we moved quickly to stage two. Wallace found Uncle Ike's phone number while Davey practiced his adult voice. No matter how hard Davey tried to lower his voice, he sounded like a seven-year-old. We decided that if we put something over the mouth piece, Davey might sound more like an adult. Davey retrieved a pair of his mother's stockings and wrapped them around the mouth piece. Wallace and I listened carefully to Davey's voice as he spoke through the panty hose. Before we called Uncle Ike, Mrs. Fitzgerald entered the room. She found us standing by the phone. She looked at us for a few moments before she noticed the hosiery in Davey's hand.

"What are you three characters up to?"

"We were waiting for Katy to call us back."

"Then, explain why you're holding my panty hose."

"We were going to pretend like Davey was Darth Vader when Katy called back."

"Oh. If that's all . . ."

She went back to the television without asking more questions. If it had been my mother who found us, she would have made us eat carrots and celery in the family room. Davey placed the stockings on the mouth piece and wrapped them around it several times. Wallace dialed the number. We waited patiently for Uncle Ike to answer his phone. It rang seven times before Uncle Ike picked up the call. When Davey spoke, Uncle Ike probably thought the Art Department had recently hired Darth Vader.

"Hello. Are you the man who has all that junk in his front yard?

"I am from the Art Department at the college, and we would like to come over and look at your junk.

We would like to buy some of it to make trash can art.

"Yes, sir. Thank you!"

"What did he say?"

"He said that it was o.k. with him if we wanted to come look at some of his junk. He says he'll sell some of it."

"Is that all?"

"No, he said if I came over, to be sure to bring my parents."

We knew Uncle Ike did not believe we were with the Art Department of any school, but he seemed amused by the call. We declared victory. I believed that the Art Department people would certainly buy some of his junk before the next town meeting. Then, Uncle Ike could buy a permit to give things away. Mrs. Hartford and her cohorts could not prevent him from doing something perfectly legal. I went home taking solace in our success. Unfortunately, I lacked the patience to wait for the results. Underneath my initial joy lingered the doubt that our efforts would succeed.

Mother and I spent three days working on my costume for the Thanksgiving feast. She and I painted a hunting scene on the front of the shirt. She painted two Native Americans holding bows and arrows. She allowed me to paint the

animals they would kill. I mistook her instructions to mean "killed animals" and glopped red paint running from the animals' sides to show they were dead. When she realized my mistake, she rolled her eyes and said, "Well, at least the costume will show you helped." She painted stripes on the back of the shirt and around the pant's legs. She then sewed a fringe on the side of the pants to imitate leather fringe. She also added a fringe around the neckline where we strung colorful beads and feathers. The night before the feast, she finished my headband with two brightly colored feathers.

"What do you think, Ophy? I hope you like it. Plus, it has some historical merit--I think."

"I love it, Mamma. I bet I'm the best lookin' Indian in school tomorrow."

"Even if you're not the best dressed, you'll certainly be the only female Indian in the bunch."

Mother placed the outfit carefully on my dressing chair when she put me to bed. Instead of reading me the usual excerpt from The History of Dinosaurs, she read me a story about a Native American girl. The girl's father gave her a bow and arrow for her birthday one year. But as she grew older, the father warned her not to hunt in the woods--her bow and arrow were meant to be a toy. The girl disobeyed her father because she knew only men were allowed to hunt. She found a swift moving stream and waited patiently to strike a fish. She believed her father would be proud of her. Her patience was rewarded. When she returned to her father with seven

fish from the stream, he took pride in his

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daughter's work and honored her with a great feast.

When mother finished reading the story, she relayed the moral to me, in case I did not find one.

"So, you see Ophy, the moral of this story is that patience is a high virtue. It always pays off in the end."

"I thought the moral was about girls being just as good as boys."

"Whatever. I'm glad you were at least paying attention."

The next morning, I awoke earlier than usual to put on my costume. Mother made me wait until after breakfast to get dressed. I sometimes placed more raisin bran on my lap than in my mouth. When I finished, I rushed from the breakfast table, put on my costume, and placed my head band on with bobby pins. Mother finished the ensemble by plaiting my hair with strips of leather--like the Native American girl in the story. I marched to the living room to show John and Dad.

"You look just like a little Indian, Ophy. But those tennis shoes just won't do. Gabby, do you think she should wear something besides those tennis shoes?"

"I think you're right. Ophy, why don't you go find some other shoes."

I returned to the den, still wearing my tennis shoes. I believed my oxfords would look worse than my tennis shoes. I looked down at my feet, fearing my costume was ruined

because my shoes did not match. Just as the fear started creeping into my system, Mother presented me with a box wrapped in turkey paper. 128

I opened the box to find leather moccasins with chocolate-colored fringe. I could not believe Mother bought them. She helped me put them on, so I could dance around the room. I could hardly wait for my friends to see them.

"I had to go to that 'head shop' across town to find them. I hope they're o.k."

(The image of Mother in a head shop did not strike me as odd until years later. But I imagined her telling the sales person, several times, that all she wanted were the shoes.)

"I love them!"

"Good, enjoy wearing them to school today because you are not wearing them outside the house again. People will think I'm trying to raise a hippy or something!"

At school, I received compliments from the Pilgrims and the Indians (Wallace and Davey). During science lesson, I reflected on how much work mother put into the costume. Despite her reservations, she truly wanted me to be happy with her work. I started to see how her sewing was her way of showing me how much she loved me. Plus, if she made the costumes or the dresses, she could make them to her specifications. She had sat at her sewing machine many hours designing perfect costumes for me. Those costumes also showed New Brookland that Gabby Harper was raising her daughter in the right way; her daughter participated in the

right things. And her daughter never, under any circumstances, wore white shoes after Labor Day or velvet dresses after Memorial Day. Never.

During the Thanksgiving feast at school, I paraded to the cafeteria with the rest of the pilgrims. I looked around at all the other girls dressed like pilgrims and began to realize why mother thought it best for me to go as a one. Being one Native American in a group of seventy pilgrims gave me an odd feeling of detachment. A few of the fourth grade girls made sarcastic comments about my costume when my class passed theirs. At first, their comments stung. I wanted to be back in Mrs. Thacker's room with people who liked my costume. But I soon realized that their comments resembled some of the comments the people at church made about Uncle Ike. I felt what I thought he felt--exclusion. When Davey and Wallace pointed out to me that they liked my costume the best, I forgot about the fourth grade girls. "None of those stupid girls could be in the Village People if they wanted!" Davey exclaimed. The Village People were cool. Davey's opinion mattered much more than those of people I had to tolerate.

On my way home, I decided to stop by Mrs. Hoffsteler's to show her my costume (and, admittedly, to see if she would disclose her husband's intentions towards Uncle Ike's junk). She answered the door wearing an apron over her jeans.

"Hello, Ophy. Aren't you cute in that Indian custome!"

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, I think it's spiffy. Would you like to come in

"Yes, mam'm. If you're not too busy."

"I'm fixing something in the kitchen; you're welcome to join me."

I followed her back to her kitchen where an enormous punch bowl filled with chocolate goo sat on the island. I stared at the massive desert for several minutes. A ton of graham cracker crumbs lined the bottom of the bowl, chocolate pudding comprised the second layer, and the third layer was whipped cream--six layers in all. I decided that if she took that desert to the church, I would be down there to have some.

"What is this?"

"That's my chocolate delight. I hope it's enough for everybody."

"We don't usually have that many people at 'Feed the Hungry.' If there are some leftovers, I might have to help eat them."

"Why don't I fix you a bowl right now?"

"Mamma would get mad if I ate some before the people at church get some."

"I'm not taking that to that church."

"Where're you takin' it?"

"The Masonic Lodge."

"Why?"

"Those snotty women at the church didn't want it, so I'm taking it somewhere where it's really needed. I hear this Ike McCaskle is related to you?"

"Yes, mam'm. He's my Uncle, but we can't talk to him, much. I went with my granny to the lodge Saturday to help him out, though. My parents were out of town."

"Oh, so you have spoken to him. Have you talked to him about selling his junk to the Art Department?"

"Sort of. I just called your husband in case he wanted to buy some of it."

"Why did you take that initiative?"

"'Cause the people at church are gonna make him stop givin' things to people. I reckoned if he had some money he could get a permit or somethin'."

"I'm sure Bill will buy some of it--if it's for a worthy cause."

"Do you think his cause is worthy?"

"If I didn't, do you think I'd take this down to the Masonic Lodge?"

Mrs. Hoffsteler fixed me a large helping of her chocolate delight. I tried not to devour it too quickly to present my best manners. While I controlled myself, she talked about how she and Mr. Hoffsteler considered moving away from New Brookland. Apparently, another college offered Mr. Hoffsteler a position as college dean. Mrs. Hoffsteler hoped he would take it. The more she talked about leaving, the more I realized I did not want her to go.

"What if he says he'll go to that school and you decide you want to stay here?"

"That's not going to happen, Ophy. We need to move out of this town. I feel stifled here."



"You may not understand this now, but the people in this town don't like outsiders, and they certainly don't like deviants. Not that I'm a deviant . . . I guess what I'm trying to say is that people don't much like me here. Bill and I need to be in a bigger town--a town where we can be ourselves."

"I feel like that sometimes, about wanting to be myself. But I have to do things like I should, I guess."

"I used to think the same thing, but now that I'm older, I've decided to do things like I want to, not the way other people think they ought to be done because of some backwards moral principle."

"Do you think you'll come back to New Brookland to visit?"

"I'm sure I will. But in the mean time, you better get home before dark. Your mother may need you to help with the cooking."

"No. She'll tell me to get out of her way before I ruin the cookin'."

Mother peered from behind the curtains as I entered the yard. She watched for me to come home regardless of whether I was alone or accompanied by armed body guards. When I opened the front door, she wore her disappointed look--the look of doom.

"Where on earth have you been? I saw Davey and Wallace walk by an hour ago! And guess who I didn't see with

them! It was all I could do not to call out the National Guard to go looking for you, young lady! Do you realize you are driving me to an early grave?"

"I'm sorry. Mrs. Hoffsteler invited me in."

"Does Mrs. Hoffsteler have a phone? I bet she does. The next time, make sure you use it!"

"Is that all?"

"What do you mean is that all?"

"I'm not in trouble for going over there?"

"No. But you will be in trouble if you don't change clothes and get ready to go."

Mother shocked me by not being angry about my visit with Mrs. Hoffsteler. I suppose she no longer cared if I visited her, as long as no Lady Daisy Garden Club members saw me leaving her house. I went back to my room in disbelief and confusion. I reckoned if nobody saw me, my visiting the Hoffstelers would not look bad.

I looked at my Holly Hobby clock, time, 4:35 pm--two hours before "Feed the Hungry." I decided to read for a few minutes before undressing. Mother found me, twenty minutes later, wearing my Indian costume, engrossed in Ramona The Pest. She gave me two minutes to do as she asked, which meant the mom shuttle departed in ten minutes. I need not look at the clock. Mother instilled into me another system for measuring time, according to how loudly she gave instructions.

"You have precisely **TWO MINUTES TO GET READY--TWO!**"

"Why are we leaving so early?"

"I have somewhere to go before church, plus, we have to pick up Renata and Burna."

(Our fathers were picking up the swamp people.)

Mother loaded John and me into the car and drove in the opposite direction from church. After seeing Jansen's Gas and Cold Beer, I figured we were going to Granny's. Mother drove past the "Spit 'n Argue" where several men sat on the front porch. As the car passed, I waved and they waved back. We then drove past Granny's street. We passed two more streets before mother turned onto the road that led to the trailer park. She pulled in at the Masonic lodge.

"What are we doin' here?"

"I want you to take this dressing into Ike. Don't speak to anybody. Just walk in and hand him the dressing. Hurry up."

I entered the Masonic lodge to be surrounded by strange people. At first, my fears of these people swelled. One man with no teeth, wearing a torn army jacket, came close to me and leaned over. The closer he leaned, the more I wanted to scream. I remembered what Uncle had told me that Saturday, and I looked meekly at the man as he spoke. The fear Mother instilled in me of these people lessened each time I interacted with them. They, too, differed from their myth. In their myth, they married their brothers, sisters, and cousins, and gave birth to in-bred mutants. They also shopped at K-Mart.

"Who are you lookin' for little lady?"

"My Uncle Ike. I need to give this to him."

"He's right over there."

I crossed the room to Uncle Ike who looked rather surprised to see me.

"Ophy, what on earth are you doin' here?"

"Mamma wanted me to give you this. It's dressing."

"Why don't you tell Gabby I said 'thank-you.' If it's half as good as your grandmother's, I'm sure it will be a hit. If you can stay a minute, we're about to start eating."

"I wish I could, but we have to be at church. I love your collards."

"How 'bout this. I can put some in tupperware for you to eat later."

Ike placed a liberal helping of his collards into a bowl for me. I thanked him several times, trying to tell him about the Art Department and his junk. My courage failed me. Before I left, he said: "Ophy, tell those crabby old women at yer church my feeding will be over before theirs starts. That way some of these people will get fed twice. I believe your Granddaddy already knows to say somethin'. Remind him not to say too much!"

When I returned to the car, I did not ask Mother why she took food to Uncle Ike. I figured she wanted to be helpful as long as nobody knew about her helping the wrong person. The church, garden club, and other social activities in which mother participated comprised a large

portion of her life. She associated with the people she was taught were the appropriate people to associate with. 136

Grandmother forced Mother to participate in the Rainbow Girls, Cotillion, Ball Room Dancing, and a million other activities that taught her how to be a lady. When Mother married Father, she slipped easily into the many roles she had to play--mother, head-deacon's wife, circle and garden club member. These roles mother played often characterized her for me. Admittedly, I admired Mother; I thought she performed all her roles with beauty and grace. People around her loved her because she was a warm gracious person.

When Mother gave Uncle Ike dressing, I could no longer understand Mother solely in relation to the roles she played. I began to see her as her own person--a person who lingered somewhere behind the roles with the same warm, gracious personality.

While the church had planned "Feed The Hungry," Mother and I had planned my Thanksgiving costume, and Wallace, Davey, and I had planned to help Uncle Ike, Burna had formulated a plan of her own. Her master-scheme involved pushing her parents, and just about everyone else, over their endurance levels. I speculate that she had no true plan, but the eloquence of her actions indicated pre-meditation.

The night Burna's parents took her home from Granny's began the first battle in the series. Aunt Renata told Mother that Burna refused to eat. After her parents bribed her with everything from another new doll to a new car, Burna declared a hunger strike. She refused to eat until Aunt Renata got rid of the baby. Burna declared her knowledge that her parents would love the baby more than her--something she would not stand for. Fortunately, her passive resistance ended after Aunt Renata bought her a Barbie make-up head.

Before leaving the mall with the Barbie head, Aunt Renata and Burna ran into Mrs. Little. Many times Aunt Renata and Mother discussed how nosy Mrs. Little was. Mother once said if she called the house and I answered the phone, not to tell her anything. When Aunt Renata felt obliged to speak to her, Mrs. Little commented on Burna's "Makin' Bacon" accident in church. Aunt Renata told Mother that before she could move politely away, Burna informed Mrs. Little that she was fat enough to be the female pig in the act. Burna claimed to make the accusation because Mrs.

Little accused her of being bad. We started to wonder if Mrs. Little was not right.

The night of "Feed the Hungry," Burna had decided she needed to wear lipstick. Aunt Renata's effort to explain how six-year-olds do not wear lipstick failed. On the way to church, Mother handed Burna a napkin and told her to wipe her mouth. Burna refused. Mother told her she looked like white trash; Burna did not care. Burna won the battle, so John and I had to go to the playroom escorting Burna and her red lips.

While we waited for the adults to finish feeding the people, Burna played with members of her Sunday school class. I looked over in her direction several times. She and the other girls pretended to cook meals at their imaginary stoves. Then, they took their baby dolls to the grocery store, which happened to be the stack of blocks some younger boys meant to be a girl fortress. After aggravating the boys, Burna and her group returned to their pretend kitchen set. John and I continued stacking leggos.

Mrs. Becker, the nursery keeper, dozed on and off throughout the evening. She depended on the theory that children in church are children with manners. Of the thirty children in the room, most were well behaved. We slipped into church mode. Perhaps the church's smell caused our lids to grow heavy and our bodies to become lethargic. Even John began to doze against the wall after thirty minutes of leggos.

As the playroom moved into a hush, someone raised a

Standing, on top of the faux kitchen table, was Burna. Not only was she on top of furniture, but she also was gyrating her hips. I assessed the scene several times before I convinced myself that she was trying to dance. As Burna moved her hips inside an invisible hoola-hoop, she and her friends sang the Bee Gee's "Night Fever." Her parents gave had given her the soundtrack for Christmas, and by November following she knew every word and maybe some new ones.

Mrs. Becker gasped several times when she saw the spectacle. Between gasps, she uttered the standard "Well, I never" to indicate her shock and disappointment in one little member of her flock. She sprang to her comfort shoes. Her support hose carried her swiftly across the room, but they did not prevent her from tripping over a four-foot high block tower. The blocks and Mrs. Becker tumbled to floor. She raised herself, in her most dignified manner, and said: "Don't you young ladies know dancing is a sin? You will sit until your parents come to get you. We can only pray they punish you accordingly!"

Mrs. Becker sat Burna and the others facing the wall. Each time one tried to turn around, Mrs. Becker gave them more time-out. Since John and I were not inside the time-out prison, we tried not to be convicted and sentenced for snickering at the shortcoming of an adult. Burna, however, would know the inside of time-out life until her parents came. She had committed what Southern Baptists feel is one of the three unpardonable sins: murder, divorce,



and dancing. The Southern Baptists considered dancing the gateway sin; like pool halls, it leads to murdering and divorce. 140

Burna shattered the silence once again by refusing to serve her sentence. She rose from her chair, walked calmly over to Mrs. Little and informed her, in a matter-of-fact-way, that her time was finished.

"I am through with time-out. I've had enough."

"Oh, no you haven't. YOU were the one dancing. You get extra time out."

"You are making me mad!"

"You better not talk to me that way, young lady!"

Burna refused to listen to Mrs. Becker any longer. She walked calmly to the door and left. John and I watched, along with the rest of the nursery, in shock. John commented: "She's in trouble. It'll be double. Alligators are gonna get her." (John called people he did not like alligators. Each time he saw Mrs. Becker, he screamed "Alligator! Alligator!") I shared John's sentiment. Burna's parents would put her on some kind of restriction, but I was not sure what. Her parents had not needed back-up restriction procedures until Aunt Renanta's pregnancy.

When Burna slammed the door behind her, several younger children clapped. John repeated, "Alligator's gonna get her! It will! It will!" He clung to my leg, hoping I would make some sort of decision. I decided to leave with her. John and I followed behind her. Mrs. Becker walked calmly behind us saying, "If you do not return to the room this

instant, I'm going to have to tell all your parents." Burna 141  
continued moving towards the fellowship hall. As we  
approached, I saw Grandfather standing in the hall with Mr.  
Roberts. He observed our procession--Burna in the lead,  
John and I following, Mrs. Becker behind--looking  
astonished.

"Burna! What are you doin'?"

"I'm gettin' away from that mean woman! She told me I  
was the worstest kid in the world!"

"James, Burna is telling you a story. I found her  
dancing on top of a table like some little hussy!"

"Mrs. Becker, I think you'd be best to leave Burna,  
Ophy, and John with me. They won't be returning to the  
playroom."

"I feel it is necessary to inform her parents of her  
horrid behavior!"

"I think you better feel compelled to stay out of this,  
Mrs. Becker. Good evening."

Grandfather asked me to watch Burna and John while he  
found Uncle Andy. Burna crossed her arms over her chest and  
thumped her foot as she waited. John hid behind my leg. We  
all knew the enormity of our offense. We had left the playroom  
without permission. One of us had danced on top of a table,  
like a hussy, as Mrs. Becker noted. When Uncle Andy, Father  
and Grandfather found us, the expression they wore indicated  
their anger. Burna ignored the warning signs. While even  
little John knew the wrath of the Southern Baptist church was  
about to rain down on us, Burna thought her father would

be understanding of why she left the playroom. No matter if 142  
Mrs. Becker beat us with whips, we had no excuse good enough  
to explain our crime.

"Daddy! That woman called me a fussy! She told  
Granddaddy I was a fussy! I had to leave to get away  
from her!"

"Burna, James said you were in trouble with Mrs Becker  
because she caught you dancing on top a table. I don't  
care what Mrs. Becker called you. I care about why you  
decided to dance--at church."

"I wasn't doing anything wrong . . ."

"Don't you smart mouth me young lady! Dancing in  
church is wrong! Sassing Mrs. Becker was wrong and for  
Lord's sake, leaving the playroom was wrong! I won't  
stand for this behavior from you again."

Never had I heard Uncle Andy use a forceful tone with  
Burna. Before Aunt Renata's pregnancy, he never needed to  
raise his voice to her. Even when Burna asked the pastor  
about Uncle Ike's hat, he did not scold her in a forceful  
manner. As Uncle Andy's voice rose, Aunt Renata and Mother  
joined us in the hallway. Aunt Renata told him to keep his  
voice down lest the other church members think something was  
wrong. Heaven forbid the church people see Burna being  
corrected in public.

"Andy, please. Let's go. I can't take much more of  
this. Burna's probably misbehaving because she's tired."

Uncle Andy said no more and went to make the proper

excuses for their departure. Grandfather decided John and I 143  
needed to go home as well. Admittedly, he wanted to get  
away from the church people. Mother and father stayed in  
order to help clean up. Before we left,  
I asked mother to spare us restriction until after  
Thanksgiving. She gave me her usual "we'll discuss it" and  
released me to Grandfather's care.

Little John was so traumatized by the events, he  
fell asleep on the way home. Grandfather put him to bed as  
soon as we arrived home. Once he slept peacefully in his  
bed, wrapped in his Star Wars sheets, Grandfather and I went  
to the kitchen to play poker for sweet tarts. Grandfather  
looked almost as tired as John. But he still won all my  
sweet tarts.

"Here we are, Ophy, playin' poker--another one of the  
devil's sins. That's right. Dancin' and poker and  
drinkin'. We'll all go to hell in a hand basket."

"We won't really go to hell for dancin' and stuff will  
we?"

"Nah. At least I hope not. Half of the New Brookland  
First Baptist Church would be there if that were true.  
I've seen more than one of those people either  
drinkin', dancin' or playin' poker--I've seen some of  
'em doin' all three at the same time."

"So we can play poker?"

"We can play whatever we want."

"Granddaddy, are you tired?"

"Yeah, Ophy. I get sick and tired of some of those

people at church. I wish they'd keep their noses out of other people's business."

"Like Uncle Ike's?"

"Yeah. Charlotte told me about Mrs. Hartford's plot to go to Judge Winfield. Winfield doesn't give a damn what Ike does, but those church women go down there and ruffle their pristine feathers, he's bound to do something."

"Why would he do something?"

"Those women have a lot more pull in this town than Ike. They're what some people call the pillars of this community. Pillars my butt. They're pillars to whatever takes their fancy."

"But what if Uncle Ike got the money so he could buy a permit or whatever he needs? I bet he could keep on givin' to those people."

"Even if Ike had the money, Ophy, people don't want him infringin' on the church's charity. Like the church is real charitable to those people every day. Ike gives 'em food and clothes and helps take them where they need to go. Where were the church people when Mr. Harvey broke his hip? Those church women probably didn't care one shred--they still think his wife's a whore. But not Ike. He took her to see Mr. Harvey every day until he came home.

"Money's not gonna help Ike in the end. Those old hens will have their way."

"But if we tried to get the money . . ."

"What kind of permit can Ike buy that would make those women leave him alone? What kind of permit's gonna help them see he's tryin' to do the Christian thing--Maybe that's it, Ophy. There's a Christian setting an example and we're all smothered in clouds unable to see it."

"I did something. I know I shouldn't have done it."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to help Uncle Ike. But if mamma finds out, I'll never leave the house again. I'll be in more trouble than Burna's in right now."

"Tell me! I'm not gonna tell your mamma. Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Me and Davey and Wallace . . ."

"Oh, no. This can't be good."

"We called the art people at the college and told them about the junk in Uncle Ike's yard. I thought about that art we saw there, and hoped they'd wanna buy some of his stuff."

"What did they say?"

"They said they'd go look at it. They might buy some of it."

"Well, Ophy, don't get your hopes up. But the important thing is you tried to help. There's no reason for you to think you're in trouble because you tried to help someone else."

"But isn't Uncle Ike in trouble 'cause he helped other people?"

"It seems that way. But the more I think about your idea, the more it makes sense. Maybe there is some permit he can buy to practice his charity. Maybe if we get that permit before Mrs. Hartford's gang goes to the town meeting, Ike's got a chance to at least keep doin' what he likes. I think I'll call Winfield and ask him about buyin' Ike a permit. Those people might be able to raise hell about their feelings towards Ike, but they have to leave him alone if the whole thing's above board."

Grandfather's proposal lifted my hopes for Uncle Ike. When Mother placed me on restriction for leaving the church playroom, effective the week after Thanksgiving, I did not barter for a lesser penalty. She inquired if I felt well. I told her I felt fine. Thanksgiving was the next day; Uncle Ike had a chance to get a permit; and Davey and Wallace knew how to execute the third part of our plan. If she kept me away from Wallace and Davey for a few days, I figured our plot would work and she would not suspect a thing. Maybe I should have bartered her down for a lesser penalty to maintain my screen.

Thanksgiving at Grandfather's was an all-day dress-up affair. Mother woke us early that morning to dress us in our new Thanksgiving outfits. She wrestled John into his standard dress pants and shirt, suspenders and saddle oxfords. He squirmed as he watched the Macy's day parade. She made me wear a new cordoroy jumper with flowers appliqued on the front. She gave me a pair of high-topped

red socks to wear with my saddle oxfords. I sat beside John looking and feeling like an elf. I prayed no one but family would see me in the get-up.

When we arrived at Grandmother's, the women went into hyper-cooking mode. The men sat around watching television. John and I found Burna sitting in the living room staring at her baby portrait. We invited her to play with us, but she refused. She claimed she needed to sit still so she would not make her parent's angry. She made her excuse to return to her intensive pouting. Lip out, eyes down, nose upturned--she had mastered the art of pouting.

Grandmother issued in Thanksgiving with the pomp and circumstance of a royal feast. Before we fixed our plates, we took pictures of the entire family. We stood in front of Grandmother's wall-length china cabinet, while Uncle Andy snapped the shot. After the traditional picture, Father said the Thanksgiving prayer. During the prayer, I opened my eyes to see the food on the table. Grandmother coordinated each dish according to color and size. Grandmother's Thanksgiving feast was what came to mind when I tried to visualize a feast at King Arthur's court.

Unfortunately, the kids were not allowed to eat in the dining room. We had to fix our plates and sit in the kitchen. I filled my plate with enough turkey to put me in a coma for three months. I also ate sugar-coated sweet potatoes, collards, olives, and a heap of Grandmother's dressing. By the time I finished eating everything on my plate, John had fallen asleep in his



She never uttered a word through dinner.

I helped John out of his booster chair so he could lie down for his nap. He and I climbed onto Grandmother's bed to sleep. The turkey coma took effect immediately. We both slept until Grandmother woke me several hours later. The urgency in her footsteps alerted me before she entered the room--something was terribly wrong.

"Ophy, where's Burna? Have you seen her?"

"No, mam'm. Not since dinner."

"Did she tell you she was going somewhere?"

"No, mam'm. She just pouted at the dinner table."

"Your Grandfather wants you to go look for her in the woods. We're afraid she's run away. Andy and your daddy have gone to drive around."

Little John sleepily rubbed his eyes as the family stormed the bedroom after Grandmother. Mother warned me not to stray too far in the woods. She was afraid I might lose my way which meant the family would call out the F.B.I to look for us both. Grandfather reminded her of my knowledge of the woods and told her to calm down. I received four more warnings before Grandfather and I left.

"Ophy, if Burna's in the woods, remember that she won't walk where she knows there's mud. I'm going to walk down behind the thicket, and I want you to walk past the creek, on the other side of the thicket. Look for any signs of someone walking that way. I think Renata

said she took her purse with her."

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"What if I find her and she won't come home?"

"You'll have to make her come home.

My heart pounded as I moved across the brown November grass. I crossed the creek's bridge and drew closer to the thicket. Grandfather moved out of my sight around the other side of the thicket. We both surveyed the land closely for signs of Burna. Her teal green dress would have been easily spotted against the golden grass. Since I did not see her in the field, I entered the thicket and followed a path. I knew she would stick to a worn path instead of forging her own. The path was mud free most of the year.

The thicket's trees closed in around me. I encountered many trees that caused the path to turn and meander in a curving direction. Each time I reached a bend, I hoped to find Burna. But she eluded me. After walking for twenty minutes, I found a recently used napkin. The turkey picture on it indicated that it came from Grandmother's house--my first clue. Apparently, Burna had wrapped some provisions in the napkin and tossed it carelessly aside. I stood as still as I could, listening for footsteps. The only sound I heard was a deer moving through the trees to my left. I continued to press forward on the path despite my limited knowledge of where it would ultimately lead. Grandfather and I had never walked to the path's end.

I continued calling Burna. I hoped she would be afraid of the woods and come out when I called her. My saddle

oxfords hurt my feet and the jumper did not shield me from the cold air. Regardless of the blisters I felt forming on my heels, I pressed on. My hands shook, and my body shuddered. I feared Burna had disappeared. My imagination prevented me from rationalizing what could have happened to her. I believed wolves had eaten her or a horrible monster had taken her away. Worse yet, someone had kidnapped her. I should have been thinking about what a six year old girl would do if she decided to run away. All I wanted was to find her.

Even though she annoyed me sometimes, well, most of the time, I realized how much I loved her. Her high-pitched whiny voice itched my last nerve when she moaned about not having enough toys. Each time Mother forced me to play dress up with her, I wanted to scream. Her little prissy walk and attitude caused no end of grief when Grandfather and I took her to the fair. But instead of focusing on all the reasons why she irritated me, I focused on how sweet she was with John and how she looked up to me. I was the only sibling she knew.

Eventually, I reached the thicket's edge. I walked timidly out of it, feeling its protection leave me with each step forward. Twenty yards away from the thicket stood a fence that surrounded someone's backyard. I reentered the thicket to observe the yard closely before going near it. Something about the yard told me to go back to the house--maybe it was the El Camino on blocks or the huge tin kettle that leaned against the fence. A large iron pot suspended above a pit

stood in the far corner of the yard. It looked like the witch's kettle in the Wizard of Oz. "On, no, " I thought, "Burna's been taken in by some witches." Then, I realized that the house was probably Uncle Ike's. I had only one way to be sure.

I walked through the thicket until I was parallel with edge of the fence. I ran to the fence's edge and inched slowly along it. I crouched close to the ground until I reached the mounds of refrigerators and metal shelving piled on top of each other. The house was certainly Uncle Ike's.

Before I could walk past the junk to his front yard, I heard his voice.

"Who's there? Make yourself known or I'll shoot."

"It's me! It's me, Ophy Harper! Don't shoot, please! I was just looking for Burna!"

"Where the hell are you?"

I came out from behind the fence and showed myself. My red socks had fallen down around my ankles and my knee bled from where I had crawled on the ground. I pushed my hair out of my face so Uncle Ike would recognize me. When he saw me, he laughed.

"What on earth happened to you?"

"I was tryin' to find Burna. I saw your yard, but I wasn't sure it was your yard, so I got kinda scared. ."

"Why don't you come in out of the cold? I'll fix that knee for you and give you a jacket. I can't believe your mamma let you leave the house without one."

"We were all so worried about Burna, we forgot."

"Where do you think Burna's gone off to?"

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"We don't know. I'm real scared she's lost."

"I'll help look for her after we get you cleaned up.

How's that?"

I followed Uncle Ike in the house, and once we entered, I rudely stared at everything. He obviously did not have the same interior decorator my parents used. The first item I encountered was a stuffed otter that had been mounted on a log. I turned quickly from it to see a five foot tall orange plastic plant in the corner of the kitchen. Ike and I went to his den where he asked me to have a seat. I sat on the crushed velvet couch surrounded by as much junk as he had in his front yard. A spanish matador velvet painting hung above the television. To the right of the painting hung a stuffed mallard duck. Next I noticed what looked like a fire place/record player. The faux fire place served as Uncle Ike's home entertainment center. (He later showed me how when the turn table turned, the fake flames spun around.) My eyes investigated every item in the room. I noted the items carefully in order to describe them aptly to Davey and Wallace. I wondered if they would believe some of that stuff could exist outside a flea market.

Uncle Ike cleaned my knee with a clean cloth, and then placed a large bandage over the scrape. He found me an old jacket to put on before we left his house. His decor fascinate me so, I almost forgot my manners and Burna's dilemma. I continued to gaze at his things while he called

"Ophy, what was Burna wearing when she left today?"

"She was wearing a green dress, and she had her hair in two braids."

Ike relayed the information to the man he spoke to on the phone. Then, he helped me climb into his truck and buckled me in. He pulled the truck out of the driveway with a sense of urgency.

"I think we ought to start with the roads closest to Charlotte's house. Then we'll work our way down the avenues. I'm sure we'll find her."

"I'm sorry for comin' over on Thanksgiving day. I just happened to find your house."

"Ophy, you don't need to apologize. I ain't done nothin' on Thanksgiving in years. I went this morning to hand out some turkeys to people, but other than that, I was plannin' to sit in front of the t.v.."

"How was your dinner at the lodge last night?"

"It was real good. Everybody liked your mother's dressing. How 'bout the church dinner?"

"I wasn't so good. Burna got caught dancing on top a table, then we left the play room. We're all on restriction 'cause of it."

"Is that why Burna ran away? Because she's in trouble?"

"Her mamma's havin' another baby and she's upset about it. I guess that's why she ran away."

"I remember when my girl got that way. She didn't want

her little brother to come, no mam'm. She cried for nine months about that baby comin'."

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"How did you get her to stop cryin'?"

"I told her the baby was going to be her real-life baby doll. After we told her that, she got excited about it.

"When he finally came, she thought he was the best thing that ever lived."

"Maybe Burna would like that--having a real-life baby doll. I bet when she finds out it's like that, she'll like it. If we can find her."

"We'll find her. She's got to be around her somewhere. Some of my friends are out lookin' for her."

"Do they help you give stuff to people?"

"Yeah, they do. But it don't look like the damn town's gonna even let me do charity work any more."

"What if you had a permit?"

"I applied for a permit a few months ago, but I ain't got three hundred dollars to blow on a piece of paper that says it's o.k. for me to feed other people. The only way I'm gonna spend my retirement checks is to help other people. I swear! The whole thing's screwed up."

"What if you had the money? Would you buy the permit?"

"Probably not. I don't think anybody in this town has a right to tell me what to do. Hell, they've been deciden' what I'm like for all these years, I figure the least thing would be to leave me alone."

"Are you gonna go to the town meetin' on Tuesday? Mrs. Hartford's gonna tell Judge Winfield about you."

"I'm gonna be there to tell Mrs. Hartford where she can go."

After driving for thirty minutes, we had seen all of New Brookland seven times. Uncle Ike decided to take me back to Grandfather's before the family worried about me. He turned the car around in the Spit 'N Argue's parking lot, and we drove home without accomplishing our mission. The disappointment of not finding Burna weighed heavily upon me. I continued to strain my eyes and closely observe every figure we passed. When we turned left onto main street, I saw Burna standing inside the corner bus stop. She looked in our direction, but she did not recognize me inside Uncle Ike's truck.

"There she is! Right there at the bus stop! Pull over!"

"I best not pull over in front of the bus stop. She might run. I'll pull into the gas station. You go over there and talk to her while I call James."

As soon as the truck stopped, I ran to the bus stop. Burna saw me coming and turned her head. She acted like I did not exist. I reached the bus stop to find Burna holding her purse and her overnight bag. She obviously meant to go away for a long time. The family thought Burna simply wanted to get attention, but she had something more permanent in mind.

"Burna, what are you doin'?"



"I'm going away. I think I want to go to Salem."

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"Salem where?"

"I don't know where it is. All I know is that's where the people on Mamma's show live. I'm sure somebody will love me there."

"You can't go there, silly. That's not even a real place."

"Yes it is! That's where those people live. They talk about it all the time. They call it Salem. I'm sure the bus driver will know where it is."

"You better go home right now or . . . "

"Or I'm going to be in trouble? I'm in trouble already. Mamma and Daddy think I'm a bad person. That's why they're getting another baby. They want one that won't act like me."

"I know the real reason why they're gettin' another baby. And it's not 'cause you're bad!"

"Why, then?"

"It's 'cause they want you to have a real-live baby doll to play with. You'll be able to dress it and play with it and rock it to sleep. It will be like havin' your own real baby--all your own. They might even let you name it!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah. That's why your mamma and daddy need you to come home. They'll need you when the baby comes. Your mamma might not know what to do with it!"

During our conversation, Uncle Ike phoned Grandfather.

The entire family came to the bus stop to find Burna. Aunt Renata and Uncle Andy pulled into Jansen Gas and ran to Burna. When Burna saw her parents, she ran over to them. Uncle Andy picked her up and held her tightly in his arms. He told her over and over how much they loved her, and how worried they had been. My mother and father arrived, but I did not run to them. Mother repeatedly placed her hand over her chest which indicated extreme anxiety. They all looked happy to see Burna.

I walked past the group to where Granddaddy and Uncle Ike stood. Grandfather tussled my hair and pinched my nose.

"Good job, Ophy. I knew you'd find her."

"I couldn't have found her without Uncle Ike's help. I accidentally went to his house. He drove us around so I could spot her."

"Ike, we can't thank you enough for all you've done. If there's anyway we can pay you back, you just let me know."

"I'll do that. Ophy, you take care of yourself and that knee. She's somethin' ain't she James?"

"Yeah, she is somethin'."

"Uncle Ike, Thank you for helpin' us. I know the rest of the family just forgot to tell you thank-you. But they're excited about findin' Burna."

"I know, Ophy. You tell them they're welcome."

Uncle Ike drove away in his old blue truck. Now I knew what he did when he was home behind all his junk. I could

see him listening to his fire place record player and reading the paper. Sometimes, I saw him putting dirt into the iron kettle in order to sterilize it for his garden. Still, at other times, I imagined him sitting on his red crushed velvet couch watching television. But I never again saw him doing anything crazy. He simply did things differently. He decorated his house and his front yard differently. He tended his garden differently. He lived differently.

At church the next Sunday, Mrs. Hartford called a special meeting after worship service. She stood at the podium waving her arms in the air and speaking of the wrath that would surely befall those of us who did not come to the meeting. The fury in her tone lingered long after the pastor took to preaching. I figured everyone in church knew her plan. They would all be at the meeting after church to hear more of her prophecies. Everyone seemed more interested in what she had to say concerning Uncle Ike's mental state than they were in what she planned to do to him. I envisioned them all turning on Uncle Ike--even the ones who never cared what he did as long as he left them alone. But accusations coming from a pillar of the church were as good as the gospel of the Lord to the parishioners. Plus, in a church where dancing was considered a sinful crime, no one wanted to be separated from the pack.

Mrs. Hartford's urgent crescendos carried over into the

Pastor's sermon. He preached with loud conviction the lessons Cain has taught Christians. Cain, the pastor explained, lived a righteous and upright life in the eyes of the community. People perceived Cain to be a good man, until he killed Abel, and showed his true nature. "Can we sit here in this church today and ignore the lessons of the Lord?" the pastor yelled, "For all those who believe in their heart of hearts that appearances can be deceiving, join in the preservation of our community. Help us help the wicked see the error of their ways!" By the end of the sermon, I felt like the pastor was trying to scare everyone into going to the meeting. His yelling, screaming, waving, and ranting scared John, Burna, and me terribly.

After the thirty-fifth chorus of "Footsteps of Jesus," the pastor allowed us to leave. Mother and father moved with the rest of the people towards the front of the church--to the fellowship hall. Mother looked pleadingly at Grandfather. He nodded. While the rest of the church moved to the front, Grandfather pushed us in the opposite direction. Burna grabbed my hem and placed her hand on my back. Grandfather held John so no one would trample him. Before we reached the outside, Mrs Hartford walked over and stood in front of Grandfather. I grabbed Burna's hand to push past Mrs. Hartford. I sensed she wanted to trap us before we reached the vestibule.

"James, where exactly are you taking these children?"

"I'm taking them home, Natty, away from this circus."

"This is not a circus. The member of this congregation

want to see that Ike is stopped. We have a responsibility 160  
to this community to see that the Lord's work is done  
properly. Do you have a problem with that?

"No, mam'm. I sure don't. But you do. If you think  
what you are doin' to Ike is right, then you have no  
reason to continue your missionary work. Good Day!"

"We'll see you at the town meeting! I know you'll be  
there!"

"You're damn right I'll be there. I'll be there to  
remind you why you're really doin' this! YOU might try  
to forget, but you never will!"

Grandfather pushed Burna and me forward. He flung the  
church door open as if to flee the sanctuary. Burna and I  
walked as quickly as our legs would carry us to the car.  
Grandfather followed close behind with John crying in his  
arms. When we got in the car, Grandmother was sitting in  
the front seat--we thought surely she was in the meeting.  
Grandfather handed John over to her and Burna and I shut the  
back doors. As Grandfather tried to find enough space to  
get his car out of his parking place, he discovered we were  
closed in. He and Grandmother got out of the car. He  
instructed us to follow them. We scuttled behind them and  
walked straight to the road. We walked home putting  
distance between us and the church.

"I swear, Charlotte. I thought you would stay for the  
meeting. I'm glad to see you changed your mind."

"I just wish I hadn't worn these shoes, James. These

When we reached their house, Grandmother went silently to the kitchen to begin lunch. Grandfather sat in the den with his face in his hands. Burna and I watched as he shook his head several times, saying: "Why can't they just leave him alone. Why can't Natty get over it?" Burna led John to the back bedroom. I inched closer to Grandfather to let him I know I was there.

"Are you o.k., Granddaddy?"

"No. I had a terrible feelin' when all those people went to that meetin'. Nothin' like a little hell-fire, brimstone and damnation on a Sunday morning."

"Do you think they'll all go to the town meetin' Tuesday?"

"Sure as shit. They'll be there with Natty Hartford leadin' the way. She might try bein' a little less petty and a bit more forgivin'."

"Has she not forgiven Uncle Ike for murderin' Ronald Harper?"

"No, she hasn't forgiven Ike for not marryin' her forty years ago."

"She wanted to marry Uncle Ike?"

"He courted Natty for a spell because he ran shine for her father. Natty was about the homeliest woman you ever saw. If you think she's fat now, you should've seen her back then--big as a barn. But Ike continued courtin' her 'cause he didn't wanna lose her daddy's business. Plus, he was bein' nice.

"After Ike married Betty, Natty nearly went crazy. She threw herself into Christian service--tellin' everybody how crazy Ike was. Back then, nobody believed her. But when he killed Harper, she knew she had him. She told everyone in the country side what a lunatic he was and how Betty did the right thing by gettin' away from him. Natty married after Ike shot Harper. She married some yankee man damn near as old as the hills. He died two years after she married him. I think he had a heart attack. I would've had heart failure if I woke up one mornin' and saw her in my bed."

"Do you think you can talk to her?"

"No, there's no talkin' to her. The only thing we can do is get that permit. Ned said he needed at least one-fifty before he could process the thing, so I've done that much already."

"You paid for the permit?"

"I paid for half. If we can get the other half by twelve o'clock tomorrow, Ike can have the permit Tuesday night. But we can't stop the church members from complainin' about him and for tellin' him what a sinner he is in front of the world. We can't buy them off or shut them up."

"It seems like every time people around here leave Ike alone, somethin' else happens. He's never asked them to love him and forgive him for what he did--all he's ever asked is to be left alone."

The rest of the family filed in the front door and quietly entered the den. Uncle Andy and Father shared the newspaper while Mother and Aunt Renata sat silently at the kitchen table. Burna climbed into her father's lap. John played slaps with Mother in the kitchen, and their palms made the only noise heard in the house. For the rest of dinner, no one spoke a word about the meeting at church. Silence crept into Grandfather's house like the mist of disruption that enveloped the town. I imagined no cars passed down main street that day--certainly no cars with people willing to wave to another. The people looked straight ahead to the town meeting and what it would hold. But I doubted any of them knew.



The front door bell interrupted the hush in the house. Grandmother answered the front door and called me. I figured Wallace or Davey wanted to see me to confirm our plans for Tuesday. But, to my surprise, it was Mrs. Hoffsteler and her husband.

"Hello, Mrs. Hoffsteler. What are you doin' here?"

"Ophy, Bill and I went to the Church meeting today, and we're quite disturbed by what's going on. We want to know if there's anything we can do to help."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Hoffsteler. I do not believe Ophy knows of any way you can help."

"I'm sorry, Gabby."

"You would both be best to leave. If you'll excuse us."

"Please, Mr. and Mrs. Hoffsteler, I'm Ophy's Grandfather. I think I may be able to answer your question. Gabby, take Ophy in the other room. I would like a word with these people alone."

Mother and I left the room and she marched me straight to the back bedroom--the interrogation room. She sat me on the bed. After ten minutes of staring at me without uttering a word, she demanded to know what was going on.

"I called Mr. Hoffsteler and asked him if he would buy some of Uncle Ike's stuff. I didn't mean any harm by it."

"What on earth possessed you to call him and do that?"

Do you think he really wants to buy any of that stuff?"

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"We thought the Art Department might wanna buy some of it to use with their art projects."

"I'm sure they get their supplies from a reputable place. Plus, what happens to Uncle Ike is none of your concern."

"Yes it is."

"What did you say young lady?"

"I said, 'yes it is.'"

"Why? Give me one good reason."

"Because he tries to do good things, and if they take those good things away from him, he'll be sad."

"We have decided to stay out of this. That means you too. The whole thing's a huge mess you don't want to get involved in. It won't look nice."

"But he helped find Burna and he fixed my knee the other day. If he hadn't been there. . . "

"We would have found Burna. Put this whole thing out of your mind. Come Tuesday, this family will not be down at city hall."

By the time the Hoffstelers left, Mother gave her final decision about Uncle Ike. She and the rest of the family believed getting involved would cause mass havoc in our lives. Father could be expelled from the head deacon post. Mother might lose her position as head of Sunday school. Uncle Andy's insurance business might suffer and he had a new baby coming (not to mention the Queen of England to support). Plus, as she noted, it would not look good to go

down to town hall. I considered her reasons and decided that I did not care why they would not support Uncle Ike. I understood clearly how damaging their support of him would be. They would be stepping out of their social realm. But I needed to know, more than anything else, if they supported him in their minds.

"Mamma, if you could, would you go down there and try to help Uncle Ike."

"Ophy, you know I would. He was my uncle once, just like Uncle Andy's yours. You know how Uncle Andy plays ball with you and takes you to get ice cream? Uncle Ike used to do the same things for me. And I've been remembering what he did for me when I was your age. But the truth is, we cannot associate with him. You certainly cannot associate with him. I hope you realize I'm telling you this for your own good."

"I don't like my own good. My own good is all the stupid stuff you make me do--like ball room dancing and wearin' those fancy dresses. I can't wait until I'm grown and I can decided what's my own good!"

Monday before school, Davey and Wallace met me earlier than usual. I whirred past Mother, hoping she would not notice the time. She headed me off at the front door.

"You're on restriction, young lady. You're not weasling your way out of it this time."

"I guess they're just early today."

"Wallace and Davey early? Wallace rarely makes it this

far without realizing he has his pants on backwards or he's missing a shoe. What's the real story here?"

"There is no real story."

"There had better not be a real story. Your restriction will be for two weeks instead of one. You've been treading on real thin ice with me lately."

"I'll be good. I promise."

"Go on. I expect you back here right after school. No stopping by Mrs. Hoffsteler's or anywhere else, understand?"

"Yes Mam'm."

Davey, Wallace, and I ran down our block, safely away from Mother's hearing range. She probably heard every word we said no matter how far away we ran--she had those super hero mom powers like bionic hearing and x-ray vision. I had the six billion dollar mother.

"Is your mom suspicious?"

"She's always suspicious."

"What are we gonna do tomorrow if we get caught, Ophy? I'm tellin' my mom it was all your idea!"

"I don't care. The whole thing was my idea!"

"Except for the sugar!"

"What about the plan?"

"O.k., since I'm on restriction, you two will go over to Mrs. Hartford's and pour the sugar in her gas tank. But you can't do it until it gets dark."

"What'll we tell our parents?"

"Tell them you're going over to each other's houses to study. Davey, your mamma won't care anyways."

"Then what?"

"After you put the sugar in her gas tank, meet me by the tree house over on the Parson's lot. Don't leave until I get there. Davey, you should bring the flash light."

"What you are gonna tell your mother?"

"I'm gonna pretend to be really sick. I'll climb out of my window and meet ya'll. She'll never know 'cause she won't be at the meetin'."

Mrs. Thacker passed us on her way to school. She shot us a suspicious glance and told us to move along before the sheriff arrested us for loitering. Mrs. Thacker was a frightening woman. We heeded her advice to avoid further suspicion. For the rest of the day, we acted like ourselves. Davey had difficulty keeping our secret from the rest of school. He asked me several times if he could tell Katy our plan. I told him not to, unless he wanted me to punch him. Wallace was visibly nervous. He looked dazed on the kickball field, and he missed several math problems. I hoped our facades would look more natural the next day. Unfortunately, we did not take Mrs. Thacker's lesson plans into account. We never thought they would be our ruin.

On Tuesday, Mrs. Thacker taught a science lesson about mucus. She made us round-robin read ten pages on mucus and its various properties. Several students pronounced it

"muck-us," which caused a rumbling snicker. After reading about mucus, Mrs. Thacker showed a film strip entitled "You and Your Nose Fairies." We more than snickered at the mere title. The sound of our laughing grew louder when we saw the first cartoon rendition of the nose fairies. A little leprechaun person with a broom danced around inside a nose. "Hi! I'm the Nose Fairy!," it said, "Each one of you has your own special fairy inside our nose. We do all the cleaning for you, so you won't do this!" A girl with her finger buried in her nose flashed across the screen. Everyone in class laughed hysterically until Mrs. Thacker turned off the projector.

"I want every one of you to stop laughing right this instant. Picking your nose can be dangerous. That is why we are studying mucus in this science unit. Now, if any of you would like to continue laughing during the film, I will happily send you to the principal's office."

She ran the projector again, sharking up and down the aisles. I held my breath to mask my laughter. Davey held his hand over his face. But Wallace, poor Wallace, snorted loudly when he laughed, and he could not control it. While everyone passed out from lack of oxygen, Wallace snorted. The snort echoed around the room and bounced off the blackboards straight to Mrs. Thacker's hearing aid.

"I heard that Wallace Bledso! Go straight to the principal's office!"

"But I . . ."

Davey and I exchanged solemn glances. We saw imminent doom. Wallace's mother would not let him off with a mere one-week restriction for going to the principal's office. She would watch his every move. He told us once that she followed him to the bathroom when Mr. Atkins caught us pulling up carrots in his garden. Wallace's mother looked like a mix between a jail warden and June Cleaver. She had the matching personality. She answered her door all day wearing an expensive outfit with dinner simmering on the stove. But on matters concerning Wallace, she slipped into overzealous motherhood. Wallace was out. His mother would see him to his room and usher him to the bathroom. Davey and I knew the plan fell entirely on our shoulders. Fortunately, his mother and father rarely knew if he was home or not.

During recess, we waited for Wallace to emerge from the office. Across the playground, we saw Mrs. Bledso's car pulling in front of the school. I thought quickly about what to do.

"Ophy, we gotta do somethin'. We can't do this without Wallace."

"We'll have to do this without Wallace. We'll just have to do it different than we thought."

"How?"

"When we go to play kickball, I'm gonna act like I'm sick. Like I feel like puking. You'll pretend too. Then, you'll run to Mrs. Thacker and tell her I need to

see the nurse. Hopefully, the nurse will let me go home. That way, Mamma won't doubt if I'm really sick.

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"Go over to Mrs. Hartford's at five o'clock and pour the sugar in her gas tank. She'll never know since she can't see the car from her front window. I'll meet you down at the tree house--if I'm not there by five thirty, go home and act like nothin' ever happened!"

I waited several minutes during the kick ball game before falling to the ground. I grabbed my stomach, bit my bottom lip, and threw myself into the dirt. Katy ran from the pitcher's mound to me; the other players followed her. She shook me several times, trying to bring me out of my imaginary pain. When I saw the worried look on her face, I felt guilty. I promised to explain it later. While Katy kneeled beside me, Davey ran for Mrs. Thacker. She arrived on the scene two minutes later.

"What on earth? Ophy, are you o.k.?"

Through clinched teeth, I mumbled, "No mam'm. I've got a terrible pain in my side. But I'll be o.k. in a minute. I just need to rest."

(Pretending like I fully planned to carry on as normal when I pretended to be ill fooled every adult I knew--Mother especially. Sometimes, when I truly felt ill, I wanted mother to dote on me. But for pranks, going with the martyr strategy worked best.)

"Let's get you to the office Ophy. You feel like you're burning up."



The nurse took my temperature, which was sub-grade as usual. Mother knew this, the school nurse did not. When she told me what the thermometer said, I weakly uttered, "Oh, no. It's like the time my temperature was real low one minute, but the next minute it was 104. Please don't tell my mamma what my temperature is. She'll make me go home and take a cold bath. Please don't tell her."

In my best interest, the nurse called mother. Mother's station wagon carried her to the school in less than five minutes. The nurse met her at the front door and ushered her to my side. Mother looked down at me lying on the cot and placed her hand on my forehead. She then examined my pupils. After several minutes of examining my pupils and feeling my forehead, Mother made a diagnosis: "She probably has that flu bug that's going around. I'll take her home."

She helped me to the car and promised to fix me instant chicken soup at home. When we arrived, she placed me on the couch in front of the television. She sat beside me most of the day, asking me if I were comfortable or not. "No mam'm," I claimed, "My body aches." I played possum on the couch until she left the room. The time allowed me to contemplate the plan and whether or not it would work. I also weighed the punishment that would ensue if mother discovered my intentions.

I decided I did not care about restriction. The only thing she restricted me from was playing with Davey and Wallace. Wallace's mother had put him on restriction before

he left school. Davey would also be on restriction if anyone caught us. Mother would continue to force me to practice piano. She would continue to make me read five pages in Little Women every night. I saw I had nothing to lose but her trust, which I did not have a lot of anyway.

Father interrupted my thoughts when he came home. His arrival meant the time was four o'clock. I panicked. I had an hour and a half for the sky to turn dark and to get to bed. As he walked through the kitchen and into the den, I pretended to be tossing in my sleep. He shook me gently to awaken me from whatever imaginary nightmare filled my mind. The only nightmare crossing my mind was an image of Mother finding my empty bed.

"Ophy, are you o.k. honey?"

"I don't feel well, Daddy."

"The school nurse said she had a slight fever. I guess it was best for me to bring her home early."

"Have you given her any medicine for the pain?"

"I was about to give her some paragoric to calm her stomach. I waited to see if the pain would go away."

"My stomach's not hurtin' that bad anymore. I think I need to get some sleep."

"Well, let me give you a dose of medicine just in case. It'll help you get to sleep."

(Mother had given me paragoric once before for a stomach ache. The only thing I remembered clearly was hallucinating. I entered reality four days later, wondering when the clown pictures on my wall would

"Really, I don't like that stuff. It tastes bad."

"It'll only taste bad for a minute."

She rustled around in the medicine cabinet to find the medicine. Before she came in the den, I desperately pondered ways to prevent taking it. Sometimes when she gave me pills, I hid them under my tongue and spit them out. But paragoric only came in liquid form. It tasted like a chalk and ant-acid mixed. Because I could not handle the taste, Mother stuck the spoon at the rear of my mouth and poured it down my throat. Ten minutes later--La La land.

"O.k., Ophy. Open wide."

"I don't wanna take that stuff 'cause the last time I did, it made me see things."

"I'm sure that was your imagination."

"I'm not sick! I pretended at school! Please don't make me take that stuff!"

"You mean to tell me you're really not sick? After all that whining and moaning and carrying on? I find that hard to believe Ophelia Ruth Harper! Tell me the truth right this instant."

"I'm not sick--I lied."

"Why did you lie about being sick? The nurse said you were sick."

"I fooled her and I fooled you. I just wanted to come home 'cause I was tired. I'm sorry."

"You're going to be sorry after I put you on

restriction for another two weeks. Do you hear me?

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Two more weeks, and You'll remember to stop all this lying and deceptiveness!"

"I think I'll go to my room and read for the rest of the night."

"Oh, no you won't. You'll have dinner with the family at five. Then, you'll practice piano for an hour. Go to your room until dinner is served."

I trudged to my room, acting reluctant to go. I took each step slowly as I did when I had been sent there against my will. Once I came to my door, I burst into the room. I sat on my bed and nervously devised another plan. Mother would call me at five sharp for dinner. She would watch me closely until after I practiced piano. Without further contemplation, I found my worst clothes. I dressed in a pair of jeans I had outgrown and an old, worn sweatshirt mother let me wear to go fishing. I wore my oldest, most worn out tennis shoes to complete the outfit. I looked like what mother called a rag-a-muffin, except I still looked like me.

To alter my appearance completely, I put my hair in a pony tail to cut it all off. Mother never let me have my hair cut. She kept it long so she could style it in french braids and pony tails. I pulled the pony tail around my neck and thought about the many hours Mother spent brushing and styling it. I also thought about all the hours I screamed as she pulled and tugged at my hair painfully. I

hated my hair. I finally put the safety scissors in my hair and cut. The long, auburn pony tail Mother had waited so long for me to grow, fell to the floor. I placed it in the trash can without thinking about it again. I checked the mirror once again. I appeared to be the child of a swamp person. 176

I opened my window and climbed out on the nearest limb. I balanced precariously on the limb in order to shut my window. I moved swiftly from limb to limb. Finally, I reached the soft pine straw under the tree. The straw muffled my footsteps as I walked behind my house. I followed the line of fences in my neighborhood to avoid suspicion.

Walking behind the houses on my block gave me a new perspective on my neighbors' private lives. Mr. and Mrs. Berke yelled furiously at each other during dinner. Their two children, Margaret and Larry, stared into their plates. When the Berkes attended church, they seemed the happiest family present. I then witnessed Suzanne Osbourne, youth leader of the church, french kissing her boyfriend behind her house. The sight made my stomach truly hurt. As I walked behind Wallace's house, I saw Mrs. Bledso standing over Wallace, screaming obscenities at him. She used the word "shit" several times--this coming from the woman who lead the church's campaign against Kiss's "Destroyer" album. I turned my head from the houses, half disappointed and half disgusted with what I saw.

I remembered Grandfather's words about the "pillars" of

the church. I determined to help Uncle Ike, regardless of 177  
what the other church members said about me. For the first time,  
I realized everyone in New Brookland had something hidden  
behind the walls in their front yards. At least Uncle Ike's  
problems were common knowledge.

I counted yards until I reached the Hoffsteler house.  
I hoped Mrs. Hoffsteler would see my dilemma. She  
understood the other church members. I believed if I could  
convince her to go to the town meeting, she might speak up  
for Uncle Ike. As I watched her and her husband reading the  
newspaper in their den, I began to see that Mrs. Hoffsteler  
abandoned all hope for New Brookland. Instead of going back  
home, I climbed her back fence. The fence caught my jeans  
and made a clean rip down the back of my leg. I knocked on  
her back door in spite of the rip.

"Who could be at the back door at this hour?"

"It's me, Ophelia Harper!"

"Ophy, what's going on? What did you do to your hair?"

"I cut it all off. I wanted to be incognate."

"Do you mean incognito?"

"I wanted to be secret."

"With that hair and those clothes, I wouldn't have  
recognized you. What's the big secret?"

"I'm goin' down to city hall for the meetin'. I came  
by to see if you were gonna go."

"What's the use. Your Grandfather said the only thing  
we could do to help was to give Ike the money for  
the permit. Bill and I decided that was the only

way we could help. The church people have a low opinion about us--like the one they have about Ike. Our going down there and speaking on his behalf would do more harm than good. Those people from the church are determined to make him stop giving out charity, and I'm sure they don't want to hear my opinion of their backwards ideas."

I realized Mrs. Hoffsteler had made a decision before I reached her house. I felt silly standing in her living room with tears streaming down my face. She told the truth. Even if the president spoke on Ike's behalf, most of the should-knows would not believe Ike had changed. They wanted to believe the myth. Mrs. Hoffsteler tried to calm me. She offered me something to eat. She tried to console me until Mr. Hoffsteler placed his newspaper on the end-table and spoke.

"Ophy's right. Ike needs all the support he can get. Plus, what do we have to lose? The neighbors already think we're the devil's spawn because I got a divorce and you married a divorced man. What the hell?"

"But Bill. . ."

"We'll be giving in to this petty mentality. The gall of these people to harass some man because he gives out things to the less fortunate. I'm going down there. If you're coming with me, you best get your coat."

"Bill, before we leave, let me do something with

Mrs. Hoffsteler found her sheers in the bathroom drawer and cut my hair into an even bob. While she cut, she told me to walk in behind them and to sit on the opposite side of city hall. She figured no one would recognize me with sheared locks and dirty old clothes. After she smeared some mascara on my face to imitate dirt, the three of us drove to city hall.

City Hall boomed with members from every facet of the community. Each group occupied a different section. The swamp people sat in the very back. In the middle section sat the mill workers and their children. The church people occupied the other three-fourths of the place. While Mrs. Hoffsteler found a seat, Mr. Hoffsteler motioned to one of the swamp people. The man worked as the Art Department janitor. Mr. Hoffsteler told him our situation and told me to sit with him. Before the man ushered me to our seats, Mr. Hoffsteler leaned over to me and said, "Ophy, I'm not sure anyone in this room has the gumption to speak out about Ike. Don't be disappointed if they make him stop. That's just the way of towns like this."

I thought hard about Mr. Hoffsteler's comment. Most New Brooklanders lived comfortably under the rules and the conditions of the town. The town meeting reinforced what I started to hold as true--the tolerance lasted as long as every person stayed in his or her place. The swamp people sat separately from the mill workers who sat separately from the church people. Even the church people divided



themselves into categories: the Southern Baptist, (the group that considered itself the highest level, and the one that interpreted the doctrines of the others), The Methodists (The Methodist could drink and divorce), The Presbyterians (they drank, divorced, and acted like liberals), and the Lutherans (the group considered the thinly guised Catholics). As long as every group stayed put, all was well in town.

Admittedly, the groups interacted with each other closely on a daily basis. Many of the religious groups worked together. The mill workers and Mr. Berke, who owned the mill, associated with one another both inside and outside the mill. Several of his mill workers took turns driving a drunk Mr Berke home from the Spit 'N Argue. Whether at work or in the community, the town was too small for its members to avoid associating with every one who lived there. But we all knew when the boundaries were crossed.

Uncle Ike not only crossed sacred barriers, he emerged in New Brookland as a trouble maker. He made no trouble for most residents; he made trouble for the people who valued the order most. Uncle Ike lived quietly in New Brookland for many years, living behind his legend. The moment he refused to clean up his yard, the town released a collective gasp. Suddenly, his charity work was a problem. His every movement brought him unwanted attention. The loudest gaspers determined to put him back in his place. The gaspers used all of their breath before they could see that

they feared what Ike might show the community rather than what he might do to it.

Grandfather later told me that Uncle Ike had been doing his charity work for some fifteen years before he gained such notoriety. Most of the community stood unaware of his work because he quietly gave to the less fortunate. At first, he bought a pair of shoes for a child who had none, or he took food to one family who lived in a school bus down by the river. Over time, the needs of the people he served grew, until he could no longer serve them individually. He tried carrying dinner door-to-door to many homes, but the food became cold before he finished. He saw his only solution rested in bringing the people together at one place.

His gathering of the people ruffled the community's organization. Church people give--swamp people receive--crazy Lunatics stay home and ponder their sinful ways. Or, more specifically: church people give and set an example for others to give--swamp people receive--murderers stay home, and never, under any circumstances, should a murderer go out into the community and help other people.

The crowd alerted itself of Ike's arrival with mumbles and whispers. He excused himself through the crowd, which parted on either side for him. Instead of going directly to the front, where someone had saved Ike a seat, Ike squeezed through to a seat in the row in front of me. Everyone

turned and strained their necks to locate him. He sat and 182  
focused on Judge Winfield's podium. The noise level rose  
steadily to a roar after his arrival. I observed people  
turning to their neighbors to whisper in their ears. After  
whispers, people looked in Ike's direction. Ike continued to  
ignore the whispers and the stares. He had practiced ignoring  
such things most of his life.

I followed Uncle Ike's example and pretended not to be  
a part of the meeting. I sat quietly in my seat, trying to  
make the faces and the madness around me vaporize back into  
one cloud of familiarity. When Mrs. Hartford entered  
the room, familiarity left me. The notions of who I would  
later be because of those people vanished. I realized I had  
to separate myself from the group in order to continue doing  
right. My Grandfather tried to prepare me for the moment  
for many years. He claimed he knew I had it in me.

Mrs. Hartford entered the room and marched directly to  
the front. She took the prized seat--the one  
beside our pastor, Dr. Reverend Skinner. Grandfather  
entered the hall after her, scanning the crowd for a seat.  
I forgot how I came to the meeting and waved to him. He  
moved swiftly to me. While everyone jabbered nervously,  
Grandfather informed me of the massive amount of trouble I  
was in.

"Your Mother's angry as fire at you. You're gonna get  
it when you get home."

"You mean we're not goin' now? Can we stay?"

"Yes. Mr. Hoffsteler called Gabby earlier to let her know you were comin'. She asked me to come down here and get you. She said for as much trouble as you went through to get here, you might as well stay. But you best be prepared to deal with her fury when you get home. Understand?"

Judge Winfield and the rest of the city council members walked out from their magic door. When Winfield looked at the crowd, he did not seem amused or surprised. He expected it. Instead of addressing Mrs. Hartford's concern immediately, he informed the other council members to conduct business as usual. Mr. Hancock discussed the opening of a new Piggly Wiggly in the Low Town shopping mart. Mr. Vates motioned the city to hire another police officer--four was not enough. The business went about in the face of Mrs. Hartford and the members of the First Baptist church of New Brookland.

After waiting what seemed like two millennia, Judge Winfield opened the floor.

"Now, I know all you people don't give a rat's ass what goes on here on a normal Tuesday night, so let's get on with it. Mrs. Hartford, please raise your complaint before the members of this community."

Mrs. Hartford rose from her seat, turned to the crowd, and loomed over us for several minutes. Confidence shown on her face. Before speaking, she inhaled deeply as if she were going to divulge the darkest secret in the world before

us. Her demeanor shook any hope I had for Uncle Ike. I saw 184  
she planned to remind everyone in town, who did not know,  
that he was a murdering, moon-shine running, cousin of  
Beelzebub. I squirmed in my seat. Her words and her  
demeanor had the power to manipulate minds.

"Everyone in this room knows there is a murderer among  
us. He pretends to be one of us. He pretends to  
care about the less fortunate. But those of us who  
have known him most of our lives remember that he  
killed a man in cold blood. We must remember this  
man's true nature--not as the caring man he pretends  
to be, but the murdering devil he is.

"I would like to propose a vote amongst the good  
members of this town. For those who believe he should  
be made to stop his masquerade, vote against this man.  
For those who believe we should stand idly by and  
allow him to infect our community, vote for him."

The Dr. Reverend interrupted Mrs. Hartford's speech to  
hand her several large note cards. Mrs. Hartford held the  
fronts away from the crowd, waiting for the precise moment  
to show them.

"Before we take this vote, I would like to show proof  
of this man's character. What I have on these cards  
should show each of you that this man should not be  
trusted.

"First, a picture of what he did to poor Ronald  
Harper so many years ago."

She flashed a large poster of a man slumped over a car

steering wheel. The enlarged photograph showed a hole in the side of his head--blood obscured the face. I turned quickly from the photo. Grandfather held my head to his shoulder. Many women gasped and shrieked in fear. The men shook their heads. Some called out "Devil!" Through the noise, Grandfather whispered, "Remember the stick, Ophy. Just remember the stick."

"Now that we have been reminded of who this man is and why we should not allow him to practice charity in this town!"

Uncle Ike raised from his seat to interrupt her. Instead of raising his eyes to the crowd, he held his head down in shame. He brushed tears off his face as he tried to speak audibly to New Brookland.

"I won't practice charity no more. If I had known she was goin' to use that picture here, in front of every body I've tried to be good to, I would've stopped a long time ago. If the church people here will take over what I've been doin', I'll never do another charitable thing in this town again. But I won't back down until I have that promise."

As I listened to and watched Uncle Ike, I felt a lump form in my throat. I thought the lump formed with my tears. But I heard myself saying "No." At first I whispered it; then I said it over and over and louder, until everyone heard. Uncle Ike turned to me, as did the rest of the people. Grandfather tried to calm me. I stood up, walked

past the people in my row, and walked to the front of the meeting house. 186

"Young Lady. You best have a seat! Your parents need to teach you some manners."

"My Mamma and Daddy have taught me manners! That's why I haven't told you to shut up!"

"Why when your mother finds out about this . . ."

"Listen, young lady, if you have something to say, please go ahead and say it."

"Judge Winfield. She's just a little girl."

"All the same Mrs. Hartford, she's been the only one talkin' sense since this mess started. Please continue."

When Judge Winfield gave me permission to speak, I did not hesitate in what I knew I had to say. I looked at the crowd, at all the faces I knew. Mr. and Mrs. Hoffsteler retruned my gaze, and Mr. Hoffsteler winked at me. Dr. Reverend looked at me momentarily. He then uttered something about the damnation of the young. Most of the people simply stared back at me in disbelief. Before I began speaking, Mother, Father, and Grandmother slipped into the back of the room. Mother spotted me at the front of the room and placed her hand to her mouth. When she met my eyes with hers, she tugged on her hair as if to ask, "what have you done?" I returned her look, asking her with my glance if I could proceed. She nodded her head in approval.

I proceeded cautiously and spoke about a stick and a stream.

"My Granddaddy once told me to throw a stick in a stream. When I threw it in, it went straight for a

while. But then it hit a current and it spun around and around, like it couldn't stop. After a while, the stick got its wits together, as Granddaddy says, and it moved on. It moved away from the whirlpool, heading in a straight line. Only, this time, the stick moved straighter than it did before. It kept moving straight away.

"Granddaddy made me throw that stick so's I could understand Uncle Ike. And he is my Uncle even though my mamma don't want nobody to know that. But I was real scared of him once. I knew what he did to Ronald Harper. I wondered why he wasn't in jail.

"Granddaddy showed me that Uncle Ike did a real bad thing that made his life go crazy. But he isn't. It took him a long time to get his stick goin' straight. And he did--even after everything that happened to him.

"He doesn't give to other people because he's tryin' to make us forget what he's done. He's just doin' the right thing. So we can't say he can't do what he likes doin' no more 'cause of somethin' he did a long time ago.

"I know I'm little, and kinda stupid. I know ya'll won't think much about what I have to say. But I'll say it anyways. Uncle Ike's a good man who does good things. Ya'll don't have to concern yourselves with what he does. Ya'll just have to leave him alone. Let him go on his way."



When I finished speaking, I walked slowly back to Grandfather. Before I reached the seat, Judge Winfield spoke:

"You never told us your name, young lady. We would like to know your name."

"Ophy Harper. I'm seven and a half."

"Well, thank you for at least giving us the other side of this story. I think we're ready to vote on this issue."

"But, I have something else to add."

"I believe you've said enough Mrs. Hartford."

"All those against Ike McCaskle having a permit to conduct his charity, raise you hand."

I sat back down with Grandfather as the people voted against Uncle Ike. Grandfather squinted at me and shook his head.

I searched his eyes for approval. When he took my hand in his, I knew I had it. He patted my hand several times to let me know that not only did he approve, but he was also proud of me. I squeezed his hand tightly as people voted against Uncle Ike.

"All those in favor of letting Ike do his charity work, raise your hands."

Grandfather thrust his hand in the air along with the people around us. I searched the room trying to count votes. To my surprise, Mother, Grandmother, and Father voted for Uncle Ike. Many of the church people turned around and saw them, but they continued to hold their hands

in the air. As the counter neared our us,

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Grandfather told me to put my hand in the air. I raised my hand, knowing my vote did not count. But I wanted others to see that I was not going to stand idly by waiting for others to make decisions for me. I wanted to show that Uncle Ike was worth raising a hand for.

After Mr. Hancock tallied the votes, the room remained motionless awaiting the results. I hoped there were enough votes for Uncle Ike so he could continue giving to others. I realized that those who voted for him to be able to continue giving to others were the people who could see the good in other people, regardless of what people said about them. The people who voted against Ike being able to continue his work were the people who used the old pecking order to judge other people.

Finally, Mr. Hancock announced that seventy five people had voted against Ike, while seventy eight people voted for him. The town split almost down the middle. The people who voted for Uncle Ike to continue his work believed in tolerance and waving to their neighbors. The against people did not. It was people's tolerance, more than their good natures, that saved him from the intolerants.

"Now, Ike can go on practicing charity--with a permit. I advise those of you who think Ike should stop doin' what he does to take a good look at yourselves. I have no more to say, except this town better get back to normal. Meeting adjourned!"

After Judge Winfield adjourned the meeting, the

intolerants left abruptly. Grandfather and I stayed in order to give Uncle Ike his official permit. Ike looked at the permit and shook his head.

"You know, James. I never thought I'd have to relive all that just so I could be nice to people. I appreciate ya'll goin' to so much trouble for me.

"Ophy, I listened to every thing you said tonight like I never heard them kinda words about myself. I've gotten so use to people talkin' 'bout how crazy I am and how I'm the devil, I forgot that some people's around who still care."

"Maybe people will leave you alone, now. I just wanted other people to know that you're not crazy."

"Ophy Harper, you are somethin' else. I wouldn't have done what you done here in a million years."

"She's goin' to wish she hadn't done it when her mother gets through with her. But she did the right thing. I guess it took a seven year old to make some sense out of this mess."

"Yep, James. She made more sense than anybody I heard in a long time. She's somethin' else, ain't she?"

"Yes, sir. She's somethin' else. I doubt her mother's figured out what, but she's somethin' else."

Grandfather and Uncle Ike laughed about the expression on everyone's faces when I walked to the front of the room. Grandfather described how Mrs. Berke literally gasped and several people commented on my lack of manners. I listened to them describe various reactions, and discovered I did not

When Grandfather brought me home from the meeting, Mother met me at the door. I stood in front of her, waiting for her to punish me to the full extent of her law. She looked at my hair, then at me. She finally shook her head.

"Ophy, your father and I have tried to raise you correctly. We have sent you to a good school, we buy you books, we provide you with lessons on everything. I guess I just don't know what to say. I can't get over your hair."

"I had to cut it. I didn't want anyone to recognize me. I hated my hair anyways."

"I'm glad Mrs. Hoffsteler shaped it up for you. It'll grow in a few weeks. I am putting you on restriction for lying to me, being sneaky, and most importantly, for cutting your hair."

"What about for speaking at the town meeting? How much more time am I gonna get for that?"

"None. I agreed with what you said."

"Really?"

"Really. But that doesn't change the fact that you cut your hair."

Weeks after the meeting, Mother continued to remind me to care about what others thought of my behavior. She commented how the members of her garden club thought I was "going through a phase." She and father used "going through a phase" each time someone said something about the meeting. In order to get me out of the phase, Mother signed

me up for drama lessons at the college. She told her friends she wanted to develop my dramatic talents. She said she never realized I was so inclined until I took to public speaking at the meeting.

One afternoon before drama lessons, Mother drove to Grandfather's. She needed to pick something up from him before we drove across town, so she claimed. When we neared his house, I recognized Uncle Ike's truck parked in the front yard. Mother acted normal about Ike's visit.

"What is Uncle Ike doin' at Granddaddy's?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

Grandfather and Uncle Ike met us at the car. They seemed eager to take me to the backyard. I followed them through the fence to Grandfather's old shed. Grandfather asked me to close my eyes while they prepared my surprise. I closed my eyes tightly, waiting impatiently to open them. When I did, I saw Grandfather and Uncle Ike holding a miniature Muffler Mailbox Person. It looked just like the Muffler Mailbox Man and Woman with nuts for eyes and a body made entirely of mufflers.

"What do you think, Ophy?"

"I love it. Can I take it home?"

"No. Your mother said I could give it to you as long as it stayed over here."

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"I wanted to say thanks for what you done. I think you helped me and a lot of other people by speakin' your mind."

Grandfather, Uncle Ike, and I tied my muffler mailbox person against the shed. Ike left shortly after. He said he didn't want to impose on the family. Grandfather insisted he was not, but Ike refused to stay. Grandfather and I stood in the driveway and watched Ike drive away. He passed a car down the road. The car's driver waved to Ike, and Ike returned the wave. We continued to watch his truck move far away in the distance. The Muffler Mailbox Man drove down the road, moving straight away.

I returned to New Brookland recently, for the first time since I moved. After driving 450 miles to get there, I decided a two-minute ride through town might prepare me for seeing the family. Jansen Gas, Food, and Cold Beer still stood on main street, as did Jansen Boutique and Jansen Hardware. I drove past our old church. We had long since joined the Methodist church down the street. I passed the road to Grandfather's and continued on to Burna's new house.

Burna and her husband, Brent, lived in a comfortable old victorian home that they had sunk a zillion dollars into. Brent's Grandmother bought them the house as a wedding gift. She, Burna, and Aunt Renata had spent many hours directing painters, house decorators, and carpenters about how they wanted the house to look. Their realized project was nothing short of absolute perfection. The Ivy colored shutters contrasted brightly with the white washed exterior. A steady hand trimmed the shrubs and the grass each week. I noticed Burna's new mailbox had the state bird on the side.

Burna's house sat across the street from the Hoffsteler's old home. The Hoffstelers had moved to Charlotte when I turned eight. Over the years, I had kept in touch with them, but seeing their old house reminded me, once again, how much I had missed them with they moved.

Before I turned off my car's ignition, I stared at the house experiencing extreme deja vu. Or, I suppose I had always imagined Burna's home looking exactly the way it did.

Mother rushed out of the house when she saw my car.

She hugged me and held me at arm's length, staring at my appearance--she did not experience deja vu. I wore cut-off jeans shorts and my favorite worn t-shirt with Salvador Dali pictured on the front. My friend, Jasmine, who worked as a stripper in Houston, had given it to me some years before. Each time Mother saw me wearing it, she said, "I hope you know what she's doing is wrong." I suppose she thought Jasmine's stripper germs seeped through the cloth, which might lead to me stripping. That day, however, Mother simply commented, "Such a cute girl in such terrible clothes! People are going to think . . ." I cut her off with a whining "Mother!" After twenty-three years of hearing "People are going to think . . ." I did not care if people thought I was a psycho-stripper biker babe in a band who played pool halls.

Mother ushered me into the house whispering, "Look who's here." For the first time, my entire family sat in the same house without raising the decibel levels two-hundred percent. Grandfather rose from his seat to hug me, and Grandmother emerged from the kitchen to pull my hair out of my face. The rest of the family remained seated in Burna's den, looking at Burna and her new baby.

When I entered the den, Burna's brother Tarver sat beside her on her Laura Ashley, Brandenburg pattern couch, rubbing the baby's blanket. Aunt Renata and Uncle Andy sat across the room in matching wing-back chairs. They smiled at Burna and Tarver. Brent paced nervously about the room as if he looked for some minute particle of dust to zap



I disturbed the gathering by sending a quiet "Hello" into the room. Burna looked up from her baby's face and smiled. She radiated the same serene beauty she had the day she won Miss New Brookland. Her smile pushed chiseled cheeks against her high cheek bones. Her tiger-eyes glowed under her chestnut hair. She wore the white, silk night gown Mother had given her at her first baby shower. When she motioned for me to come closer, I hesitated. If the baby was used to seeing the sort of clothes Burna wore around the house, I did not want to traumatize it with the wide-eyed expression of Dali.

Tarver moved from beside Burna and allowed me to sit next to her. Wrapped in a mass of hand-embroidered blankets, the baby slept quietly in Burna's arms. She shifted to hand it to me, but I refused. I feared either dropping it on its head or dirtying its blankets. Burna encouraged me to take it slowly and to support its little head. Once she placed it in my arms, she whispered, "Ophy, I'd like you to meet Charlotte Ruth Tuten. I hope you don't mind us giving her your middle name. You don't mind, do you?" I whispered that I did not mind, in fact I was relieved to discover the reason why Mother would not tell me the child's name over the phone. I feared Burna might have named it after Brent's grandmother, Jocasta Duessa.

After I held the child for several minutes, she started to squirm in the blankets. She opened two round black eyes and turned her tiny head to yawn. I peered into

those eyes and saw all the things little Charlotte Ruth would experience. She would wear the best dresses and attend the best birthday parties. She would go through piano lessons and ball room dancing class. She would grow up surrounded by the finest furniture and draperies her mother could find. Burna had already hired a house keeper to clear little Charlotte Ruth's plate from the table when she grew older.

After carefully handing Burna her baby, I excused myself to join Grandfather in the kitchen. He stood in Burna's picture window staring out over the pool in her backyard. He spoke about the baby and reminded me of how Burna acted before she realized Tarver would be the best toy she ever received.

We sat at the kitchen table and reminisced about the time Burna ran away. The conversation led to Uncle Ike, who continued to do the same things he did as before I had left. Grandfather helped Ike give out dinner in his pool hall every Monday and Friday. Grandmother never approved of Grandfather helping Ike, not because of Ike, but because he had to spend time at a pool hall. Grandfather told me to go see him before I returned home. Apparently, Ike asked about me each time he saw Grandfather.

Grandfather then told me how the family handled my absence. Mother and father tried to fill their time with other activities. Mother chaired several committees at church, while father worked overtime each night at his company. Grandmother spoke about my move as if I had

committed high treason. Grandfather imitated her daily sentiment: "That girl's gone up there to live with a bunch of Yankees. Now go figure how long it'll take her to figure out she needs to come home!" I asked him how he felt. His letters were rather reserved when it came to his feelings, and I needed to know, once again, if he approved. He answered frankly, "I don't mind you bein' up there, but I get kinda lonely sometimes. I was walkin' in the woods just yesterday, thinkin' about us goin' down there to get away from the family. I just miss ya. Not much fun gettin' away from the family if there's nobody to get away with. But you'll be comin' home." I then asked him if I turned out how he thought I would. "I can't say," he answered, "I never really knew how you'd turn out, but I knew it wasn't gonna be the way every body around here planned."

During the few days I was home, Grandfather and I fished and walked in the woods. I spent a majority of my time with him. Being in Grandfather's presence brought a certain part of me, the part of me I had left in New Brookland, back through my system.

One afternoon, Grandfather and I helped Uncle Ike's continuing food drive. When we finished for the evening, we shot a few games of pool and drank beer. Ike admired Grandfather's raising of me--he thought a woman who drank beer was a woman who could take care of herself. "Or she's white trash," Ike noted. "Heaven forbid I become white trash," I responded. Ike and Grandfather laughed through the next games. I beat them both at English nine ball,

eight ball, and mousetrap. I explained that my improved game resulted from my work at the juvenile shelter.

The rest of my spare time I allotted to mother. She wanted to buy me a nice chair for my apartment. She took me to every furniture store in the surrounding area before she saw the chair she wanted. It was a mahogany, high back chair, with red upholstery. "Red's a good color," she said when she saw it, "We could build from that red." I told her I loved it. In my opinion, it was functional furniture; it passed all my requirements--someone could sit in it. She bought the chair on the spot, while she tried to convince me to go with her to find a matching couch. I decided the chair was more than my cluttered apartment could handle.

The day I left, Mother rented a U-Haul to carry the chair and the many new dresses she had sewn for me back to the place I now call home. While she and father loaded the car, I went to Grandfather's to see him one last time before leaving. I found him standing in his backyard, in front of the Muffler Mailbox Person.

"I was just thinkin' about why Ike made this ugly junk for you. Your Grandmama's told me to throw it out a thousand times, but I couldn't do it."

"Why did you keep it?"

"I reckoned I'd keep it here for you. I don't know if you still like it after all these years."

The Muffler Mailbox Person had rusted a little over the years. A few nuts had fallen from their places, but it still had a

quirky smile. I touched the smooth metal of its belly. I had rubbed that spot many times; I felt the Muffler Mailbox Person brought good luck of some sort. When I had my first piano recital in college, I drove to Grandfather's before the performance, simply to rub the Muffler Mailbox Person.

"I do still want it. In fact, I want to take it back with me."

"What on earth are you gonna do with it up there?"

"I plan to put it in my living room. Right beside the new mahogany chair. It will look perfect."

Grandfather and I used our pocket knives to untie the Muffler Mailbox Person. The string was so old, it turned to dust when our blades touched it. After releasing it, Grandfather put it in his truck and followed me to my parent's.

After we loaded the Muffler Mailbox Person into the trailer, Mother began listing instructions for me to follow at home. "Don't eat that Ramen stuff all the time--too much MSG. Try to keep warm. I know you get so cold up there." She insisted on giving me some money for groceries and heat. "Mother, " I responded, "I think I do just fine by myself." She stopped talking long enough to hug me and to put me in the car. Grandfather and father wished me a safe trip home. As I pulled the car and trailer onto the road, the three of them stood and watched me leave. I accelerated slowly and waved to them at the same time. I felt the trailer swerve and sway behind me, but I knew I would make it home. Even if it was my own way.

**The Muffler Mailbox Man**