

STRIKE FLAT THE THICK WORLD

by

Sonja D. Curry-Johnson

A Thesis

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of

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in Partial Fulfillment of

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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Master of Arts
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my loving husband David Johnson, my three wonderful children, David III, Imani and William, my mother and her sisters, and Alan Cheuse.

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ABSTRACT

STRIKE FLAT THE THICK WORLD

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My thesis for the George Mason Master of Fine Arts a fictionalized account of a historical event that profoundly impacted my mother's family and greater community entitled Strike The Thick World Flat. It will explore loss in terms of family, community, and physical locality, as well as examine how politics, economics, race and the advent of the Cold War, shape the perspectives and destinies of a family through generations.

In November 1950, The U.S. Atomic Energy Commission announced the construction of the Savannah River Plant, a facility dedicated to the production of plutonium in response to the Cold War. In order to do this, USAEC procured approximately 300square miles of land from three counties located in South Carolina, near the Georgia border, and gave the residents five months to move off of the land. Within these 300 sq. mi were three incorporated towns and thousands of outlying farms. My mother's family lived just outside of the city limits of the largest of these towns, Ellenton, SC.

Although my brother and I visited South Carolina most summers as children, we had no knowledge of this occurrence. My Aunt Minnie lived and still lives in New Ellenton, and we spent most of our time on her farm, but I never thought to ask after “Old” Ellenton. I was older, out of college and years into my profession that I heard one of my Aunt’s remark about the “old place” and how it was inaccessible to them, that I asked the *right* questions and the story tumbled out.

Many aspects of this time spurred me to write about this “removal”. The enormity of such an endeavor: numerous buildings: churches, houses, municipal buildings and businesses were hoisted onto flatbed trucks and deposited 8 miles down the road, struck me as both theatrical and apocryphal. As I watched actual footage of this process, I wondered how various members of the community perceived this. In my book, I intend to filter this image from the point of view of four members of the fictional Hill family.

I am also preoccupied by the injustice of the removal. The US Government, along with the DuPont Corporation, underbid the value of the land. As a result, most residents received a fraction of what their land was worth. Socio-economic status determined the terms of the property sales. Under the umbrella of this one act, also run the fault lines of race, class and gender which are integral to the telling of this story.

Lastly, this story is not widely known. Most Americans have no idea that imminent domain could be so all-encompassing as to displace entire towns. In addition, Ellenton itself was the site of the first depository after the Depression, the first automatic telephone dialing service in the 1930s and other quaint historical events. But it was also the site of one of the bloodiest riots in response to Reconstruction, a fact that has also

been all but lost to the annals. These stories are important, and I would like a wider audience to know and understand that import.

.

CHAPTER ONE

TESSA

A line of white pines shaded the path leading up to Cokerville from the fields. It wound past the backsides of the houses of folks who didn't care to live off of the last snatch of the municipal road. The children who went to Peterson Primary had worn a fifty year-old trail from the playground to the path and cut off about fifteen minutes from their walk, if they lived out that way. Tessa liked to use the shortcut, when it made sense.

Ordinarily, she reckoned she had to take the long way home, on account of having to mind her cousin Louis to and from school. Louis's place wasn't off of the cut-thru, though it wasn't far from school, so Tessa'd have to pass the school before she'd get to Louis. She hated to double-back. Instead, she'd take Hamberg Road all the way past the tree line and then turn down the road to get Louis and they'd go on to the school. Franny teased her about it, and Mama fussed about it, worrying about people driving too fast to notice a little girl picking her way to school, but Papa told Mama not to worry and Franny to let her alone after she explained her reason to him. "I hear you, squirt. You don't feel like you going anywhere if you have to double back. So long as you getting' your work, none of us here should be worrying you about how you get to school." He had settled back in his chair and shook out his paper, and that, for once, was that.

On this particular day, Louis had to go home early; Aunt Helen was taking him up to Dr. Green in town to see about his cough. Tessa got to go home the way she pleased

and it pleased her to take her time, weaving between forest and field, the heat from the sun tamed as it filtered through the tree tops. Tessa liked to hold out her arms, turn her palms down, and study the patterns the light made on her hands threaded as it was through the pine needles. Sometimes it made her think of the doilies Grandma Hall was always tatting and draping over everything: the backs of sofas, the tops of chests of drawers, the big walnut radio set in the back corner of her living room. Sometimes she thought of old Herschel Givens knotted scars that covered the left side of his face and neck and his hands. People say he got them as a baby, falling into the fire when he was learning how to walk. Tessa felt bad for him, and tried to imagine him as a baby as he limped around town glaring at anyone, black or white, that he figured looked at him too long.

She also liked to take in the fields as she walked, especially if there was a breeze. When the wind swelled over the fields of wheat, soybean and alfalfa Tessa imagined the ripples were like the sea, although she'd only read about oceans in books and saw one once in the movies. The gentle *shhhh* of the stirring crops could settle her after a trying day. The adult choir at The Runs sang a song that whenever Tessa heard it, her chest would swell, and her eyes would tear, though she wasn't quite sure why: *The little cares that fretted me/I lost them yesterday/Out in the fields/ Among the sea/ Above the winds at play...* Maybe it was the truth to it; when she walked home this way, when the sun baked the smell of alfalfa into air and the rustling of the crops slipped under her thoughts, it was hard to worry about the math test, or the Bush boys bothering Louis, or if Loretta Mathews had something to say about her slip hanging after a game of tag.

Tessa had about thirty steps before the path would quit and dump her back on Hamberg Road, when she was startled by a slight movement in the fields. A brown hat sailed over green hay. As it cruised towards her, Tessa saw that was on the head of a tall white man. She froze. It wasn't as though she'd never seen white men in these pitches; white farmers worked pieces closer to Ellenton and further out, but some also had land up here close to Tessa's family parcel. Sometimes, when the white farmers weren't hiring and things got lean, white hands would drift out to black farms to see if anyone needed some "help", and farmers who could use it would take on a few hands if they didn't 'smell like trouble', something Granddaddy Hall swore he could smell, but none of these men wore felt hats. Or shirtsleeves and dress pants. And they rarely smiled at her and most never greeted her, tipping their felt hats, like this man did.

"Why, hello there, little lady! What are you doing out here in this lonely place?" This man looked her in the eye and then over her head and shoulders, wolfing everything he saw with his eyes. Tessa shrank back a little more, the forest hemming her in at the back. The man's eyes lit on her again, eyebrows arched curiously at her silence.

Tessa swallowed. "Walking home from school, sir." His eyes were a glittery ice blue, and he looked at her as though he was trying to fit her in a puzzle.

"School? Oh, up from Peterson Road? There's a school over there?" He talked like his nose was stuffed. He turned to look down the footway. He pulled out a small notebook and scribbled in it, then looked back at Tessa.

“Yes sir. Peterson Primary.” Why was a white man asking after the colored school? Tessa edged a little closer to the road, but looked at full on. Maybe he’d ask something else that would let her know what he was after.

“Aren’t you scared of snakes? I’ve been told the woods are full of them, and my partner almost stepped on one sunning himself trapping through these fields!”

“No sir,” Tessa lied a little, “I make a little noise as I walk and they mostly stay away.”

“Well, I’m still surprised to see such a little pumpkin traipsing around back here. I suppose it’s just as well. I used run and swing all around the woods when I was tyke...you live up on Hamberg Road?”

Tessa’s stomach fluttered and she suddenly didn’t want the man to know where she lived. But home training overrode her fear. “Yes, sir.”

“A lot of families up there?”

“I believe so...” Tessa dug a hole in the dirt with her saddle shoe. She desperately wanted to get home now, to be home and away from those glittering eyes.

“Yeah, well the census takers didn’t manage to get up there, so I suppose we’ll have to...” He swung around to the break he’d made in the alfalfa and hollered down the row. “Hey, Wilson! The road is over here!”

“What? I’ll be... You want to go back to the truck first?” A voice, heavier than this man’s but just as stuffed up, blasted out of the fields.

“Naw, I’m here now. You can go on and take the equipment back, then drive until you have to turn on Hamberg to pick me up. Ok?” He put his hands on his hips and winked at Tessa, as he waited for the answer.

“Sure, I guess...see you in a few minutes.” It was then Tessa saw a silver pole towering over the crops. It took her breath away; it looked like something the aliens in Louis’ comic books would use to herd people to their space ships. It didn’t belong out here and neither did these nasally men. Maybe they were spies, spies from Russia, and that’s why they talked funny. But what would spies from Russia want in an alfalfa field?

“Well, don’t let me keep you, little one. We don’t want your folks to be worried if you’re coming home from school late. Goodbye.” He smiled and went back to his notebook, flipping through the pages and marking it with his pencil.

Tessa turned and walked toward the road, gradually picking up her feet faster until she flew onto Hamberg and down to her house. She didn’t stop to bring in the mail from the shiny tin box posted at the beginning of the drive, but ran straight up the steps and into the house, banging the screen door against the house as she went.

“Girl, are you crazy! How you coming in here with all that noise!” Franny sprang up from the book strewn kitchen table, hand to her chest. “Someone had better be chasing you!”

“No, sorry Franny, but listen, there are two white men out on the path to school!” Tessa caught her breath and plunked her satchel on the nearest kitchen chair. “Well one was on the footpath, the other was in the field, and---“

Franny stepped up to her quick and close. “Did they bother you? Tessa, you OK?”

For a second, all of her story rushed from her head. Franny's serious and fearful face scared her more than the men ever could. "No, what do you mean bothered? They were just strange is all, and one kept asking me questions." She walked on the other side of the chair and studied her sister's expression, which had relaxed.

"Nothing, just, you should be careful..." Franny looked at her hard once more, then returned to her seat at the table.

"Aw, first I'm foolish for not taking the shortcut, now I got to be careful when I do. Make up your mind next time you want to direct me to do something. Listen, now, these two men or, I guess just the one, came out of nowhere and asked me where the path went, and was the school down there and was I scared of snakes, and who all lived on Hamberg... what now?" Franny was frowning again.

"They asked where you lived and you told them?"

"Not exactly. He asked if I lived here and how many others lived up here." Tessa was getting hot. She was trying to tell a story her way, and Franny kept stopping her, trying to twist in some grown-folks story that could only be whispered when kids were around. Little pitchers and all that nonsense used hide interesting tales. Well, it wasn't happening here, this was her time to tell something. She hadn't even got to the shiny alien stick yet. "So anyway, the other man had a shiny stick, taller than him even with a hat on, and--"

"Wait a minute, one man had a hat on?"

"Both men had hats, but that's not the point."

“Hold on, were these hobos? Did they look like drifters? Like the men we sometimes see hanging around the train yard? Tessa, you can’t be talking to strange people out in the woods. Girl, they’ll slit your throat soon as look at you.” Franny pointed at Tessa’s neck and Tess couldn’t help but touch it gingerly. She shook her head.

“No Franny, listen, these didn’t look like hobos. They were wearing dress pants and church shoes, and white shirts...at least the one I saw was. And they talked strange, like they had a head cold. And they had this stick, and the one who talked to me kept writing things down. You think they maybe could be spies.”

Franny burst out laughing. “Spies? Oh, girl, you reading those magazines again? What would spies want out here?” She moved to sit back down at the table. “Spies... you are cute. Look, Mama says you can have the chicken sandwich if you hungry before dinner, but she said leave the fried pie for Papa. She also said you’d better sweep the front and back porch and the garden walk before she get home. And your school work...” Franny bent over a thick book filled with numbers arranged like the sentences Miz Martin liked to make Tessa’s class diagram on the board. Tessa couldn’t sit down to the table like every other afternoon. The men had stopped it from being every other afternoon. She looked at her sister, sitting there surrounded by all those books. Franny was always acting like she had all of the answers. Maybe now was the time for her give one or two when actually asked.

“Franny, why would those men be running around out there in good clothes if they wasn’t spies then?”

“*Weren’t* spies, and I am sure I don’t know. I do know I’m not going to get fussed at because you want to talk about Russian espionage in Cokerville instead of getting your work and chores. Stop worrying me now, I’ve got a lot of studying to do before I have to start dinner.” Franny lowered her eyes to the notebook in front of her. The light from the large front room window bounced on Franny’s head, making the neat braid that ran down its center gleam.

Tessa went to the icebox and took out a carefully wrapped sandwich. She sat across from the bent head of her sister and chewed. The men weren’t hobos, and Franny didn’t think they were spies, though she could have said so nicer, instead of making Tessa feel silly. And she would feel silly too, if Franny had come up with another story that made sense. But really, she hadn’t answered anything. “Franny…”

“Hmmm?”

“What’s a sens suss?”

“A what?” Her sister didn’t look up from the figures.

“A sens suss. That man said sens suss takers hadn’t been up here? What’s that?”

Franny looked up at her for a moment, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, you mean a census? That’s when the government sends people out to count all of the people in the country. That’s probably who your man was. And he’s right, the census people don’t worry about counting all the colored folk accurately.” She went back to her book.

“Oh. “ Tessa chewed some more. “So what about the stick?”

“ Tessa, I don’t know…are you sure you saw a stick?”

“I did see it! Why would I make that up?”

“Don’t talk with your mouthful. I don’t know Tessa. Ask Papa about it when he gets home, but for now, let me finish this, please.”

Tessa finished up the sandwich and wiped up her crumbs. She took the soiled napkin to the basket next to the washtub in the back of the kitchen, and then came back to the table to start her homework. The spelling did not hold her interest in the least: *accurate, arrest, costumes, crisp...* She got up, grabbed the broom and headed to the back door.

“Be sure not to slam the door on your way out, and latch the screen so the flies don’t get in...”Franny called behind her.

Franny couldn’t rest unless she was telling Tessa what to do. Tessa started in the corners of the porch, sweeping dust, leaves and other forms of dirt into the middle of the floor. The dull chore gave her some space to mull over what happened. Franny knew it was strange for white men to be poking about the fields in Cokerville, but because she didn’t have a good guess as to what they were doing, she didn’t give it any credence. Franny had different notions the longer she was in high school, and making up tales about the neighbors and adding to the legends that swirled around the town didn’t interest her anymore. Well, fine with Tessa, but she didn’t have to make her notions sound silly. She’d wait ‘til Papa got home and tell the story again. He’d listen with a serious ear, and wouldn’t pooh-pooh her spy idea, at least not out of hand. And she could bet now as sure as the dirt on the porch was dirty, that as soon as Papa said there was something to her tale, here would come Franny, talking about she knew it. For now Tessa’d wait.

CHAPTER TWO

ELLIS

“Ellis, baby, why don’t you set a spell with me before goin’ home. Get you some water, and tell me what my grandbabies are up to.” Mama patted the bench beside her.

Ellis sighed softly, and ambled up the porch to satisfy his mother. He knew she was just trying to keep him out of the fields for a spell. It’d been almost nine years since his accident, but to his mama, it was yesterday. No harm in making her feel better.

“Hey, Mama.” He took the glass she held out to him. He settled himself next to her. “Alright, Mama, let me drink this here and then go back out and see about Daddy.”

“Don’t be worrin’ after the ole man, he fine. Now about my babies.” She put her hands, still slender but worn into tanned leather by forty years of white folks wash and handiwork, on her knees, waiting.

“Well, Franny’s getting top marks at school, should be graduating next year.”

“I’ll be, seems like yesterday she started up at Peterson. She goin’ to be like her mama, all about school. So she finish in... ’51?”

“Yep, in May.” Ellis took a big swig. Daddy had asked him to fetch the whet stone and would be wondering what took him.

“Well, an even number’d be better, but that’s still good. What about our lil’ ole gal Tessa?”

“Tessa is the same as ever. Talking a mean streaking, growing like a weed. Bitsy keeps her on her lesson.” He drank the last bit of water. “Mama, we’ll come out for dinner this Sunday, and you can query them all afternoon.” He handed her back the glass. “Thank you for the drink, my dear,” He bowed, “but Daddy, probably getting madder by the second out in the alfalfa. You don’t want him to cook, do you?” He grinned at her, and his brown eyes caught the sun, their honeyed glint made him look even more the rake.

“Suppose not. Go on, then, but you take it easy, Ellis. Ain’t nobody askin’ you to do more than you able.” She looked him up and down.

“And I ain’t aimin’ to do more than that. Turns out that keeps me hoppin’ most days!” He flashed her a wicked grin and then turned and ambled down the porch steps, taking care to jinn up his limp to a swagger.

“Boy, you a fool!” laughed his mama, as she turned back to the house.

Sure enough, Daddy pulled a sour face when Ellis finally made it back to him, whetstone in hand.

“Took you long enough.” Daddy took the stone and passed it over the blade of the scythe he held in his right hand. He gave it back to Ellis. “See if it helps.”

Ellis didn’t bother to explain his tarrying. Most likely his father figured his mama couldn’t resist fussing over their second son, and Ellis sure didn’t want to hear all the complaining over his mama’s silliness. For as much as his mama never forgot the day Ellis almost lost his leg, his daddy would rather put all of that day in the back of his mind. And Ellis was inclined to go with that. He whetted his own blade and went back to

work on the row to the left of his father. They added two more rows to the four they'd cut earlier, when his father called time.

"This just a waste, here." his father quietly declared. "Need that tractor." He rubbed his palms together and looked up at the sun. "You have work over at the shop?"

"I got a couple of jobs." Ellis had more than a couple, but Daddy needed help on the old place, and Ellis knew he could make up the time at the shop. The alfalfa couldn't wait, and if Ellis didn't come out, Daddy would try to tackle it alone.

"It'd be best that you see to them tomorrow. I'll go out to Augusta and look for a used Deere. We got enough?"

Ellis made a quick cipher in his head. "It'd be dear, but yeah, we can swing it." He slung both sickles over his shoulder. He imagined his father felt a bit better, looking at the puny piles of hay at the end of the rows, but just as he'd hoped, the old man understood that the two of them could not harvest acres of hay by hand. Thursday, he'd go by the bank and draft a check so that Daddy could pick it up and get the Deere by Friday. That would give him two good days at the shop before, he'd come back over and help with the harvest and the baling. Anyone who needed him would come out here after that.

Ellis and his daddy walked back up to the house. As they passed the barn, Daddy, called out to George, who was on loan from Daddy's brother. "George, can you get one of your brothers out here tomorrow and store what we got so it won't get wet while we get ourselves straight with the tractor?"

“Yes, sir! We be out early tomorrow. Hey, Ellis!” George clapped him on the back.

“George, I swear you getting’ taller by the hour! Man, what Maybelle been feeding you?” Ellis gave him a good going over. These kids springing up like weeds.

George looked down, happy to be noticed. “You should see Larry. He almost a head taller than me.”

“I’ll bet! Well, your Uncle Rich, don’t need to worry with you two monsters on the job.” George fairly whistled as he sauntered back into the barn.

“Lord, Ellis, don’t swell up that boy, he won’t be good for nothin’ he be so full of himself.”

“I just told him what he already know. He’s a good fella, George. Keepin’ you from worryin’ about the animals during harvest.” Ellis looked square at his father. Daddy wasn’t happy unless he was worrying about something.

“I warrant I waste double the money comin’ down here checkin’ behind him.”

“Then don’t do it!” Ellis grabbed his father’s neck and pulled him toward the house, the both of them laughing the rest of the way.

After a quick wash-up, Ellis pecked his mama on the cheek and jumped in his truck headed for home. Even though they didn’t yield more than a quarter of a day’s work, he felt good. He liked working in his shop, but spending 4 to 12 hours bent over the bench welding made him stiff and tired in a way that working out in the fields did not. He was still tired, to be sure, but it was a tired that stretched his chest and arms, and made

him sore instead of achy, promising more strength in another day's work. He whistled tunes from the last western he'd seen for the twenty minute drive home.

As soon as everybody sat down to dinner, the baby girl spilled out another one of her stories. She was so happy about telling something first, Ellis almost missed some of the details.

“Repeat that for me, Baby Girl?”

“These white men asked me where we live, and about where the school was

“IS,” corrected her mother and her sister.

Tessa looked at Bitsy. “—Is, and they had silver sticks and hats...I know they weren't from another planet---“she cut her eyes at her sister, “but they talked strange.” She watched his face to see how he was taking the story.

Bitsy arched her eyebrows at the girl. “‘Talked strange’ or...?”

Tessa wrinkled her forehead. “Talked strangely?” she offered.

Franny jumped in. “*Spoke* strangely.” She tilted her chin at her sister.

Tessa frowned. “Franny, I don't know why you are always forever sticking your nose where it don't, doesn't belong! I'm trying to tell Papa what happened!” His daughter looked to him for help, but he turned over the gist of what Tessa reported and let the girls bicker it out a bit.

This was worrisome. Could be a bunch of reasons for a white man to be out there in the fields...if Tessa was remembering correct, they'd have been on Walter Griggs land. Ellis hadn't heard of anyone surveying down that way. Usually surveying would commence after one of the white folks wanted to throw some paper muscle around

because he believed a Negro farmer had overstepped in some way. The table had quieted and he felt them all looking at him to continue.

“Well, I wouldn’t worry too much about all that. They probably ain’t from Mars, Miz Tessa. Most likely it’s something ordinary, people marking off land so that everyone know what’s what. Even still, I might go along with what your Mama told you about keeping to the road.”

“Awww... Papa, it’ll take forever walking home...” Tessa slumped her shoulders. From the other end of the table, his wife’s fork stopped in midair, but Ellis tilted his chin up a bit and she held her peace.

“Now, young Missy, I took you for an almost grown up woman who could understand my reasoning here. If you right, and what we got here is a full blown Martian invasion the first folks they gonna snatch is the ones they happen on in the fields! No Martian worth his salt is gonna risk snatching up someone in full daylight on a road folks use all the time. No Ma’am, imagine coming out on Hamburg in a full flying saucer! I don’t think so.”

Tessa’s eyes grew wide for a hot second, until he winked.

“It’d be a shame if those Martians got you, Tessa...” Franny said, low and serious, before bursting into giggles.

Ellis looked at his youngest mournfully. “I’d sure miss you, Baby Girl.. .What about you, Mama?”

“I miss the days when y’all had more than half a brain between you. As long as Tessa keeps to the road, I don’t have to worry about missing her.” Bitsy smiled at Ellis over the girls’ heads. He went out to the porch with a cup of coffee and his pipe.

Once Bitsy had set the girls straight with homework and dishes after dinner, she came out onto the porch and sat out on the metal glider rocker with him.

“Was today a shop day, or did you go out to the old place today?” Bitsy asked.

“Bit of both today. Orders were knee deep, but I had told Daddy Sunday I’d help him get the tractor back up and running early this week. He thinks he might need to bring the alfalfa in before too long.” He tapped down the tobacco in his pipe. “We got it going, but I’d be surprised if it lasts into next season.”

“Well, you all looking for a replacement? Don’t make sense to be caught in the middle of a harvest without a tractor. Daddy Hall mention it?”

“You know he did. Wants a John Deere.” He lit his pipe, settled back in the rocker and blew out a ring of smoke, waiting.

“For what he needs, that’s, what about a thousand dollars?”

Sometimes there downsides to marrying a smart woman. “About right, yeah.”

“Will the alfalfa cover it?”

“Doubt it. We’d have to see what we made off of the corn and the sweet potatoes. In the end, I expect we’ll have to look at a used model. Might put the word out at the shop, see if somebody need to sell one.” He looked over at her. His wife was forever nervous about how much they were tied to the old place. He couldn’t blame her, her

daddy had a rough go of it and lost everything some years ago, and what he didn't lose, he drank away. Her questions were meant to remind him of their own path. He knew.

“Used ain't bad. You all know what you're doing I reckon.” Bitsy swung her legs over onto his lap. He grinned at her.

“You want me to rub 'em for you, as that what you askin'?”

“No, sugar, not now. Today wasn't that busy.” But she allowed her head to rest propped on her hand, yawning and sighing at the same time. “What do you make of Tessa's story? I'm not too pleased about the thought of Tessa running into strangers on the way from school.”

“Probably nothin'. I ain't heard of anybody arguing over property lines as of late but sometime, you know, that information don't always come down our way. We'll worry about it when we know to worry, I imagine.” He blew another ring into the night air, watching it float to try and meet the stars. “You right to want her to go back to the old route, though. Least until we know something for sure.” He rubbed the tops of her feet, and tugged playfully at the toe of her left slipper. “I won't tickle ya, if that's what you thinkin'.”

“Uh-huh, well, that means that that's exactly what you gonna do. I thank you Mr. Hall, but I'll catch you on another night.” She relaxed there another minute, then rose, stretched and swatted his shoulder as she swung the creaky porch door open. “I gotta get my clothes ready for tomorrow, and double check on the girls. Tessa don't always wrap her hair before she go crawling in the bed. That girl, I tell you, she'll wear me out before the ward will.”

“All right now, baby, be in in a minute.” He listened as his wife put the girls through their bedtime paces: homework, chores, tomorrow’s lunch, hair, and smiled. She kept them straight, no doubt about it. Bitsy could be hard, but Ellis knew from whence it came; she knew firsthand what could happen when you let the details get away from you. When he started courting her, she told him right off that she had a plan for herself: working as a nurses’ aid at University Medical, enrolling in Paine College to become a full fledge nurse, and work as long as she was able. The first afternoon at Presley’s Café, the first time they were alone together, she told him that right off. Boys he knew would take a proclamation like that as either a challenge or as walking papers, in fact, he knew of sweet talkers that found it a game to try to knock a girl like Bitsy down. Tried their best to get between these girls and their dreams, get ‘em in a family way, marry em or not, and let them know that they did it, taking joy from the light going out of their eyes. He couldn’t understand that. No, he worked hard to show Bitsy he could see the value in what she was doing, that he was doing the same with the farm. Took her awhile to see that he was in earnest, but she got there.

Once they had the girls, Bitsy passed her plan on down to them. She didn’t say they had to be nurses, but they had to go to school and be something. That was fine with Ellis, though once in a while he reckoned it’d be good to have a son to help and maybe take over the old place. Couldn’t expect a girl to be that interested in farming unless she had a farmer beau, and that could only bring a girl so far nowadays.

Ellis got up, his bad leg giving him a bit of grief. He shook off the stiffness and stepped out into the yard to empty out his pipe. Before he went in, he glanced across the

road at the pines, tall as god himself stretching out beyond eyesight . The old place lay a couple of miles out but right along these trees and likely his daddy was coming off of his porch and going to bed. He smiled as he went in the house.

CHAPTER THREE

BITSY

Bitsy stiffened when she saw the young doctor approach the nurses' desk. He kept looking about him: left, right, straight ahead, and most often over his shoulder, taking in everything on which his blue eyes alighted with sharp focus. Soon enough, she and everyone else on the ward would know precisely what he thought about what he saw, and if history was any measure... Bitsy squared her shoulders and braced herself. Would it be rapid fire questions crafted to try to trip her up? Probably, he looked like an intern. They often came over this side of Jackson to throw their weight around. They wouldn't dare do that on the white wards where they'd be shut down right quick, even by the head nurse. But this one looked nervous. Maybe he'd made a wrong turn, and was afraid to ask the way back. Bitsy pretended to read the chart she was about to file, watching him. It would be easy to end his discomfort, all she had to do was offer help, emphasizing the address of "Doctor", but the nervous ones could be particularly dangerous and she didn't want to add a casual insult from a knocked-kneed child in a white coat to her pile of things she'd already had to press down in her chest today. But here he came straight for her and with eye contact.

"May I help you, Doctor?" she said before he could speak.

"Uh, yes, Nurse--?" He squinted to read her nameplate "Nurse Hall. Yes, maybe you can."

He called her by her title and surname. Bitsy reserved her smile of surprise for later, for a time when the nurse supervisor would call her Betty in front of a doctor or a difficult patient.

“I was looking for the geriatric ward, and I can’t seem to find it. Have I made a wrong turn?” He peered down the hall in front of the green metal desk as if to make sure he hadn’t missed it.

“Well, Doctor, we have a general ward in which we care for most adult patients save the children’s and maternity rooms. We have a very small number of beds where we can quarantine a few patients. But we don’t separate our old folks from the general population.”

“I see. Well, given the size of the hospital, I suppose that makes sense. Up in Boston, we put everyone together under the same roof and separate the populations by floor” He peered at the chart he had in his hand. “It made finding the patients a bit easier...”

Bitsy softened a bit towards the young man. She regarded his nervousness, and recalled her first day at A. She was a gangly bundle of arms and legs and nerves, brand spanking new out of the hospital’s graduate nurse training program. That first day she could hardly remember a speck of her training, much less the layout of the place. She took in the length of skinny wrist stretched from the white coat and the raw ends of the fingers that tapped on the counter. She raised her brown eyes to his blue ones and before she thought the better of it, asked him if he needed anything else.

“If you could direct me to Supervisor...” he unfolded a scrap of memo paper, “Castle’s office. I’m to ask her to help me get settled.”

Oh lord, another rotation. Poor Dr. Green, he’d be busy cleaning up after yet another intern unconcerned with sloppy mistakes made on the colored ward in the name of “hands on” learning. More work for all of them.

“Of course, Doctor, follow me.” Most of Bitsy’s days were spent getting her work done around Barbara Castle, but so be it. She led him down the hall to Castle’s office. Her friend Lorraine pushed the lunch tray cart in the opposite direction and raised an eyebrow. Bitsy smiled and tilted her chin a half an inch.

At Castle’s door, Bitsy smoothed her pinafore out of habit. Usually if she had to present herself to the supervisor she’d do a full check: stockings (seams straight, no runs), hair (bun tight and smooth, no cowlicks). Pinafore (spotless, no matter what happened over the course of the day), uniform (clean, hems secure), cap (straight, pinned tightly to her scalp). Castle may say whatever pleased her, but she could never take Bitsy to task for appearance, well, at least the things she could control. She knocked lightly.

From behind the door a staccato “Who is it?” shot out into the hallway.

“Nurse Hall, ma’am, I—“ The door flung open.

“Betty, you had better hope this is important! You girls and your interruptions!”

Nurse Barbra Castle came to the threshold, her square jaw already set and aflame, watery blue eyes shiny with anticipatory rage. “I’m surprised you all can tie your shoes without asking me a hundred questions! I swear I,—oh, good afternoon, Doctor, may I help you?” Castle saw the doctor and Bitsy became mercifully invisible. She stepped back and

moved to catch up with Lorraine and get lunch out. There had to be, Bitsy believed, some sort of switch in white folk's brain, whenever they dealt with Negroes. Want something from you: ON, other white folk around: OFF. This infuriated her when she had to buy something in Ellenton where the two stores were run by Barbra's father, Mr. Kent, or say, walking minding her own business on a sidewalk, but she had to admit that not being seen was the only way she and Lorraine and the others could keep the ward clean and fed. She turned to slip back to her work.

“Good afternoon--- a moment, Nurse Hall.” The doctor turned to Bitsy and extended his hand. “Thank you for your help, Nurse Hall. I realize I didn't introduce myself. I'm Michael Carter.”

Bitsy was shocked to be sure, but home training took over and she accepted and shook his hand.

“That'll be all, Betty. I do believe lunch needs to be seen to.” Castle regarded her with narrowed eyes, even as she continued to smile at Dr. Carter.

“Yes, ma'am.” She looked Dr. Carter in the eye. “You are welcome Doctor.” She turned on her heel and went to join Lorraine. She knew Barbara Castle would make her pay for this later, the sin of another person treating Bitsy decently, but for now she'd quietly revel in the ether of respect.

Lorraine had fed half of “A” ward by the time Bitsy caught up with her. “Well, well, good afternoon, Nurse Hall.” said Lorraine, handing Bitsy a tray. “This one goes to Mr. Allen, bed 7.” Lorraine sang out to the patient, “All right now, Mr. Allen. Nurse Hall is here to save the day!”

Bitsy cocked her head at her friend. “Yes, Mr. Allen, I’m here. Nurse Webb can rest easy.” She put the tray on the table next to him, and helped him to sit up a bit straighter, plumping the pillow behind the elderly man.

“Miz Hall, don’t bother trying to get any air in that limp thing. I’d be more comfortable with my work shirt under my head than this lump of rag.”

He was right. She could feel the batting under her hands , matted and flat. She sighed and turned it lengthwise behind him so that he didn’t have to rest his back against the cold iron headboard. She would bet money the pillows in Jackson West weren’t so flat.

“Speaking of my clothes, when y’all think Doc Green gonna let me go? I done missed four days laying around her.” He smiled, good naturedly, flashing a mouth missing the right incisor, but worry darted behind his eyes.

“We’ll ask Dr. Green to come and talk to you when he does his rounds. Until then, we’re going to do our best for you.” Bitsy furnished him a quick smile and shook out his napkin, smoothing it over his chest, then handed him his tray.

“Mr. Allen, you just trying to get away from us. Aren’t we treating you right?” Lorraine winked at Bitsy.

“Miz Webb, this has been as close to a vacation as I’ve had! But you know, a body gotta work. ‘Sides I feel heaps better than I did a few days ago.” He ate a forkful of green beans to prove his point.

“Good to know, Mr. Allen, good to know.” Lorraine continued to feed the rest of the patients on the ward, bantering as she went. They were men, mostly older, with a

variety of ailments: high blood pressure, emphysema, back issues, problems that were the result of grueling work and had resisted bushels of home remedies. Mr. Allen was likely speaking for the lot of them; a hospital stay was the most rest they'd ever had. Despite the pain and or weariness they may have felt, Lorraine teased them into whatever liveliness they could manage. Bitsy loved that about her friend. Bitsy herself was practical, good at finding out what was needed and how she could manage those needs as swiftly as possible. She didn't spend much of her time with her charges joking and holding hands, so much as finding extra blankets, changing bandages, and keeping Doctors Green, Mills, and Foster abreast of changes in their conditions, things that sometimes were overlooked.

Like now. John Sturber, a thirteen-year-old who'd just been admitted last night according to his chart, had been awake and talking in the late morning but now, Bitsy could barely rouse him to take his tray. "Nurse Webb, could you bring me that thermometer, please." Lorraine wasted no time. "Thank you. Open up for me, Mr. John." Bitsy slid the thermometer around his tongue and placed her hand on his forehead. No doubt, although she had him hold it in his mouth as she kept time on her wristwatch, that he had a fever.

Lorraine paused as she passed out the rest of the trays. "How high?"

"It's not time to check yet, you know that."

"You know you know. Call it."

"You are so silly. How would I know?" Lorraine looked at her expectantly. Bitsy gave in. "103.0 at least." A moment later Bitsy took the thermometer from the boy's mouth, and read, "103. Oh, you go on." she said to a laughing Lorraine. She and

Lorraine were different, in both looks and temperament. Lorraine, tall, and tapered, looked like the models in the old fashion magazines the ladies auxiliary would dump by the entrance into East, only Lorraine was darker by a shade or two and to Bitsy's mind ,smarter. Bitsy on the other hand was shorter, tiny like a doll, Ellis liked to say and round were Lorraine was angular. Once or twice it struck Bitsy that for all of that, Lorraine was the softer of the two around patients. The staff teasingly called them 'Mutt and Jeff', opposites in all, but fast friends to the end. "You, young man need to drink this juice at least." Bitsy handed him the cup off of his tray. "Do you feel like eating?"

"No, ma'am." The boy dutiful sat up and sipped at the grape juice she'd offered but he could barely keep his eyes open. Bitsy unhooked the chart at the foot of his bed, scanning the notes. She looked over at Lorraine.

"He hasn't been seen since nine this morning, and no one's scheduled to swing by before one."

Lorraine nodded. "I can see if Foster is in the building."

Bitsy shook her head, "You know he isn't." She'd have to ask Nurse Castle to send for a doctor from the West. The hoops that she would make them go through before the boy got attention, she knew too well. Was "Betty" sure she read the thermometer right? Was a fever in a child serious enough to call a West doctor from his very important work? What had "Betty", done to bring the fever down? After assuring her supervisor that she had done all in her power, Castle would still wait until the patient took a desperate turn before calling for a white doctor from West to simply look at a black patient from East wing. Sometimes they'd get lucky and would be able to get ahold of

Dr. Green out in his Ellenton office or catch Doctor Foster in his Belair practice before he went out on house calls, but that was rare. Negro doctors had more patients than a farm dog had fleas and it was hard to reach them before their rounds. Bitsy knew that at least three of her patients over the years had died as a result of Castle's insistence that the white doctors steps away could not be bothered to save a black patient's life.

She prepared compresses and applied them to the listless boy, then helped Lorraine with the trays for the women in Ward B. She checked on John again, no improvement. Bitsy exhaled, wiped his forehead and stood, squared her shoulders and stepped into the hall. She almost collided into Dr. Carter. Dr. Carter. She'd forgotten about the young intern.

"I'm sorry Doctor, I—" He waved his hand.

"No harm done." He looked at her curiously. "Where are you rushing to?"

"I—I was going to ask Nurse Castle to send for a West doctor to see about a patient, but—"

"But, East has one on the floor? That was what you were undoubtedly going to say." Was that humor in his eyes?

"Yes, of course. This way, please." She walked back to John's bed, unclipped the chart and handed it to the doctor. Dr. Carter read the top sheet and turned over to the admitting form. John didn't register their presence, and Bitsy noted his breathing was now raspy. She waited for the doctor to direct her before she pointed this out.

"You took his temperature last?"

"Yes, sir."

“Would you bring me a blood pressure cuff, please?” His eyes never left the boy’s face and as she turned to fetch the sphygmometer, she saw him touch John’s forehead before he checked his glands. If she didn’t know better, she’d have sworn there was tenderness in the touch.

She handed him the cuff. She waited to see if he would have her pull the boy’s sheets back, or adjust him for examination; it was her experience that doctors from West touched East patients as little as possible. Yet, Dr. Carter did everything himself, raising the boy’s arm to check his glands, gently laying them back on the blanket. He only asked her to help steady the boy when he lifted him to sitting in order to listen to his breathing.

He pulled the stethoscope out of one ear. “Is the wheezing new?”

“Yes, Doctor, within the past few minutes.”

He nodded and rocked back on his heels. “Did anyone ask his mother about how long he’s been ill?”

“She was in this morning to visit and she said he’d been feeling tired for about a week.”

“Ah, I see your note here, but nothing on his admission slip.” He clipped the chart back on the bed. “Looks like sarcoidosis, but we’ll wait for Dr. Foster to confirm. Aspirin for the fever. That’s really about all we can do.” He looked at Bitsy. “More than likely he’ll get better.” He paused. “I sort of wish I could of made a heroic sweep of this on my first day, but, oh well. Handsome young man.” Dr. Carter turned to leave, took a step, stopped and stood in the door of the ward. “Nurse Hall, don’t ever worry about bothering me. It’s part of your job, to help know when to do mine.” He smiled and walked out.

Bitsy recalled the whole encounter to Lorraine who slipped in to the dispensary with her on the pretext of getting a jump on the afternoon meds.

“Shook your hand, in front of old Castle?” Lorraine’s mouth could’ve housed a family of flies.

“As sure as you are sitting here. He’s from up north for sure, and folks say things are different up there.”

“Must be. Well, don’t get too used to it, those interns don’t stay too long.”

Bitsy looked at Lorraine’s tray to see if there were any pills she could give out while taking John his aspirin. She scooped up two other cups and walked back out to the ward with Lorraine. “No, they don’t. We’ll do what we always do, make the best of whatever comes.”

Bitsy settled John, gave him his aspirin and folded another flat pillow under his own to ease his breathing. She moved about both wards picking up finished trays. Usually the only thoughts she had as she worked were about the next task, rounds, laundry, filing, or things she had to do once she got home, mending, checking homework, shopping, checking in on her folks. This afternoon, those lists were crowded out by this new creature, a white man who looked a body in the eye, and seemed to respect the work of the East, and the people here, a doctor on top of it. This was enough to cause Bitsy to wonder, something she didn’t often allow.

Life as it presented itself was hard to navigate; there was little time to “wonder”. She had never wasted time with what ifs; if she wanted to know what would happen if, say she moved to Augusta to work and train as a nurse, she did it. If she wanted to know

if Ellis Hall would be as good a husband as he promised, she married him. Wondering and waiting kept her brother, her mother and her daddy standing right where they were, sharecropping on land that once belonged to them. No once you made a plan, no need to roll it over and over, follow it. Otherwise, the world conspired to overtake you. That's how she saw it, anyways.

Bitsy folded blankets in the linen closet as her shift came to an end. The dark grey blankets were essentially unhemmed blocks of thin wool. She and Lorraine were diligent about keeping fresh cedar chips in the corners of the shelves, but more often than not, holes would pepper them. Yet they could not throw anything away, not holey blankets or threadbare sheets, nor the flat pillows that gave no support, unless Nurse Castle gave the OK, and she rarely did. Castle loved to remind Bitsy and the other nurses that their patients were not hotel guests and that what they had was surely better than "anything they were used to..." Linen that was not fit to serve as horse bedding was conscripted back to the closet, while the patients on East convalesced under bright blue blankets with neat hems that were switched out in spring for cotton blankets to appease the oppressive summer heat. Bitsy folded the last blanket, and placed it on the middle shelf. She ran her fingers over the row. These had the least holes, thirteen, fourteen; fifteen blankets more or less ready for duty. For forty patients. Well, at least they were clean. The patients' families understood this within a couple of days of a stay, and would soon appear with a neatly folded quilt or two at visiting hours. A gray blanket on a bed said more than it should.

Bitsy shut the door to the closet and headed to the nurses' desk. Lorraine was double checking the notes they'd made over their shift. Bitsy slid a handful of the files from the bottom.

"Girl you, know you don't need to do that. Ellis won't be fretting?" Lorraine pulled on the corner of the pile.

"I have ten minutes. Let's both clock out on the dot, so we won't have to hear about time cards next week." She waved Lorraine away. They sat side by side for a couple of minutes, the starching of their pens floating in the air between them. If Bitsy were pressed, she'd allow that if she had a favorite time of the day, this might be it. It was the perfect blend of peace and utility. But Lorraine could only keep silence for no more than a few winks.

"You know, I've been thinking about your young man,"

"Ellis? Why?" Bitsy didn't look up, didn't stop. She could never guess what Lorraine would say. Once she talked for a half-hour straight about people who "favored" each other; she had an uncle who people swore looked like Harold Nicholas and an aunt on her father's side who was Billie Holiday's twin. Bitsy didn't have the heart to tell her friend that she knew about half of the people she named by name and only a quarter by face. Or oftentimes Lorraine would report on the latest doings at the big church she visited from time to time, United House of Prayer for the People and the preacher, if that's what he was called, Sweet Daddy Grace. Lorraine maintained that she didn't take any of the congregations whopping and hollering serious, but she did like to slip in for the music. And if Bitsy wanted to save herself the work of dinner, Lorraine advised that

the restaurant in the church served food that tasted like her own mama was cooking out back.

“I am not kidding, girl, best peach cobbler I *ever* had, and I was raised in Savannah!” Lorraine always put her hand over her heart when she mentioned Savannah.

But every so often, Lorraine would unwind one of her war stories. Those were Bitsy’s favorites. She could imagine Lorraine’s willowy frame striding sharp and in high feather, wearing the Army Nurse Corps uniform, while soldiers around her of all colors snapped to attention. Now where Ellis factored in any of that, Bitsy was sure she didn’t know.

“No, girl, Dr. Whosie-whatsit. I’ve been watching him out of the corner of my eye, and there may be something to him. He went back twice to check on little Sturber, asked him how he was doing in school, even told him to mind his lesson so he could be a doctor himself. He talked to everybody who was awake on B ward and got caught up on Sister Ginger. But he was patient with her, lord knows, listened to what each of her grown children was doing, even lasted into the grandchildren. I almost felt bad for him, considered going in to remind him of some lancing or something else to help him escape.”

Bitsy turned to look at her. “But you didn’t.”

Lorraine looked up. “I said “almost”. If I’d of done it, you know good and well she’d have grabbed me next. I want to go home before midnight!” They both laughed, taking care not to be too loud, lest Nurse Castle come out nose wrinkled and send them to

the laundry or the kitchen, since they “clearly had time for gossip”. “But really,” Lorraine turned all the way to her, “ That doctor reminds me of---“

“Unless you say Joel McCrea or Gary Cooper, I will have no idea...” Bitsy rolled back to the files. Heat rose in her cheeks.

“I’m not talking about that, you need to let a body get the whole thought out. He reminds me of the British soldiers, back in the war. See, there you don’t know everything.”

“The ones you took care of?”

“Well, yeah some of those, but I was more thinking about the young officers that worked in the hospital, not so much the doctors, well, some, but the supply men, the other support staff.”

“What about them?” Bitsy put her pen down, and considered Lorraine’s face. The spirited fire in her eyes had burned down to sentimental embers, softening her whole look.

“Bitsy, nobody in England ever heard of any ‘Jim Crow’, or at least they didn’t live it the way white folks do here. Can you imagine? I mean, it’s there, sure—we WACs were there to take over for the white nurses who got tired of tending to German POWs, so we were again doing what they wouldn’t—but somehow they looked at us like folks, at least the Brits did anyway.” Lorraine stopped, looked at Bitsy and tried again. “It’s hard to put into words... you’d show up for duty, and they’d look at you, surprised and then kind of curious and then, well, the war was still going, and there was a lot of work. No one had time or space to keep you from using the same privy, or sitting at the same table ,

or keeping the laundry separate, or any of the foolishness these Georgia folks can make up to do. We worked hard, we were cheerful, and we were treated according to our merit. Girl, we didn't know how to take it at first! I remember this one girl, Evonne Griggs, from Opelika, smart, but country as could be! We came into the mess tent, got our trays with Evonne leading the way. Most of the tables had a seat here and there, but there weren't enough seats to sit together. Evonne looks and looks until this man, I think he was enlisted but he could've been any rank, jumps to his feet, pulls out his chair and says to Evonne smooth as new leather 'Aye, Ma'am you can have my seat!' Well, you could have bought that girl for a penny! She just stood looking at the seat, all of us milling behind her, food getting cold until I tapped her on the shoulder and told her to go on and sit. All the other men on either side pushed down a seat or two until we all had room. We tried to be sharp about it but...I never will forget that."

"Seems like you would have told me that one before now." Bitsy twirled the pen in her fingers, trying to picture what Lorraine said. She didn't blame that Opelika girl not one bit for being frozen. She couldn't count the number of times she'd have to step off the sidewalk in downtown Ellenton or waited twice as long for an order at the Long store. The thought of a white man giving up a seat, she'd have stopped in her tracks too.

"Honey, I don't know." Lorraine began to replace the charts in their wire stand. "Maybe it's too hard to go back to a time when 'negro' wasn't put in front of everything. Maybe I'm scared to think about how quick I was to step back into 'my place' once I got home. But that doctor---"

"Doctor Carter."

“Yeah, that Doctor Carter puts me in mind of those times.” Lorraine finished the files and gazed off, unfocused.

“I know that look!” Bitsy cocked her eyebrow at Lorraine.

“That’s a story for another time, Nurse Hall. Maybe.”

“Girl, you are too, too much. You ready to clock out? I can run you down to the dorm if so.” Bitsy walked down to the small closet that did duty as a breakroom, locker room, and coatroom and slid her time card from the wall rack and under the tiny clock until she heard the jarring clack of the time stamp. She squinted at in the dim light. “What time does the hall clock say?”

Lorraine looked over her shoulder. “Eleven o’two. What does the timeclock have to say?”

Bitsy turned it to her. “Ten fifty-seven.”

“Lord Jesus. I’ll put on my coat and wait it out. How you doing tonight, Ellen?” she nodded at a young girl who rushed in behind them, freckles dotting the bridge of her nose and tumbling over her cheeks. Ellen tore at the buttons of her cloth coat in front of her locker.

“Fine, Miss Webb, I’m sorry, but the trolley ran late.” A round woman at least twenty year older than all of them put together rounded the corner.

“I can attest to that. *This* time.” The woman narrow her eyes at Ellen. Ellen turned away.

“Don’t worry, y’all. Father Time over there is eating up the minutes.” Lorraine stood with her coat on, card in hand.

“One day, ladies, I am going to leave this aggravation behind.” Maud had been naming that one day for as long as they could remember.

Lorraine scrutinized the tiny clock again, then punched her time card. “Ten fifty-nine.” she read. “I guessed I fixed for you. Night ladies.” She took Bitsy’s arm and they walked to the back stairs.

“Looks like Castle’s been gone for some time.” Bitsy remarked as they passed her office, dark and locked twice.

“Goodnight Nurse Hall,” a voice called behind them. They turned to see Dr. Carter in front of Ward B, watching them go from behind his clipboard, “and, ah we haven’t met, Nurse?”

Lorraine unhooked her arm from Bitsy’s and stepped toward him. “Webb, Nurse Webb, Doctor.”

He’d met her in two steps. She extended his hand, and he took it. Bitsy’s color rose once again. “I’m Doctor Carter. I believe on East’s staff now.”

Lorraine dropped his hand. “You’re not an intern?” She stepped back.

He dropped his head and smiled sheepishly. “Oh!” said Bitsy before she could think not to. He glanced at her.

“No, I’ve been hired on staff. You are stuck with me, I’m afraid. Well, goodnight.” He stepped back into Ward B.

Lorraine recovered first and steered Bitsy down the stairs. “Staff on East? I told you, this one is different, girl!”

Bitsy allowed herself to wonder, just this one time.

CHAPTER FOUR

FRANNY

IT was an hour after regular lunchtime at Schofield Normal School. Franny had just been released from her Advanced Biology class, when a young man dressed carefully in a white oxford shirt black pants and a herringbone jacket appeared at her elbow.

“Boy, you must be hungry after using all that brain power, Miss Francine. Let’s go on over to the commissary before you got to head for home.” Franny sighed.

“OK Sam, I’ll go with you, but only for a bit, hear? I need to catch the bus on out home.” Sam grinned as she let him guide her by the elbow across the courtyard to the large cafeteria that took up the first floor of the boys lodging at Schofield. They glided past a handful of dorm residents who were out smoking by the back door, where they would stay until a teacher in search of coffee would question the use of their leisure time and shoo them away to more productive pursuits. For now, they hailed Sam with their eyes, silently congratulating him on snagging Francine, a widely regarded beauty, accelerated student, and a demon on the basketball court. They knew enough not to say anything but “hello”.

Once inside and settled, Francine watched Samuel Kettle, her newly minted beau, glide back to join her at the table in the back of the commissary. She had also watched him charm the cashiers, though she was quite sure he didn’t know it, and gathered most

of what was piled on his tray was purchased with a wink and a promise. Well, if he thought she would put her lips on anything he offered, he had another think coming...

“Look what I got for my baby!” Sam slid the tray to rest in front of her.

“Samuel Kettle, you ain’t got no more sense than a rock, if you think I’m going to eat any of that.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s not paid for, for one thing. And I’d like to know how you got it without handing Clarice any money. No, on second thought, I do not want to know.” Francine got up and went to the counter.

“May I have a chocolate soda, please?” The counter girl looked at her a minute and then made soda. She caught Franny’s eye and pumped an extra squirt of syrup in the glass. The counter girl looked at the cashier, and over at Sam as she handed Franny the finished soda. Franny smiled the smallest of smiles then tossed her head and approached the register to pay.

“How you doin’, Clarice?” Franny met her eyes.

“Just fine, Franny, you?” Clarice regarded her warily.

“I’m feeling fine, thank you for asking. Now, how much do I owe you?” knowing full well the cost.

“Twenty-five cents.” Clarice held out her palm.

Franny smoothed a dollar on the strip of stainless steel between them then placed it firmly in Clarice’s hand. Clarice looked down at the bill then fixed her gaze firmly on the register. As she started to count out the change, Franny stopped her.

“No need, Clarice I trust you.” She slipped the quarters into her letterman sweater and walked back to the table, jingling the change as she went.

“Franny, baby, why you want to act like that? I had us covered.” Sam reproached.

“You did not, Samuel Kettle, have me covered nothin’. You can barter all you like with the likes Clarice Davis, but I don’t want any parts of your Romeo deals.”

“Franny, so what if them girls gave me a little something extra because I gave them some attention. That’s the way of the world. I gotta hold on to my nickels as best I can, so if I can get extra French fries or a coke with my magic grin, what’s the big deal? You ain’t got to pull out your money like that. Now folks think I don’t take care of you.”

“I’ll just bet if we go get a dictionary and look up “foolish”, there you’ll be looking out with your ‘magic grin’. I guess I have a bit more pride than you. And I am not a fool; you think that food is free? You just gonna have to pay for it somewhere down the line. And one last thing, you don’t take care of me, my daddy does that just fine. I may let you buy my lunch now and again, but I promise you, I can get my own at any time. Believe that.” She reopened her book,

“Oh, I believe it, all right.” He regarded his tray, sighed and scanned the lunchroom. Petey Barnes was sitting catty-corner to the doors that lead into the boys’ dormitory. He was unwrapping a sweet potato he brought from home, carefully spiraling the foil down as he ate it. It was a small potato and Petey was a large boy. Sam watched Petey while Franny watched Sam. After a bit, Sam picked up the tray and walked over to Petey’s table.

“Hey, Petey.”

“Sam.” Petey looked up at Sam, shifting himself closer to the door. Sam’s cheeks warmed. Back in the eighth grade, everyone remembered that Sam had been one of handful of kids that had set on Petey and others from the “backwoods”. Petey heard all about his homespun clothes, his broken down shoes, and the various reasons why he was so far behind his studies than the rest of the grade. Sam possessed a sharp, quick –on-your –feet wit and for years he had honed at Petey’s expense. Sam had grown up since then, Franny allowed, but she hadn’t forgotten. And neither, apparently, had Sam.

“Look here Pete, I uh, I guess my eyes were bigger than my stomach, so, I thought mebbe you’d help me out and take this sandwich off my hands.”

Petey studied Sam’s face then looked at the tray.

“Look, man, ain’t nothin’ wrong with it. We, I, don’t be playin’ round like we used to.” Franny, was all ears from her seat.

“Uh-huh...” Petey looked over the near empty tables at Franny. She half-shrugged. “Okay, Sam, I’ll help you out. Don’t like to see good food go to waste.” Petey took the sandwich, and eyed the cookie in waxed paper next to it. “ That oatmeal?”

“I believe so... you want it?”

“Only if’n you don’t.”

Sam slid the cookie and sandwich off the tray onto the table.

“Preciate it, Sam”

“No problem Petey, you helping me, remember?” Sam sidled back to his seat.

Franny eyes shone, just a little.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel better.” She closed her book and slipped in her tartan book bag.

“Glad you feel better. I got to go the rest of the day on an apple and--- what’s this mess? The beige mound he poked at had very little to distinguish itself.

“Looks to me like you got a cup of Miz Ella’s finest tapioca pudding. You enjoy that; I’ve got to get on home and see to it the Tessa starts her homework.” She shook out the back of her skirt and smoothed the front.

“Woman! You mean you made me give away a good meal, and you ain’t staying to keep me company while I eat what’s left? You a cruel one Francine.” He shook his head in mock disbelief.

Franny patted his head. “Aw, you gonna be all right. You got Petey and Clarice’ that’s all the company you need.” She turned to go. “But if you get lonely, you might could call me up after dinner and invite me to a show at Cassel’s on Saturday.”

“If your pappy lets you out, you mean.... I might could do that, yeah. Only, I ain’t so keen on them musicals, Franny.”

Franny shouldered her bag and headed to the door. “Twelve O’clock High is playing...” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Now that’s a woman!” Sam whistled at her retreating back.

She smiled to herself. She knew the way to man’s heart were his westerns.

Franny walked to the bus lanes. Sam, Sam, Sam. She hadn’t thought about Sam before the beginning of 11th grade any more than she considered a mosquito in the summer time; buzzy and irritating to distraction. If you let one get close, you’d get a

persistent, itchy reminder of his presence for weeks afterward. Sam and his antics and teasing buzzed around her and got swatted away until this year, when they found themselves in the same history class.

CHAPTER FIVE

OLLIE

Ollie picked up a newspaper on the way to work. Today was a bus day, it didn't look like rain and he had nothing to do when the final whistle blew. For a nickel, he could slow down for a minute or two and read the paper fresh and awake, while someone else drove him around. This was one of his pleasures, public transportation, though he'd owned a car for years. To settle in a seat, rigid or plush, and ride anywhere, usually driven by a white man, was a possibility he couldn't have dreamed up himself. One day, he may even relax enough to truly enjoy the trip.

The bus pulled up to his stop on time and Ollie chose a seat in the middle of the bus, on the aisle, legs turned slightly out, as usual. Here, he could have eyes on the entire bus with a slight turn of his head in either direction. He could see anything coming.

He scanned the headlines of the front page. As usual, there were very few stories that caught his interest. Truman offering to help white folks all over Europe, that figures, South Africa making it legal for Jim Crow to live throughout the land. Poor bastards. Black people forever catching hell. Nothing new. But... at the bottom of the page a small square column talked about the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission was looking for a site like what it already had in Sandford, and they were looking for another place to build a plutonium plant to gain more legs in the arms race. Ollie scoffed to himself; how many ways would these fools find to "protect" the country from some other people clear across

two oceans? Each body stockpiling things that would blow a hole in the world and nobody be left to admire it. But it would be done, of that you could be sure. According to this they were looking for a big enough parcel to build on, looking in Tennessee, Delaware, and well, now, South Carolina. Ollie couldn't find specifics, but he knew they couldn't use anywhere in the low country. There were spaces out by Florence, Orangeburg. Shoot, they could even go out by Daddy and them.

It was a ten block cab ride that kept him from going further north 15 years ago. He was supposed to meet a distant cousin of his mother's who'd got a bead on a job, and he'd no earthly idea how to get to him. He had asked another resident of the

CHAPTER SIX

BITSY

Bitsy drove carefully up the gravel road to her sister's house. Helen was on her porch waiting, her arms wrapping her blush sweater tight to her body. That girl keeps cold. Bitsy hurried out of the car so she could bustle her in out of the weather. This year, fall had hurled itself at summer, leaving no traces of sweet warmth poking through the bright chill. The leaves changed quickly and shed quickly and the gray settled into bones, into corners, into moods.

“Girl you crazy? Standing out in cold with nothing but that thin sweater on!”

Bitsy herded Helen into the house and shook off her own coat. The heat from the new gas furnace Lewis had installed enveloped her as soon as she closed the door. The front room was toasty and welcoming, to be sure, but Bitsy saw a corner of her sister's kitchen table, and it was enough to sweep away all the gray outside. Helen had draped one of Mama's white lace napkins crossways so that the edge of the lace dipped down into pert triangles. She followed Helen in to the kitchen. “Well, what have we here?” She stopped in front of her usual seat to admire Helen's handiwork. She had set out two of the china cups from the set Bitsy and Ellis gave her and Lewis when they got married. The delicate cream-colored cups were edged in gold, even along the curved handles, and the gold brought out the deep blue of roses that spread over the cup like spilled water. They stood expectantly in their matching saucers. Four pecan tartlets were laid on a blue milk glass

plate; Bitsy guessed that these were “sneakies” from Miss Geri’s tea party earlier this week. Next to these was a shallow basket lined with one of Helen’s everyday linen napkins piled high with fat golden biscuits. A jar of Helen’s own jam stood at the ready along with a saucer of palest yellow butter. Helen stood across from her and beamed for a quick second, then pulled out a battered green upholstered chair.

“Sit down Bitsy, you act like you never seen a set table before!”

“Well, I’m just confused, I thought I’d just walked into Miss Geri’s kitchen, it looks so fancy.” She sat down and put a biscuit on the blue milk glass plate before her. “By your leave?” she arched an eyebrow at her sister.

“Go on with you!” Helen laughed, “And you’d best not fill up on them biscuits before you taste those tarts. Seemed like every time I turned, that woman was stepping on my heels. It never occurs to her to offer me the leftovers of the food I spend two or three days fixin’. No lord, every crumb is to be wrapped up and stashed in that Deepfreeze. I tell you, aside for some venison, I ain’t never seen them take anything outta there.” She nibbled one of the pastries then turned to bring the coffee pot off of the stove.

“So what did you hear that got you waiting on the porch, catching your death?”

“You won’t even believe this.” Helen poured each of them a cup. “Miss Barbara was holding court in that parlor. She kept telling Miss Geri and them that they needed to get their husbands in line.”

“What? What in the world?” Barbara Castle hadn’t been close to an altar as everyone in Ellenton, white or colored knew. How would she know from getting anyone ‘in line’?

“I know, that’s what I thought! But it weren’t about keeping or losing them, it was about money, pure and simple. I suppose she knows something about that. That’s why they were hanging on her every word.”

Bitsy leaned forward. Nurse Barbara Castle was much more likely to talk about having money, not so much about how anyone else could get any. “Was she selling something? Or her daddy, was he selling something?”

“No, not exactly. But listen, she was saying that they all needed to get their husbands to “prepare for something big”. Helen dropped her voice down low at this, and Bitsy laughed as she narrowed her eyes and hunched her shoulders just like Nurse Castle.

“Girl, you need to quit. “ she said , wiping her eyes. “ That woman is always acting like life is a play.” “‘Something big’ could be her daddy stocking Borden’s instead of Pet milk.”

“I don’t think so. They were all chirping in that parlor, but as soon as I stepped through the door they clamped up. So I hung around the breezeway when they started back up. I think someone is coming in and offering to buy land, lots of it.”

“What? Why? Another lumber company?” Bitsy put down her cup.

“Bitsy, how do I know, I done told you they kept tight so long as I was in there with them. And you can only hear so much behind a door.” Helen drew her sweater around her again, though nary a draft was in the house. “I tell you what though, they don’t want us to know nothing about this, and that’s never a good sign.”

“No you definitely right about that.”

“This is what I thought was curious: some of them ladies weren’t from Ellington. Miss Best’s cousin from over their at Meyer’s Mill was there, and some woman talked like she was from Barnwell. And there were two or three that were dressed like they were just out of the cut.”

“The cut? In Geri Sandy’s parlor? Something must be wrong with your eyes, Helen. Geri Sandy and Barbara Castle would say hello to a dog in the street before they’d sit down with farmer’s wives from the cut.”

“You think I don’t know that! Ain’t nothin’ wrong with my eyes, I can see and you best believe I can smell, and it smells like money. I told Lewis about it soon as I got home that night.”

“And what he say?” Ellis need to know too, for sure, and she wanted to have a little more than “something big” to tell him.

“He say it go right along with talk he hear at the yard. Only he thinks it ain’t another company, because he heard that Castle was called out to Columbia to talk with big men up there. Whatever it is, white folks there get closed mouth whenever they think a Negro can hear something,” Helen moved the cup of milk over without Bitsy asking for it and jiggled the sugar spoon up and down. Bitsy studied her sister. She’d started working for Geri Sandy once Lewis started school for pin money and to put something away for her son’s education, but for that, Helen would stay at home. White folks made her nervous, Bitsy knew. How much of this talk was driven by that?

“Well, I’ll ask at the hospital. Sometimes folks get careless, start talking around us as though we were part of the furniture. Someone else might have more.”

“Be careful if you do that. You mess around and ask the wrong somebody and before you know it...” Helen trailed off.

“I got sense, Helen. I know who to ask.” Bitsy sat back in her chair.

“I know you do, just be careful....Let’s talk about somethin’ else now. Before you go, you be sure to take some of these biscuits home. Lord knows your bunch don’t get good biscuits too often, unless Franny make time. “ She arched her eyebrows as she sipped her coffee.

“You ain’t too grown for me to cut a switch for your sassy self!” The sisters laughed and teased the rest of the afternoon away..

At home, Bitsy went through the girls’ homework, at the kitchen table with her usual scrutiny. Franny had 2 careless mistakes,

14, or 16?”

“No ma’am...” Franny slunk back down in her chair.

“Then, I may be new to this, but I don’t see how you learn from your mistake unless you root it out yourself. You think a professor in college is gonna sit with you, hold your hand until you get it? No, ma’am, he will not. But you won’t even get there to find out if you sit here ‘sizing’ instead of getting your lesson.”

She fixed her daughter with a stare until Franny bleated a “Yes’m.” she let that one go. These kids have no idea what the world has in store for them. Blacks, and particularly black girls can’t afford the luxury of mistakes. Franny better learn that here at the kitchen table then out there where people be looking for her to slip-up in one way or the other. Time spent looking for the math mistake (and she was right, she didn’t add the

second line into the equation) meant less time spent mooning over some boy or falling in love with herself in the mirror. She turned back to Tessa's work. "Mat looks good, finally." Bitsy flipped through the sheath of papers. "Tessa, girl, you need to work on your handwriting! Where's your spelling?" Tessa pulled out a ruled sheet from the pile and presented it to her mother. "You know them all?"

"Yes, ma'am." the child said, looking at the sheet.

"Franny, this true?"

Franny looked up from her book. "Yes, but she stumbled on 'opportunity'."

Tessa shot daggers at her sister, but Bitsy ignored that. "Well?"

"O-P-P-O-R-T-U-N-I-T-Y, opportunity... and I didn't stumble before, I was thinking about it."

"Well, that's fine, Tessa. And your sister was just making sure you were sure. Off to bed with you. Be sure to wrap your hair."

Tessa went first to Ellis out on the porch to deliver good night kisses. Her mother watched her go, then turned to the sink to rinse out her coffee cup. She knew she was hard on her daughters. She needed to be. No matter how much money she and Ellis squirreled away at the end of each day, they would still be black and female to boot.

CHAPTER SEVEN

FRANNY

Miss Trevor's black leather heels clicked up and down the rows of students in US history passing back papers, sifting comments on their desks with them. "Well done, Miss Parker." Mr. Jones, much improved, now that I know you what you can do, this is what I expect." "Miss Fields, looks like you've never met a comma you didn't like. Before you submit your term paper, kindly go over it with Mrs. Burns first." "Miss Hall--" she stopped to catch Franny's eye, "would you be sure to stop by my desk before you go on to your next class."

"Yes, ma'am." Franny covered her surprise as best she could. She scanned her paper. There was a huge "A+" in red grease pencil in the upper right-hand corner, so that wasn't why Miss Trevor asked her to stay behind. The last twenty minutes of class dragged after that, and instead of taking notes about the effects of the Great War stateside, she listed possible reasons Miss Trevor wanted to talk in shorthand: she'd noticed Sam and her holding hands, she needed volunteers for the next assembly, maybe Miss Trevor had heard back from that essay contest she had them all enter last week...that last one seemed unlikely. It had to be about Sam.

Franny looked over at Sam sitting three rows over. He was slumped across his desk, twirling a pencil between his index and middle finger, not a bit worried about paying attention. Franny'd just bet he'd got a big red "C" on his paper, and no wonder.

Sam Kettle paid more attention to his clothes than his books . But they sure did look nice. Today he sported a better yellow dress shirt collars and cuffs peeking out of his black and tan hounds tooth sport coat. Sam looked over at her, and finding her staring, broke into a delighted grin, and immediately cut the fool, tossing the pencil high in the air with his left hand when Miss Trevor turned to the board, and catching it behind his back with his right. Irene-Ann Davis, sitting behind him, stifled a giggle. Franny bowed back over her notebook. No need to make things any worse if that was why she was in trouble.

Never in her life had time crept so slowly. Whenever she managed to steal a glance at the clock she swore the minute hand had slunk back, and she spun threads of possible consequences of real and imagined doings, until by the time the bell rang, her chest and throat were tight and dry.

She hung back, waiting for the room to empty. She cut a hard look at Sam and he sauntered out cocking his head to the left so she'd know where to meet him, but she barely paid him any mind. Franny squared her shoulders and approached Miss Trevor's desk.

The teacher was scratching in her gradebook. Franny stood a discreet pace away and waited. "Thank you for your patience, Miss Hall, just give me a moment." She ran her pen down the column, laid down her pen and then regarded Franny. "Well, Miss Hall, have you any idea why I held you back? What class do you have 7th period?"

Franny swallowed hard. It wasn't as if Miss Trevor hadn't ever looked at her; she always spoke to her and the rest of her students in the halls and in the courtyard as the kids spilled out to the buses. And Miss Trevor was one of those teachers that made a

point of looking her students in the eye during class and insisted that they all do the same. But this was just the two of them and Miss Trevor's eyes burned with narrow intensity. Still she managed a 'No, ma'am', and let her know that she was expected in Dr. Gaines' Advanced Math class.

"Ah, well, he won't mind for this." Miss Trevor stood up and folded her arms over her chest. Even with the whiff of dread in the air between them, Franny drank in the soft elegance of Miss Trevor's silk blouse, the folds of cream finely embroidered with dove gray thread. The thread matched her eyes. No one dressed as smartly as Miss Trevor did, and most teachers dressed better than the white folks in Ellenton.

"Miss Hall, you are hands down one of the best students I've had this year." This was good, but Franny's chest was still tight. Was there a 'but,' in this? If she did talk about Sam, that would be it for them. She hadn't realized how much she needed for Miss Trevor to think well of her until this moment, but she'd always been aware that if anything troublesome about Sam got back to her parents, that she'd cut him loose faster than you could say 'Jack Robinson'. Now she was nervous and sad.

"And as such, it occurs to me that you have a promising future, as long as you are planning for it." She looked over the rim of glasses at Franny. "Are you?" Those eyes expected something very specific from Franny.

"I,huh, well, yes. I want to go to college." Now she was another kind of nervous.

"That's good to hear. What kind of college? Two or four year?"

"Umm..." Franny didn't know. She knew Mama had gone to school, but not for how long.

“Do you have a mind of what you want to study?”

“Um...nursing?” ‘College had been as far as she’d gotten. Still, that was further than most of her classmates, especially the girls. Most were looking for who would be best to meet at the alter the month after graduation.

“Is that a question, or a cogent thought?”

“Ma’am?”

Miss Trevor sighed and swept her glasses from her face, placing them on the desk. “Franny, I see girls like you traipse in and out of Schofield’s doors, smart, capable girls who work hard and have good sense. But most don’t give a thought to what they are going to do after graduation, and before you know it, life overtakes them and they get stuck in whatever they can get, rather than preparing for what they might want.”

Franny stood silent.

The teacher touched her shoulder. “Look, Franny, I want you to start thinking about where you see yourself in five years. If it’s working in a shop, or married with babies, so be it. But maybe you can see something else, like your mother did. At any rate, once you’ve thought about it, you might stop by Mrs. Robert’s room and tell her, see how she can help you.”

Mrs. Roberts taught home economics and served as an informal career counselor. She had a pin board full of memo notes listing jobs around Aiken, but she wasn’t widely known for helping people get into college. At least not to Franny’s mind.

“Yes, ma’am and thank you.” Franny took a step toward the door. “Miss Trevor?”

“Yes, Miss Hall?”

“Did you always want to be a teacher?”

Miss Trevor fixed Franny with her grey eyes for so long, Franny was afraid she'd overstepped, but the woman sighed and addressed her glasses as she worried the end of the temple holder. “No, Franny, I guess not. I truly had no inkling of what I wanted to do at your age. I liked school, I liked it very much, but I had no idea of what to do about it once I graduated.”

Franny tiptoed back to her desk. “So how did you get to be a teacher?”

“Well, a neighbor of mine was home visiting her mother one Thanksgiving and asked my sister and I if we'd thought about pressing on with our studies. She was, as it turned out, the secretary of a dean at Edward Waters College. Have you heard of it?”

“No ma'am.”

Miss Trevor smiled and shook her head. “I wouldn't think so. It's a tiny little school in Jacksonville. At any rate, she told our parents that they were looking for students like us, and that we could get scholarships and loans to pay for our two years there. And there we were. It was a two year school, so there were only a few programs offered.” Miss Trevor looked out of the window as though she were sorting out what happened as she spoke. “I didn't want to be a nurse, and there weren't many jobs for colored secretaries, so I opted to be a teacher. Plenty of schools needed teachers.” She sighed once more, and then turned to Franny.

“Franny, you have better choices, despite what the world might tell you. Look at Dr. Evans.”

“Dr. Evans?” The name was vaguely familiar, but Franny only knew Dr. Green and Dr. Fredrick, the white and black doctors in Ellenton.

“Dr. Matilda Evans?” Miss Trevor pushed her chair and stood up in indignation. “I swear you kids...you walk by her portrait every day. Don’t tell me you didn’t bother to read under the picture?”

Franny was about to answer, but Miss Trevor held up her manicured hand. “And please do not tell me, you thought it was Martha Schofield.”

“No ma’am. No, I do know, I just forgot. Matilda Evan’s graduated from Schofield, went to medical school and came back, well, came back to South Carolina, and started a hospital.” Franny paused. She was pretty sure that was right.

“Good girl, yes! She did all of those things, though you can’t find her name anywhere but here. My point is that you can make your own way just like she did. Only now you have a more direct path than Dr. Evans or I had. Think carefully and wildly, Miss Hall, about what you want, and maybe we can find a way to get you there. Here---“ She tore a small square of paper off the top of a pad on her desk and wrote a pass for her next class. “ Apologize to Dr. Gaines for me, and give me a report on your progress by Thursday. Off you go.”

“Yes, and thank you, ma’am.” Doctor Gaines? That was right, though, some teachers did call Mr. Gaines ‘Doctor’. And he smelled like Dr. Green’s office, but Franny was sure that wasn’t why. She scurried down the deserted hallway. Sam must have carried himself on to class as he should have. Her head swam with relief, with pride and with the enormity of possibility as she slipped into math class.

Franny swung right towards Mrs. Roberts's classroom instead of left like everybody else, eager to feel the late afternoon sun on their faces. The door was halfway open, but Franny knocked anyway, if for no other reason than to take a split second to consider what to say.

"Who's that?" Mrs. Roberts asked. She pulled the door wider and Franny saw that the teacher had her hat and purse laid out on the desk. "Oh, one of the Ellenton girls. Which one are you?" The woman looked Franny up and down with rheumy eyes.

"Franny Hall, ma'am I---" Franny wondered how she knew she was from Ellenton, but the woman cut off both speech and thought.

"How come I haven't seen you until now?"

"Ma'am? Miss Trevor just---" Had Miss Trevor already spoken to Mrs. Roberts about her?

"Miss Trevor? What does Miss Trevor have to do with your graduation requirements? You girls have to take Home Economics in order to graduate. A husband will only take so many batches of burned biscuits before he--, well never mind. Are you a sophomore, junior?" She began pinning on her hat.

"I'm a junior, ma'am, but I'm halfway through my senior year credits." Franny pulled back her shoulders. Maybe that would make this woman stop fussing with her hat long enough so that Franny could ask a question. It did, and once again Franny was regard with her cloudy eyes.

"Oh, well then, I imagine Miss Trevor sent you to talk about college. Good, good. Well, Miss...?"

“Hall, Franny Hall”

“Miss Hall, what’s today, Wednesday? Do you have a study period tomorrow or Friday?” The teacher opened a black leather bond appointment book.

“Yes ma’am, Friday I have third period study hall.”

“Hmmm...well, I’m teaching that period but, I’ll be able to keep watch over them from my desk here.” She looked past Franny. Franny glanced to where she was looking. The classroom was a bit bigger than the others in the school and Franny was surprised to see three small kitchens complete with ovens, stoves, sinks and even little counters lined up in three neat rows. The undersized versions still seemed sleeker than what they had at home. Maybe she’d enjoy this class next year. “I’m sure I can see the little fools before they burn the school down.” Or not. Mrs. Roberts wrote Franny’s name down in her big book. “All right , Hall, run along before you miss that bus.” Mrs. Roberts hooked her patent leather purse over her wrist as she waved Franny on. “We’ll chat on Friday. I try to beat the buses out of the parking lot so I can get home in time enough to fix dinner for Mr. Roberts, though I put my life in my hands with the these boys peel out of the parking lot like bats out of, well, never mind. See you promptly at 9:20, Hall.” The teacher sashayed out of the door. Franny had to admit that the woman moved quick for a woman of her size.

Franny didn’t know why she again felt a fluttery tightness to her stomach that evening during dinner. She wanted to talk about the two conversations she’d had with the two teachers with Mama and Papa but she didn’t know how to broach it. College was something she understood was expected, but she also understood that college cost money,

something that she hadn't considered before now. At sixteen, she understood about cost, and salary, and last year, Mr.—Dr. Gaines had taught them a little about bank accounts and interest and such, but money as a thing that could make plans a 'yes' or a 'no', was a notion she was just now understanding. So while Tessa, yammered on about what Lewis did or didn't do on the way to school, Franny picked at the peas and carrots that circled her piece of pot roast and tried to write out in her head how she would ask her parents about college. Or not.

Leave it to Mama who never missed a trick to cut into her thoughts. "Well, Miz Franny, I can't remember a night when you've been this quiet. Are you sick?" Mama's almond eyes seemed to read and then erase whatever Franny had written in her head. Franny opened her mouth, but Tessa butted in being 'helpful'.

"Oooh, I'll go get the castor oil!" Tessa jumped from her chair and scampered to the cabinet above the sink.

"Keep your seat, Miz Tessa, and let Franny answer." Papa pulled out Tessa's chair and point to where her seat should go.

Franny glanced at both her parents before holding her peas in regard. "I, well Miss Trevor wanted to talk to me after class..."

"What about? Are you getting your work in her class?" Her mother's gaze went from curious to concerned, and Franny could see the start of sparks. Mama did not play when it came to school. Better to cut to the chase.

"Yes, Mama, she wanted to talk to me about going to college." There.

“Oh, well, ok, and of course you’re going to college. You don’t skip a half a grade in school and hang out at home. What did she want to say?”

“She wants me to talk to Mrs. Roberts, who helps students with that, and I’m supposed to meet with her on Friday.”

“Well, that’s good. Why are you pushing around your food like someone’s fixin’ to take your birthday?” Papa wanted to know.

“I just, well, Miss Trevor talked about loans and I started thinking about money and I didn’t...” Up to now, Franny had been treading through the conversation like she was jumping stepping stones through a pond. But there was nowhere to jump from here.

“You didn’t what?” Mama held her fast in her gaze from across the table. This felt like a test she had not studied for at all.

“I hadn’t thought about the cost.”

A thick silence hung over their heads. The girls had never thought much about money, because Mama and Papa never discussed it in front of them except in a broad way: Money exists. We need it for things. We have it or we don’t. And that was it. The last time money was talked of was when Franny was trying to coax the last bit of Pearly Pink nail polish out of a bottle she’d bought at Woolworth’s in Augusta around Christmas last year. She’d had the idea that if she’d put the bottle up against the stove pipe for a couple of minutes, the polish would melt and she’d get at least one more coat out of the half a week’s allowance she’d spent. Instead the bottle exploded, sending tiny bits of glass shooting out from behind the stove. Mama was at work, but Papa was home and came running in from the yard ready to pounce or rescue, only to find Franny

frantically sweeping and Tessa cowering on the stairs to the loft. Once he pulled from his daughters what happened, he helped Franny collect the little bomb and throw away the evidence. Franny had mournfully dumped the last bits of Pearly Pink in the dustbin on the back porch, and Papa had followed behind, closing the heavy lid with a flourish.

“Miz Francine Louise Hall, if you ever need you some more fingernail polish, please let me know before you blow up my house. I will gladly give you the, how much did you pay for that again?”

Franny lifted her eyes to whisper “Thirty-five cents, sir.”

“Papa will do fine for now. Anyway, I will gladly give you the thirty-five cents. I warrant that’d be cheaper than replacing the kitchen. Go on now; make sure you got it all up before Mama gets home.” This was about the head and the tail of all of their discussions about money.

But here it was now, and though Franny’s cheeks burned hot, she raised her gaze to look at her parents. Well, looking at Papa was easier, but she could see Mama’s form.

Papa cleared his throat. “I thought all of this college business was decide next year?” Franny didn’t sense she’d upset him.

“I think you can start figuring out some things now, like where you might go and what you might study. Miss Trevor told me it’d be a good idea to think about it so I have a plan.” Franny still couldn’t fully turn her head to Mama.

“Planning for things is always a good idea.” Papa looked to Mama.

Mama scraped her chair closer to the table and Franny finally looked at her face. She couldn't tell a thing about what her Mama was thinking. She didn't *look* mad, but Franny knew not to trust that too much.

"Who is this Miss Trevor? What does she teach?" Mama opened a roll, but kept her eyes on Franny.

"History, Mama, American History."

"Uh-huh. I heard about her. She was the one refusing to teach from those old books from Aiken High, right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not the text book but the Negro History ones. She said they were inaccurate." Franny's heart beat faster. Was that a bad thing? "She brought her own books in and had us check them out like the library. We each had to write a report on a person, or an event and then read it to the class." All throughout that unit, Franny and her classmates had a feeling they were all doing something thrilling and dangerous, and they loved every minute. Even Sam turned in a decent report in on time. But sometimes the older folks didn't like even the whisper of risk.

"That's the one. What did you tell her?" Franny was caught full in Mama's stare.

"Uh, well, I told her I'd been thinking about it, but that I wasn't sure about what to study. She told me to go see Mrs. Roberts, because she helps with that." Franny had to look back down at her plate.

"Well, looks like you've got two days to think about it, Missy. Don't go in there unprepared." Mama passed the uneaten half of her roll to Papa, who took it and winked at Franny. Little by little Franny let the air that had caught in her chest out. Mama put

her plate in the sink and padded to her bedroom. “Girls, don’t forget about the dishes, and I don’t want to hear about letting that Dutch oven ‘soak’. Get some steel wool and clean it good. Franny,” Mama paused by her chair and tucked a loose hair back into Franny’s braid. “It might interest you and Miss Trevor to know that we’ve been ‘planning’ for some time now. Your job is to figure out where you want to go, you let Papa and me take care of the cost.” And with that, she went into the bedroom and closed the door. Franny left the rest of the breath out.

Later that night, after the dishes, Franny made a list of things she would like to do that might require college: nurse, teacher... What else? She thought of the people she knew and what they did. Most everyone did something you didn’t have to go to school for. Dr. Green and Dr. Evans had to go to school, but she didn’t think she wanted to do what a doctor did. All those people saying “Ahhhh” in her face, yuck! Not everybody brushed their teeth. Dr. Green’s wife answered the phone and typed the bills, but she didn’t know whether she had gone to school to do that. Plus, that looked kind of boring. Mrs. Dawes was a librarian at the school, and Franny was sure that keeping track of all those books had to have some schooling attached to it. That was something, librarian went on the list. It wasn’t long to be sure. She rolled it up and tucked it in her satchel. She’d go to the library at school for some more ideas. She mounted the stairs to the loft she shared with Tessa, still thinking.

Truth be told she knew more about what she wanted to look like than what she wanted to *be*, and on top of that, she had a notion of how she wanted other people to look at *her*. She loved the way the kids in the hall stood to the side when a teacher,

particularly Miss Trevor , tap-tap-tapped down the hall in their high-heeled shoes. Anyone could hear them coming and like magic, those shoes made even the laziest student straighten shoulders and smooth out creases. That's what she wanted, maybe not a teacher, but someone who made one straighten up just by walking by. She'd figure it out.

On Friday morning, Mrs. Roberts fanned the brochures out at the edge of her desk, looked at them and then looked squarely at Franny.

“Well?”

Franny shifted in her seat. The pamphlets were emblazoned with rich, strong colors: crimson and gold, blue and white, red, black and grey, gold and blue, and they beckoned to her. WELCOME!!! One declared, “The Pride of the Swift Growing South” declared another. Yet another displayed a row of serious young women dressed smartly in tailored suit jackets and mid-heel pumps, examples of “Being Your Best Self” according to the soft script slanted underneath the heels. That one was closest to her and Franny wanted so much to touch it, no, not touch it so much as fall into it, dressed in a sharp suit. She wanted that look they had, eyes uplifted and looking to the right. Whatever it was they saw, each woman seemed unsurprised, ready. Franny wanted to be ready too. But for what? She raised her gaze, thumb still on the brochure.

“There are so many!”

“Indeed there are. I, myself, matriculated from South Carolina State.” Mrs. Roberts pulled a deep maroon pamphlet from the middle of the fan, covering the suit girls. “They have a law school, a normal school, and I believe a nursing school, should

you want to follow in your mother's footsteps." Mrs. Roberts gave the pamphlet a loving brush before she pushed it to Franny. "You'd do well there, regardless of what you decide to study."

"What about this one?" Franny slid the "ready girls" brochure from under the SC State flyer.

Roberts fished for the glasses that dangled from a pewter and pearl chain around her neck and gave the paper the once over. "Ah ...this is Bennett, it's just over in Greensboro. Not too far from home. To be honest, I don't know much about it." The counselor snapped the folds open, startling Franny, and spread it out over her desk. "It's an all girl school, as you can see, and what else..." Roberts scanned the paper. She perched her glasses on the bridge of her nose.

Franny slid closer and twisted to see. More girls dressed nattily, peering through microscopes in a laboratory that looked as though it could swallow Schofield's lab twice. There was another photo of a teacher standing in front an auditorium full of pin-curled, crimped, pixie heads.

"This looks like a promising place." she ventured. Roberts never looked up.

"I suppose so. Franny, do you know what you want to study?"

Franny opened her mouth, but Roberts sped past the question. "You see here, these degrees all lead to teaching. Are you interested in teaching? You've mentioned it."

Franny sat motionless for a moment. She had spent an hour in the library, looking at "career" books, but most of them required skills, vocations that many people she knew were already training for at Schofield, like beauticians or secretaries. She'd taken enough

typing and shorthand classes to get a job in an office now if she wanted. She wanted more than that.

Roberts's glasses had slipped down her nose. She scrutinized Franny for a moment until Franny looked up from her shoes. "I, I hadn't made a decision yet..."

Roberts leaned closer to Franny's chair. Franny could smell the heavy artificial lavender of her perfume. "Well, Franny, look, college cost quite a bit of money." She pulled the maroon pamphlet from under the others. "South Carolina State is a state school, and as it happens, has just received some money. You could go there without spending too much money while you decide what you want to study."

Franny shifted in her seat. She wanted to tell Roberts that she wanted to look like the Bennett girls without sounding silly or vain. Franny had only seen that "ready" look in a few women, Mama, sometimes, Miss Harvey her English teacher, and of course Miss Trevor, but also the women she saw in Augusta on Saturdays when Mama took them shopping. Franny listened for the clack-clack of these women's heels as they strode through the aisles of Belk's head high, offering no apologies for taking up space. Franny would look at their faces, cheeks powdered, lips lined and colored in with pinks, and mauves, and the occasional thrill of fire-engine red, and see their eyes set on something Franny couldn't yet see. Roberts, in her crepe rubber soled shoes and her grey plaid boxy suits, would have no idea what she was talking about.

"I understand." Franny looked at the Bennett girls. "But I wouldn't mind being a teacher."

“Well, that is certainly an option. But I heard you are doing very well in Miss Trevor’s American History class. Have you thought of studying law? “

“No ma’am. Do you mean go to law school?”

Roberts pushed back a little from her desk as she laughed. “Well, that would be a sight. Do you know how long it takes to go through law school? No, my dear, I was thinking about a clerk. There are a few colored lawyers in Aiken and Barnwell, and I think you only need two years of school to be hired. How does that sound?”

“It sounds fine ma’am, but my parents are set on me going to a four year college. Isn’t Bennett a four year school?”

“Yes, yes it is, but it’s also a private school, and they tend to be more expensive than state schools.”

That was the second time she mentioned money. Well, there it was. “Miss Roberts, my parents have told me that they will pay for me to go to school, even up north if I like.” Franny stood up, and turned toward the desk. She wasn’t the least bit shamed in the liberties she was taking with the truth. If they had talked more, maybe Mama and Papa would have said just that. Point was, Mrs. Roberts didn’t know either. “My I take this?” Roberts waved her permission. She carefully folded back to its original size. “I will talk to my parents when I get home. Thank you for your time.”

Sam was in the main hallway pretending to read the girls’ basketball schedule. She walked past him toward her chemistry class slowing her pace so that he could catch up to her.

“So which school you pick, Miss Professor?” He glided his left arm lightly around her shoulders. She bent her knees a quarter of an inch and spun to his right side.

“You know better than that, Kettle. I’m not missing the movie on Friday because you trying to be Mister Smooth. “

“Ok, I got you.” He slipped his hands deep in his gabardine trousers. “So what did old Roberts have to say? She going to help you make it in the big city?”

“Is Greensboro the big city?”

“Oh, one of the biggest!”

“Well, there’s a school up there that I’ve taken to.” She started to tell him why, but even explaining to Sam who knew from big talk, might not know how to take her reasoning. She was sure she wouldn’t bear to hear anyone laugh or scold her for her notions.

“Professor Hall got her mind made up and pushing up and on, you watch.” He smiled as she slipped her wrist around his. “She going to leave this all behind goes on girl!”

Franny stopped two doors away from her classroom. She looked up at Sam, her chest and filling with roaring water, helpless to release what was in her heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FRANNY

The wooden box was full of shampoos, hairsprays, tin boxes of hairpins, rollers and endpapers, but Franny only needed two things, the red and blue jar of Dax Pressing Oil and the black iron tiny toothed comb. She checked the box to make sure nothing was out of place, then pushed it back to its position, peering at it crouched on the faded oriental rug to be sure it appeared untouched, though she'd have to replace the comb and the oil to complete the whole mission.

She padded back into the kitchen, and glanced at the clock. She had about an hour if not more before either of her parents would darken the door and about thirty minutes before Tessa'd slam the screen door as she tumbled into the kitchen. She could handle Tessa, and maybe even Papa, but if Mama caught her in the middle of pressing her hair, well, she didn't want to think about that, she needed all the nerve she could muster.

Just to be sure, Franny read the instructions on the jar of hair oil while the hot comb heated up on the back of the stove. In front of the comb, a pot of pigeon peas simmered, the onion and fat back seasoning them almost covering up the thick smell of years of heated oil and singed hair that filled the room. "Apply desired amount to hair before styling. Ideal for use with a hot iron." A whole lot of nothing, no measures, no advice no diagram. Franny looked at the handle of the comb for a little bit. No, she could do this and in fact she would have to do this, once she went off to school. Nancy Martin

bragged all the time about the burns she always gets at the nape of her neck because she “can’t show up at school like some of y’all, looking like a bush-baby, thinkin’ that all that grease is laying’ y’all’s hair back...” and Nancy was a known fool; it couldn’t be that hard. Franny’s ears burned though, just as they had when she heard Martin braying about hair in the commissary that day.

Franny went to the side kitchen window and shoved open the heavy shutter to get some of the tell-tail odor out , then went to fetch her mother’s vanity mirror, again being very careful to leave Mama’s dresser almost like she left it. She propped the mirror up on a couple of her text books and arranged a tea towel and a glass of cold water where she could reach them. She parted her hair down the middle and scooped out a dollop of hair grease about the size of a quarter and worked it into one side of her hair from roots to tips, trying her best to move her fingers like Mama’s on the special occasions she would press Franny’s hair. Easter, her baptism, last year’s dance. But Mama’s idea of special, wasn’t the same as Franny’s ; on picture day Franny had to brush her hair hard and braid it behind her ears so she wouldn’t look like a six year-old instead of the sixteen year-old that she was. When she left for the bus, she let the braids hang down her back as usual, though Mama still gave her a look as she passed through the kitchen, noticing that Franny had parted her hair to the side, instead of the middle. Thankfully, Mama didn’t say a word and Franny dashed to the restroom before the first bell to pin the braids into a half-halo. She’d spent a few precious seconds staring at herself in the mirror. She was face to face with the wisp of who she might be in five years, the pulled back hair revealing high cheekbones, long heart shaped lips and her dark eyes, deep and bright looking ahead to,

who knew what. She wanted to be that woman. Once she got to her first class, and certainly as she waited outside the gymnasium, she deflated at the sight of the girls in her grade that not only had their hair pressed, but marceled! And wearing lipstick to boot. Grace Culver had a cascade of pin-curls that fell softly over her left eye, the curls on the right swept up by a tortoise shell comb. Maggie Brown had on powder as well as lipstick, and her hair hung to her collar in soft waves. Her girlfriend, Joan Mallard, had made a fuss over her pinned up braids, but it was all she could do to smile when it came her turn to sit on the cold metal stool. Facing the photographer, she pulled her shoulders back and faked it.

Now she imagined what she might look like with her hair soft and ripply, what Sam might say when he saw it. She shivered a bit and then reached for the hot comb. It was solid and heavy in her hand. Franny could see the smoke seeping from the iron in the mirror and she hesitated, holding the iron inches from her head, feeling the heat from the teeth on her scalp, the handle almost too hot to hold. She steadied her hand and pulled the comb through her hair section by section. She watched her thick mane fall into shiny tendrils around her face. She soon mastered a rhythm, pinning the un processed hair away from the area in which she worked, loosening it as the comb reheated, all as she stared at her transformed reflection in the small mirror. She lost track of time. A loud smack across the kitchen pulled her out of her trance, and she dropped the comb. It hit her ear, her shoulder and came to rest on the wooden floor, leaving a mark wherever it hit. Franny yelped in surprised and indignant pain, snatched up the comb from the floor and burned her fingers in the bargain. She managed to toss the comb in the sink. What was the noise?

She hadn't heard either the truck or the car turn into the driveway, and Tessa had no business at the side of the house. The window. Franny hadn't fixed the latch between the frame and the hinges fast and the shutter had swung shut, almost shut, anyway. She pulled it open, pushed the prop latch until it clicked and slunk to the ice box to chip some ice to minister to her hurts. Leaning against the sink she ran her left hand through her hair. There was a small patch at the back of her left ear that needed smoothing and she'd be done. She looked at the clock. The iron was cold, though, and would take a bit more time to heat up, and she still had to braid her hair up before Tessa came home. Franny didn't have time. She knew she couldn't lie to her sister and say that Mama'd given her permission, even if Tessa believed her, she couldn't hold water, and would surely bring it up at dinner. She'd have to bribe her with something.

Just as she'd dried off the comb and placed it back on the stove, she heard tires on the drive. She snatched the comb from the stove and wrapped it in the tea towel, grabbed the oil and the mirror and started for her parents' bedroom. She set the mirror back on the dresser, pulled out the box and put the pomade back in the center then licked her index finger and tested the comb. Still hot! She wrapped it back in the towel and ran on tiptoe out of the bedroom and to the stairs. She'd hide it under her bed and then...what? She couldn't think of a time of the evening when she could slip into the bedroom without cause. It didn't matter now though, she had to make everything look as normal as... Franny stopped. She hadn't heard anybody on the porch steps. She took the stairs to the loft lightly, and crossed the room softly to peer out from the little window. Mama and Papa were in the drive next to Mama's car talking low. Franny leaned closer to the

window, straining to hear their conversation. She couldn't even get a snatch of a word, and stepped closer still until she remembered the creaky floorboard just under the window. As quiet as they were, they'd surely hear that. She slipped over to the vanity, picked up her brush and swept her hair up then quickly braided it down into a single rope, Mama and Papa still hadn't come in the house. She looked toward the window but instead tucked the comb, still wrapped in the tea towel, in the corner of her side of the closet. She crept downstairs, tended to the peas then pulled the big bag of rice off the larder shelf, rinsed it twice, and set a pot of water next to the peas to boil. All the while she worked, she kept an eye on the door. She examined the scorch mark on the floor and gave it a swipe with a damp rag which did nothing. It was not going away.

Grover finished the bus route early, half of the kids along Silver Bluff road were out with some sort of cough, and so he got to skip five stops. Franny opened the door to a full hour of solitude before Tessa would get home. One glorious hour! She ran up to the bedroom, and kicked off her school shoes. She shed her wool skirt and her midi blouse straightaway, tossing them to the bed then pulled on her faded pink jersey pullover and her dungarees, what Mama still referred to as her "play clothes". She'd get everything she was supposed to get done started so she could squeeze every minute out of empty-house time she could. Look after dinner, start on her American History, sort the laundry- by the time she'd finished, Sam would probably be home. Her hands shook just a tiny bit as she hooked her skirt on a wooden hanger and buttoned up her blouse. He'd be sure to remember the signal, but she felt kind brazen calling up a boy's house even if she was hanging up before anyone picked up. Brazen. Franny smiled a little.

She lined her shoes on the floor of the closet, taking care to keep them clear of Tessa's jumble of Mary janes and old tennis shoes. The girl had three pairs of shoes but it looked like a mountain of church-drive castoffs. Franny rocked back on her heels and reached for the closet door, then sighed and crouched back down to sort her sister's shoes. It just irked her to see the straight line end in a pile of foolishness. She set the last pair, white Easter slippers Tessa maybe could slide two toes into aligned to the closet wall, when she heard tires crunching the rocks in the drive. Who would be driving up to the house at this time of day?

She slipped over to the window tuck under the eaves of the house to look down in the drive. Papa's truck swung up close to the porch. The driver's side door creaked open and Franny got a bird's eye view of his brown felt hat. She grinned; how many times did she and Tessa toss little bits and pieces out the window trying to hit the brim of his hats? They'd squeal and hide behind the curtains when he'd glare up in playing at confusion and outrage.

"Who that pelting me with stuff?" he'd growl, shading his eyes and pretending to search the sky. "Nasty crows, ain'tcha got nothin' better to do? Like studying?" The girls would burst with strangled giggles. Later that evening they'd find whatever they'd thrown down on Papa in odd places: a hairpin straddling the handle of Tessa's cup, a penny doll standing in the soap dish, and whoever found it would giggle all over again.

Franny looked around for something to drop now. Papa popped in and out of the house when he worked the shop and although she'd have to find another time to phone up Sam, she wouldn't mind spending time with Papa before Mama came from work and

Tessa got off the bus. The passenger door swung open and Franny saw the top of Mama's blue cloche. She stopped. Why was Mama home this time of day?

Her parents' voices rose up to the window, piercing the quiet. "---don't take it that way, Ellis..." Mama's words sounded like a cushioned push.

Papa stopped. He pressed into his hip socket, like he did sometimes when the weather was wet and shivery, but he didn't turn back to Mama.

"Ain't but one way to take it baby. I just signed away seventy something years of family blood. You want me to dance? Naw." He made his way up the stairs and into the house. Franny stayed fixed to the spot, watching her Mama's blue clad head.

Mama had not closed the door. She appeared to not move at all, motionless, with one foot still on the running board. Franny's chest tightened. Why wasn't Mama going to check on Papa?

Tessa

(chapter about school, responsibility for Lewis, walking the roundabout route and a truck, again full of white men, one of whom she recognizes as Mr. Peter Castle, daughter of Barbara, defacto mayor. Tessa observes but does not tell, not wanting anymore scrutiny from the family)

CHAPTER NINE

ELLIS

Every time, every single time Ellis opened or closed the clattering shutters that secured Ellenton Metal Works, his chest expanded an inch. Most times he grinned, just a little. A colored man with a hopping business, a colored man with one leg and a hopping business. Hopping. Better to hop than to shuffle.

Lately, though, Ellis counted the times he drew the shutters, and if he was counting, he wasn't grinning. Lately, each time he clicked the tumbler of the lock in place, he felt something sour in the bottom of his stomach. Where would Ellenton Metal Works be if there were no more Ellenton?

"Hey, Ellis, how's it with you this morning?"

"Aw, I ain't doin' much but killin' time and groceries. How things with you, Russell?"

The elder man rocked back on his heels and smiled. "Aw, you know Ellis same old same old. And you know I know that you ain't got time to kill. What's the good word?"

"Ain't none that I can think on. What you heard?" Ellis moved around the shop, pulling out the clapboard sign, hand lettered by his oldest, spelling out the basic price list.

“Nothing. Nothing worth repeatin’ no ways. White folks following Cassel, most black folks goin along.” Russell ran his hand along the smooth counter. ”But some of us waiting to see what you gonna do.”

Ellis straightened up. He looked at Russell. “Me?”

“Come on, Ellis, you got property, this here shop. You move, folks figure that’s the way to go.”

“ I ain’t figured that. Why not look to Doc Green? He say what he intends?” He studied on Russell’s face. Why come to him, stead of an educated man like Earle Green? Ellis himself hadn’t gone further than 6th grade before he dropped out to pull in a bumper crop of soybeans.

Russell met his eyes then took off his hat and studied it for a beat. He addressed the hat. “Some folks figure Doc ain’t got a good dog in the fight. He got a house in Aiken and he can mister to us regardless where we end up. He go with Cassel, he ain’t losing much, he rent that office anyways. But you, you got your folks land plus what Ollie left, plus what you done bought along the way.”

“That’s true, I suppose. But nobody should be looking to me for no decision. This here’s beyond my reckoning.”

Russell put his hat back on his head and looked down the road toward Cokerville. He stepped out onto the sidewalk. Ellis walked out with him a ways. “Ellis, I ain’t tryin’ to put more pressure on ya, lord knows. We all facin’ the same thing. It’s just hard to know what to do. Most of us ain’t got but a little to scrape together, so the money lookin’

real good. But you always gotta look at the big picture, and most of us can't see that far. Seems like a body who always been able to see, would be the man to ask."

"I appreciate that, Russell, truly. Bitsy and I ain't done nothin' yet, but soon as we get a mind to, I'll let y'all know.

"I'll hold you to it. Tell Bitsy and the girls I said 'hey'." He moved on down the road.

"Will do."

Ellis continued to set up for the day's work but looked down the road at Russell's retreating back. So people were waiting for him, were they? The sun broke through the slats of the open shutters and fell on his shoulders as he worked. He only felt the weight of it, not the heat.

Hard work and tough decisions had followed Ellis his entire life. His family, Mamma, Papa, Ollie, Lydia, Ellis and Jane, lived on thirty acres that Mamma had inherited, some say from an uncle once removed who had no heirs, or from Judge Thomas up in Barnwell County who some say was her true daddy. Mamma never did allow for the speculating around her. As soon as the children were old enough, they worked the farm. Even a small child could feed chickens, or pick beans, or open a gate for a wagon. The whole family worked tirelessly during planting season and harvest season. Momma also took in work, seaming and laundry and such, but as soon as Papa bought her a sewing machine, she stopped taking in wash and set her mind to needlework. Papa worked as a hand whenever the farm didn't need him and was known as a pretty decent carpenter. Ollie would sweep out the bank lobby up in Ellenton proper

TBK. Lydia would sometimes work in the white folks houses her grandmother used to tend, though neither Mamma nor Daddy were keen on her doing so. Ellis made a little extra money helping out his cousin Barney, who worked as a smithy in town. Jane mainly helped Mamma, but would sometimes help their neighbor, Miss Presley, who ran a lunch counter on the sun porch of her house. All money made was handed over to Papa, who recorded it all in a ledger; Papa wasn't the best reader, but he could cipher as well as anyone.

Both Ellis' parents had a regard for schooling, but their efforts to keep the farm going were their main concern, so it wasn't unusual for any one or all of the Hall children to be out of school for weeks on end. Ellis and the girls always caught up all right when they got back, but Ollie would be confused and mad, and after he got held back in fourth grade twice, he asked if he could work instead. Mamma and Papa agreed to it, as it didn't seem to make sense to keep him in only to have the principal come visit about his mischievousness every other week. And so they were able to keep their land when others around them, both white and black after what they called the Big Market Crash.

But they were lean times for everybody, and when Ollie got swept up by the sheriff on his way home from the bank at dusk, they didn't have money for a lawyer to help him when the sheriff say he looked like a "nigger who held up a bank in Augusta" and let the chain gang captain have him when he slide through town as was his wont every quarter or so. Ollie got cobbled up for about seven years, and though the family came to visit on Sundays with food and bible verses, Ollie changed his heart to the

farmstead and walked in the opposite direction when they let him out. Nothing Mama or Papa could say would change it back.

Without Ollie's strength Papa tried to manage, but he seemed to need Ellis' help more often than not, and Elis decided that school was taking up too much time. He asked to stay home like Ollie, and Mamma turned him down flat, She was convinced that Ollie had come to grief because he wasn't in school and she saw the same thing happening to Ellis should he leave. But Papa's need after a bumper crop of soybeans, overrule Mamma's fear and Ellis worked extra hard to show her it wasn't a bad thing. He took up Ollie's job at Barney's and kept his eyes and ears open like he did in class.

What Ellis most missed in school was a tiny spitfire of a girl named Bitsy, or Elizabeth as her parents called her. He made up for it by waiting for her after church, and just so happening to be in Cassel's general store when she and her friends stopped in for dill pickles and potato chips on Wednesday afternoons when the teachers shoed them home early so that they could work.

One day, when he sidled into the store and pretended to look at sewing notions while Bitsy and her crew made their purchases, she walked right up to him.

"Ellis Crenshaw, why you always creeping around me? You got something to say?"

"I, um....I". She had caught him completely off guard.

"Uh-huh, you what?"

"I ain't studying you , Bitsy Hall, I just come to buy my mama some buttons, if that OK with you..." He turned to the button bin and fished out two of the most

mismatched buttons known to man. He sure hated to part with the ten cents, but he walked right up to the counter and bought them from Cassel Sr. to save face, although his was now burning. He still had them buttons.

That following Sunday, he asked her mother for permission to walk her home from church. Less than six months later, he asked her to marry him. (rewrite to fit narrative as it has changed start Ollie's 1st section, cut to Ollie in Baltimore/Annapolis then move into Lila. Next section could be broken up.)

Without Ollie's strength, Papa tried to manage, but he seemed to need Ellis' help more often than not, and Elis saw that school was taking up too much time away from chores that needed to be done. He asked to stay home like Ollie, and the first time, Mamma turned him down flat, She was convinced that Ollie had come to grief because he wasn't in school and she saw the same thing happening to Ellis should he leave. But Papa's need after a bumper crop of soybeans overruled Mamma's fear and Ellis worked extra hard to show her being out wasn't a bad thing. He stayed on at Cousin Barney's as well, and kept his eyes and ears open to learning the trade just as he had done in school.

And really it weren't a bad thing. He had taken up his daddy's gift for ciphering and his Mama's eye on expenses. When Ollie sent wandering word from Jacksonville, or Mechanicsville, and later, Detroit that he needed money, and wanted Daddy to sell off bits of the land left to him by the nameless uncle, Ellis would pull together what he asked and buy the land from his brother. Land stayed in the family.

Ellis' figuring pulled him up out of a bad place many a time, most particularly after taking what was supposed to be a routine welding job back when he and Bitsy were

still newlyweds.. His time in Cousin Barney's shop had earned him a reputation around Ellenton, Barnwell and the surrounding areas, so it wasn't nothing to Ellis when a logger came to fetch him from the farm late one afternoon. It was T. J. Kent who'd come. T.J. was a regular in the logging business, known for his quick, precise cutting. T. J. was a third cousin of Ellis' father and knew when one of the chain lengths used to secure the logs to the beds of the trucks broke , that they didn't have to wait for someone to rustle up another chain that would likely be too short or too long to be much use, when Ellis was a holler away. Ellis got in the truck with T.J. taking along his portable tank to make the quick fix.

"I'm glad you 'greed to come up on such short notice, Ellis, " T. J. was apologetic.

"Awww, T.J. , I'm always chasing work. You helping me out." The light truck came up quickly alongside the logger flatbed, the driver, a white man from Aiken, standing off to the side , away from the workers T. J. parked the truck behind the flatbed and the two men jumped out.

"Ifin you can fix that chain, we can get this load on up to Augusta before 5. That'd make Mr. Johnston here mighty happy." Johnston didn't look happy. He eyed T. J. and sized up Ellis

"You the nigra this one says what can weld this piece and make it stick? You awfully young to know how to do that." He sliced his chin towards T. J., "Ain't anybody in town can get this done?"

T. J. wasn't rattled by Johnston. He knew him to be a small man afraid of shadows cast by what he thought were greater men, I found him easy to read very early. "Naw, boss, ain't nobody else in town. Most all the farmers here, black and white go to his cousin Barney's farm if they want so thin' welded or soldered, No need a' goin' all the way out to Aiken for a link, is there? It'd take forty minutes at least to get a body out here and we done already lost twenty minutes. We wait any longer and that five o'clock gonna tangle us for sure! Ellis here gonna get us on the road fast, before three, then we'll be down at the yard before four with time to spare."

Johnston squinted at the both of them, then took out a crumpled packet of cigarillos. He took his time in selecting and lighting one. He leaned against the cab of the truck, looked at the logs and waved his hand toward Ellis. Ellis scrambled to the top of the load and set to work. It was the easiest of jobs. Three links of the chain had broken and needed soldering. Shouldn't have taken more than twenty minutes. But he would never know how long the job *would've* taken. Five minutes in, the load gave way, undone by an unseen break in the chain below. A loud snap rent the air, followed by the sickening clank of the released chain. The break sent the cargo and Ellis, sprawling amidst a sea of shouts of warning, swears and calls on God. The load of logs rolled like water over the road. The wave rolled over Ellis before he could think, leaving his left leg crushed and useless.

He didn't remember T.J. bellowing in his face to hang on as he lay in the road. He didn't remember the men swarming around him and how quickly they figured the best way to lift the logs off him. What he did remember was the count: "One-Two- Three and

nice and easy boys..." as they freed his body from the pile. He remembered how grateful he'd been. And then, nothing.

He spent the next couple of weeks in the hospital, hazy with grief and morphine, watching Bitsy move in and out of focus as she tended to his wounds and his spirit. When two men from the logging company sidled up to his bed hands full of money and promises, Ellis weighed what he could do with what he should do and he figured he'd take what they handed him.

"You a fool, if you don't take those crackers to court, you leg got to be worth more than that..."

"If it was me. I'd wait to see what else they come up with, they give you that, they got more...got insurance for days!"

"Make 'em pay Ellis." Everyone from deacons to cousins once removed to the man in the bed to his right was full of advice on the matter. But Ellis figured insurance or no, a black man could find no good in front of a white court. Besides that, too many of his folks cut and toted logs for him to give the logger any reason to lay off black folks for fear of trouble. Bitsy nodded as he explained his plans to raise his own business once he left the hospital, to get it running as he healed, and to keep money coming in until he could get back to the farm. He had figured right. He made a good living off of the welding alone, enough to move Bitsy and Baby Franny from the roughhewn cabin with the windows had no glass on the farm, to a one and a half story house on the road to town. And here he was, fifteen years later, trying to figure things out once again.

From the time he greeted his first customer, until the time he pulled down the shutters, Ellis turned his life and his notion over in his head. Russell Barnes had said that Ellis could see the “big picture” but all day, his mind had crowded up with small pictures, Mama seaming her first dress for a lady in town, Ollie back bowed behind bars, Daddy crowing over a second-hand tractor, and his girls, giggling and tumbling in the yard. His chest tightened at the click of the tumbler, squeezing squeezing as he walked on home.

CHAPTER TEN

OLLIE

It was small, Ollie was not foolish enough to think he'd bought Lila a crown jewel, but as the evening stretched, the tiny velvet box grew heavier and heavier in his breast pocket. He had to find the right time to spring it on her, when she'd be most likely to say yes. But up until now, that time kept getting waylaid. Now seemed right. All was quiet, and the cicadas serenaded the two of them, their song floating on the thick, warm evening air, Ollie took a deep breath to tell Lila all of the things he felt deep in his marrow. The porch swing creaked like a young bullfrog searching for his girl.

"It's 9:30, Ollie..." Lila said, but she didn't lift her head from his shoulder and continued to push the glider rocker with her toe. Ollie looked at her foot, white oxford scuffed here and there, tiny and precious, and curled his fingers around the box deep in his jacket pocket.

"Naw, girl, it's 9:24, we got plenty of time..." he pulled her closer with his free arm.

"You so bad, Ollie Hall, I don't know why I let you keep coming by here."

"Sure you do! Who else gonna come all the way back here just to keep company with a girl, even one as pretty as you? And I haven't even started on your daddy. Shoot, Henry Moses have me shot, stuffed and mounted before anyone in town'd' think to look for me. I'm just the foolish one, too crazy to worry 'bout it." He brushed a make-believe

speck off of his lapel, just above her head. He was a bit worried. Ollie was big, came from a long line of men built solid, but Henry Moses, well, Moses brought to mind Zebo, an Angus bull Daddy had lucked upon some years ago. Zebo patrolled the cow pasture with aggressive suspicion, stalking up to the fence line when the girls tried to feed the cows grass through the lines of wire. He could hear Moses' patrolling just behind the front door, maybe ten feet from where he and Lila sat swinging. The father's shadow cast wide by the low light in the parlor window made Ollie, antsy, and he couldn't remember the words he had practiced to say to Lila.

“Hush, that talk, you know Daddy just inside there. You want him to run you off for real?”

“I told you, I ain't got sense enough to go.” Ollie inhaled the scent of Lila's hair, a mixture of rose oil and Dax pomade shot through with the smoke of a hot-comb. He stroked her shoulder, feeling the soft smoothness of the cotton of her pink dress, and the heat from the skin glowing underneath. Lord, but he did like to see her in this pink dress, sprinkled all over with tiny yellow flowers. She didn't like it much, she said her mamma'd made it for a big ten-year old, what with the square collar and pink rick-rack every which where, but to Ollie, she looked a picture. He slid his shoulder out from under her cheek and turned toward her. He slipped the box into his hand; it was heavier now than when he tipped it into his trouser pocket earlier that evening. His fingers curved over the soft velvet.

“What are you doin' there, Ollie?” Lila sat straight up, her face full of joy and fear.

“Lila, I—“ The porch light flicked on and off three times. Ollie could see the gravel path that led to the road glow like the warning lights of a train.

“Oh, that’s Daddy...” Lila grabbed Ollie’s free hand. She looked toward the screen door, then back to Ollie’s face, her eyes wide.

“Umm, I was just gointa tell ya, that I---“ Ollie got cut off by Moses clearing his throat, a deep rumble close, too close. Ollie’s palms itched.

“Mebbe you should tell me tomorrow, when we have more time.” Lila kept looking over her shoulder at the door.

“Look like some folk don’t know when to end a visit...” Moses declared. “Look to me if some other folks want to keep keeping company, they might tell some folk to get going.”

“Ollie, you’d better go now, fo’ Daddy get mad for real.” She pulled back from him. Ollie straightened up.

“Pose you right. I’ll see you tomorrow fo’ sure.” He pushed the box deep in his pocket and swung his coat over his shoulder. Lila rolled up on her toes so he could kiss her forehead. “Good night Mr. Moses, “ he called as he stepped of the porch. The porch light cast the yard in a half-halo. Outside the half –circle the night had closed in tight and dark.

“Go on home, son. Give your folks my best.” Moses rumbled. He might as well have been on the porch with them.

Ollie walked out to the yard, slow at first, but before he knew it he was almost to the road. The light was behind him and he felt cold.

“Ollie! Ollie!” Lila ran toward him whispering his name in the dark of the yard.

“Lila? Girl, you better get on back up to the house!” Ollie glanced up at the porch and was sure he saw Lila’s father in the now open door.

“Hush up, a minute! I just wanna say, that I’d be likely to agree to whatever you were gonna ask me.”

“Lila!” Girl I won’t tell you again!” Ollie stepped to the road quickly, afraid Lila might try to kiss him while her father gathered steam on the porch. He’d be back tomorrow at seven sharp, and he’d waste no time; he couldn’t risk Moses putting Lila on lockdown.

“Go on, now, I’ll see you tomorrow.” He stood out of reach at the edge of the road and waited until Lila hightailed it to the house and sidled past Mr. Moses, then turned and walked toward home.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and turned the box around over and over, and said a quick prayer of thanks and hope, though he didn’t really take much stock in such notions. But it couldn’t hurt, and when he was done, he whistled, snatches of melodies until he fixed on “What a Little Moonlight Can Do” the words tripping along in his head: *You’re in love, your hearts fluttering all day long/You only stutter, 'Cause your poor tongue just will not utter the words, "I love you"* He smiled. The song was more of a prayer than the prayer. A chorus of cicadas backed him up. It was promise, that’s what it was, the cicadas singing along, here tonight, here tomorrow

He heard the car behind him before he saw the headlights break through the dark. He stepped onto the berm and glanced over his shoulder. There shouldn’t be anybody out

looking for trouble this early, black or white. The car gleamed gray in the moonlight. It was the sheriff. Ollie slowed his pace and looked straight ahead. He kept his hands in his pockets. The car didn't slow; just drove around the bend. Ollie took a deep breath; he hadn't realized he was holding onto his air in his chest. A another mile and he'd turn down the farm lane and be able to breathe his own air. But as he rounded the bend, he saw the sheriff's car parked and waiting between Ollie and the path home.

Ollie half- believed that maybe the man hadn't seen him and was simply resting before turning round by the road that lead to Skinface and heading back downtown. Ollie slowed and made to turn back to Lila's. But what would that look like, hiding out in the Moses' parlor from the law? He kept to his route.

Kent Castle popped open the door of patrol car. The creak of it tore through the cicadas chirruping. "Who's that out for a stroll?" Castle looked Ollie up and down, his eyes holding fast and hungry to the blue seersucker jacket.

"It's Oliver Hill, Sherriff Castle." Ollie stopped some fifty feet from the car. He looked over Castle's shoulder. Toward the turn off to the farm road.

"Sure is. Ollie Hill, out on the road on a clean spring evening. Watch you doing out here, boy?" Castle folded his arms over his chest.

"Visiting, Sheriff."

"Oh yeah, what niggers live way out here?" Ollie looked at the turn off. "Aint but a handful I know. You killing time with Peterson? You helping him with that still? If so, you tell that nigger he aint smart, we been know about that rusty thing. We'd of dragged him in a long time ago, but we figure only the drunks in nigger town going blind,

so...naw you aint messing around with no still with that get-up... You courting, boy?" Ollie didn't move. "Why sure, you is! Who's the gal there, little Ollie? Whose skirts you sniffin'?" Castle chuckled, showing a mouthful of yellowed teeth. "C'mon boy, that's why you all dandied up, you out here chasing tail! Now which filly could it be? Peterson got that dried up sister, you wouldn't be lookin that good to catch that..." Sweat dripped behind Ollie's ears and slogged down his neck into his collar. "Oh, I do believe, I got it! You after that Moses gal. Boy, you do got an eye. She cute for a nigger gal!" Ollie looked at the turn-off and didn't move. Castle stepped up to Ollie and cocked his head to the side, like he an Ollie shared a secret. Castle was as close to Ollie as Lila had been just a minute before. Ollie had to look down to keep eye contact. Castle rolled up onto the balls of his feet. "Tell me this," he said sucking his teeth, "how's her snatch?"

Ollie felt the Castle's jaw connect with his knuckles before the reality of the hit sunk in his brain. It didn't matter, he was mad and the mad drove him to try and finish the job. Before Castle fell Ollie drove his right shoulder into the center of the sheriff's chest. Ollie just heard the "ouff" as the sheriff's legs crumpled. He was on the ground, curled in a ball; Ollie watched his chest heave and the half-sobs of the man trying to catch his breath and the sound uncurled his fists. Ollie again looked at the turnoff. But to go home would bring Castle and his hangdog deputies would be hot on his heels, and that would be with any luck. Chances are some of the crackers that stretched their legs over the railing of Castle's uncle's store would get wind and jump at the chance to come and offer "assistance". Ollie stepped closer to Castle squirming in the weeds. It would be easy enough to reach down and grab the soft part of his neck. There were so many places

deep in the woods where the sheriff's skinny bones would never be found, same with the car. Kudzu would cover over them both before anybody'd think to hunt back here.

Castle was down in the grass of the berm, and pulled himself up, still gasping on all fours, fumbling for his sidearm. Ollie was now on the other side of the patrol car, chest tight and breathing raggedy breaths. The time had passed. Whatever would happen now was out of his hands. They locked eyes. Castle found his gun and pointed it square between Ollie's eyes as he rose. He shook all over, except his left arm. The hand that held his service revolver was still and true. Ollie raised his hands to his shoulders. The night closed around him, silent and airless. He couldn't see the light from the Mosses' front porch from here; the car and the sheriff blocked it from view.

"Boy," the sheriff wheezed, "you gonna regret that move for a good, long time."

"Hey, Milt...it's Kent over in Ellenton----yeah, you ole dog, we miss you up to the store---no, ---no more than usual...." The sheriff burst into laughter that fluttered around Ollie's skull like two fighting chickens. "Look, when are fixin' to roll through here?--- that soon, huh? Well, good, I got two presents for you, the sooner you get 'em, the fresher they'll be! Ok, we'll be here...---Uh-huh--- oh, yeah. All right then, we'll be on the look-out for ya'! Bye, now!" He slammed down the receiver on the cradle. The crash bounced around in Ollie's skull. Castle had radioed ahead once Ollie climbed n to the backseat of the squad car, and once they made it to the jail, two deputies were waiting to welcome Ollie proper. They had dragged him out of the car, and once they saw he had no handcuffs, Ollie felt a sharp thrust into his spin and he landed face first, too fast to break his fall. His mouth was heavy with blood and his teeth rattled loose in his gums.

The pain rushed through his whole body, fierce and loud, and it muffled whatever the two undersheriffs were screaming at him. The only thing he knew for sure that he was on the ground and that someone he couldn't see was kicking him while someone else wrenched his arms behind his back in a direction they couldn't go, and he knew that pain could always build upon itself.

He tried to sit up. He couldn't. Every soft piece of his body was sore, and he found there was some damage to a couple of hard parts as well, as his fingers felt for serious hurts. He'd found them: three ribs from the left side. His jacket was gone, torn from him though he didn't know when. He ought to consider it a small loss, all things considered, but he couldn't, though he'd forgotten why. The ring... Castle wouldn't much for protocol;; anything those goons had found on him was long gone.

And then it was dark. The clang of the iron cell door rang in Ollie's ears. It drowned out the bits of song he had reeling in his head, all the songs, Lila's whispers, Ellis' laugh, Daddy's grumbling, Mama's call. Click! The key having served fell to jangling with the others on Castle's ring. No they, jeered, echoing Castle's declaration, you ain't never going back. Deep in the cell, someone sniffled from a curled up heap in the bottom bunk. Ollie startled. "Who's there?"

"Mikey Nixon..." The thin tear tinted whisper was familiar. Nixon, Nixon, there weren't but two and Mikey was along with Ellis in school. So this boy couldn't be more than 14, 15, at the most. Ollie shook his head. "Who you?" Mikey's voice wobbled with false audacity.

"Ollie Hill."

“Ollie? What they got you for Ollie?” Mikey’s voice was stronger now, and curious, Ollie could hear him raise up from the ball he’d made of himself.

Ollie sighed and turned back to bars of the cell. He could just see a bit of light from under the door that led out of the cell block to the front desk.. He stood staring at the light for a moment before answering. “I just couldn’t get home, I guess..”

Mikey must have thought that was enough. Ollie heard him turn over . “OK..”
Mikey sniffled again

Ollie could barely hear it over the keys., though the deputies and Castle had long since moved out of the block. He stood at the door, peering into the blackness that stretched before him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BITSY

The bedroom door opened, sounding like a weak kitten that lost its mother. She kept her eyes covered by her forearm. The white-hot pain that had drove her into the bedroom hurt less when she pressed against it. Ellis was standing at the foot of the bed, checking to see if she were awake or not. How easy it could be. Let him go on out there and up the road. Let him hear it from the horses' mouth shifting with the others on the front porch of the store while inside, Castle handed out side grins and winks to Prater, Coby and the others, waiting till the niggers headed home before handing out cigars. Ellis could know then that it wasn't anyone's lack of faith that was the cause. And maybe they all could get on with it.

"Bitsy, baby I have to go up to the meeting now, honey. I'm sorry you feeling poorly but I need to see what these men gonna say so we can figure....--"

"Don't go." She said it faint, but she knew he heard.

"Honey, I have to go now..." the old mattress sank as he sat on the edge of the bed, and tweaked her big toe. She couldn't have him think she was scared to have him leave her.

"Ellis, it's all over. Them men are gonna tell you that tonight, but it's been over since the summer." Ellis said nothing. Bitsy listened to him breathe in the dark. "You hear me?"

“I hear you. How you know this? This some talk coming from St. James? Augusta folks love to talk on all they don’t know. It ain’t like you to take that kind of foolishness seriously.”

“I heard it from Linda Castle myself, Ellis.”

Ellis stood and the springs squeaked n release. The motion sifted the pain in her skull, it escaped from under her arm.

“Well, that ain’t exactly a reliable source, there Bitsy. She liable to tell you anything if she thinks it’ll get under your skin. I can bet you she---“

“I overheard her on the phone. She didn’t know I was outside her door. She was talking to that fool up in Jackson she’s been trying to marry. She went on and on about how her daddy had already laid the foundation for their new house. How the cement was from his very own new factory and how they were going to be richer than Rockefeller on account of how the government gonna use Castle’s new company to pour the cement over the town for the plant. You don’t get a company built up in a week, Ellis. They always knew.”

“He already got--- damn...” Ellis sat back on the bed. Bitsy’s stomach coasted on warm, sticky waves that threatened to twist her body inside out. Now he knew. There was no fight. There never had been. Bitsy couldn’t let anyone see the last bit of hope leave him, not even herself. She be damned if he’d be huddled on that store porch, seeing the land seep away from them while others milled around counting imaginary money. No one needed to see that.

Ellis laid back across the foot of the bed . His hand lit on the top of her foot again. He squeezed her toes and then just held them lightly in his fingers.

Franny's voice floated under the door. She was fussing at Tessa about something, and sure enough, Tessa was fussing back. She lifted her head off the pillow, but she didn't move to stop the squabble. It was the only thing in the air that circled them that was real. She wondered if Ellis was listening to them too. She hoped he was.

“I'll go out to Mama's in the morning. I'll see what...when we can get the papers signed. We all here but for Ollie, and I suppose they can get him by mail.”

Bitsy waited. The girls stopped arguing. All Bitsy could hear now was the sound of Ellis' breathing. She lifted her arm from her eyes. The evening dark had filled the room. All Bitsy could see now was her husband's bent form at the foot of the bed. After a beat, he unlaced his shoes and crawled over Bitsy, settling down next to her on the bed. They lay there, Bitsy listening to Ellis breathe until one of the girls knocked softly on the door to tell them that dinner was ready.

Bitsy looked at Ellis' face when he came in from the meeting. What she saw shook her to the core, but wasn't a surprise. Helene had dropped off snatches of information along with the extra acorn squash she brought her sister from her backyard. Just last week, Helene told Bitsy that her friends who worked in white folks houses, were talking about “something big” happening. White folks minded less what they said in their parlors than what they said at the Drawn store , or down at the case company, so women were letting their men-folk know that they might need to make plans.

But Bitsy had waited to say something to Ellis. Why should she? ‘Something Big, Something Big’, now what did that mean? It meant that the neighbors were going off all half-cocked, some wringing their hands, others speculating about wild “somethings”, the government paying top dollar for all of Ellenton’s soybean crop, moving Fort Gordon to Ellenton, a huge factory for cars like in Detroit, ludicrous notions that deserved no attention. Why rile Ellis up over that kind of talk? Ellis took everything to heart, worried as much as a woman, his own mother liked to say. They were on solid ground now, why put more on him?

Bitsy got up to pour her husband a cup of coffee from the pot kept warm on the back of the stove, watching him out of the corner of her eye as he hung his hat on the umbrella stand next to the door and made his way over to his chair at the table. He was curved into himself, quiet, calm and burdened. She set the coffee down in front of him, sat down across from him and waited.

“Well, Bitsy, I don’t know what to tell ya, baby. I guess Helene and those was right, what they say on the radio is true.” Bitsy didn’t stir, or make to answer him, just looked into the grooves of the dining room table. What could she say? Nearly a hundred years of holding on the land by the fingertips, gone. She studied his profile; his brow was too low for a man of his humor, at rest it gave his face a serious cast, as though he was continually brooding about something or another. His brow shaded his eyes, dark like shoe buttons and almost as shiny. His jaw was set tight, and there was no hint of his ready grin. What could she say?

“Everything is sure?” she leaned closer to him, her hands clasped on the table between them.

“I reckon it is. They want everyone out by April they say.” He cupped his hand over the mug and turned it counter-clock wise. “They say everybody gonna get a fair price. They even say those living in the Quarters can spect to move in another set along Route 278 , they want to....”

Bitsy sat up a little straighter. “The Quarters?! Now, who in their right mind want to move back into some Quarters! What kind of foolishness is that?” She shook her head and pressed back in her chair. “Talking about some Quarters....”

“Aw, baby, I spect they just want to try to keep somethin’ the same. Can you blame them? Look here, they’s moving this entire town, from Ellenton proper down past Skinface, all of Cokerville, Dunbarton, all this here. The farms...” Ellis leaned out of the chair, his hands in his head.

Bitsy moved swiftly around the table and stood at his elbow. She pressed her hand in the space between his shoulder blades. “ Mr. Hill, we will be all right. Everyone here will be all right.” She slid in front of his chair and raised his chin to meet his eyes. “Even the folks living in Quarters will be all right, seeing as it can’t take too much to build another set of Quarters.” Half of his mouth turned up and she released his face. She sat directly in front of him, their hands barely touching. “I imagine they offered to buy folks out?”

“They did say that.” Ellis looked at his mug again.

“What are they talking? How much?” Now was not the time to dance around the subject. She rose up to get pencil and paper, but saw that talking about this was hard enough. She kept her seat.

“It’ll be different for everybody. Folks that own their house, land, course they get more. Renters and sharecroppers get little to nothin’.”

“Hmm, Castle stand to make out like a bandit, then. The Drawn store, that restaurant, the house, and what, how many parcels he got people working on...9. 10?”

“I think he got 15 at least. Got twice as much as Momma and Daddy, least ways.” He kept turning the mug.

“ True.”

“Here’s another somethin’, Castle declaring he’s movin’ his house itself close to a piece of land close to Dry Branch.”

“What? How he gonna do that?”

Ellis chuckled. “He say he got a crew to build another foundation and he gonna get a flatbed truck, slide the house off of the old foundation, slap it on the truck and drive the whole kitnkaboodle to the new one.”

“Yu say that as if it’s as easy as movin’ the sofa from one side of the room to the other.” Bitsy smiled to see him smile.

“Well, that’s like he describe.” He folded his arms over his chest. “Leave it to white folks and their notions.”

Bitsy laughed with him. If he saw what could be funny, maybe he would see how it was also a chance. In the lounge at work underneath the cigarette smoke floated the

belief that colored folks who had them a bit of something might stand to see more money than they could imagine. Bitsy and Ellis had always put aside a bit here and a bit there for the girls' education. They fretted over every big purchase they made, checking prices at the Sears in Aiken or C.L. Appliances in Augusta or pouring over different catalogues at Doc Brinkley's to make sure they got the best deal on the ice box or stove or windows. They got both cars used and Ellis only bought his once Franny started at Schofield, in case he was needed to fetch her, not over his leg. Every penny they earned was accounted for, except that they spent on their girls. If there was money, in whatever amount, would make it easier to breathe for both Ellis and Bitsy, if only Ellis could focus on what could be gained instead of mourning what was bound to be lost.

“ Ellis...”

“Yeah, baby...”

“What do you think they could do for us? I mean, I know we ain't the Castles, but we ain't share cropping neither. How do you see it shaking out for us?” She rubbed along another groove in the table.

“Bitsy, baby, I haven't even thought of it. Nobody's come to us with any numbers. I couldn't even give you a guess. I'm tired, baby, I'm going in to bed. You comin'?”

“I'll be in directly. The girls didn't finish the dishes, and rather do it myself than fuss.” She returned Ellis' smile and stood for a while.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BITSY

If she hadn't drunk that last bit of coffee, she'd be asleep by now. She'd picked up the pot after dinner and felt at least two cups sloshing around before she opened the lid to pour what should have been dregs down the drain. And there it was, almost three cups worth of coffee were in the percolator. She had put it back on the stove and stoked the fire. If there was one thing she couldn't abide, it was waste.

Bitsy turned over and looked at the clock ticickticking away on her nightstand. Whether she slept or not, it would keep going, out of time with her heartbeat, unconcerned with her thoughts, winding away whether her back touched Ellis' back or not. She closed her eyes.

She had hoped that the smell of the reheated coffee would have brought Ellis out of the bedroom and back to the kitchen table. She didn't want to talk, there'd been enough of that already, just wanted to be. Bitsy wanted to live a moment or two without planning or wondering aloud. Every move anyone made these days aimed to keep them one step ahead of tomorrow. Helen especially kept Bitsy's ear full of Philadelphia, the houses Lew was looking at, the jobs he might could get. Her sister mused about the schools, how Lewis would do, excitedly worrying about going to a mixed school, and speculated about taking the Government exam. And the money, oh the money. A body could truly get ahead in Philadelphia. Not like here. And so on. Bitsy up and told her

yesterday when they were sitting in Helen's kitchen, that she was jealous of Helen "because the way you talk, you'll be in your grand house a year before the movers even get here!" Her sister's face closed up then, and Bitsy right away felt bad. She folded the tea towels her sister had left in a chair, while telling her what she missed at the last usher board meeting which truth be told was little of nothing. Shortly after, Bitsy went home. What else could she do? Certainly she couldn't tell Helen how just listening to all of the hubbub around moving, those going North, those moving cross the bridge to Augusta, or in town to Aiken, even those moving a piece up the road, made her tired, as though the all the preparation gathered in a knot between her shoulders making her slow and mean.

She opened her eyes. Sleep was not coming, not soon. She pulled up on her elbows and paused. Ellis breathing was steady. He was still sleeping sound even now. She had to put space between them. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and felt for her slippers. She padded to the door and lifted her dressing gown from its hook. She waited a bit, listening, listening to Ellis' even breathing, listening to the house, to the heat snaking it's way around the corners. She opened the door enough to slip out and walked to the front door without lighting the alcove.

They never had a mind to use the bolt lock, but the door stuck a little from disuse. The screech of the screen door tore through the quiet, she held her breath and stopped to see if anyone else had heard the noise. Nothing. She stepped on to the porch and surveyed her front yard, very much like her father used to stare at their land from his back porch, very much like Ellis' father still did from the wide door of his barn. There was something to this study after all. The moon, full and shimmering, lit the black-eyed susans, azaleas

and the late blooming goldenrod In the moonlight, Bitsy could see the tips of the half buried bricks she'd spent two weeks lodging into the sandy ground, slowly making the three round flower beds where she'd planted the flowers making careful circles of coordinating colors. From where she stood, the rounded tops of the shrubs she'd planted the year Ellis had handed her the brass house key tied on a red velvet ribbon five years after they married, two years after Francine was born. She had searched her in-laws almanac for flowering bushes; robust pink camellia in the fall and sometimes the winter, satin blue Rose of Sharon for the summer, and flowering, ruby red quince in the spring. She took care of all that she planted no matter how busy things got. It gave her no small amount of satisfaction knowing that these flowers were the first thing her girls and husband saw when coming home. The house would never be as grand as those in Ellington proper, pillared places with rolling green lawns and gardens tended by generations of Negros that had "been with the family forever". All those pretty plants were lovely, true, but Bitsy's flowers threw out her intentions: love, pride, and ownership, something that a gardener who lived in the Quarters could not raise. Even so, Bitsy didn't mourn when they had to pull up the shrubs when they'd decided to put the porch on, she just talked Ellis through digging up the ones that could be saved and replaced the plants that couldn't. In a year, a year and a half, the blooms were as bright as ever. And they had a porch.

Unlike the men, for all her work, she could leave it all. Farmers worked from sunup to sundown and for what? Every one of them was one dry spell away from ruin. She knew that firsthand. After the sale The strip of land her own father used to work was

had for a song in 1939, including the house. Bitsy's father Ernest would walk on over to Castle's store every month with the rent money rolled tight in his front pocket, then come back stumbling up on the porch in the early morning light. Many times, Bitsy had to help Mama get him all the way in the house and into bed, before the folks heading off to work caught sight of him. That was what came of hanging on long after the writing was on the wall.

The cold hard fact of the matter was that the past three years had been tough for farmers both black and white, and more than a handful of families had given up and moved in town. A lot of them lived in "the cut" just off of Highway 19, as far as they could get from the fields surrounding Ellington without leaving the county tiny shoebox houses all jumbled up on top of the other. Couldn't even get the mailman to go on out there. About the best thing going for them was that the older kids didn't have to get up so early for school, not that many of them stayed past the 10th grade. Hanging on too long meant that you ended up raising kids to be street sweepers, hired hands, help. If you weren't careful, a body could lose everything dear and have nothing left to give to give to your children but a life of helping white folks go about their own business, getting to keep little or nothing for themselves. Well, not her girls.

Bitsy needed Ellis to see that the money the government offered was a way out just as sure as Lew and Helen believed in Philadelphia. They could get a house close by and put the rest in the bank for the girls schooling. The way she figured it out, between the payout, and if Ellis took a job like they offered, they could pay for both girls to go to college outright, all four years. What else could they want?

Bitsy settled into the metal glider, ignoring the cold that seeped through her robe. She needs him to understand. She did. The Hills had had that piece of land since anyone could remember. Ellis' blood was in the land. And maybe if they had a boy, a boy who loved farming as much as the Hills did, she'd hesitate too. But that was not the case and Ellis had to stop waiting on what ifs and act, he had to sign. Maybe after Ollie signed, Ellis would follow.

Though she shivered in the night air, she stayed on the porch for another half an hour. It was rare she could sit with herself. Tomorrow, she'd rise start breakfast, prod the girls out of the house and to school, make Ellis a lunch, slip into her uniform and hustle down the halls of the hospital, dodging Castle, and coming back home to do it all over. Somewhere in there she'd have to steer her husband toward the future before it overtook them all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIS

Chapter has Ellis meeting at his parents' home to discuss options or lack thereof. Ollie is there and declares his intention to sell his lots and to sign away any claim on them. Ellis and he argue. When Ellis returns home he over hears Franny fretting about her college prospects. He knows what he has to do.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TESSA

The next few weeks were filled with talking and no talking. Mama and Papa decided and undecided dozens of things. They drove off in the Series 60 together, an anomaly during the week, as Mama usually drove the car and Papa either walked to his shop or got a ride early in the morning with the other men in Cokertown who worked at Dunbarton Sawmill. They came back down the road frozen faced and tight-lipped. They stopped talking at the kitchen table and spoke in angry whispers in their bedroom. Mama packed up her grandmother's china only to have the girls put it back in the cabinet with stern admonishments to take special care, as she went through the house considering the furniture, its shape and sturdiness. She could not wrap her mind around it, the whole town moved down the highway 278 some eight miles. Everything, the houses, the businesses 2 white churches, the one black church, stores, even, do Jesus, the dead. The graveyards would be moved as well. In the midst of this behemoth in which they had no choice, suddenly they had to make endless choices. The worst was the house. Many folks, particularly white folks, were putting their houses on the back of flat-beds and dragging them down to the new patch of land people were calling "New" Ellenton. As if it were that simple. Driving back home from work one afternoon, Bitsy saw the Brinkley's two story house cruising down Elm Street before she turned onto Hamburg. It took her breath away. She remembered sitting in the kitchen of the Brinkley's house at a low table

waiting for her mother to finish her cleaning. Sometimes she would help her mother and see the other rooms, rich polished floors in the hall and dining room, soft pastel carpets in the living room and study. Upstairs was a nirvana of silks and linens, and indulgent woolens, draping the windows, covering parts of the polished floors, enveloping the beds, peaking from drawers and closets. And now, there it was, on wheels, heading out of town. She pulled to the side of the road to give the moving house wide berth...and to collect herself. Just as the Brinkley homestead turned out of town toward the highway, Bitsy lifted her head and laughed at what she saw. Another, smaller truck was hauling Silas Johnson's shotgun shack after the Brinkley house. A trail of splinters followed the truck and Bitsy swore for years afterward that the roof of the shack slid forward an inch whenever the truck hit a pothole, and Hamburg Road was lousy with potholes. Silas would put down that shack wherever he could, provided it was within walking distance of a package store or a still. Maybe life wouldn't be that different at all.

Yet she drove up Hamburg Road, past Petticoat Junction, which was already shuttered. She couldn't remember a time when the tiny store wasn't open during the day, even on Sundays. Ellis' welding shop, next door, was open, but he didn't come to the door to wave, though she knew he heard the car. He'd be busy of course, filling the last orders and packing up his tools before he too would close his doors. They wouldn't try to move the house or the shop. They really couldn't afford to. Even with the settlement money (a dark day when the check arrived) and the discounted lots heading toward Beech Island, they could not swing a lot and a move, and Ellis would not hear of touching the girls' money in the bank.

“That’s for their schoolin’ and nothing else. I don’t care if we have to live in a chicken coop until graduation day, not a nickel for nothin’ else!” He was spitting this to himself, because Bitsy had no intention of using the girls’ fund for moving expenses, although she did wonder why he didn’t make use of the money he got in a settlement against the saw mill. One bright unassuming day, Ellis walked to his job at the mill as was his custom, and meet a log truck coming out of the entrance. The driver was green and cut the wheel too sharply. He’d also failed to secure his load properly and the jarring turn freed the logs on the bed of the truck with Ellis scrambling to get out of their path. His left leg was crushed by one of the logs and the owner of the mill, afraid of a lawsuit, visited Ellis in the hospital with a check in hand and a promise of a job for life. The money and the promise enabled Ellis to open his own shop, where he did welding and soldering for both the businesses and the farms, both white and black for two and half days a week. He spent the 4 and 1/2 days a week at the saw mill coordinating deliveries, keeping track of inventory and sweeping the office from which he worked. It was in this way he and Bitsy had been able to add bits and pieces of land to the original lots left to them by their parents and to add a half-story to their modest clapboard home. She imagined that he’d saved some, but with the price of cotton fluctuating wildly, who knew what he had to do in order to keep them afloat. She pulled into the yard where both her daughters sat on the porch, waiting for her. She looked at the house, small, neat as a pin, built from the ground up by Ellis, his brother, and her father. She griped the steering wheel, for the briefest of moments and opened the car door. Today they will pack up the house, taking only what will fit in the trailer Ellis had bought and affixed to the small plot

of land they were able to buy with the proceeds of the sale, or the “land snatch” as Ellis and some of his relations and friends referred to it. The plan was to start out small, once again and build the farm back up. But Bitsy wondered if that were at all possible now.

She directed the girls to step lively in their task, praising efficiency, and sniffing out slapdash work. “Tessa, that plate is going to break if you just look at it sideways, the fashion you got it wrapped. Look at Francine’s box, not a one’ll get scratched, I warrant. But Franny, honey not so much paper.” Bitsy unwrapped Tessa’s saucer, set aside half of the paper, then swiftly rewrapped it in a neat, unassailable bundle. “There...”

“Thank you, Mama.”

“Well, go on girls, you are doing a good job now, don’t ruin it by stopping.”

Bitsy bustled to the back bedroom she shared, had shared for 13 years with her husband. She opened the closet door and emptied it from the back, folding up summer weight clothes to be placed on the bottom of whatever trunk or box Bitsy would find for them. The magnitude of the packing, labeling, sorting, discarding, selling and saving, loomed above her, a tidal wave of tedium and despair. But there was nothing to be done. Nothing but to do what lay before her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELLIS

Ellis closed up the shop, locking the door before he started up Hamburg toward home. The click of metal against metal this time seemed to echo in his chest. So much of his life's blood in this business, one of three black owned and the only one where black and white alike came and stood shoulder to shoulder while conducting business. No one carried on much; anyone needing his services was attending to serious affairs on the farm and farming left most with little time to shuffle out who was standing where in line. If a white man weren't inclined to defer to Ellis he'd have to drive 15 miles up 278 into Augusta, beat the freight trains at the intersections and pay almost double what Ellis would charge. Nobody had time for that foolishness, so Ellis made enough money to put some in reserve, to buy the Oldsmobile (mostly for Bitsy to get to work safely) and to keep the farm going when others, both black and white had been ruined. He had gone further than anyone else in his family and for what, for what? For the girls of course. He pocketed the keys and walked on back to the house, trying not to figure how many times would it be 'til he made this walk for the last time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TESSA

March comes in like a lion and leaves like a lamb, Miz Washington said to the class first thing today, and then asked them what that meant. Tessa and the rest of her classmates kind of sat quiet for right then, so Miz Washington went to the board and wrote it out as though that would help. It didn't help Tessa. She didn't know about everybody else, but March seemed to be more like a mule: not moving when you wanted it to one minute and then taking off fast in the opposite direction. Seemed like all the months were like that since December, since Papa had slowly and quietly told her and Franny that they were moving. They'd been waiting for things; news, something called a settlement (which was funny, because even when it came, nothing seemed settled) word from the man who was selling Papa and Mama some land, and while they waited they packed. Sometimes they unpacked, because Franny had to have her pink light jacket when the weather went warm, or Mama wanted to make soup for all of them and Lewis, and Aunt and uncle because they hadn't had time to cook and it was the least Mama could do. And then Lewis and Aunt and uncle were living in the house with them, Mama telling her and Franny to up and quick get what they needed out of the room so that Aunt and uncle could get settled. But they never seemed to get settled, with all kinds of clothes and records and linens spilling out of trunks and suitcases that they had to step around. And Franny and Tessa could never get settled in the living room, sleeping on the velvet

sofas which were pretty to look at, all polished squiggly walnut and burgundy, but hard to settle on at night. If Tessa turned her head too sharp and forgot, she'd whack her temple, or her cheek, or her lip on the shiny, unforgiving wood. The narrow cushions gave very little and most mornings, Tessa would wake with a knot low in her back to go with the knot low in her stomach.

All of that flitted through her head when Miz Washington was going on and on about lions and lambs, and the end all she had in her head was the mule.

“What we have here, children, is what is known as an ‘aphorism’. Does anyone know what that is?” Miz Washington looked around, hoping someone would answer. Of course no one did.

“ Well, an aphorism is a short phrase that expresses a wise idea, it’s something that your parents or grandparents say from time to time.”

“Naght-uh, my daddy has never said anything like that!” Charlene Drake said her hand up for no reason, since she said what she had to say without leave.

“Thank you, Charlene. Maybe not everyone uses them, but I’m sure you’ve heard the or even read them before. Who has ever heard the saying “don’t cry over spilled milk, or ‘don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched’?”

“Oh, Miz Washington, my Mama always tellin’ my daddy that. She say he always got a new way to get out of a good days work. Is that ‘afersm’? Bernice Gregory bounced in her seat, so sure she was right.

Miz Washington rubbed a little at her forehead. “Not exactly, Bernice. Has anyone heard of those expressions?” she smiled as a few hands went up. “Ok, well, they

are wise saying that are also ‘metaphors’. How about we all give that word a try.

Together now: METAPHOR!” The class more or less repeated the new word as she did.

“Good. Now, boys and girls, a metaphor uses something that we all know about, like milk, chickens, lambs and such, to describe something that we can’t see, like impatience, sorrow, or trouble.”

Tessa was very much interested now and concentrated on Miz Washington.

“So what does it mean to not cry over spilled milk? Maurice?”

Maurice Singleton would know. He rarely raised his hand, but when he did, he was hardly ever wrong. “I guess it means, that what’s done is done. You can’t put the milk back in the bottle, so you might as well not bother about it.”

“Ifn’ you in my house, you had better bother, else you get the switch!” yelled John Baker and everybody laughed until Miz Washington cut her eyes at them. They shut up quick then.

“If we are done being silly...Okay, Maurice you are exactly right about that. ‘Don’t cry over spilled milk’ means ‘what’s done is done’ and yes, you can’t very well put milk back in the bottle. Now a simile...” but Tessa had taken that phrase and rolled it over and over in her head. ‘You can’t put the milk back in the bottle...’

Of course you couldn’t. You couldn’t unspill something. And because you couldn’t, you shouldn’t be upset about it. You just clean up and go on. Maybe that’s what she had to do. Instead of being scared and sad and all about the move, she should just clean up and go on. Tessa wondered if Mama and Papa had thought about this. Papa was, in truth, always talking about spilled milk to Mama. She would get upset about this or

that and fuss. She would fuss about the price of gasoline going up, or how Miz Jones would take too long giving ‘testimony at church and waste reams of time on a perfectly good Sunday, or how Tessa wore through shoes every three months and Papa would always ask her not to cry over spilled milk. Maybe they hadn’t thought of the move as spilled milk. If Tessa could explain it to them like Miz Washington did, they would feel better, they would stop sighing, stop looking out of the windows like it hurt to look in, and most of all stop looking over her head at things she couldn’t see. For the rest of the day, she practiced in her head how to tell them this in just the way Miz Washington said it. She imagined that they would shake their heads or rub their eyes and be back to their normal selves. Papa would grin and tease and play checkers again, Mama would hum and smile quiet smiles, and start another project: canning or knitting or needlepoint and tell her and Franny that they need to know all of it, books, and housekeeping if they wanted to make their way well in this world. She barely answered Lewis’ regular string of questions as they walked home that afternoon, so sure that if she said it right, things would change. Mama and Papa would have to tell Franny, though because these days, Franny didn’t hear much of anything Tessa had to say.

“Tessa, Tessa! Look at that! Look!” Lewis grabbing on her coat, pulled her out of her head. She looked to where Lewis was pointing, and stopped stock-still. The church was slowly floating, *floating* toward them. Their church. Forest Hills Baptist Church snaked up Hamburg Road on the back of a long. Wide truck, the longest and widest Tessa and Lewis had ever seen. Tessa watched the brown clapboard building inch toward the entrance to the highway and thought she was dreaming or worse, crazy, and thought

fleetingly of being hauled to Columbia to the hospital where they took people who'd lost all their sense, but remembered that Lewis was watching too. And it was their church; there were the pretty stained glass windows that workers just put in the year before, with gentle hands but coarse mouths until Reverend Moore came out and scolded them for swearing while literally doing the Lord's work, rolling down the road. Lewis stood beside her, still as well. The creaking of the structure as the truck wound its way toward the intersection filled Tessa's ears and crept down her spine.

"Where's the bell, Tessa?" Lewis pressed his side into hers. His question was a whisper; she had to bend close to hear it. Even then, she was puzzled. Lewis pointed to the empty steeple. "What did they do with the bell?"

Tessa looked. Sure enough the bell was gone. She didn't have a clue. The bell of Forest Hills had called people to worship, but also chimed the hour between 7 in the morning to 7 in the evening. Cokertown people calibrated where they were supposed to be by that bell. Tessa knew when she walked to fetch Lewis whether she needed to hustle if she hadn't made it to the corner of Elm and Hamburg by the time the eight chime had sounded. She knew she had to be in the schoolyard if she had gone home for lunch when the bell struck one and could barely be heard over the din of the chatter. And nothing seemed sweeter than hearing the school bell harmonize with the church bell at three...

Francine handed a bundle of quilts to her mother. Bitsy settled them among the contents of their house, half of which was in this: Ellis' banged up pick up the other half was in Helen's husband Lou's truck and ready to take Helen, Lewis and Lou to new brick house in North Augusta. Lou had decided to cut his losses on his farm and take the buy-

out and the job promised by the Savannah River Plant. For Francine this was the crummiest part of this whole business. Since she was younger than Tessa she'd stop by Aunt Helen's house for respite. Aunt Helen didn't correct her grammar, nor empathize the virtues of being good, most of which entailed keeping her dress down and her grades up. She didn't tell her all of her secrets, for she was only just now collecting significant ones, but Helen allowed her to think of other things besides college prep classes and a program for studies once she was prepared. She could sit with a cup of cocoa and not worry about the thousand and one things her mother devised to keep her busy and out of trouble. But no more. Francine would still attend Schofield, the Negro high school in Aiken's city limits, she'd still get on the bus and ride the 45 minutes in the dark of early dawn with her same friends and classmates, and the same teachers and staff would be there to greet her and take up where her mother left off. And yet, she felt unmoored, disconnected from something essential, like a limb and could find nothing to ground her enough to feel whole. She knew it was silly. She certainly would have a better time of it than Tessa, whose school was not moved down the road as they had seen Cassel Elementary roused and hauled down Elm and out onto 278. Most of the town stopped and lined Elm or hovered at Petticoat Junction to witness this bizarre sight. The pupils of Cassel Elm, as they called it hooted and cheered as their alma mater lumbered out of town; the other onlookers kept silence as a concrete representation of their immediate status passed before them. Thurmond Primary would be razed like any other building left after last resident of Ellenton left for parts known or unknown. Some thought it was just as well, but the thought left Francine with a faint flutter in her chest and the taste of metal

on the back of her tongue. She would never be able to come back and visit that very school on its own grounds as did so many of the matriculated before her. They interrupted class to the delight of the teacher and the relief of the students with pictures of babies, fiancés, and college campuses, their faces radiant with hope and success. Franny would never be able to bring her diploma to Thurmond for praise and in some cases she was sure, disbelief and she felt preemptively cheated.

Before the “displacement” the clunky word the teachers at Schofield used when they discussed it, Franny hadn’t given any thought to her life after Schofield. Her biggest concern had been whether Mama was going to allow her to try out for the cheer team. Now, she found herself worrying about little things, things that made Tessa crinkle her face in worry. Where would she go to buy her marble notebooks and pens? Where would she catch the bus? Who would be on that bus? Franny knew all of the kids and their families, many were relations. But now, the families would be scattered. Her best friend, Lucille, was moving with her family to Aiken proper. She had bragged that the house her father was renting was bigger than any in Cokertown. Lucille regarded Franny with pity when she told her that Ellis was moving her family up the road to be a part of New Ellenton. “Well, that’s okay, Franny, “ she assured her. “I’m sure my mama will let you stay over some nights. It’ll be exactly the same.” But something in Lucy’s tone struck false, and Franny knew that nothing would be the same.

Tessa’s face flared red hot. She turned to group of children snickering by the water fountain. “What did you say?” She addressed the group in hiss, her fury rushing to her clenched fists.

A lanky seventh grader raised his chin and looked down into her burning eyes. “He said you come from ‘Illinton’. Ya’ll folks some stupid coons to give up yo’ town like that.” The gaggle of kids laughed in appreciation. The boy puffed up his chest and flicked his eyes over her figure. The school had been overcrowded with the influx of the children from Ellenton and nearby Dunbar; each town had their own “colored” primary school. Jackson Elementary heretofore had served the impoverished populace of the sharecroppers youngsters. These kids looked at these new “townies” with suspicion. Tessa could feel a hundred pairs of eyes on her dress, on her shoes, hungry, resentful eyes, that took in her mother’s careful double stitching on the hems of serge, corduroy and lisle, while they in stark contrast to the t-shirts, dungarees, and calico they wore. When she opened her lunch at her desk, her sandwiches and fruit made a stark contrast to the biscuits and sorghum they brought wrapped in brown paper. In class, she was a year and a half ahead of the other 4th graders, though that hardly mattered. Many children were still pulled out of school to work the land in the early spring and late fall, so the school was staffed for the itinerant numbers of students and it became convenient to teach two to three grades together. Thus, Tessa’s abilities exceeded those of even the 5th graders in her class. After her initial year, most of the schoolmates that had migrated to Jackson with her had drifted away with their families to the city of Augusta or Aiken proper. Some families went even further, taking the opportunity to move “up north”. By the advent of her second year, only handful of her former neighbors remained.

And no one came to her aid now. Lewis lived in town. She had made very few friends among as the new kid. And this overgrown bully, wasn’t about to lose the draw of

his audience. “ My pap says a sillier group of coons ain’t never been borned. And he say yo pap one the worst, sittin’ up there in the woods waitin’ on land that never come. At least when the others got swindled, they could take what little they got and buy a decent house. Y’alls stupid, don’t care about y’alls town manners,”

Tessa launched herself at his torso. Despite her mother’s campaign to raise her daughters as ladies, they both had enough experience with cousins and kids to know how to fight. The boy’s shock at her attack and her determination to get in as many licks a possible gave her the upper hand. Before he could get his bearings, Miss Wilkerson, the 3rd through 5th grade teacher, pulled Tessa up by the shoulders,

“I declare, Tessa Hall, have you lost your mind? You know better than this!” She hauled Tessa down the hall and to the principal’s office and pointed to the short row of chairs just outside the door. Tessa sat in the hard wooden chair while Miss Wilkerson slipped in the door. The voices inside were muffled, but Tessa could hear snatches of phrases. “Brawling...” “Disruptive...” and what she thought sounded like “Refugee...” By the time she was called into the office to stand before the principal, shame and frustration choked the words from throat. She stood in a cloud of indignity as he passed a sentence of three weeks confinement, which mattered very little to her.

Tessa walked down the dirt road that lead to the trailer, dragging her feet, kicking up red clay dust that settled on her jumper. Franny’ d be sure to say something to Mama about that, but she didn’t care, she was sure Mama’d forget all about her dirty clothes when she read the note Miss Wilkerson, had stapled to the front cover of her composition book. The note, she knew, would recount the fight, but it was also the only “bad note”

she'd brought home. She had never felt so angry, so out of sorts in her life. Her parents were working longer hours, and Franny stayed in town engaged in after school pursuits as often as was allowed. She was often home from school alone, her Aunt Helen and Lewis now a 30 minute drive away.

Worst of all was knowing that just down the highway, under steel pipes and turbines lay the remains of her life.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ELLIS

The luminous clock face read four fifteen and it was still dark outside. Ellis didn't think he'd be able to go back to sleep. Most mornings nowadays started like this, him staring at the clock face before the cock crowed, as his daddy used to say, the last year's events circling in his mind like dirty water swirling down a sink. Naw, a sink drained, and his mind could not let go off the feeling that maybe, maybe they could have done something. Maybe had he stayed in school like Mam wanted, he could have come up with the words that would have stopped folks from selling their family land. Maybe he could have gone to Doc Green and got him to thinking of another way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TESSA

Usually the December air was minted with the anticipation of Christmas, Christmas and the promise of a new year. This year the air clung to water and gray mist encircled everyone and everything. Tessa was glad she didn't have to walk through that mist to wait cold and anxious at the bus stop before one or two of the other students would creep too the stop at first; but the gray seeped into the yard and through the cracks under the front door and through the eaves of the gabled roof. There was nowhere to go, nothing to break up the gray like history, or business math, or lunch time. These days after Christmas stretched out into an interminable period of wrapping and packing, packing and wrapping.

Papa, a thin man the color of toasted pecans, had built and bought this house six months after he slipped away to marry Mama. He was in a rush; Mama and Mama Hill were eating up the air in Mama Hill's house , pushing on his lungs. Each woman's love for him twisted his love for them, and he knew it was time to go. He bought the house on Hamburg Road without noticing there was no bathroom and a pump at the sink. His brother and a handful of cousins helped him to remedy that quickly, but he made time to add a dining room, two other bedrooms and another water closet before Tessa was born. He painted it blue with red shutters , which Mama let him keep for a year until she insisted the red made her feel like they might be showing off. This is also why she kept

her brilliantly hued garden out back where it couldn't be seen from the street. She grew plum mist cuphea bordering the stairs and the sides of the sun-porch, their lacy plummy blooms dipping and bowing to the feet that passed, but bordered the fence with scornful, vermilion rue Lilla to break up the clusters of pale pink, cream and peach rose bushes. Some years the intrepid peach roses would twist and creep over the fence. Mama sometimes could be persuaded to give the flowers berth to climb out and down, but the instant their blossoms broke bold, she'd prune them back. In a small town 11 miles off of the border of Georgia, life ran smoother for black folks the less attention they garnered. An errant peach rose in a town where the white denizens tended their flowers more carefully than their children, might be more trouble than it was worth. He made sure that the windows let in all the light and warmth he could syphon into the house and for sixteen years light and two girls, friends, relatives, more money , less money, chuckles, good news and all of the things that go with those poured in.

Down the hill away lived Aunt Helen, Mama's younger sister who wore the same face on a smaller frame. Her husband Lewis bought that house from his uncle for a dollar. Small, neat and cute, their front yard burst with flowers and toys. Helen was more liberal with her gardening prowess because their home was well into the negro side of town and anyone likely to pass it likely lived apiece down the street.

Ellis Hall's anniversary was two days away. Fifteen years before, he was able to spirit Bitsy Upshaw off to the Justice of the Peace in Barnwell and she came back with his name and a pragmatic explanation for her father. Bitsy reasoned to her irate father who stood staring them down in the middle of the threadbare rug in his living room, that

she'd be more likely to get into nursing school as a married woman than as a teeny bopper fresh from school. Never mind that this was a dubious notion at best. Old Man Upshaw stomped around the rug for a bit, snorting and hurrumphing, and complaining about the "fastness" of today's youth but in the end he acquiesced. Bitsy was one of seven mouths he was trying to feed from his farm; if she were off of his hands AND in school, who was he to holler.

Once Daddy Hall gave his blessing, he moved his bride in with his Mama. He knew this wouldn't be a comfortable fit, but this way he could save some money up before striking out on his own. It became quite clear, quite soon that this was a bad idea. Both women had strong opinions and Mama was suspicious about the alacrity of their wedding. She would muse about the tightness of Bitsy's student uniform, and speculate on the origins of Bitsy's exhaustion.

"Hmm, can't be one place all that food is going on a small girl like that..." she said when Bitsy reached for another biscuit at dinner.

"School is good, but everybody has to pull their weight, specially when you're colored.

Who ever heard of a colored wife sitting reading a book in the afternoon while her husband out in the fields." Bitsy would storm from the kitchen table to the their cramped bedroom, leaving her husband pained behind her.

Ellis would turn to his mother "Don't you be looking at me all stern, Ellis Gordon Upshaw. This here is my house. I gotta a right to speak my mind."

“Yeah, but Mama you got no call to treat Bitsy like that. She family now, and you need to be nice.”

“I ain’t coddling my own, what make you think I’m gonna nurse Al Upshaw’s’ cidity gal? I ain’t got naught gainst her, but we don’t do like they do there here. And she here now.”

Ellis made sure now was not long. He knew it was time to go when he heard his wife in the kitchen.

“No ma’am, I will not keep my peace. I ain’t pregnant----“Mama Hall gasped “I ain’t putting on airs and I ain’t stoppin’ my schooling for nothin’ Why I want to work in some white biddy’s house clean and cooking for her above my own? No ma’am I’m in school so the only house I’m working in is my own.”

“You ought not to turn your nose up over honest work. Though seems to me them hands too soft for much.”

“Never you mind about my hands. I’d rather have soft hands than a hard head!”

“Now look here , young miss, I won’t have this in my house!” Ellis stepped into the room.

“Look here---“ but the two women swung on him with angry eyes.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

OLLIE

As soon as the back swung open, Ollie grabbed the sliver handle. It was cool, and heavy in his hand, cool despite the high sun already piercing through the shade of the oaks. Dobson looked at the other five men, six if he counted Martin Wilson standing to the side of Joe. “One-Two-Three” Dobson intoned, and they all lifted and slid the mahogany box on the trolley. Until they reached the steps, a light push was all the work the men had to do, Dobson himself executed any steering, but Ollie held fast to the handle. They reached the steps of the church. The handle was a bit slick now, and he could feel how the pressure of his hold drove a groove in his palm. Dobson stopped the men, where they waited. The sun now drilled into his skull. Bitsy hadn’t come out the limo yet, so no one moved. Out of the corner of his eye saw Mamma and Daddy standing still as statues under the oaks, Mama’s simple straw hat, black lace grazing her eyebrows not stirred by the faint breeze, Daddy’s shoulders in his black serge suit, curved toward the ground in grief. No one was in a hurry to get into the church. Ollie couldn’t remember ever being around so many folks and it being so so still.

The click of the door latch broke the quiet; the slam of the limo door closing seemed to move the breeze forward, pressing the backs of the pallbearers. Ollie was glad that he couldn’t look back. Last night he had seen the girls sitting huddled heads together on Mama’s long davenport, and he was sure his chest would burst. He’d hustled to Mama

and Daddy's bedroom and took a long draw from his flask. He had sat for a long while on the edge of that bed rubbing his hands over the pebbly chenille bedspread, only raising up once he realized the bourbon had done nothing to sand off the day and would likely not do anything to touch the next few weeks, years maybe....

“One-two-threeee-hupp...” and now they had the full weight of the casket. Ollie willed all of the strength of his body into his right arm, and he felt the sinew strain, though he'd swung pickax, hoe, mallet and scythe for decades. He gripped desperately at the handle, his hand hurt so, he didn't know if it was blood or sweat that made the handle slippery. He knew it didn't matter, that no matter what, he had to take the twelve stairs to the church doors as smooth and precise as he could manage. He pushed back to a chant he'd absorbed on the gang: *Well, my John said/ in the ten chap ten/If a man die/He will live again/Well, they crucified Jesus/and they nailed him to the cross/Sister Mary cried/My child is lost!* and used it to march up to the doors, pulling the other men with him to the waiting trolley. It was, he thought, the last time he'd tote Ellis anywhere.

The double doors swung open the instant they'd hit the top of the steps. Dobson had the trolley in place and the six men rolled their shoulders back and hoisted the coffin with nary a lost breathe. They seemed to sail down the aisle. There was Dobson at the alter---how did he get there so fast?---and he had Ollie swing the front of the trolley so Ellis' head would rest under a giant white spray of roses draped with a blue ribbon on which was written in gold script “Honored and Beloved” . Ollie bumped the wreath with his shoulder, but it barely wobbled.

Once they had done, Ollie and the rest stood to wait for the family to process in and take the front pews. Bitsy looked a queen, her shoulders straight and set, head up and eyes ahead. She'd chosen a fitted suit and had been smart enough to wear a hat with a veil, edged in lace and stopping just short of her nose. Most everyone else would have to do this with bare faces. Bitsy was always a smart one.

The girls were on either side and they had their hands clasped in front them much like Ollie and the other pallbearers stood. They were trying hard, but Little Tessa was concentrating on her shiny shoes. Franny---damn she'd sprung up tall--- looked ahead but her shoulders curved over her chest. After them came Mama and Daddy, hands clasped tight as they hobbled to their places. Then Jill, she and Alton keeping their brood of boys between them and moving, then Linda and her quiet daughter Lucy sauntered down. Ollie slipped in behind them and settled in. The church was full and hushed. Dobson and Joe advanced to the coffin.

A cold shot of panic gripped Olli's stomach. He should have asked earlier if Bitsy had given permission for this. He would've said something, and maybe been half-listened to. It made no sense to open up the box for another look. Folks that wanted to see Ollie could have gotten off their asses at some point in the past two days and gaped at him then. Now people who weren't happy with the size of the audience at the wake could wail and carry-on to their hearts content while the rest of the town sat locked up in the pews. Lord, please let someone with sense got on top of this. Down his pew to the right, he heard a woman moan and turned to see Rae Stone a third or fourth cousin rocking back and forth. Ollie'd put money down to say she hadn't seen Ellis outside of church in

a dozen years. He looked at Dobson's back. Don't make me have to deal with this, Jeffery, he thought.

At that moment, as though she heard his thought, Bitsy turned and looked to catch someone's eye. She found Linda, whispered something quick and sharp and Linda stepped around to Dobson just as he opened the lid. The 'pop' rang out like a shot in the church, but Linda put her hand on Jeffery Dobson's shoulder and he closed it back. Cousin Rae fell silent.

Reverend Weston, ---was he still pastor here?---turned slightly in his chair, the same heavy oak throne-like chair Ollie remembered from eighteen years ago, and gestured to the choirmaster. The slim man, someone Ollie didn't know, raised his arms in front of his chest and the dark robed choir came out of their seats as one body. The organist, hidden behind a wall of brass pipes pressed one note to center the singers. A woman, someone else Ollie didn't know, stepped forward. "Sooooome---Some bright morning/When this life---when this life is oveeerr/ IIIII—ooh. I'll fly away" The woman released the notes from deep in the belly of any person anywhere who'd ever grieved. Behind her, the choir supported her in four parts. Ollie was glad he was settled in the pew, his knees shook so. He clamped his hands on them to keep from rocking his whole row. He looked at a point above the alto section to calm himself. But then he saw her. Years had not touched her. Lila looked exactly as she did when he'd left her on her daddy's porch twenty years ago, the way she did when he told her to get on with her life on his daddy's porch a year later. Except now she wore her hair like the women in the

shiny adverts in Ebony did, straightened smoothed in shiny waves brushed behind the ears. And lipstick. Lilla.

There was no church, no funereal, no grieving widow, nor suffering children. No pastor, no choir, nobody but Lydia singing and Ollie watching. Ollie straightened up to get a better look at her profile.

She must have seen him. She broke eye contact with the choirmaster for the briefest of minutes to look at Ollie. If he were standing, he knew that look what have struck him down. She smiled a little, but her eyes., liquid smoke that traveled across time burdened with want and woe.

The church, the hymn the amens to the choir's declarations, "like a bird from prison bars has flown/ I'll fly away" all solidified around him. The song ended, and Rev. Weston filled the pulpit and asked for all heads to be bowed which relieved Ollie to no end. He used the time to set his face so that no one could read it. Weston asked for the congregation to give thanks for this "going home" service and to give thanks for Brother Ellis' life. The man's words were supposed to make this easier. What home would Ellis be going to? They were burying him after all of this into a piece of ground that Ollie doubted Ellis had even seen. Or did the good reverend mean the "pearly gates"? Bullshit there too. And he didn't need to be prompted by him to remember his brother or to give thanks for his life.

CHAPTER TWENTY

FRANNY

She pulled the car off the road into the breakdown lane as soon as the chain-link fencing gave way to razor wire. She let the car idle a minute, scanning the road ahead. Nothing going or coming, the road remained as silent as the first few minutes of a wake. A rivulet of sweat snaked down her spine. She turned to her uncle, who hadn't opened his mouth since she'd turned off of 278 and onto SR1.

“Well, Unci, here we are. What do you want to do?”

“What you mean, ‘here we are...’ we ain’t nowhere.” He glanced over his shoulder. “What that sign say? ‘S-R something? This used to be Route 7. “ He opened the car door and grabbed the safety handle to haul himself up and to the berm. Franny jumped out to cut him off from whatever craziness he was preparing to perform: looking for holes in the fence, marching the two remaining miles up to the fortified gate, raising a fist at the security cameras perched and swiveling atop each post. He didn't do any of that, though, just leaned his back against the car, hands resting in the pockets of his grey flannel trousers, staring out at the patchy green expanse between him and the razor wire. Franny eyed the road in both directions before joining him, resting her hip on the hood. They leaned in silence for several minutes. The air around the car was still and dry. Nothing moved. Franny felt no need to make her habitual examination of the ground around her feet; a snake wouldn't be caught dead out here.

Uncle Ollie looked hard at the stretch of land he faced. “I can’t get my bearings from here. They’ve torn up most of the roads we used to use to get to town.”

“Well, yeah, to be sure they did. They tore out everything.”

“I guess they didn’t want anyone wandering out here. Couldn’t double back here from nowhere, if you tried.” Uncle Ollie tilted his chin up toward the right of the field. “Near as I can tell, that out there might be the old road. Used to be lined with huge pine trees. Around this time of year, all you could smell was the sap.”

Franny looked over to the right, straining to see what he saw. Maybe there was a break in the austere ground, the barest trace of a path, a point from which would spring the ghosts of the wood-frame houses, the lone service station, the spire of The Runs church on the south side of Cokerville and the steeple of Zion Fair up to the north. She used her hand to shield her eyes from the late afternoon sun and focus her gaze, but nothing rose from the ground, not that she’d believed that it would. She glanced down the road again. All those signs, letters screaming about restricted areas and here they were, an old man pushing eighty and a grown woman who ought to know better, hanging out by the side of the road, peering through the fence of a uranium plant so they can “have a look”. What are we looking for; she wanted to ask Ollie, because no trace of the town or their family could be found on the side of the made-up road. Even the dirt looked different. The dusty brick red Carolina clay had given way to washed-out ash. How could they find landmarks when the land itself was no longer recognizable? Franny rolled back on her heels then up on her toes.

“Your Aunt Jill used to do that tippy-toe thing when she was nervous. You nervous, Bean?” Unc didn’t break his scrutiny of the parcel to look at her.

“Yeah, Unc, I’m nervous! You saw those signs. We can’t be out here like this. Somebody will be up here any minute pointing us back from whence we came, if we’re lucky. Tessa and Mama told you there’d be nothing to see.”

“Y’all kids, ya got all the sense of who you are and what is yours knocked right on out of you. Thirty years ago, there were trees and fields of corn and soybeans, and alfalfa, barns and shops and houses, and a good part of all that was yours. Why shouldn’t we be out here? We just looking. No need for you to be nervous, I don’t care what them signs say.” He shifted slightly and leaned deeper into his heels.

Franny looked at her Uncle Ollie, this old man who looked so much like Papa in profile, same tawny skin stretched over steel set jaw. Unc had the same raw sienna eyes as her father, and they caught the sun just as Papa’s used to...but where the light danced in Papa, Unc’s eyes trapped and held the glint ,and it was impossible to stay too long in his gaze, just as it was with the sun. There was a familiar comfort in standing next to him, not Papa, bigger, gruffer and tinged with a bitterness that Papa never had. Papa hadn’t lived long enough to acquire the veins that wound up tight from Uncle Ollie’s left shoulder to his temple. Papa’s brow had had only the faintest furrow when he died, nothing like the sunken lines burrowed in her uncle’s forehead. Franny looked down at the tops of her tennis shoes. On the day before Papa’s wake, Cousin Jeffery had taken Mama’s hand as she sat between Tessa and Franny in his office and told her how Papa’s face had needed so little of the work he and Shirley had been willing to do ...”Really, we

could *not* even think of what we needed to do for Brother Ellis, besides our standard preparation, of course. That's how good he looked." Jeffery had then settled back into the soft velvet of the wing chair, hands folded over the vest of his three-piece suit. His declaration had hung in the air, settling on no one at all. It was these types of memories that skittered across her mind, not sepia-colored notions of the grid of Old Ellenton. It did no good to have any of these thoughts out on the side of SR---whatever. She pressed her hands on either side of her lower back, kneading the knots she found and looked where Unc looked.

"So you think we're near the old road? Hamberg? What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, I might be telling tales to myself. Something about the way the sky looks from here." He squinted. "You right, they tore every last thing out. We could be out near Myers Mill for all I know. I just wanted to see what I was able from the road..." Franny could see the glint in his eye clouding over.

"Unc, they have tours of the old place once or twice a year. I think Tessa goes every time they get one together. We could ask her when the next one is, get you on a nice bus. You'd see a lot more on a tour." And be less likely to be cuffed and stuffed. Franny craned her neck again, to scout for squad cars. She was too old for this high adventure.

"Baby, I ain't getting on a bus like I'm on vacation, sightseeing on a piece of dirt. They tell you anything, 'hey, y'all look over here and see where the old post office used to be, and over there was the First Muckety Muck Church of White Jesus,' People

sticking their necks out to see, and um-hum each other to death. Gotta take their word that this is this and that is that, naw, not me.”

“Well, Unc, I’ve seen the pictures. There are still some old places out there; you can see the foundations of things. You’d see more on that tour than we’re ever going to see out here.” She sighed. Nothing she said would be of any use. She’d have to treat Ollie as she had her kids when they were young, wait it out, and let him see for himself.

“Um-hum... you sure there ain’t way to get another view?” Ollie had taken his hands out of pockets and used the car to steady his steps as he walked around.

“I’m sure there is, but I don’t know it. “ She stretched up on her toes. He grunted. Unc made no move to get back in the car. It was getting hotter.

Franny heard it before she saw it. A car was barreling toward them. She could just make out the mounted siren on its roof. Speak of the devil and he shall arise in the form of SRS security. Franny turned to her uncle. “Please, Unc, let me do the talking.”

“Aw girl, stop jumping at your shadow. We ain’t doing nothin’ but looking.” So he did see the car. And yet, his gaze was steady; she imagined he was entreating the resurrection of the past out of the barren dirt.

A cloud of dust enveloped both cars as the small SUV drew up behind Franny’s dark green Camry. Franny coughed, but Uncle Ollie stood stock-still. A young, freckled-face officer hopped out of the driver’s side and strode toward them, walking heavy on his heels. “ Hey, y’ all! How y’ all doing? Can I help you folks with something?” He had an easy grin and he stopped within three feet of the Camry’s bumper. He looked at Uncle Ollie, but bowed a little to Franny. She pushed up off of the car and faced the officer.

“No, I don’t think so, sir.” Her uncle shifted. “My uncle and I used to live in Ellenton, and he’s been away for quite some time. He wanted to see if he could see anything of the old place from the road.” She arched her eyebrow at the young man, though her stomach flipped like a Russian gymnast. How long would it take for Mama to glance at the clock and muse aloud about how long they’d been gone?

“Oh, well, we get a lot of people from the old place up here.” He said “the old place’ as though he had some claim to it. From the looks of him his mother hadn’t even been thought of before the “old place” was razed. He beamed at them like he’d get a cookie for establishing rapport before he arrested them. “Trouble is, there just isn’t much left from those days. At least not what you could see from the road.” He tried to catch Uncle Ollie’s eye. “Hello, sir.”

“How you do.” Unc didn’t look at him, turning instead toward Franny and jabbing his thumb in her direction. “This young woman was a teeny-bopper when her parents moved down the road. She need a look too.”

No, Unc, I’m quite alright. She faced the officer. “That’s true, I was a junior in high school when we moved onto the highway.” She looked back over and through the razor wire, full of artificial intensity.

“Well, I can’t imagine you’ve seen much. You folks know, the plant has tours regularly. They even have a tour for all the old little communities. I’ve been on a couple and I can tell you that you can see much more on the tour than hanging out here. You want to sign up for a tour?” He put his hands on his hips, waiting. Franny could see the

officer's partner watching them through mirrored sunglasses from the passenger side of the SUV. He sat very still.

“Funny, I was just telling my uncle that.” She looked from Ollie's profile back to the officer.

Ollie swung sharply to face the young man. “Look. You know another way to the other side? This the only road?”

“No sir, not at all. But is the most traveled road for civilians and visitors and such. But look, y'all won't believe how easy it is to sign up for one of them tours.” He glanced over his shoulder to the SUV. “But, I'm afraid y'all are going to have to turn back around for today.”

Franny looked at her uncle. Surely he could now see this was an exercise in futility. He didn't move. Franny sighed and rolled her shoulders back to draw up to her full height. “Unc, I think it's time to go on back home, you hear?”

“I hear you and I hear him. Now you two hear me. I'm 78 years old.. I ain't hardly going to sign up to go on a tour I might not live to see. “ He looked at the officer for the first time, scanned him up and down.

The officer changed his weight from the balls of his feet to his heels. He looked at Uncle Ollie , squinting his eyes against the setting sun. “I understand. Well, Mr. uh, what did you say your name was?”

“We didn't. ” Unc's vein now made a line up from his temple to his scalp, and even in this still, sticky air by the side of the road with this security guard watching, all Franny could think of doing was to trace the line down to his temple. She stopped short

of doing that, reaching instead to rub his shoulder. Unc closed his eyes. “Your Pappy...” he started, but nothing came after and he walked back to the passenger side of Franny’s car and eased himself in the seat, never once eyeing the young policeman.

The patrolman walked with Franny around to the driver’s side of the car. “Your uncle, you say?” Franny nodded. He reminded her of one of her students at the university, all eager timidity, happy to display what they knew, but terrified to be found to be a fraud. She smiled in spite of herself. “We’ve been getting, more and more of our seniors out here as of late. Can’t figure out why.” He was so young.

Franny leveled her gaze to meet his. “It isn’t hard, Officer...?”

“Gilmore, Jimmy Gilmore.” He stuck his hand out and gave hers a vigorous shake.

“Officer Gilmore. I imagine the people you see stopping along this road are ones making proper goodbyes. When they left 40 years ago there wasn’t time or room, if I remember correctly.” She tried to smile.

“I wouldn’t know, to tell you truth.”

“Of course you wouldn’t, you are entirely too young. I honestly don’t know why my uncle wanted to take this drive, no idea why the others come either. I saw the town ripped up from its roots, and there was little left of it when we turned round for that last glance. It was depressing then, and it’s depressing now.” Franny moved to the driver’s side. Gilmore jumped in front of her to open the door for her. “But maybe I’ll be back in another twenty, you never know. Unc, you belted in?”

“Stop worrying me girl and go, if we got to go.” Ollie slid his thumb under the belt to adjust it. It snapped back with a “CRACK---“ that pierced the quiet. Gilmore jumped back a little.

“Well, you folks have a good afternoon. Think about that tour, now.” He grinned again and this time Franny saw relief relaxing his jaws. His face appeared younger still. Franny stifled the urge to laugh. She pulled off of the berm and onto the road, executed a perfect three-point turn and rode off, all under the relieved and watchful gaze of Officer Gilmore.

Franny looked over at her uncle. He stared out at the horizon. If he was upset, he did not show it. Maybe what she had said to the young man wasn't off the mark. Maybe Unc was mad because she had played the “oh, grandpa “ card with security. Or maybe Unc was sorting all that he saw out on the grid stored in his mind and trying to reconcile the difference between memory and life as it stands. She wouldn't bother him. And now she found she needed to think.

Physically, there was not a single thing there on which to hang a memory. Most of hers lived between the leaves of her Schofield annual, on Mama's mantelpiece, in the photo albums fat with stiff black pages of carefully mounted photos. Smiles were forever fixed. Arms stayed encircled around waists that remained trim. Porches were always filled with crinoline and pumps, pomade and sports coats and couples were always on their way to a dance. Brides and grooms continually fed each other cake and babies stayed nestled in the laps of doting grandmas. They couldn't live out here.

“You know Bean,” Unc's voice cut through her fog.

“What’s that?”

“Your papa and I didn’t see eye to eye when the time came. He wanted to hire a lawyer and fight to keep the old place.”

She could feel him now staring at her. “I remember...”

“He was so vexed with me, he wouldn’t drive me to the train station after I signed for that check.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Course you didn’t, why would you? Your Papa never wanted to upset, he was always smoothing feathers, plus he didn’t want you all to have a bad opinion about me regardless what he thought.”

“Well, that was Papa through and through.”

“It was. But he was ready to ruffle feathers then. He didn’t want to let the land go, and it took him too long to understand that the land was already gone, long before y’all knew it, long before they made that announcement. He was fighting a battle but all the solders on the other side had gone home, smokin’ cigars.”

It was all she could do to not turn to face him despite the 70 mph she was driving.

“Are you saying we didn’t own that land?”

“If you asking did we have legal deeds and were the taxes paid, then yes. If you asking did we ever have real control over it, then no, we didn’t own nothing.” He was quiet for two mile posts. “ You ain’t so young you don’t remember how it was. Black folks had to ask for permission to sneeze, where to live, where to shop, where to sit in the movie theater. You think we could buy and sell enough to be on par with a white

landowner? Naw, they had the Klan to keep ahold of that. Your Papa and mine didn't know how much that land was holding them back. You wanted to sell, you knew you weren't gonna get what the white neighbor would get, and after years of payin' them taxes, who gonna walk away?"

Franny nodded.

"So instead of moving on when the government offered a good price, not a fair one, mind you, but enough so a body could make his own decision, your Papa grieved, and never got to see how them decisions turned out."

Franny swallowed.

"I know you didn't see what I saw out there, and I know you didn't want to tote me to begin with. But you need to know, I ain't sad, I ain't got the Alzheimer's or nothin' like that. I just wanted to recall how it was. I wanted you to recall how it really was."

She did recall. It had divided the house split down the middle. How could she forget? "I understand."

"You do, but Tessa, I think she's like your Papa. She was small back then. She got a lot of pretty notions, but she never saw the whole picture. It ain't good for her to keep going on them tours. She ain't gonna see anything, and she ain't gonna know any more about the way the world works by going. She might want to be careful too about what she's soaking up out there..."

Franny snorted and Unc chuckled, though he wasn't done. "The last thing I said to your Papa was that he'd always have his neck under the white man's boot. That was the way I saw it. But it wasn't right to leave him like that."

“I think he knew what you meant.” She didn’t share her own struggle with the last conversation she had with Papa. She was rational, like Mama. Their betrayal was pragmatic, not philosophical. Papa forgave Uncle Ollie, she was sure, and just as sure he had never gotten over Mama and Franny’s pragmatism.

“It don’t much matter now.

Franny signaled right and they were back on Silver Bluff Road.

BIOGRAPHY

Sonja D. Curry-Johnson graduated from Montrose School, Natick, Massachusetts in 1986. She received her Bachelor of Arts in English from Tuskegee University in 1993. She earned her Master of Arts in Teaching from Tufts University in 2000, and has taught in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, Ramstein, Germany and Fairfax County Public Schools, where she continues to teach English.