A View from the Porch



*And other views….* Myrtis Brown

Introduction

Prologue

 Outline

Chapter One: Front Porch

Chapter Two: Back Porch

Chapter Three: Dormitory Window

Chapter Four: Teacher’s Desk

Chapter Five: Hospital Newborn Nursery

Chapter Six: Mountain Top

Chapter Seven: Front Steps

Chapter Eight: Bedroom Window

Chapter Nine: Rearview Mirror

Chapter Ten: The Patio

 Epilogue

Chapter One: A view from the Porch

**Location**: Sumrall, MS

**Time**: Early, 1950s

**Theme:** “Summertime and the Living is Easy”

**Synopsi**s: Annual summer vacation visit with grandparents, swinging on the front porch; happy time playing all day with my brother and cousins, feeling warmth and love from grandparents and neighbors, front the front porch I can see neighbors trudge home from working for the “white folks”, watching the cars go by on the highway adjacent to my grandmother’s house as well as an occasional horse drawn wagon, listening to great aunts and great uncles talk about their lives growing up, learning about family history , listening to and singing gospel songs on the radio, watching my grandmother get on her knees every night to pray, being taught to crochet, helping my grandmother shell peas on the porch, going to Sunday school every Sunday and attending mid-week prayer meeting.

Chapter Two: A View from the Back Porch

**Location: Bonneville, Chicago (South Side)**

**Time: Mid 1950s-late 1950s**

**Theme: “We Have Come this Far by Faith”**

**Synopsis**: The Brown family joins thousands of other African Americans in post-World War 11’s Great Migration. Jim Crow will follow us. We are part of the Mississippi Diaspora settling in Chicago. Our house transitions into an apartment building, the grass we use to play on is now concrete. We don’t play out front but in the courtyard, our mother watching from the back porch. We also go to the nearby park to play. My brother continues to tease me. My cousins also live in this apartment building. There is a steady influx of other family members coming. Instead of going to the fields my parents now go to the factory –Campbell Soup Company. We join a church and I get baptized. God seems to be a little scary. So I’m not taking any chances. I love school; my teachers inspire me, I am always eager to learn. I spend hours reading. My destiny is sealed.

Chapter Three: A View from My Dorm Window

**Location: DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois University**

**Time: Early 1960s-mid 1960s**

**Theme:” How Can We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?”**

**Synopsis**: I feel like an alien. I feel disconnected. Never understood what it meant to be a minority. Never felt like I was poor until I see how many clothes these white girls have in their closets. I can’t get WVON on the radio or any other black radio stations. Dining hall food is unfamiliar; I have never eaten frozen vegetables. I am learning a lot about myself; growing up is different from becoming an adult. I face many challenges and some heartache; you know first love, “true love”. My pastor’s wife gave me a Bible for graduation from high school. I am glad that I brought it with me. I keep it on the table by my bed. I read it often. Life is not just about you as an individual but you are a part of something bigger; a family and a community. I get a lot of encouragement from members my family; a college education is highly valued. My support

Chapter Five: A View from the Newborn Nursery

**Location**: Chicago Lying In Hospital, University of Chicago

**Time:** November 15, 1973

**Theme:** The Samaritan Woman

**Synopsis:** I have seen her only twice; last night immediately after surgery and again briefly one of the nurses had brought her into my room. I press the call button.

 “May I go see my baby?” I ask. “Do you want a wheel chair”? “No thank you, I’d like to try and walk.” She helps me into a robe, navigating the IV drip. I make it down hall; slowly the incision sight from the Caesarean Section is still very painful. Arriving at the nursery window I hold up my ID bracelet. The nurse rolls a bassinet closer so I can see. She picks up the baby for a better view. “Thank you God,” I whisper. I name her Kwame.

It has been a long, hard, and lonely 9 months. An unwed mother was a scandalous thing in 1973. People could sympathize with a teenage mother, but not a grown woman and certainly not a 30 year old teacher!

I lived in isolation for the last six months; I could not go to church. My appearance in a conservative Black Baptist Church would be unthinkable. I could not go to work. I had to take an unpaid medical leave or face firing from the Chicago Public Schools for. “Immoral conduct”.

I was abandoned by my baby’s father. He was a Vietnam War veteran and was suffering from PSTD. He disappeared and became MIA the rest of our lives. Daily phone calls from my mother and my lifelong best friend, Romesa encourage me.The promises of God I read in scripture sustained me.

Chapter Six: Mountain Top

**Location:** Europe

**Time**: 1980s-1990s

**Theme**: “Traveling Mercies and Arriving Grace

Synopsis

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Chapte Seven: A View From The Front Steps

**Location:** SouthSide Chicago – “Pill Hill”



Chapter 8 A View From My bedroom Window

Location: South Suburban Chicago

Time: 2005

**Theme:** “ I woudn’t give nothing for my Journey”

**Synopsis**: It is cold ! January is supposed to be the coldest monthof the year, but Februray can brutal. I am shivering under the covers. I have on

a ski cap and socks. Even the clouds outside my window look like they are shivering. How am I going to survive? I have endured the first seven weeks of chemotheraphy.I have 43 more to go. I prayed the prayer that King Hezekiah uttered when told byIsaiah about his fatal illness.

 “Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed totheLord,saying

*“Remember now, O Lord , I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart and have done what was good not in your sight” AndHezekiah wept bitterely*. God listend his prayer and sent the prophet Isaiah to the King ,his prayers were heard and that he would be healed.

I lost my breasts, my hair my, abilty to smell, my abiity to walk; but I found my faith.

**Chaper : 9 A View From My Rearview Mirror**

**Location: Route #59**

**Time: 2016**

**Theme: The Jericho Road**

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**Chapter: 10 From the Patio**

**Location: Backyard**

**Time: 2018**

**Synopsis**: The breeze feels good. I love sitting in the glider under this huge maple tree; plenty of shade. I am enjoying having my morning coffee

and doing my morning devtions out here. I get up and wander over to the pond. I think the fish recognize my footsteps because they always swim to the surface when I approach. In spend a lot of leisurer time out here;

reading a book, watching my grandchildren play ,or tending to my flower garden. So this is what retirement looks and feels like.

*God does hear and answer prayers, everday is a gift, and what doesn’t kill you, wll make you stronger.*

Prologue

January 21, 1943

12:15 am

Gulfport, Mississippi

Dr. Milas Love feels a chill, he pulls the covers around him tightly .He wakes up momentarily confused; why is he not in in his own bed sleeping next to his wife? Why is he sitting on this porch wrapped in a quilt? Fully awaken now, he remembers he had been summoned a few hours earlier when his patient, an expectant mother had gone into labor, He had hurried from his home to a small neat house at 3401 19th street. False alarm, no baby yet; a common occurrence. However he had stayed; the baby was definitely on its way.

Dr. Love stands and stretches, He enters the house. It is a typical colored folk’s house – the” shot gun design.” He passes the first room and sees his patient’s mother, Mrs. Daisy Felder; she has traveled from her home in Sumrall, MS. She is gently rocking and humming “Jesus Keep me Near the Cross” to her grandson, his patient’s first child. Dr. Love had delivered him 18 months earlier. He enters the second room, brightly lit by kerosene lamps. The patient’s mother in law, Mrs. Ida M. Brown is standing by the bed. Dr. Love peer down at his patient-“How are you doing Hazel”? She looks up and replies quietly “I’m ok Doctor”

Continuing through house to the kitchen, Dr. Love walks out on to the back yard and stands gazing at the sky. He imagines that he can hear the waves from the Gulf being slapped on the beach in the near distances. accompanied by the smell of dampness brought by a gentle breeze. The muted sound of thunder reverberates in the air. The sounds remind Dr. Love that a war in going on. He it makes him think about his brother Charles drafted into the Army now serving in Europe. Dr. Love ponders as he stands still looking up to the shy. “Will the war change things? Will he, a Negro physician ever be granted attending privileges at the local hospital? Will they ever admit a colored patient?

1:15am Some calls his name and he move quickly back inside

1:28am Doctor Love happily says you did good Hazel; you have a girl this time. She’s a big baby.”

1:3 am Someone in the room raises the ancient question “What shall we name this child.”?

Many hour later and 4, 742 miles away in the South Pacific, Solomon Islands, a young Master Sergeant Wallace A. Brown is hunkered down with the 8th Army’s 93 division-366 Regiment. It

is all Black. Jim Crown has followed him all the way from Mississippi. His white commanding officer approaches Wallace and says “You have a telegram. It is from your mother.Sgt. Brown reads it quickly and silently and then loudly so everyone in his troop can hear.

 Son, you have a baby girl. We have named her Myrtis Jean. Hazel is well.

 Love, Mother

Wallace smiles and immediately starts to write a letter:

 My Darling Wife,

I am so happy. Please send pictures of our baby. We don’t know how much longer that this war will last. Probably at least two more years, General Macarthur says that he will return. The Japanese are fighting hard to hold on to this territory. I long for the day when I can come home to you and the children. I miss you so much. Kiss the children for me.

 Your loving husband,

 Wallace

 INTRODUCTION

***The Doors of the Church Are Now Open.*** These words are uttered by the Pastor at the end of worship are familiar in Black church life. The deacons rise in unison from their seats. The gospel choir begins sing or the organist might simply play. Lots of amends from the pews. The spirit of the Lord is indeed in this place. This passionate exhortation is an invitation to membership and to discipleship.

The pages of my book are now ready to be opened! My readers, I am extending to you an invitation. Come; join with me as I revisit rural Mississippi, Black Belt Chicago, and suburban Cook County and beyond. This however is not a travelogue; it is much more.

 **This is a thoughtful journey**; a curated collection of views that I have assembled to share with you. These views become snapshots, encapsulating; what I have heard, what I saw and what I felt.

 What do you see; a half empty glass or a half full glass?

Our views, what we see can shape our perspectives, plant memories and impact our lives. Throughout my life’s journey, the landscape and along with it my views have changed. However there are two constants. In an upward view, when I ***looked up*** I could always see God. I can still hear my grandmother reciting her favorite scripture:

  *“I will lift my eyes to the hills- where does my help come from?”*

 *My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

 *He will not let your foot slip-he who watches over you will not slumber*

 *Indeed, he watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121:1-4*

This scripture always has brought both comfort and reassurance to me.

When **I *looked around***, in my peripheral view, I could always see my family. Sometimes it was my biological nuclear family, sometimes it was my extended family, blended family or church family. Sometimes the family included both in-laws and outlaws.

On this journey I had a few pits stops, some bumps in the road, some rest stops and sometimes I had to take the nearest exit. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. I lost my breast but I found my faith. I did not make this journey alone.

**This is a reflection**

A symbol for the Akan tribe of Ghana. The bird has its feet planted forward with its head turned backwards. Its meaning ***–“go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful.”***

As I pulled out of the parking lot, I caught a quick view of the Sankofa Bird’s banner hanger over the side entrance to the museum. It caused me to stop and reflect about my own life’s journey, the roads that I have traveled, the paths that I have walked and the people that I have met. Many of these individuals have collectively contributed to my views of life. Delbert and Martha Lawson provided a good witness for the gospel. Dorothy and Douglas Alexander lived out the “Good Neighbor Policy”. My 5th grade teacher. Mrs. Davis planted the seed and a thirst for learning. My relationship with them strengthened my faith. You will learn more about these indivduals as my life’s story unfolds.

 Other negative encounters like the ones with Samuel Dorsey, I wish I could have avoided on my journey. I met Sam in the spring of our years, when life was new; it was a time of excitement and expectation. We were going to plant our hopes and dreams for the future together. We met again in the winter of our years when life was older, a time of rest and relaxation. We were supposed to share memories and keep each other warm during this season. Neither of those things happened. The admonition: “What you *see* is not what you always get.” resonates with me. It is sound advice not just to take in the view with our eyes, but we must read with our hearts. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French poet and journalist writes in his book –*The Little Prince*: *“One clearly see clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eye.”* Often time during our journeys we can experience” blurred vision “or even “double vision.”

From childhood through young adulthood; (the 1950s through the 1960s), I experienced a few road blocks. I ran into every kind of “ism” there is: Jim Crowism, colorism, racism, sexism, ageism and classism. With the love and support of family and friends and with the countless blessings of God; I was able to continue on my journey.

**This is a memoir**

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This is my story. It is a narrative of selected vignettes from my life. It encompasses some special memories *–“memories light the corners of my mind.”*(Barbara Streisand The Way We Were). These memories feed and nurture my spirit as this journey continues

When it comes to new construction framing is where your building begins to take shape. A building’s frame is the skeleton than supports all the other features. The first step in the process is to pour a foundation. To keep the frame up, you need loading bearing walls. These walls provide the infrastructure for the rest of the building. God and my family have been my “load bearing” walls throughout my journey. My family has been the backdrop for my life’s story. They gave me my identity. I *am* because they *were.* Therefore I am resilient, empowered and equipped for life’s journey. A foundation of love was laid for me before my arrival, January 21, 1943. Wallace and Hazel Brown were responsible for bringing me here; God has kept me here.

The church has always been a part of my life. I grew up in the Baptist church. My faith was deeply rooted there. Part of my journey took me on the road of theological discernment and faith formation. I took a peek at the Nation of Islam and sat awhile with the Jehovah’s Witness. My spiritual journey finally leads me to the ELCA (the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) and yes the doors of the church were indeed open.

 As you read my story, you will explore and discover a closer view of what my journey looked like. Traveling mercies and arriving grace for each of you.

Chapter One p.1

Sumrall, Mississippi 1955

*“Swoosh, forward-*

*“Swish, back,*

A nudge from my foot prompts the swing to move more slowly.

 *“Screech” “Screech”* *loud grinding from the chains of the swing.*

The back and forth creates a rhythm and produces a slight breeze. The breeze is welcomed. We need it. The sun is hot, not directly overhead yet and is intense. The large willow tree looking exhausted from the heat; stands drooping next to the house. It provides little shade.

I love being out on the front porch; my favorite place is the swing. I look across the porch at my grandmother. She is rocking in her chair, humming as usual; something soft under her breath. I am pretty sure it is *“Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross’* Mama Daisy is a petite woman about 4’11”.Her silver gray hair is piled neatly on her head in a bun. She has a bronzed weathered look about her face. Most of her early years were spent picking cotton first Florence, Alabama and later in the Mississippi delta. Her high cheekbones reflect her heritage from her father Sam Miller, who was a member of the Choctaw Nation. The word Mississippi actually comes from an indigenous American word meaning *“Father of Waters”*

Someone passes by the side of the house on his way to town.

.”Hey there Miz Daisy”. Mama nods her head and smiles in acknowledgment. This paved road runs along our house leading to town and tangentially separating the “colored” part of town from the “white folks” part of town. A line of “separate but equal” – the standard of living in Mississippi circa 1955.

I will bring the swing to a stop. I watch Mama shelling peas and snapping beans. I see her split the seams, the push the peas out with on smooth motion. “Mama, can I help you” “Yes, baby” she chuckles. She passes to me with a bowl of peas. I try to duplicate her movement. It is a disaster. My bowl doesn’t look anything like Mama’s. Tears run down my cheek. Mama looks over at me; “Don’t cry baby, you’ll get it *bye and bye*. You’re leaving too many snaps. Run your thumb down the seam like this and open the whole pod, that’s the way. Only snap the small ones. We want to get as many peas as possible.” There will be other lessons from Mama from that porch; learning to crochet, play cards or to simply to sit, listen and learn.

I hear movement coming from inside the house, my great Aunt Nellie emerges:” Daisy” she says, and gently let her gaze rest on me.”Sista”, Mama responds. Aunt Nellie lowers herself, popping open her fan, into the other rocking chair; “I done brought you a *mess of greens*; you might want to cook them for Pastoral Sunday”. Aunt Nellie is the exact opposite of Mama; whereas Mama was a diminutive woman, her sister is an ample woman, with plenty of “rump”. Enough I once heard the women folk talking saying” could you place a cup of coffee on her rump and it would never spill. Laughter followed that. Not malicious, humorous. I was curious about Aunt Nellie; she lived alone. I didn’t know anyone in the whole town who lived alone. I heard bits and pieces of her life; she had outlived three husbands and lost six children in childbirth or shortly thereafter; some of whom reportedly were buried in her back yard. She was known to be a superior laundress, especially ironing; which she did for both colored folks and the white ladies. Most people I learned from the porch were afraid of “bad weather” sometimes Aunt Nellie would come and sleep at Mama’s or other times she would ask her to send one or two of the *chillen* to spend the night at her house. My brother, Wallace’s mission seemingly in life, by his teasing and other antics, was to make me miserable would often volunteer me.

I return to the swing. Higher and higher I go. I look up to the sky; Mama says God lives up there. “Hello God, can you make it not so hot.” *Buzz, buzz, zzz*, this is the only thing that I don’t like about the porch; the flies also seem to like the porch. I try to swat them away.

Mama, I ask “What is a *mess* of greens? My grandmother and her sister exchange looks, Mama smiles at me and says, “Baby, you’ll learn in the *bye and bye.”* Aunt Nellie asks Mama for some ice water. They go inside the house; I follow them.

*Inside the house…*

Colored folks houses were either the *“dog trout”* or *shot gun”* style; Mama’s house was more on the former style. There was neither electricity, gas nor running water in the house. As you enter from the porch there were two large rooms, separated by a door. The first room was a large bedroom which consists of two large beds. Both beds have antique cast iron bed frames; covered with handmade quilts. One I remember Mama told me was given to her by her mother; my great grandmother Amanda Morgan. These beds were always warm and comfortable. I loved to snuggle in the quilts, I felt safe and secure in these beds. And I love the smell of the sheets, always fresh from having been hung out to dry in the sun in Mama’s back yard. The other furniture in the room was a large chifferobe, and a dresser. A large wooded table sits between the two beds. A kerosene lamp and a Bible rest on the table. Mama always read from her Bible by the light from the lamp. She then got down on her knees, clasped her hands together and prayed. I once asked her” Why do you pray like this every night”? ; her answer “Baby, you’ll understand in the *bye and bye.”* A black Singer sewing machine is positioned on the wall adjacent to the beds. A radio is perched on a small table next to the sewing machine. A large wood burning fireplace is in the center of the room. I can still remember the warmth from the fireplace and the crackling and dancing of the flames. Through the doorway there is another bedroom, slightly smaller with two beds, an armoire dresser and a “chest of drawers.” In the rear of these room was another room- sort of multipurpose. In the center of the room was a black potbellied stove, on the adjacent wall was the “icebox”, next to it was a table with a galvanized tub. Cupboards holding dishes were on another wall. A screened door leads to the back yard.

Mama opens the icebox and pours Aunt Nellie a glass of water. “Thanks Daisy, I’d best be getting on home. Mama puts on her apron and follows her out the door; me too. I once heard a neighbor remark, “Daisy that child is your shadow”. Mama just smiled.

NEXT:

*Outside the house…..*

*Under the house……*

*In the “Quarters…..*

*Going to town…….*

*Revival time……*

*End of summer…….*

Outside the house.

Mama puts on her apron and head out the door. There are screen door at both the front and the back. The real exterior door are only used at night, otherwise the house is open all day; no locks, only latches were used on the screens.

Mama approaches the chicken coop, opens the pop door. Inside the chicken coop in the hen house with nesting boxes and a feeding trough. The chicken coop looks flimsy built of mesh wire, but it is strong enough to keep the predators – raccoon, possums , cats , foxes, ) away. There is a roof overhead to discourage these “critters from getting to the chickens.

I love feeding time with Mama. The chickens come running once mama is inside they seem to recognize her steps. She calls them*” Here chic, chickie, here”*, plus she has a soft whistle and a chick ling of her tongue. I try to copy her, but I can’t. I have a favorite, the smallest of the baby chicks. She does come to get feed from me. I have named her *“Little Bit”.*After feeding I hand mama the wire coated basket as she enters the hen house. The hens are sort of intimidating; those quick, darting, piercing eyes; looking like a real mean teacher. As they sat perched on those nesting boxes; I expected at any time them to leap down, whip out ruler and whack me on the hand. If they sometime wandered out of the chicken coop, my brother would throw rocks at them. I was glad that he found something else other than me to torment.

We leave the chicken coop, Mama always careful to make sure that the latch was secure. Mam washes the eggs. Some she will give away, some she will sell, some she will barter for other goods, the rest she will keep for cooking and baking. I hear my cousins, Brenda and Peggy calling me. It sounds like a sing song; *Myr- tis, Jean.Myrt-tis Jean*

*Under the house*

Most homes in rural Mississippi were built on cider blocks or bricks. It is a perfect play room, hide out place. It is cool under the house; a welcome refugee for the scorching, relentless Mississippi sun. Out the red dirt we build doll house, and played with our dolls. We even ate some of the dirt. It didn’t taste too bad. Brenda and Peggy were more like my sisters than cousins. We were very close. They were my first play mates, my first friends to share secrets with. We join forces to keep all intruders out of our “house”. We shooed away wandering chickens and banned my brother Wallace and their brother Joe. I think that bonding was generational as it was replicated from the bonding I saw between my mother Hazel and their mother Helen as well as the “sista hood between Mama and Aunt Nellie.

*In the quarters*

We hear the screen door banging shut. Mama calls out “I’m going to Aunt Sadie’s”. We hurriedly scramble from underneath the house, following closely behind Mama. She’s heading toward the “quarters.”, where the colored folks lived. Although Mama is short, she’s a fast walker. We almost have to run to keep up with her. We pass these homes, most of which are flimsy, dilapidated weathered beaten, looking like they were prone to fall over at any minute. On most of the porches there are women sitting on the porches just fannin; they all call out a greeting”Hey Miz Daisy” as we pass by. Soon the St. Louis Baptist Church comes into view, where we attend Sunday school . As we walk further we pass the “juke joint”. Not much happening there now. It comes alive after dark and on the weekend. Sumrall’s juke joint and all other juke joints throughout the south were vividly depicted in Alice Walker’s “The Color Purple”. The word juke comes from the creole Gullah- meaning “wicked or disorderly”. We were never allowed to go near the juke joint but sometimes, my brother accompanied my grandfather there on the weekends when he sold peanuts. We were curious about what went on the juke joint and I would pester my brother to tell us what he had seen. He would smile that wicked grin, which he reserved for me and say “None of your dumb business Piggy”. Years later I would learn that neither he nor my grandfather went inside the juke joint. My grandfather, who did not drink, would sit on a large tree stump situated near the juke joint and sell his peanuts.

Mama finally arrives at her destination- Uncle Will and Aunt Sadie’s house. Uncle Will was mama’s older brother. I thought he was kind of rich. He did not work in the saw mill or pick cotton as all the other men in Sumrall did. He wore suits a lot, not just on Sunday. Uncle will sold insurance policies and as a part time Methodist preacher. His house was separated a little from the rest of the quarters, on a slight hill. It was larger than most homes, was painted white. Uncle will had concrete steps gong up to his house. And inside his house was a real parlor, just like the white folks. His son Prince was away in college in some place called Ohio. He was a disappointed to his parents. He would soon be kicked out of college for his wild, drunken behavior. Aunt Sadie, well she was described as a real “proper lady”. She had come from well to do family from New Orleans. She always seem to have on he “Sunday go to meeting clothes. She did not work outside the home, nor did she take in washing or ironing as did most of the other womenfolk. Her specialty was pound cake. She and Mama were close but there always some tension between her and Aunt Nellie. According to Aunt Nellie their sister in law was too “uppity”

Mama has brought Aunt Sadie some eggs. She insists that Mama take the money. Mama thanks her and slips the cons into the pocket of her dress. They sit quietly in the rocking chairs on the porch sipping lemonade talking and exchanging news. Mama thanks her and says to us *“Let’s* *git on back home.”* We each give Aunt Sadie a hug and wave goodbye; some of her face power rubs off on my face; I remember, she always smelled so good.

*Going to town*

When we got back to house, Mama made a potted meat sandwich made with crackers, not bread. This was our mid-day meal called dinner; along with my favorite fig preserves and a cold glass of buttermilk. After playing all morning, eating, and with the mid-day heat my cousins quickly fell asleep for a nap. Not me, I am eager to have some more one on one time with our grandmother. I watch Mama as she puts on her shoes and a sun bonnet. “May, I go with you Mama.” she smiles “Yes, baby, I’m going to town to get the mail. “We head off towards town. On the outskirts of town we stop a Mr. Lott’s house