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Myrtis Brown

A View From the Front Porch



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**EPILOGUE**

**OUTLINE**

**Chapter One**: A View from the Front Porch

**Location:** Sumrall, MS

**Time:** Mid 1950s

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

**Synopsis:** 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”; black women with their parasols high over their head to shield them from the obliterating sun, sun, or black men swinging their lunch pails matching the rhythm of their walk, 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 along with 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:** Bronzeville, 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 hard 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.

**Chapter Four:** A View from the Teacher’s Desk

**Locations:** Chicago (south side) Downtown Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago (west Side)

**Time:** 1965-2018

**Theme:** *The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word” (*Isaiah 50:4-9)

**Synopsis:** From the University **I learned** the mechanics of teaching: pedagogy, educational psychology and best practices for teaching. From my professors I learned “what to teach.” The quote from astronaut/teacher Christa McAuliffe , who died tragically when the Space Shuttle –The Challenger (1989)exploded during takeoff, *“I touch the future, I teach”*; encapsulates my feelings about education- to mold children and guide their future, From my student I learned **how to teach** and I learned **why I teach**. I entered my first classroom- February 1, 1965; I left my classroom for the last time on December 10, 2018. What a joy! What an honor!

**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. A nurse soon appears

“May I go see my baby?” I ask. Smiling, she nods her head 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; moving gingerly 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. It is a breath taking 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:** A View from a Mountain Top

**Location:** 30,000 feet over Western Europe

**Time:** 1980s-1990s

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

**Synopsis:** My Faith Journey and Faith formation

**Chapter Seven:** A View from the Front Steps

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

**Time:** 1980s-1990s

**Synopsis**: Forks in the road

**Theme:** On the Move Again

**Chapter 8:** A View from My bedroom Window

**Location:** South Suburban Chicago

**Time:** 2005

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

**Synopsis:** It is cold! January is supposed to be the coldest month of the year, but February 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 chemotherapy. I have 43 more to go. I prayed the prayer that King Hezekiah uttered when told by Isaiah about his fatal illness:

*“Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed to the Lord, 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” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. God listened to his prayer and sent the prophet Isaiah to the King, his prayers were heard and that he would be healed.”*2 Kings 20:3

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

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

**Location:** Route #59, South Suburban Cook County

**Time:** 2016

**Theme:** The Jericho Road

**Synopsis:** Obeying Traffic Lights and the Stop Signs

**Chapter:** 10 A View From the Patio

**Location**: Backyard, Suburban Chicago

**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 devotions 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 leisure time out here; reading a book, watching my granddaughter play, or tending to my flower garden. So this is what retirement looks and feels like. God does hear and answer prayers, every day is a gift, and what doesn’t kill you, will 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 the worn floor boards squeak under his weight. 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”. He touches her shoulder reassurely.

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 reminds 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 Someone calls his name and he move quickly back inside

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

1:30 am Quietly a voice in the room raises the ancient question “What shall we name this child.”?

Many hours later and some 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 93rd Division-366 Regiment. It is all Black. Jim Crow 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:

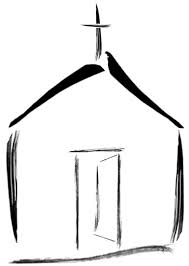
My Darling Wife,

*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 to 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. As I traveled, often times I was distracted by the view. I made some detours and wrong turns. I am thankful that I had a manual for my journey. As we a reminded in scripture “*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a* *light to my path.* “Psalm 119:105(NIV) *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 individuals 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. Why? 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, tribalism and classism. With the love and support of family and friends and with the countless blessings of God; I was able to navigate around obstacles or roadblocks and I was able to continue on my journey.

**This is a memoir**

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 also 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 clearer view of what my journey looked like. As you travel through the next pages, I hope you that will learn a few things, or revisit some of your own experiences and hopefully be enriched by my story. Traveling mercies and arriving grace for each of you.

Myrtis Brown

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” you could place a cup of coffee on her rump and it would never spill. Laughter followed that. Not malicious, just 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; whom 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. I would often awake up on Sunday mornings and be greeted to smell of homemade biscuits and fried ham and to the soulful sounds of gospel music. A station in Jackson played the most popular recordings; especially quartets - *The Dixie Humming Birds,* *The Five Blind Boys of* *Alabama , the Mighty Clouds of Joy* and Mama’s favorite *The Soul Stirrers.* During the week Mama listen to her “stories on the radio. Often her neighbor Ms. Berda would stop by if she finished work early for the “white folks. They would engage in lively discussions about the goings on in-*The Guiding Light, the Secret* *Storm, Young Doctor Malone* and Mama’s favorite *Stella Dallas.* 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.

***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 doors 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 is popular because this county is a “dry county”\*. Moonshine liquor could be bought here. 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. We pass the juke joint again on the way home. Mama says *“Yawl stay here a minute”.* She comes back out slipping a bottle wrapped in brown paper bag into her apron. She looks at us and nods we know what this means. Don’t tell anyone she stopped her. When I am a little older Mama will explain this is the reason she doesn’t go to church; because she drinks alcohol. She said God wouldn’t like her being in a church. Later I would ask God, “Please let Mama come into the church house; she is so good.”

***Going to town***

When we got back to the 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. Mama makes the buttermilk herself; it is so good; especially with a slice of cornbread. After playing all morning, eating, and with the mid-day heat my cousins quickly fall 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. Mr. Lott is rich is farm is across the highway from Mama’s house. From the porch I can see the cows grazing in the pasture. Sometimes, my brother Wallace and cousin Joe would cross the highway and taunt the large Brahman bull. My grandfather repeated warns them about this antic. Once Mama got a switch from the tree and threaten to tan their hides if she ever caught them going across the high way. One of Mama’s neighbors, Clarice works for Mrs. Lott. She’s **“The Help”** \*. Clarice opens the back door for us. “Afternoon Miz Daisy”, hey Myrtis Jean”, she smiles and runs her hand over my hair. She has three boys; loves to braid hair and welcomes the opportunity to comb either my hair or my cousins’ hair when we are visiting Mama during summer vacation. We walk into a bright, sunny sparking white kitchen with crisp, colorful curtains hanging on the windows. Inside the house of a white person, I thought at that time, must be like going to heaven. It was so big, so many rooms. They have electricity, running water and inside plumbing – they have a bathroom. Mrs. Lott appears at the door way leading to the dining room. Clinging to her mother her daughter, a few years younger than I am. Mama nudges me “Say hello to Ms. Anna May”; I smile broadly and say “Hi”. Anna Mae stares back at me, she didn’t return my smile. Her bright blue eyes are hostile, her face frozen in a stone cold mask. Inwardly I cringe; no one has ever looked at me like that. I feel hate seeping from her pores. I involuntarily shake, drawing closer to Mama grabbing her at the waist. In a cosmic interchange, the past and the future collide in my mind’s eye. From some 80 generation earlier I hear a voice speaking through the vista of time *“Let not your heart be troubled”;* and in a microcosm of a second I am plummeted 60 years into the future, I can hear John Legend singing *“One day….glory will be ours*” Mrs. Lott pays Mama for the eggs that she has brought. She says “Here Daisy”, Mama replies, “Thank you, Ma’am”. As we leave the Lott’s, I ask “Mama why didn’t Anna May say hello to me? Mama replies, “You’ll understand in the bye and bye” As we continue on our walk to town, she hums softly “After while It’ll All Be Over,”

We cross the railroad tracks and enter the town. The town consists of two, maybe three block in length. It is a sleepy, slow moving town. No one ever seems to be in a hurry. There are stores lining both side of the street. There’s a doctor’s office, a restaurant, a dry goods store, a movie theater, the bus depot, a drug store with a real soda fountain and a post office. The Post Office is the only place where we “colored folks” are allowed to use the front entrance. When we went to the “picture show” we enter by the side door and go up to the balcony by a very narrow set of stairs. Seating was in on roughhewn benches. I looked over the railings and longed to be able to sit on the first floor in those regular theater seats. If there was ever an overflow on the main floor, whites would come upstairs and we would have to relinquish the first row of benches to allow seating for the whites. If there was ever overcrowding for us; we simply had to stand during the movie. We used the back door or side entrance for everywhere else. Mama and I proceed to the Post Office. Colored folks do not have mail boxes, Sumrall is such a small town; the clerk knows everyone by face. When Mama enters he says “Hello Daisy”; reaches behind the counter and hands Mama some mail. Sometimes she collects mail for her neighbor as well. We head back home; Mama says” Let’s go, time to get supper ready for Oscar.” Some whites pass us; no one speaks just walk by with blank looks on their faces; like we don’t even exist. Their attitude offer no surprises; after all this is Mississippi and Ross Barnett is the governor, a staunch segregationist and a member of the White Citizen’s Council the I don’t understand Jim Crow, but I know what it feels like.

***Revival time***

Brenda, Peggy and I are excited about the Revival; mainly because we get to go out at night! I love the stillness of the night, the soft breeze, seeing the stars; it seems like is God gently covering us for a while; to give us rest. It is a special time for everyone. There is always a visiting preacher who comes to conduct the revival; maybe from up North, like Chicago or maybe from Memphis or Jackson. Some member of the church will host a dinner for the preacher and his family before the worship begins. All members of the church will contribute a dish. Mama is often asked to fry some chicken. That’s her specialty .Other visitors come from Prentiss, Hattiesburg or Laurel as well. Our grandfather, Oscar Felder; we call him Popeye. He is Mama’s second husband. He is a big man, over six feet built like defensive lineman. But he is a man of few words and a gentle spirit. I never heard him raise his voice. His goal in life was to provide for his Daisy Mae. We are excited because we get to earn some money to go to the picture show. Poppye sells peanuts at the church after the revival. He will roast them in the fireplace. We are allowed to help stoke the fire. I love that rich almost burnt smell. After the peanuts cool off, we will help place them into small paper bags, securing the top in a knot. They sell for 5 cent each. Poppye gives us money for helping. He packs them into two large shopping bags. We leave for the” church house”. As we walk we are joined by others, children, young and old folks; some greeting my grandfather; *“Even’ Mr. Oscar”,* Popeye, nods in response.

As we get closer to the church, music greets us, catching a ride and floating on the night time breeze. I hear a “Doctor Watts.” It is slow, mournful, rhythmic; coming from somewhere deep within the collective pathos of the African American soul. It speaks to me even as a child of the omnipresence of God. “*Where words fail, music speaks, lift the soul”.* We enter the church. The capping of hands, the patting of feet all in unison to the *call and response*.\* This music is both collective and connective; it is very spiritual and bonding for me; I feel close to God; I feel the essence of God and those who have lived before me. The small church is crowded. In the closeness of bodies, I can smell freshly iron dress and shirts, hair that has recently been “hot combed” with lots of grease as well ladies’ perfumed probably bought from the “Five and Dime Store in town. Fans were plentiful, almost every woman has them. The fans help to keep the congregation cool and could also be used to make sure that the *young’uns* behaved in church. Church fans were said to have been part our culture from Africa where the fan was used by the goddess to pass blessings. The fans were also used as well as an advertising tool for local businesses, like insurance companies and funeral homes. I was excited to be asked to help sometimes to pass out the fans

During the revival service, whole gamut of emotions are displayed; clapping, shouting, crying; all stirred by the spirit. Sometimes a few white visitors would show up and they would be given front row seats.

The guest preacher would artfully retell the painful experiences of blacks during slavery and the continual struggles that we face today. There were lots of warning about staying away from sin. I wasn’t exactly sure what a sin was but I was sure it involved drinking, cussing and *loose living*. He used stories, parables and metaphors-just like Jesus. Towards the end of his sermon, the preacher would begin to *“Whoop”.* Emotions would be very high, some people would *“get happy”*, get the Holy Spirit. Some of the same people always got “happy.” Some people never got happy. I was always curious about this. I raised that question to Mama and she simply said Someday you’ll understand in the *bye and bye*. Lots of clapping, *Amens* and Praise *the Lord.* Sometimes it seemed like the whole room actually rocked a little or moved. The room got hotter and the fans were being used more and more. Despite the hardship that our people face daily; the preacher would encourage us, we should not lose hope, Jesus was on his way back and everything would be all right. Just a God had freed the Hebrews; He would do the same for the American Negro; in just *a little while.* In the end of his sermon, the preacher would “Open the doors of the church.” He would exhort the back slider, the unsaved or the unbaptized to come forth, take his hand and accept this invitation to discipleship. He especially said those who wanted to stop drinking or to give up their sinful ways to come forth. Eventually someone would get up and walk down the aisle. Usually it was a young adult, a boy who was considered ‘wild” or a girl who was consider “fast”’; sometimes an older man. Not too many women.

The service would eventually come end; after a long prayer by one of the deacons. Lots of sleepy children being carried out by their parents. These revivals usually produced a sense of renewal, and of bonding within the community. Those in attendance were always in a good mood, feeling enriched and encouraged by the revival as we spilled out of the church into the late night.

We leave in groups and clusters heading out in different directions. There is laughter, joking and sometimes singing; hymns sung softly to match the night, sprinkled with reviews and gossip

*“That was* *some powerful preaching*”,

*“Yesss Lawd”,*

*“Sho nuff”.*

*“Yo know tha boy sho can preach”*

*“Glad to see Jimmie Lee done give his soul to the Lawd*.”

*“Good for him, you know his daddy was some trifling Negro*

*“And Missus Laura had the nerve to show up; she ain’t paid me yet for that last iron ‘I did for her old pappy”*

*“What you speck from white trash?”*

The crowd begins to thin out as we leave the quarters. It is only Popeye, my brother, my cousin Joe and I. It is very dark. I know that God is real but so is the *boogey man,* and he comes out at night. I walk closer to my brother and grab his hand, “Don’t be scared” he says. My brother loved to tease and torment me when we were children, but he was always ready to try and comfort me when I was frightened. This became a lifelong pattern in our relationship

The darkness of the night can be over whelming; it is pitch black; sometimes I am tempted to reach out and touch it, for I am sure that the night is a wall.

We reach our home. Mama is sitting on the porch; I cuddle up next to her. Popeye sits and begins to rock in the chair. Wallace and Joe take seats on the steps. We are quiet, the night is still. We are reminded of the benediction given by the prophet Habakkuk *“The Lord is in his* *Holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”* Yes, the night is quiet but it is not silent; there is a cacophony of sound unique to the night. We look across the highway to the farm and pastures owned by Mr. Lott. Beyond his land is a railroad line. We can hear the mournful sounds of the train’s horns; the *chickety –clack*, *clickety-click* of the wheels turning on the rails; they seem to squeak as it rounds a bend towards town. Popeye’s rocking joins in a steady rhythm to match that of the train’s approach. We watch the train until it disappears from sight. Popeye pulls his pocket watch from his denim overalls.” She’s late tonight.”Joe and Wallace jump from the steps, trying to catch some “lighting bugs. We hear as she approaches rapidly- the 8:00pm Trail Ways Bus whizzes past the house heading north to Jackson. Mama gets up from the swing; we all know what that means; we follow her into the house. Only Popeye remains on the porch. Stuffing his pipe, he strikes a match and begins to smoke. I notice for the first time that his hunting rifle which normally rests on a rack above Mama’s bed is placed on the floor by his chair. Mama closes the front door; I look out of the window; quietly and stealthily two men join Popeye on the porch. I start to ask Mama a question but she just puts her finger to her lips and says “*Shush”*

**The back window….**

The movement of the swing is putting me to sleep. Popeye doesn’t seem to have moved from the rocking chair since last night. He’s talking to some other menfolk who are lounging on the steps. He’s staring out at the highway; he stands, using his hand to shade his eyes from the sun, to get a better view. I follow his gaze. I see a car moving down the highway directly towards us. He calls out “Daisy Mae”. I am amazed as it gets closer. It’s my father car. Why is he here? It’s not time for us to leave yet. Its two more weeks before the end of summer vacation. His car pulls to a stop the front yard. I am so surprised to see him I don’t move’. Something is wrong. He mounts the stairs, “Mr. Oscar” and shakes Popeye’s hand. He asks “Where is Wallace Jr.?” Popeye replies. “He’s out back *slopping the hogs* with Willie B. “I haven’t let him out of my sight” His eyes dart downward at the shot gun at his feet, Daddy replies “Thanks” He hugs Mama, gives me a quick kiss and continues through the house. Why is he so anxious to see my brother?

News spreads quickly in the quarters- Miz Daisy’s son in law has arrived from up north. In the next few hours people move in and out of Mama’ yard. Some stop to admire Daddy’s car. It’s a 1954 Buick Road Master. Only a few Negroes in Sumrall own a car. Some men have pickup trucks and but that’s about all. Others want to know the latest news. Daddy has brought some newspapers from Chicago; he spreads them out on the top steps of the porch; people crowd around to see. Mama’s closest neighbor, Ms. Berda covers her mouth with her hand as she scans the first page. There as gasps, and “Lord, Have mercy.” Others just shake their heads and walk away. I try to get a quick peek but Mama shoos me away. It’s a picture of a boy, about my brother’s age. He looks familiar for some reason.

The next morning, the car is loaded and we are ready to leave. Daddy hugs Mama and says goodbye to Popeye. My brother gets in the front seat with daddy. I perch myself on my knees to get a better look out the back window. As Daddy drives away, Mama’s house and the front porch began to fade from my view. I am overwhelmed with sadness. I am losing something. From the front seat, I hear my brother ask daddy, “Who is Emmet Till?” Our father doesn’t answer; he just grabs the steering wheel, like he’s trying to get a better grip and looks intently on the road in front of him. I slide down in my seat. A flashback; in my mind’s eye; I remember when we had traveled to Mississippi earlier that summer on the train-**The City of New Orleans**. The stop before ours was the town of Hazlehurst ;( nearest stop to Money, Mississippi) some passengers getting off, a boy passes by me, looks down and smiles. He has that same mischievous smile as my brother Wallace has. It starts on the lips and dances all the way to his eyes and they are twinkling. It’s the same boy whose picture was on the front page of the newspaper. My heart is pounding against my chest wall, my throat is tightening. I scramble and try to look back again out of the window again; but tears cloud my view. There is a deep mourning, someplace deep down inside of me. I feel darkness but the sun is shining brightly. It will be nearly ten years will pass before I touch the soil in Mississippi again. This time there will be a picture of three boys on the front page- two white boys and one black boy.

Chapter 2 View from the Back Porch

Grand Boulevard, South side Chicago late 1950s

**Teddy Bear**

*“Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Turn around*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Touch the ground*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Touch the ground*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear.*

*That will do……”*

Clap, whack, twat, clap… the rope makes a slapping sound against the pavement. The chant matches the rhythm of the rope. Lela and Francine are turning the rope. Tootsie and two other girls are in line. “Come on Myrtis Jean, hurry up It’s our turn next.” I look up Janet, my good friend, is calling me from her porch on the second floor. Our apartment is on the first floor.

**Miss Mary Mack**

*Miss Mary Mack, Mack*

*All dressed in black, black, black*

*With silver buttons, buttons, buttons*

*All down her back, back, back….*

We live in apartment building; which looks to me like a bunch of boxes, of red brick stacked on top of each other; there is a courtyard instead of a back yard. In Chicago most courtyards are in the front of the building, but ours is in the rear; making it unique on our block. The building is L-shaped hugging the courtyard on three sides. The building is three stories high. I never saw tall buildings in Mississippi. There is no grass, no dirt; it all hard concrete .The front of the building faces the street with the entrance to the apartment, a hall way and stairs leading to our apartment. We have a living room that has a bed that closes up and disappears into the wall; it is called a Murphy bed. There is also a kitchen, a bathroom and two small bedrooms. The second bedroom is the smaller of the other two and it has a door which leads to the back porch. It is a tiny apartment but it doesn’t seemed crowded to us; my mother, father, brother Wallace, little sister Pat and myself. I marvel that we have a mailbox. I love getting the key from my mother or father; opening the small rectangular shaped box and getting the mail. I especially look forward to getting a letter from Mama back in Mississippi. I miss her so much.

“MYRTIS JEAN”, Janet is calling me again. “Okay, Janet as soon as I finished feeding Lil Ben”. Lil Ben is my pet turtle. He is so small. I have fashioned a home for him from an old mop bucket. I like having him around; he keeps me company when I am missing Lil Bit and Piggy. He is curious and won’t scuttle away to hide when you come near. I finish feeding him and scurry down the stairs just in time to meet Janet coming down from her stairs. We jump into the rope- *Double Dutch* time. We jump until we are tired and sometimes exhausted. We take a break, sitting of the steps of the back porch playing with our paper dolls or combing the hair of our real dolls or playing *Hopscotch.* There is laughter, fun, genuine friendship and a bonding for some of us which will survive childhood through adolescence into adulthood. We will meet again during the course of life, at a different time and at a different place.

My mother emerges from beneath the stairs, the basement. It is a dark, dank, musty, smelling place. This is where all the women wash their clothes using a new invention, the wringer washer.\* For me it’s another hiding place for the *boogey man*. It really creepy down there. I avoid going down except with my father. My father follows closely behind Mother carrying a huge tin tub of washed clothes. Behind him is my little sister Pat. She was a new addition to our family, once we had moved up north. She a cute little toddler but she doesn’t talk much and always has a scowl on her face when she looks at me. I leave my friends on the steps; “Can I help you, Mother?” “Yes, she replies, get the clothes pins”. She asks my father to go and check on the red beans she left cooking on the stove. Daddy and my little sister Pat disappear into the house.

I marvel at the adroitness and the facility demonstrated by my mother when she was hanging the washings. When finished her clothes line looked like an army platoon in line formation for inspection. Mother hangs the white clothes first, making sure they get the direct sun because the sun does such a good job bleaching the clothes. She shakes each clothing item vigoursuly enough to get most of the wrinkles out. I watch mother closely because she seems to do this so well; just like Mama shelling those peas; and she has a system. Shy always pins the right side of the clothing first, then works her way to the left. Socks are hung in twos by the toes. Pants are always by the ankles. Towels get three clothes pins so they don’t sag in the middle. Mother moves deftly along the clothes line, making the most of limited space; in case another woman wants to hang out her washings. But that rarely happened; there were forty-eight apartments in the complex, mostly families but I can never remember any conflicts from the use of the clothes lines or the washing machines.

The courtyard was a busy hum of community life. Women talked to each other from one porch to the next, watched their children playing or even helped each other if one woman had an especially heavy wash load. Women could get into a rather heated discussion about who was behaving badly or who got what they deserved on the latest episode of *The Guiding* *Light, Search for Tomorrow, Edge of Night or The Secret Storm*. News was always shared about what was going on “back home” or “down home”

*“Chink, clang, clank”*

*Squeak, squeak*

*Ding, a ling,*

He announces himself

Kaey*-yea*

*Kaey-yea* (never could figure out what that meant)

The Knife Sharpening Man has come to the courtyard.

I hear him before I see him. Mother stops hanging her wash, looks down at me and says “Go tell your Daddy to bring me my knives.” I see other women opening their doors and peering over the porches. Some begin to make their way down the stairs.

He stops pushing his rickety, green and yellow cart. He is bundled up in several layers of clothing even though it is warm outside. So, he is often called the rag man. I cannot tell his age or ethnicity. Mother says that he is a gypsy. I ask for a definition. None is given. My brother says he is the boogey man, probably looking for me. My mother has to again admonish him about his teasing. He just smiles.

The peddler folds down the side board that serves as his seat. He begins working the pedals with his feet in order to move the grinding stone in front of him. He quickly has a line of customers. Children crowd around, getting as close as possible. He receives a knife from a woman; he leans over the grinding stone pressing the knife against the wheel, creating a shower of sparks. The loud grating sound is ear piercing. The old dull knife gains a new edge, glistening in the sunlight.

Saws, knives, scissors and other tools are made to look brand new. He keeps working until every customer had been serviced.

Front the back porch during the years we lived there, I saw other peddlers come and go. They created a distribution system of goods and services and information. It was as though we were looking at “stores on wheels.” For women who cooked ever thing from scratch, The Watkins man was an essential for good tasting meals; the original door to door salesman sold spices, extract, baking products and some medical remedies. My brother and liked to sneak into the pantry and take sips of the vanilla extract; it taste so good and smelled good too. Once I overdid it; got sick, I never drank from those bottles again. Besides the Watkins man, there were the Fuller Products salesmen, whose products were especially tailored for the Black community; sold deodorant, hair products and hosiery. There also a parade of life insurance salesmen. Going surreptitiously door to door was the neighborhood numbers runner with the policy slips. People opened their doors, money is given and bets are made.

The back porch was also the delivery place for the egg man, the milk man and the ice man. There are some things however that we had to shopping for. Mother takes us on a shopping trip to 47th Street and South Park. I enjoy the walk through the neighborhood. I see other apartment builds like ours. Much of South Park however is lined with Greystone mansions. They are beautiful. I can’t believe that black people could actually live such places. One day, I say to myself, when I grow up and become rich. One day, I will live there! South Park is a busy street, very wide .A beautiful tree lined boulevard. Cars and buses going whizzing by and the jitney cabs. We pass the Regal Theater. I look at the marquee to see who is coming for the weekend stage show. Oh, wow Little Richard and Red Fox will be there! And the movie *The Curse of Frankenstein* will be showing. I know my brother will want to see that. I will ask daddy if we can go as soon as we get back home. Mother takes us to the South Center Department store to buy some “back to school clothes”. It is a big grand store. There are so many things to see, such colors such beautiful things. I can’t believe it when mother explained that this store and most of the stores along 47th street are owned by black people. She said it with such pride. “This is why she said, we came to the north.” Sometimes our father would take us downtown; we would ride the “L”. I don’t like riding this train because it is not on the ground but up in the air. Why would anyone build train track up in the air? I am terrified as the train makes a turn, I fear that we will come crashing to the ground. Then the train goes down a slope and enters a tunnel beneath the street and it becomes a subway. It is pitch black at times. I have night mares that we will be trapped. I do not like this either. The train is rushing too fast making a loud gushing sound as it races along the tracks. I am sitting between my brother and my father. My brother squeezes my hand, “Don’t be afraid.” Finally we reach our stop. I follow father out of the subway and up the stair to the street. I feel like I have emerged from a cave. We are going to the Fair Department Store to buy some shoes. This is one of the few times that I see a lot of white people. Before we go into the store; my father gives us a geography lesson .We walk a few blocks and my father stops and points to the street sign. “This is State and Madison. This location lays the city out on a grid; divides the city into north and south and east and west. The lake is always to the east. Look at where the sun is in the sky; remember the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. If you ever get lost you should always be able to find your way.” Alone, a cold snowy evening; it’s getting dark 60 years later, on an expressway, gas tank almost on empty that lesson will bring me safely home.

I am anxiously sitting on the porch watching my father turn the hand crank freezer of the ice cream maker, waiting as he pulls out the dasher to check for the right consistency. He waves my brother and I over. We get the chance to lick a sample. It is delicious “That’s enough for now.”

Daddy says. “Dinner will ready soon; then we’ll have dessert.” The aroma from the kitchen waffles out to the porch- mother is frying pork chops. My stomach starts to growl. I wish dinner would hurry up.

It’s hot sitting on the porch but not as hot as Mississippi. Mother says it is because we get a breeze from the lake- Lake Michigan.

Sitting on the porch waiting for dinner, I see the residents coming home from work. Some have on uniforms denoting their kind of employment .There is lots of laughing and talking and sharing of news of the day. A familiar figure approaches our porch. It is Daddy Lee. This is mama’s first husband and my mother’s father- Lee Jordan. I don’t know what Daddy Lee does for a living but he always has on his “Sunday go to meeting clothes,” He is wearing a three piece suit, a tie and a hat. His hair is combed and slicked down. He very tall and dark skinned. His shoes, I notice are always polished, they actually seem to shine. He reaches the porch. ”Hey there baby girl, is your Mama home.” I nod. He takes off his hat and enters the back door. After the First World War, following his discharge from the army; Lee Jordan leaves Natchez, Mississippi and settles in Chicago with his young bride, Daisy Miller. He like thousands of others has been lured to the North by the promise of freedom and the hope for good jobs beyond the cotton fields. He joins the Great Migration, (Part One) He had already caught glimpses of Chicago with his job as a Pullman Porter. He loves his job, the travel throughout the country, the collegiality among the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and this big sprawling city. All of that is about to change. Lee and Daisy find rent a room near downtown Chicago located on 37th and Giles. It is the summer of 1919. A race riot breaks out the same summer they had moved to Chicago. My grandmother would retell the story to me years later. “There was shouting and there were guns going off during the night. I looked out the window and could see buildings burning. “People were yelling ‘They’re killing all the colored folks. I was so scared.” Mama didn’t really like Chicago. She said it was too cold and the white people were so mean. She wanted to leave. She missed her Mama and her sisters and brothers. Lee wanted to stay. Later, that summer Daisy finds out that she is pregnant. She doesn’t want to have a baby in a hospital. Superstition among some black folks from the south; they get babies mixed up in a hospital. She returns to Mississippi, home to her mother to wait for the birth of her baby. Her baby is born, a girl Helen. Lee visits often. He is still hoping that Daisy will change her mind. She is resolute; she doesn’t change her mind. Lee stays for a period of time and finds work. But his heart yearns for the rails and the lights of the big city. Daisy is pregnant again. After the birth of their second child; a girl, they name her Hazel Lee. Daisy again refuses to move north. Lee returns to his job as Pullman Porter with the Illinois Central Railroad. Lee visits become shorter, less frequent and then stop all together by the time Hazel is two years old. Lee and Daisy are divorced. They both remarry. So I grew up having a “down south” grandfather and an “up north” grandfather. I didn’t see any difference in them .And I loved them equally.

I peer over the banister and see my brother emerge from the basement. He is struggling to get his bike up the stairs. He looks up at me “You wanna go for a ride?” I eagerly say yes. Mother still has not called us to dinner. He goes back into the basement and brings up my bike. We had both gotten bikes for Christmas; of course it had several months before we could ride. We had to wait for the snow to melt and for warmer weather. Daddy had bought the lasted models, my bike was the deluxe Schwinn Flying Star; it was a bright orange. Wallace’s bike was the Schwinn Tornado Deluxe; he names his bike “the Green Hornet.” We head out of the courtyard. I ask him “Please, don’t go so fast”, Wallace”. He just smiles and starts to peddle. We cross 51st Street and enter Washington Park. At last some green grass! What a relief from the hard concrete of our home. We ride leisurely around this vast greenery. I love the feel of the warm spring breeze against my face and inhale the sweet smell of fresh grass. We stop and rest for a while under the shade of a Chinaberry tree. Wallace pulls some berries of the leaves and slips them into his pocket. We resume riding around the park. It is vast beautiful and beautiful; we pass the arboretum, monuments and sculptures. We come to stop again at the lagoon. I don’t particularly like this stop. It brings back memories of that horror movie we had seen at the Regal Theater a couple years ago- *The Creature from the Black Lagoon.* Wallace throws the berries into the lagoon; he said to feed the monsters. We get back on our bikes; ride to edge of the park where it merges onto Cottage Grove. We look across the street to the east; what on the other side. We have learned that there is an invisible line; just like in Mississippi. Cottage Grove is that line; to the west- the so called “Black Belt” where black people live, to the east- Hyde Park where white people live. A mammoth building stands here; the Illinois National Guard Armory. We are familiar with it, because daddy joined the guard when we moved to Chicago. He serves with the 2nd Battalion 178th Infantry. This unit always participated in the Bud Billken Parade. One summer my brother marched alongside our father. A photographer from the Chicago Defender captured this father and son picture and put in on the front page of the paper. It was a source of pride; we mailed it back home to Mississippi so Mama could see.

We leave the park for a quick ride back home. Wallace goes down to the basement to store our bikes. I head up the stairs to our apartment; almost immediately I’m hit with a familiar and delectable smell that is mouth-watering: red beans and rice, fried pork chops and hot water corn bread. Everything is ready except dessert .Mother is making fried apple pies. Mother tells me to wash my hands; then gives to me the rolling pins. She shows me how to roll the ball of dough until it is very thin. Mother then places a heaping spoonful of the cooked apples on one side and folds the other side and presses down. I like helping Mother, but really don’t like cooking; I just like to eat. When we finish Mother will put the pies in a skillet and fry them. They will be just perfect to go with Daddy’s homemade ice cream. I can’t wait.

Daddy Lee stays for dinner. Soon a few of our neighbor gather in our small living room. We are only one a few families which have a television set. An oval screen is encased in a large brown console. There are only 3 channels and the pictures are in black and white only. Often we share our TV with others, especially on a night like this; Sugar Ray Robinson, a popular black professional fighter -the World’s Welterweight Champion is trying to move up to a different weight division and win the Middle Weight Championship .Cheers can be hear throughout the complex as those without TV are listening on the radio. A sense of pride is felt in the community. Sugar Ray’s success is our success.

Neighbors often ask permission to use our phone as well. Not everyone has a phone in their apartment. We have what is called a two-party line. Customers who wanted a private line had to pay an extra monthly fee. Another person had the same land line as we did. You couldn’t make a call when some else was already on the line. If my brother or I picked up the phone and a teen-age girl who lived upstairs, named Tootsie was on the phone talking to her boyfriend; we wouldn’t politely hang up as the required us to do; quietly we stayed on the line and eavesdropped on her conversation. Once we got caught and Tootsie reported us to our mother. Daddy gave us a very stern lecture about good manners and not being nice. Next time he said “Y’all gonna get a whipping!” That was enough to scare me. I never tried that again. In fact I managed to avoid being whipped throughout out my childhood. My brother Wallace was not so lucky. This caused some disagreement and even arguments between my mother and father. She said he whipped my brother too hard. The last time my father wanted to give my brother a whipping my mother stepped in between them. My father back down. It caused some hard feelings all around. Many years later my father would attempt to hit my mother during an argument and my brother, (much older at this time) would intervene. It caused an estrangement between my brother and father. It would take years for that relationship to be mended.

Bored with watching the fight I wander back outside to the porch. The courtyard is very quiet and still. I like to listen for the sounds of the city just I had done so listening in rural Mississippi Most people are inside eating dinner or listening to the radio.

Mammo slowly comes into view. This is my other grandmother, Mrs. Ida M. Brown. She arrives in Chicago, with my Uncle Luther, his wife my Aunt Frances, their three sons, Luther Jr. (Bubby), Cleveland (Turk) and Joseph (Joe). Included in that family unit, is my Aunt Emily but she is away in college-Tennessee State. Uncle Luther was the first to come to Chicago after the War. He had encouraged my father to “come on up” and daddy had done just that. Whereas mother and daddy had found jobs in the factory, Uncle Luther was a mechanic with the Ford Motor Company. My Aunt Frances worked in a cleaning plant.

Physically speaking Mammo is the exact opposite of Mama Daisy She is a large, robust woman, she weighs over 200 pounds. She is very fair skinned; people say she could “pass”, and has steel gray eyes. Mammo and Mama are very much alike in some ways however. Both of my grandmothers shared some common attributes which will have a lasting and profound effect on me for the rest my life: unconditional love, patience, generosity and presence. These two women “*dusky daughters of Mississippi*, demonstrated the core foundation for what I call “Grandmother Theology”

Mammo is a woman of great strength; I call her *The Survivor*:

**Southeast Georgia, 1889**

As soon as the plantation’s wife’s suspicions were confirmed; the blue eyes, white skin and wavy hair were all the evidence that she needed. Ms. Caroline demanded that her husband get rid of the field hand’s baby. So at the age of two, having been fostered off to another field hand, (Ma Collins); Ida set out on her life’s journey. She would never see nor come to know her mother or siblings again. Eventually she and Ma Collins ended up in New Orleans. At 18 years old she meets, Wallace B. Brown and marries this longshoreman from Jamaica. He is 43 years old. They settle in Gulfport, Mississippi and have five children. She is widowed at the age of 31, never remarrying. She raises the children alone during the harsh years of the depression. Ida works as a wash woman and a cook. She manages to send three children to college and all three of her sons serve in World War II. She relocates to Chicago with her son Luther later joining the Olivet Baptist Church she was a lifelong member; she rarely missed a Sunday going to church, She survived a tragic accident after being run over by a street car \*on Cottage Grove. Even though she never attended school, had no formal education at all; she managed to pass the State of Illinois exam to become a LPN ( licensed practical nurse) She worked at Mt. Sinai Hospital, on the west side of Chicago for 40 years as an obstetrical nurse in the delivery room. With her savings she attempted to buy a house in the late 1950s, but was told that no banks would give a mortgage to a single woman. My father had to co-sign for her. That was the only way she could get the house. In 1955 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She traveled to the Mayo clinic in Minnesota for treatment and underwent a double mastectomy. She survived the cancer and died at the age of 82.

Mammo gave all of her grandchildren the same present each Christmas; it was either going to be underwear or pajamas along with a bag of assorted candies in a red net bag. She insisted that we take a tablespoon of castor oil ***for*** a cold each morning. I can almost conjure up that unpleasant taste; something like petroleum jelly. It was thick and hard to swallow. It was almost as bad cod liver oil and it smelled twice as bad. Mammo also insisted that we take it on a regular basis for overall health and to prevent us ***from*** getting colds. We couldn’t escape these daily routines as Mammon babysat us when our parents went left work at Campbell Soup Company. Mammo got us ready for school; always cooking a big pot of oatmeal and freshly squeezed orange juice.

Some of my lasting memories were of Mammo in the kitchen teaching my mother how to make Gumbo- Louisiana, (creole style). There are no words to describe what how good this rich flavorful stew smells. When you smell gumbo, you can almost literally taste it at the same time. This unique blend of vegetables, shrimp, tomatoes, sausage, and roux, reflected a heritage from the French, West African, Creole and Cajun. It is the true American melting pot. Mammo didn’t write down anything for Mother. I could hear her say “Hazel just add a ‘pinch’ of this and ‘just enough of that, it needs a little more of that”, and so on. Mother was a really good cook and learned quickly. Mother would add her ingredients, making it Gumbo- Mississippi style.

**Saturday Night / Sunday Afternoon Drives**

I am sitting on the porch feeding my turtle and watching my brother shoot marbles with our cousins Bubby and Cleveland. Daddy appears at the back door; “Let’s go for a drive.” In unison we all shout*“Yeah”.* We all race for the car; no one wants to be stuck with the middle seat. I don’t care; I will sit up front with Mother. She is so pretty. I can see why Daddy fell in love with her so quickly all those years ago when they first met in Gulfport. Sitting close to her, I can still smell that *Evening in Paris* perfume, she always wore. When Daddy took us for drive it was always an adventure; we explored different part so the city. We leave the so called “black belt”\* and Daddy steers the car along Lake Shore Drive. Nothing captures the beauty and charm as this scenic route into the heart of the city. Towards the end of the drive we get a specular view of Chicago ‘skyline. As we approach 39th Street Beach, my brother asks from the back seat “Can we please stop for a little while?” Daddy glances over at mother; she nods her head- yes. “Okay Daddy says, but just for a few minutes”. Daddy pulls over and we all get out. The boys take off their shoes and race down to the beach. I stay on the grassy park area with Mother and Daddy. I have good memories of family picnics here. Sometimes we would be joined by Aunt Helen, Brenda, Peggy and Joe Joe. They walk over from their home in the Ida B. Wells housing projects. We would eat and afterward play soft ball games.

I am taking in the blueness of Lake Michigan and its vastness, stretching and disappearing beyond the horizon. I ask Daddy “What’s at the end of the lake, on the other side?” As usual Daddy has an answer; he is so smart. -“The state of Michigan and Canada.” In my innermost thoughts, I wonder “What’s a Canada”? I know God lives far away; maybe God lives in Canada? I’ll ask mama the next time I see her. She will know the answer. Daddy interrupts my reverie; calling out “Let’s go boys”. Wallace and my cousins run quickly back to the car. Mother asks “Did you have fun”? I don’t know what mischief they have been up to while on the beach; they are laughing and exchanging looks conspiratorially. I turn around and look over the seat asking “What did ya’ll do while on the beach? My brother sticks out his tongue at me. My cousin Cleveland replies “None of your business –Myrtle the turtle”. This evokes loud hilarious laughter.

I turn around, tears run down my cheeks. I hate to cry and I am embarrassed. Mother looks over her shoulder into the back seat, “Don’t be mean to Myrtis Jean, you know she is real tender hearted.” Daddy looks at them through the rear view mirror. He doesn’t say a word. The back seat grows quiet. They get the message. Junior offers the apology “We’re sorry Myrt”.Our drive continues. I like these drives; the hum and smoothness as the car moves along. I like our family being together. It’s a time for peace and quiet. I just sit back and enjoy the passing scenery. My mind can wander without interruption.

Our drive continues through downtown Chicago and on to the outer drive. The Lake draws closer in view. Our destination Daddy announces is Navy Pier, Lower Wacker Drive. We’re going to get some scrimp, Mother’s favorite; not for cooking but for eating- deep fried. What I was hoping for comes true; the drawbridge over the outer drive is being raised to allow sail boats to move from the Chicago River on onto Lake Michigan. We can get out of the car and gawk. It takes about 12 minutes for the lifts and all traffic comes to a stop. It is so awesome. After the bridge comes down we continue .We feast on bags of scrimp; I like mine with plenty of ketchup.

We stay for a while just looking out at the water. We eat until are stomach are full. Doziness takes over , the warm breeze from the lake, the gentle hum of the car’s engine.I fall asleep , resting against Mother and don’t wake up until we are back home.

*Wintertime*

It falls in a muted stillness, in a powdery formation, each snowflakes seems to know just where to land. Soon everything outside the window is covered in a blanket of snow. Sometimes winter can be grey, but today the sun is shining brightly; determined to make it through, despite the very cold temperature. I heard the battering gust of the wind, picking of some snow as it moves along. Yes, Chicago is indeed the “windy city”. The clouds even seem to huddle tighter to keep warm. “Why did you make winter?” I ask God. Waiting for God to answer I get distracted by the smell coming from the kitchen; I recognize the aroma, homemade chicken soup and bread pudding. We’re going to have a good dinner tonight.

Winter can be silent and still. The house always had quietness about it. I remember looking forward to our mother making hot chocolate and letting us add marshmallows. We don’t go out to play often, but sometimes we do. We bundle up in snow suits, gloves and boots. It still feels cold; but we don’t seem to mind. My brother and cousins organize and orchestrate snow ball fights. He tells them “Don’t throw any at Myrtis Jean”. I like to help build a snowman. My brother taught me how to keep my feet dry while playing in the snow. He took two empty wonder bread wrappers and told me to place them over my socks and wrap tightly around my feet before I put my boots on. It did help somewhat. We got used to snow; it usually starting to snow right after Thanksgiving and it didn’t stop falling until the end of January; so it was not unusual for us to trudge our way to school or to church during the winter time.

Looking out of the window that faces the porch, I can look up across the courtyard and see my friend Janet and see is looking out of her window also. We try to communicate through a crude sign language. She asks “How are you feeling?” I grab my throat and shake my head a little. I am still recovering from having my tonsils removed. It hurt a little after the surgery, but during recovery and convalescent we got to eat all the popsicles and jello we wanted. During the 1950s doctors almost routinely performed tonsillectomies on children. Before the widespread use of antibiotics this was considered to be the best way to treat persistent, severe or recurrent sore throat.

***Lining Up- Hospital***

My brother and I had our tonsils removed at the same time. I remember there were several children lined up in the corridor at Provident Hospital\*. It reminded me of the time when we would line up outside our classrooms at school and get our Polio shots. A nurse approaches from a long, darkened, eerie looking hallway that we all know leads to the very ominous sounding “operating room”. We had seen the movie *The Curse of Frankenstein.* I had a fear that I would be turned into a monster. My brother had predicted that I might. “Who wants to go first”, she cheerfully, asked. My brother points and me “She does”. Wallace likes to volunteer me for stuff. This is not the first time Wallace volunteers me to be “first.

***Lining Up-Church***

Our family joined the Zion Temple Missionary Baptist Church when we moved to Chicago. The church was part of those “*belongings.”* that we packed and brought with us on that journey “up north”. This church was so much bigger than the one where we had worshipped in Sumrall. I remember Popeye saying “Everything is big in Chicago, Y’all gonna see”. I was amazed to see a huge choir stand; there was both a piano and an organ. When we first started to attend Zion Temple, we loved to explored the lower level where there several different rooms set aside for the “children’s church and the Sunday School rooms. There was also a kitchen and a dining room where diners were sold after church on Sunday. Soon after my parents joined my brother and I were encouraged by our parents to get baptized. That’s not quiet how that happened actually we were told one Sunday by our father “Go on up there, take the preacher’s hand and tell him you want to “Give your life to the Lord.” On the next first Sunday, several children of various ages along with a couple of adults lined up in the hallway adjacent to the baptism pool. Everyone is dressed in all white. One of the deacons appears, he has a wide grin on his face. He has on all black. He reminds me of Dracula. Happily he asks “Who wants to be first.” He looks us over like we might be his next meal. I shudder inwardly. Again my brother volunteers me, pointing at me “She does”

I stand up and walk down the stairs into the pool. The water comes up to my shoulders almost. It is cold; I begin to shiver. Some body starts to sing “*Wade in the* *Water”*. The Pastor has on fishing boots and a black robe. There is another deacon in the pool; he helps me walk toward the Pastor who is standing in the middle of the pool. He shouts “Hallelujah”. I look out at the people standing up in the pews for a better look. I see my father; he’s looking at me proudly, my mother, well I could never tell what she was thinking or feeling. She had one of those “poker faces”. Later she would talk a lot about what was on her mind. Pastor Johnson was known to “get happy” during a baptism. I am hoping that this is going to be quick since there is a line of people after me. Not my lucky day! He joins in with the singing. Then he expounds on a scripture. He looks at me and seems to remember why he is standing there. He takes my hand which are clasped together in front of my chest, places another hand on my shoulder. This is the moment I had feared. I had a nightmare that he would let me go and I would drown. However, I survived; came up out of the water. Not sure what this baptism hype was all about. I still felt the same. Looked at my hands and they looked the same. Many years later this experience will be revisited during worship and prayer at church. I will both feel and hear the water. It will be an important part of my faith formation. Flipping the script on the “volunteering” thing; many years later my brother will be the first to volunteer to donate needed a blood transfusion following my surgery.

***Lining Up-School***

***Phweee…***

***Whooee-uveet..***

***Twit two.. Fweet***

Francis E. Willard School

4915 St. Lawrence

Chicago, IL.

It is a crisp, cloudy fall day. We are wearing warm jackets and hats. Some of the children even have on mittens. It looks very busy and chaotic. Everybody is in motion. There’s running, jumping and yelling. The gym teacher blows the whistle. Girls stops jumping rope. The boys stop whatever the games they are playing. Everyone runs, making a dash to be first, to line up neatly in class groups. Silence descends on the school yard. We quietly file into the building, marching in rhythm and a cadence similar to an army platoon. This a huge, old cavernous building, built during the depression era.

**Room 102**

I take my assigned seat. The girl in front of me turns around “Hello my name is Romesa, what’s yours?” She is wearing thick glasses and has a huge gap in her front tooth. Despite her outward appearance no one ever made fun of her looks. She had a presence about herself even at this young age that commanded respect. I am rather shy but I muster up, quietly, “Myrtis Jean” This was the beginning of a friendship that would last for the next 40 years of our lives.

I love school and I like my teachers. They are like magicians to me; with a ruler in their hands; we learn to read and to count. I especially love to read. Reading is important also because students are not seated alphaphectiaccly according to your last name but according to the reading score you got on the last standardized exam. I goal was to always have a reading score which landed me in the first two rows. These places were always reserved for the best students. Romesa was always seated in the front of me. I didn’t care, I wasn’t jealous ; I was proud of her. She was so smart. We were taught from the same basal reader first grade through eighth grades**-“Dick and Jane”**, different color books indicating the different levels of difficulty. The best readers were selected the join the school’s Bookworm Club. Occasionally we were excused from class to go to the library, meet and have lunch with the school librarian. We read stories together and sometimes we were treated milk and cookies. We were quite an elitist group!

Recess time was a welcome break from the classroom. In the1950s, the classroom was often restrictive rather than developmental. The learning environment reflected the “Cold War Era\* period in American life and history of that time.

Students rush out of the doors with shouts of joy. Recess meant freedom and fun; but not without its hazards. A girl name Tonya has a vendetta against me. For what I don’t know. She always was trying to pick a fight with me; once she actually did hit me. She called me names and pulled my braids. She said I was stuck up and thought I was better than anyone because I was light skinned and had long, “good hair”. I didn’t understand any of this. Once Tonya actually did hit me and give me a shove. I would retreat to a corner of the school yard and cry. Romesa would always find me and try and comfort me. Romesa would stand up to Tanya. She would threaten to tell the teacher on Tonya. That was enough to get her to back off temporality .Soon however Tonya’s reign of terror would come to an end. One sunny afternoon Tonya and her group had me partially surrounded, and taunting me; silently my brother had approached the group. Someone told Tonya to turn around. She did so looking directly into my brother’s eyes. He stood very still and never said a word, just smiled at Tonya. A hush fell over the small group of bystanders to the melee. Tonya never bothered me from that day on. Later she begins to plague my brother as she developed a tremendous crush on him in fifth grade and it lasted until eight grade.

Romesa and I walked home from school together. We were going to the same high school and college. We shared secrets, our dreams and plans for the future- weddings, babies, and careers. We compared our churches; Romesa said Methodist (her church) were different from the Baptist (my church); because Methodist didn’t do a lot of *“shouting and getting happy*” in church. We talked about the books we had read; sometimes we would go to the George Cleveland Hall Library\*on Saturdays.

Life did not unfold exactly as we had planned. I said goodbye to my best friend on December 1, 1989. She died a painful death from metastatic breast cancer. Fifteen years later to that date - December 1; there I was, being rolled into the OR at the University of Chicago to have a complete radical mastectomy to save my life from breast cancer.

Line Up, School’s Out.

Our teacher says “Line up’ time to go home.” We piled out of school. I arrive at home. My father has an announcement. “We’re moving –out south.” My brother and I exchange looks. His looks mirror my thinking-Let me get this straight. We moved from *“down south*” to “*up north”* and now we’re moving again *“out south* “and my father adds happily grinning *“We’re going to have* *another baby*.” Yeah, I say to myself*, Every time we move we get a new baby.*

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Chapter Three

View From Dorm Window

***Moving-In Day***

***“I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were.”*** Psalm 39:12

I have just started a new chapter in my life. I have moved to a strange new place that is far from anything that I have known. I feel isolated and disconnected. I look out the dorm window. Everything is so different from home. And yet I am having mixed emotions; I am feeling tentative and but eager to learn and excited about being in college. I want that degree so badly!!

This is my dream! I have always wanted to be a teacher. The campus stretches as far as I can see across the horizon. The tall grey buildings, classrooms, administration building, student union all look cold and uninviting. Beyond the campus – nothing but corn fields. Well, I say to myself, “*You’d better get used to it; this is home for the next four years.”* I turn from the window to finish unpacking.

There’s lots of noise and movement outside my door. Doors opening and closing, laughter, excitement! Mothers telling younger siblings “to stop running”, then “*Thud”*, some box being dropped .Some grunting, probably belonging to a father carrying a heavy load. The roll of wheels on the carpet. My moving in had been a different experience; my trip to NIU had been solo. I had made the trip to DeKalb on the Greyhound bus. All of my belongings I had packed in two suitcases and a shopping bag. I would make two more weekend trips home to Chicago to bring my other belongings. I had walked the mile from the bus station in town to campus. I did not have any money for a cab. There were no elevators in Douglas Hall; therefore when I arrived at my dorm; I had the arduous tasks of lugging my things up four flights of stairs. I am beyond tired.

I sit down wearily on the bed. I am hungry; luckily my mother had wisely packed me a lunch - a cold chicken sandwich, some potato salad and a thick slice pound cake. This would tide me over until dinner time in the cafeteria. My brain starts to work on overload and I am bombarded with questions. Will I be able to find all my classes in those different buildings? Will I make friends? Will I pass all my subjects? What should wear to class?

I was folding and putting away my clothes when I hear the unlocking and opening of the door. A white girl enters the room, glares at me and asks “Are you my roommate?” I nod my head say “Uh huh”, simultaneously I say to myself. “*That should be obvious, otherwise why would I be* *sitting on this bed?”* Her mother enters the room immediately behind her; she looks at me *“like a* *deer caught in a car’s headlights*; she stops in the door, frozen in place. She and the daughter quietly exchange looks and leave the room immediately without another word to me. It’s Deja vu; similar to a long time ago in Sumrall, Mississippi when I went with Mama to that white lady s’ house and her little girl stared at me and refused to speak. Oh well.

*The story is on at a different time but it is the same station.*

Later, I would learn that they went to the Dean of Women. The mother requested that her daughter be given a different room. The dean asked for the reason for the request. The mother’s reply” I don’t want my daughter to have to room with a colored girl.” The Dean explained that the university could not honor her request. A lengthy discussion followed. Eventually the mother and daughter went to the Director of Housing and to one of the Vice Presidents of the university. They eventually returned to the dorm. They were unhappy and disgruntled. My reluctant roommate was further annoyed as I had arrived first; I got to pick the lower bunk and the desk which faced the window with a view of the campus. The other desk in the room faced a wall. Oh yeah as Mama used to say *“God don’t like ugly”* For the next five months she barely spoke to me and was rarely in the room. She spent most of her time in some other friends’ room down the hall. At the end of the semester she moved out to live in a sorority house on campus. Second semester I had the whole room to myself. It was great.

***A Dark Day***

**Friday, November 22, 1963**

*“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times”*

It’s painfully cold, winter has come early. I see students scurrying and darting in between the building. It’s only 4:00pm but much of the campus is blanked in darkness; in reality since about twelve o clock today we have been shrouded in darkness; but it’s more than just physical. The gloomy weather matches everyone’s spirit.

Earlier that day….12:30pm; I was getting ready to go down to dining hall for lunch. “*I can’t wait to* *blow this pop stand”* I thought to myself. After lunch I have my Russian History final, ugh! I hope I at least get a “C”. I don’t like the class and don’t understand the subject. I have one more exam –Constitutional Law on Monday; I love this class the course is challenging but interesting, no worries about doing well on the final. And then I’m on my way home for Thanksgiving break. Just thinking about Aunt Helen’s baked ham lightens my mood and makes Russian History seem even palpable. Why is there so much noise in the hall? Quiet Times\* are enforced in the dorm during exam week. I open my door and look out; my RA passes me; she is crying; her eyes are brimmed in redness “What’s wrong”? , “The President has been shot and killed. I ask. Well, I thought to myself, “That’s too bad but why cry about it”. I have never seen him and what does the President of the college do anyway? Another girl comes down the hall crying and the RA hugs her. She says, “It’s all on TV now” Then it hit me, they are not talking about the President of the college but the President of the United States - President John Kennedy has been shot and killed. I go back into my room and close the door. The tears come and so do the memories. I had seen the then candidate John Kennedy when he had come to Chicago to campaign for the Presidency. There was a big parade through downtown Chicago; he road in an open car with Mayor Richard J. Daley. I had begun my college life just as John Kennedy was delivering his inaugural speech about a New Frontier. Yes, I too was to begin a whole new *frontier* in my life’s journey. Why did this happen? A presidential assassination should only happen in history books, something we only read about. I feel sad.

The 1960s were turbulent times in U.S. History and it was replicated in my personal life.

*Peek-a- boo. Peek- a- boo, Where are you God? Where are you hiding? Come out wherever you are?*

After 20 years of marriage, my parents decide to bring their union to a close. I felt like I was in a boat and the boat was constantly rocking. I am shaken, have motion sickness and am unnerved. After the divorce both of my parents remarry. New words are introduced into my vocabulary- stepfather, stepmother, step brother, step sisters. My mother moves with my stepfather and they buy a house. And of course with the move, we get a new baby; my sister Tina is born.

**The Saga of Sam-Part One**

*“There was death at every window. And hell at one dark window”* \*

Why is this happening to me? I don’t understand anything, so confused. I’ve **seen** building being demolished; now I **feel** like a building beingtorn down. A movie starts playing in my head…

July, 1960-

*“The first time ever I saw your face*

*I thought the sun rose in your eyes*

*And the moon and the stars were*

*The gifts you gave to the dark*

*And endless skies, mu love.”\**

Oh yeah, I remember our first time, *Hello, who are you? I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”* An irresistible smile and deep, soulful dark brown eyes. I look up from my desk; extend my hand through the Dutch door of the Sunday school office to receive the collection from his class. Each Sunday school teacher would designate a member of her class to bring the collection from the class. I was the assistant secretary of the Sunday school and was responsible for counting the monies, making a record in a ledger and then turning everything in to the Superintendent of the Sunday school. For a few years my family had been away from Zion Temple; we had worshipped at another church or for periods of time we didn’t go to any church at all church. I did miss church during those times. I needed God. After a few years my Dad got us back into the habit of regularly going to church and we renewed our membership and rejoined Zion Temple.

Sam and I were mutually and instantly attracted to each other. After Sunday school all the children would go upstairs for the 11:00 o clock worship service. I was secretly happy if Sam and I happen to sit next to each other in the sanctuary. After a few weeks he made a deliberate effort to sit next to me. It was beginning to be hard to stay focused on what the pastor was preaching on. Sam would write notes to me during service. Once he asked if I had ever kissed a boy. I did not answer the note. Sam would walk me to the bus stop that I would sometimes take home, if my dad was still busy after church was over and I was ready to go home. Sam had just graduated from high school. I would be graduating in January. We started dating that summer. We went to the parks, to the movies walked along the beach, doubled dated with his best friend, often bowling and playing cards. Sam was outgoing and was very shy. He made conversations easily; I was a good listener. We talked about our families, our high school memories, our hopes and dreams for the future. He was witty and joked easily; he made me laugh. And I thought he’s the cutest boy I have ever seen. He said he had never spent time with a girl as serious minded as I was and who was a really a “good church girl.” He said I made him feel good and was happy to be with me. We enjoyed each other’s company .And we were falling in love. Some in our families defined as what the old folks called “puppy love”. Well, what we felt was real to the puppies.

Sam was becoming frustrated because his plans to go to a college in Missouri on a football scholarship had not materialized. His alternative to attend a city junior college in Chicago and go away to college during his second year; but then he abruptly decided to enlist in the Air Force. At the same time I graduated from high school and headed off to NIU; Sam completed basic training and was deployed to Alaska; Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage. In the midst of all these events; we discovered that we were falling in love; deeply, quietly, and earnestly. I had heard the expression “head over heels in love”. I tried to visualize what that might look like and I imagined us holding on to each over gently rolling down a hill. Yes, that is how I felt. And I could sense the same emulating from him; I heard in his voice and felt it the way he looked at me. And yet we were going to be separated by time and distance. We consoled each other with the old adage “*Anything worth* *having is worth waiting for”* But was that really true? We were committed to each other and knew we wanted a future together.

Sam wrote me letters every day; sometimes I got two or three a day. I eagerly looked forward to them. I responded every night after my classes and any reading assignments were done. We talked about my college life and his experiences in the military. We poured our hearts out to each other. On special occasions we shared a telephone call. They were very special because back in the 1960s a telephone call beyond your city were considered a long distance and had to be placed by an operator; and these calls were not cheap.

**December, 1963**

Sam was granted a leave to come home for Christmas; it was the end of my sophomore year. On Christmas Eve we were sitting on the couch in the front room of our apartment. Sam looked so handsome in his uniform .Finally we were alone; my younger sisters, Pat and Debbie had finally gone to bed. Not for long however, periodically they would silently get out of bed, tiptoe to the door way to the living room and just star giggling and yell back towards the kitchen *“Mother, Myrtis Jean is kissing Sam.”* My mother was busy back in the kitchen preparing for next day’s Christmas dinner. *“You all stop it, and go back to bed”*; I noticed that she did not respond with much conviction, her tone was not very stern or threatening. We could hear her moving around, we could smell the dressing already in the oven. Mother herself made a few trips down the long hallway from the back of the apartment to the front room. She made enough noise so we would know that she was coming. Ostensibly she would ask me to taste something, to see if there was enough seasongs. On another trek from the kitchen to the living room she had given Sam a sample to taste. I was a little embarrassed by my family’s “visits” but he just laughed and took it in good naturedly. That’s another thing I liked about him. he was so understanding. He thanked her and then said to me “I hope you can cook as well as your mother”. I did not reply; but to myself I said *“That’s some wishful thinking…that’s not going to come true.”* It was the lights from the Christmas tree that made ever thing so warm and cozy. Even the hissing, clanking and banging of our old radiator could not alter this “our magic moment”. The night felt very calm and yet there was something in the air of expectation; and I was sure it wasn’t going to be Santa Clause. We sat quietly, close together, my head resting on his shoulder relishing this time together, enjoying the music from the radio; it was mostly Christ music then and they switched to some soul music. *“At Last”* by Etta James started playing; Sam starts to stir, I raise my head from his shoulder. He puts his hand inside his jacket and pulls out an engagement ring *–“I hope you like it”* He slips it on my finger. The diamond is so sparkly. I am overwhelmed with joy. This is the happiest I have ever been in my life. “*How did you know my size, I ask?”* Sam looks me very intensely but wishfully and says-“*I remembered what your hands looked like, remembered holding them and I took a guess on the size ; I’m glad it fits so I don’t have to it all the* *way back to Alaska with me. But I wouldn’t mind taking you back with me.”* He hugged me tightly for a long and then we just sat on the couch, holding hands and watching the sparkle from the diamond in my ring reflect the colors from the Christmas tree. At midnight we exchanged gifts; Sam gave me a real cute Eskimo doll wearing a fur parka, leather boots and gloves. She had brown eyes like Sam’s so I named her Samuelina. I gave him a NIU sweatshirt that he had been asking for; he said he that wearing it would make him feel like I was with him. From the back of the apartment, my mother stared coughing loudly; Sam smiled and said, *“I guess it’s time for me to go*. I walked him to the door; we just looked into each other’s eyes for a long time. We didn’t say a word but we knew there was an unspoken destiny waiting for us. First love is very passionate. Old people use to say that it is just “puppy love”; that doesn’t make it less real to the puppies. There is a connection to that person and they have an imprint in your heart that will last for a lifetime,

For the next two days we talked a lot about getting married. We finally decided that we would wait out the last year and half, until I finished college and his enlistment in the Air Force would end at the same time. Christmas break ended on a happy note; Sam’s next assignment was an Air Force base in Mississippi near my grandmother’s home; Keesler Air Force base, Biloxi, Mississippi. I will be able to visit him when school was out. Sam’s mother drove him to the airport; as he got out of the car, he kissed me goodbye; I watched him walk towards the terminal; he turned and smiled, waved and shouted “See you in June”. I waved back. Sam’s mother starts to pull away from the curb; I turn to look out the back window; I keep watching until Sam disappears from my view. I felt so sad. I cried all the way back home. Every time I thought about him walking to that plane, I cried harder and harder.

I returned to NIU after Christmas break. I was anxious to show all the girls in the dorm my engagement ring. I retold Christmas Eve’s night and how it unfolded. I embellished a little; I said that Sam had gotten down on his knees, which never did happen. I prayed that the semester would go by quickly; so that Sam and I could meet again. We wrote each other daily. I would fall asleep every night staring at the ring on my finger. I put little Samuelina on the table besides my bed, it made me feel that Sam was close. I counted the days until the school came to an end. However I would not be able to visit Sam immediately after school. Once the school year ended I began working at the University Of Chicago Hospital for my summer job. I would have to work the entire summer in order to save money to return to NIU the next fall. I had a scholarship and a loan, bur it did not cover all of my expenses, like books. I will have only one week to visit Sam before the fall semester begins. I worked overtime whenever I could, sometimes 7 days during the week to earn extra money.

Finally the summer is draws to an end. I board the train to Mississippi. The sky line of Chicago quickly disappears, replaced by the prairie grass lands of Illinois. I lay my dead against the window. This is a fast moving train, I feel the rhythm, and hear the hum of the wheels along tracks. The houses and the trees are a quick moving blur. Thinking about Sam, my heart is beating rapidly in synch.

I step from the train in Brookhaven; aware that I had left Mississippi as a child, return now on the threshold of adulthood. My first stop is in Sumrall, where I visit with my grandparents. Everything looks smaller now but I guess that’s because I am bigger now. The landscape of the south is beginning to change; there is talk of Black people in some counties starting to register to vote, some white store owners are allowing Black people enter through the front doors. Slowly, sometimes with violence Mississippi starts to look different; there is sense of hope and maybe even progress. I will cherish this visit with my grandparents; for the first time I realize that they are getting older. My grandfather moves about slowly, he doesn’t work any longer. The lines in my grandmother face are more deeply defined. Despite their physical changes, I feel the depth of their love and the warmth of their hospitality. It is good to be home; yes, *home is where the heart* *is* .Lots of neighbors stop by to say hello, sit on the porch and begin sharing their memories of me, my brother and my cousins from our childhood visits. They are eager to hear about college life “up north, with the white people.” I could see my grandparents’ faces glow with pride as people gather on the porch to visit. My great Uncle Will insists that I sit on the pulpit during Sunday morning service. I feel a little embarrassed. Mama says it made Uncle Will so happy; he like the rest of the family is so proud of me; a college girl. After breakfast, I enjoyed some private time on the porch in the swing. Memories flood my thoughts. My return visit to Sumrall is inconsistent with Thomas Wolfe’s premise *You Can’t go Home Again* –“If you try to return to a place you remember from the past it won’t be the same as you remember it”. It is good to be home. ; Love makes us feel at home; home makes us feel love. Mama appears at the door *“Its bout time* *Myrtis Jean.”* Mr. Happy Jack rolls up with his old battered noisy truck. Popeye carries my suitcase out of the house. Mr. Happy Jack drives us to Hattiesburg, which is only about 20 minutes away, where I will get a bus to take me down to Gulfport. We arrive at the Greyhound bus station. People are already gathered around the bus; waiting for the driver to open the door. Mr. Happy Jack gets out of the truck, takes my suitcase and sets it on the ground near the waiting bus. Popeye doesn’t move from his seat, but he just kept looking straight ahead out of the window*. Because we have been created with a soul; that we are more than just physical beings; I believe sometimes one can know when they are seeing a* *person for the last time; and I believe the dead know when they are dying.* This will be the last time I will see my grandfather alive. Mama walks me to the bus, hugs me tightly and says *“You be good now, be careful, write as soon as you get back home”* She puts a handkerchief into my hand wrapped tightly in a knot *“Too much of my life”* I say to myself, *is spent saying good bye to people that I love*. It is a bittersweet moment; I hate to leave my grandparents but I can barely wait to see Sam. The bus is warm and the sun is shining brightly in my window. I untie the handkerchief that my grandmother had given me; there were two dollars and some coins- nickels, dimes and pennies. She had also made me a chicken sandwich and a piece of pound cake. I wasn’t hungry before but now I am. I eat my lunch. It is more than an hour’s drive to Gulfport. It is a bumpy, choppy ride, I find myself being lugged me into a nap; I doze off to sleep.

The bus lurches to a hard stop; it awakens me.” Gulfport’! the driver shouts. I gather my things and exit the bus. Miss Ernestine and her husband are there waiting for me. Miss Ernestine is my father’s godmother and part of our extended family in Gulfport. They have come to pick me up because Sam is still on duty at the base. I will be staying with them during my visit.

I look at the clock seems; it like 5:00pm will never come. I change clothes three times, trying to decide which outfit to wear when Sam comes. I want to look my best! Finally the doorbell rings; Miss Ernestine calls out *“Myrtis Jean, you have company”*. Sam is sitting in the “front parlor with Mr. Henry. Sam gets up when I come into the room; he smiles broadly and our eyes hungrily greet each other. We want to kiss, but we both were raised to always be on our best” behaviors’ and have good manners, prevent us from doing so. We sit and have polite conversation with Mr. Henry and Ms. Ernestine- too long for the both of us. After a while, Ms. Ernestine says we should be on our way, reminding me *“Don’t stay out too late.”* “*We won’t,* answers Sam”. He has a curfew to be back in the barracks. Sam takes me on a quick tour of Gulfport. I don’t remember anything of the town since I had left as a toddler. Whereas, Sumrall is very rural-“country”, Gulfport has that small town feeling; it is a small coastal city on the Gulf of Mexico about 90 miles east of New Orleans. It’s location on the coast makes it vulnerable to hurricanes and it has weathered a few.\* We drive along the beach. The white sand is so pretty. Sam explains we can’t get out and walk, as we had done often in Chicago along Lake Michigan.

We are still in Mississippi. The beaches are for “Whites Only! As we take a scenic drive, we see white families relaxing, flying kites, sunbathing and pier fishing. I longing look out of the window and see several restaurants along the coast; seafood is king here- shrimp, crab, oysters and fresh fish. I am embarrassed but my stomach starts to growl. Sam laughs, “*Don’t worry I’m going to take you to a café in the colored part of town”*, Sam says. We drive away from the coast into North Gulfport, stopping at a *chicken shack\*.*We sit in the car munching on a catfish sandwich, some fried green tomatoes, with cold sweet tea. Once we finish eating, we sit holding hands, we laugh, we talk, and we are quiet; both of us are absorbed in our individual thoughts, and yet they are the same. I can read his thoughts and he can mine as well. We watch a few cars drive up; more often people walk up to the chicken shack, there is laughter and conversation drifting from the door. We listen to the night; it is starting to get dark; Sam looks at his watch “*I’d better get you home and I need to get back to the barracks”.* Sam drives slowly back to Ms. Ernestine’s house. He walks me back to the door, hugs me, whispers in my ear*, “I’m getting tired of this*, and kisses me good night. He turns and walks toward his car; I shout after him*, “What do you mean”?* ; *“Nothing* , he answers, *just joking.* Feeling a little troubled, I ring the bell and Ms. Ernestine lets me in. *“Did you have a nice time tonight?”* “Yes, ma’am, I murmured politely. How else could it be, when you’re with the one you love\*? I lay in bed dreaming about the time with Sam; it had been a perfect evening, but I don’t think Sam was joking with that last remark. I will ask him again tomorrow, finally I fall asleep.

The next day, Ms. Ernestine drives me around Gulfport, showing me Mamo’s house, my parents first home as newlyweds; they lived there briefly before my dad was drafted into the army. Ms. Ernestine stops in front of the 33rd Avenue Baptist Church. She shared with me what happened that day; the morning, Sunday December 7, 1941 when they were all on their way to have my brother; Wallace was to be christened .Worship serviced was changed quiet bit that morning. Many people were frightened *“Are we going to be the next target?* *“Could the Japanese bomb parts of continental United* *States.?”*

Ms. Ernestine continues the drive; she is on her way to make deliveries. From her small vegetable garden in the back of her house; Ms. Ernestine has developed a business. She has a small group of customers. We head for the “white part” of Gulfport. I think to myself “*Does each and every city in the United States have a white part and a colored part of town.”?* We return to the house. Ms. Ernestine serves a delicious lunch; shrimp and rice. And a stable southern drink- sweet tea! I wander back outside to sit on the front porch to wait for Sam to come after work. Siting in the swing I am reminded of Mama and Popeye back in Sumrall. I miss them. I watch people walking home from work. Everyone smiles, waves and greet *“Hey thar”.*People are friendlier in the south than in Chicago. Everybody speaks to everybody, even if you don’t know them.

Sam arrives a little after 5:00pm to pick me up. We drive to the base in Biloxi. He takes me on a tour; I see everything, the barracks, then the housing for the married people, the airfield, where he works, the BX, the commissary .We go to the NCO club and meet some of his friends. I am trilled and flattered that his friends all say that they are glad finally to meet me; that I am all the Sam talks about. They tease and joke about him relentlessly. There is another club near the base; we go there, listen to some music and dance. Many of his friends join us at our table. It was a fun filled evening. After we leave the club, we drive down to the beach and park. We listen to the water lapping against the shore. We watch the sun as it disappears from the horizon and sinks into the Gulf; its pale tint of orange quietly dissolves in the blue of the water. Everything is so peaceful and perfect. We talk about what my upcoming school year will be like; I am apprehensive about student teaching and about where his next tour of duty might take him. He too has some anxiety that he might be deployed overseas, in which case he might not make it home for Christmas.

We again talk our life about what lies ahead for us. We discuss all the pros and cons of marrying early or waiting out the year and a half. We agree again for all practical reasons to wait. We set a date, for our wedding, a month after my graduation from NIU- June 20. 1965. We would be married in the same church; where we had first met - Zion Temple MB church, by the same Pastor, Rev. F.D. Johnson who had baptized both of us. Sam says he will probably get a leave for Christmas or Thanksgiving. *“That’s so far away*”, I moan. Then Sam adds that he might get a two day pass to come for Homecoming at NIU. We look at a calendar that he has in the glove compartment. Only six weeks from now. Both of our spirts are lifted as we drive back to Ms. Ernestine’s’ house. Sam walks me to the car, hugs me and gives me a good night kiss. As he gets into his car he waves and ticks off by his fingers;1,2,3,4,5.6 ; he smiles broadly; *“I love you,* *Myrtis Jean, see you then”* I shout back at him, *“I love you, Sam.”* I do not go into the house; I watch him as he drives away; darkness seems to swallow the car and it disappears. I feel an unspeakable sadness. Destiny has come calling. Sam is gone. I will not see him in six weeks. Fifty –four years will pass before I lay eyes on Sam Dorsey again.

It is raining sheets of rain. It seems that heaven itself is crying; unstoppable. It has been raining all day. I had stayed almost two hours after my shift in the library had ended, waiting for the rain to stop. I tried to study for my upcoming American literature final but I couldn’t concentrate. Sam is very much on my mind. He didn’t make it to Homecoming as we had planned; saying he couldn’t get a weekend pass. His letters have become shorter and shorter. He used to write seven or eight pages. For the past two years I have gotten an average or four to five letters a week. Now a whole week and a half has gone by without one letter from him. I am so worried. I wonder if he is ill or maybe depressed, missing me. I missed him. The rains don’t seem be going to stop any time soon and it is getting close to dinner time in the dorm. I put my jacket over my head and run all the way back to the dorm. I am completely soaked. I anxiously approach my mailbox. There is only one mailbox per room, so roommates share the same mailbox. I pull the letter out, my heart beats with joy and I recognize Sam’s hand writing. Before I start to tear the letter open, I notice that the letter is addressed to my roommate Gloria. What? The question shouts inside my brain. I hurry up the stairs to the fourth floor; my heart is pounding with each step; I hear and feel my heart thumping. I am out of breath as I reach my door. I open the door; my roommate Gloria is sitting at her desk reading. She looks up, a little started by my entrance; looks at me and ask *“What’s wrong, Myrt”* “*Sam has written you a letter*” I reply. *“Me?* she says. I hand her the letter. She opens it, her eyes widen, and a started look of horror crosses her face. He eyes widen and she puts her hand to her mouth as to stifle a scream. *“Oh my God”* she gasps. I can’t keep still; I am hopping from foot to like I am walking on the hot sand barefoot at the beach. *What is it Gloria?* She doesn’t answer, she read the letter again. Unexpectedly she jumps from chair opens the door and runs down the hall. I call after her but she keeps running. At the end of the hall she takes the stairs up to the next floor. I know where she is heading. Gloria reaches her destination and opens the door without knocking. Karen is sitting on her bed, textbook open and taking notes. She opens her mouth to say something, but Gloria thrust the letter at her and says *“Read this.* “Karen shifts her looks from Gloria to me and back to Gloria. Karen reads the letter and says to Gloria *“Let her read it”*. Gloria takes the letter back from Karen and says simply” *No”.* Karen gets up takes the letter out of Gloria’s hand , *“She has to read it”* and gently gives it to me. My whole body begins to shake.

*Dear Gloria*

*Tell Myrt that I am not going to marry her. I have met someone down here that I have fallen in love with. We plan to marry very soon. Tell Myrt that I am sorry. Please take care of your friend.*

*Always*

*Sam*

I read the letter, once then a second and third time. I stop breathing for a microcosm of a second. The room is spinning. I look at Karen and Gloria. I can’t think of any words to describe the looks on their faces. I let the letter fall from my hands to the floor. I can’t remember going back to my room. I look out of the window; it has stopped raining, the sun has come out, but my room is in total darkness. I climb into bed and pull the covers tightly around me. I try going to sleep because this must be a dream and I am going to wake up soon from this nighmare,