

# FIERCE TRUTH

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## PROLOGUE

“The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims...” *Trauma and Recovery* by Dr. Judith Herman

I am a survivor of sexual, emotional and physical abuse. That is my truth. The stories in this book arose during years of therapy as I attempted to peel away the layers of denial I had laid down in order to survive. Each story contains facts of my abuse fleshed out with character and dialogue to create a means of delivery for this truth.

The number of survivors of domestic violence, incest, childhood sexual abuse, sex trafficking, and drug and alcohol abuse is so huge the chances are that you are such a survivor or you know one. These stories are for you, for those who have suffered the unspeakable or witnessed it and wish to address the truth of your own violations.

This was not an easy book to write and it will not be an easy book to read. I suggest having a support system in place—those who are capable of helping you bear whatever might be triggered.

I wish you strength and courage, conscious awareness and healing as you remember and tell your own truth to yourself, at the very least, and to others capable of bearing witness to your recovery.



## BLACKBIRD

*Songwriters: John Lennon/Paul McCartney*

*Blackbird lyrics ©Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC*

“Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
    Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to be free  
    Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night  
    Blackbird fly, blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night  
    Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise”



## I WILL MISS SCHOOL TODAY

It's very late, but still the summer heat lays on my skin like microwaved taffy. I'm rocking back and forth on my knees, the scrub brush is making shushing sounds against the linoleum.

I asked her what she wanted for dinner, and she raised her head and glared at me. I saw the contempt and knew that she had spent the day with a man. At least, this time, she didn't bring him home.

She got to her feet, and I stepped back as she bared her teeth and screamed, "Why don't you leave me alone!" I can't leave her, we both know this. I waited for another outburst, but she turned and ran to the window.

I ran too, through the vision of the mess seven stories would make of her, but she fooled me this time, she didn't try to jump. Instead, she balled up her fists, then there was a sound like dishes being hurled into the sink and glass crashed against the sidewalk below.

She folded her arms and embraced herself through the empty window frames. The motion seemed to remind her body that it was wounded because she suddenly began to bleed in long furrows from her shoulders to her palms. I went to her then and said, "Please, come away from the window." She slapped me. Dark liquid splashed across my face, the floor, the wall.

It's so quiet now. The scrub brush makes the only sound in the house. She won't be back tonight. 26 stitches and they said they were keeping her for "observation." They always do that but somehow, they never see.

I will miss school tomorrow, so I'll have to write a note and sign my mother's name. Ms. Usher can always tell the difference, but she never asks me the truth about my absences.

When I was in the third grade I would watch the news and wonder who cleaned up the blood after the police and the ambulance and the neighbors left. I'm in the 12th grade now, and I know, I do....

## FLIGHT

The front door opened and Celie turned a little to watch her mother pass the living room on her way to the kitchen. She held her breath but her mother didn't see her standing in the corner, the room was too dark.

Celie stepped up to the window and looked out. The city sparkled, stretching away for miles to the far horizon. She laid her hand against the cold pane of glass and pushed. As the window opened, the voice of the city entered added a soundtrack to the view and made a movie of the lights. Almost all the action was from cars streaming by, headlights flickering as they passed telephone and light poles.

She put her foot on the radiator and pushed up to the windowsill. Cold air slapped her face and made her gasp. It rushed inside the cuffs of her sleeves, raising goose bumps as it flowed over her arms and tumbled inside her nightgown, making the fabric billow like a sail.

She smiled into the wind and felt it take the moisture from her lips and teeth. The cold flow grew even stronger and she leaned into it as she had seen birds do seconds before they spread their wings and laid down on the carpet of air that took them away.

She grasped the sides of her nightgown and spread her arms, making her body a basket to catch the wind. The metal window frame dug into her shoulders and thighs, the wind whistled around her ears, and tickled the hair on the back of her neck.

She stood on tiptoe and the cold rush slid under her arms and raised her up. She forgot silence, yelled her frightened excitement, but the wind snatched the sound away from her lips before her mother could hear it.

She turned slightly, freed one shoulder, then the other, stepped onto the narrow edge of the window, and winced as it bit into her bare feet. The pain kept her from lingering too long and she escaped it by stepping out onto the back of the wind.

Wouldn't her mother be surprised when she found out Celie could fly!

MR. R.

He comes into my room at night. The door opens silently, just enough and he slides into the room sideways. He has that grin on his face that I used to love. It meant that we were going to have fun, laughing, and playing together. Now I hate it. It means that only he will have fun.

He closes the door and the light from the hallway disappears, but I can still see him in the light from the apartments across from ours. I see his white, white teeth against his dark face and clothes—like the Cheshire cat in *Alice and Wonderland*.

I'm in the middle of the bed. Koala Bear is near my left arm, but I don't hold onto him anymore. He'll just get thrown to the floor. The bed dips as Mr. R puts his knee on it and I roll a little towards him. He puts a hand under my pajama top and pinches my nipples. It hurts. I open my mouth but no sound comes out. I cried once and he got mad. He bent over me and talked through his teeth about how my mother would feel if she knew I was crying again. I knew she'd be angry. She's always angry about the things I do no matter how good I am. She's always angry with me.

He said, "You know what will happen if I tell her you cried?" It was a question but I didn't answer him out loud but in my head, I saw the belt and I could feel it stinging my arms and the backs of my legs. I'm not allowed to run away from the belt. She won't stop hitting me if I do and NO CRYING. "I'll give you something to cry for," she says if I do, and she hits me harder.

I hear the zipper and I have to stay still, even if I want to put my hands under me. Mr. R grabs my hand and puts it inside his pants, squeezing it around his penis. I know what a penis is. Mom told me that boys have one, not girls, and it's for putting a baby inside grown-up ladies, not little girls. It's so big now, but I know it starts little because sometimes he makes me touch it while its soft and I feel it get big and hard. He doesn't put it in my vagina, he puts it where Mom gives me the enemas when I don't have a bowel movement.

This time he's big when he puts my hand in his pants. He's breathing hard and I can smell his scotch and cigarettes. My mother smells like that too from her mouth when I kiss her good night, but there's another smell that comes from inside Mr. R's pants. It's like the time I forgot to put the

milk away and we couldn't drink it because Mom said it was sour. She made me smell it and drink some anyway so I would never forget to put the milk away again.

Mr. R is whispering, "Oh god, oh god," like he's praying. I don't pray any more because God never stops Mr. R from coming to my room. I think God only hears grown-ups not little girls like me, or maybe just not me. Mom says I cry so much I would, "drive the devil to drink." I don't think God hears little girls who make the devil drink scotch.

Sometimes squeezing Mr. R's penis is all that happens and then he wets my hand and cleans it off with his big, white handkerchief. Tonight, it's not enough. He pushes my hand away and I have to not cry again because he pulls down my pajama pants and he pushes his penis into my bottom. He pushes over and over again, faster and faster, and I know he's done when he wets my legs.

When Mom gave me the enemas, she complained that I was too tight for the tube that puts the soapy water inside. It hurt going in so I know I'm too small for Mr. R because his penis is bigger than the thing for the enemas, but I don't cry any more.

## CHARLEY & REEVA

When Charley was six, Mam married Daddy George and they moved into his three-bedroom house on Hyde Street.

George was no prize. People said things about him like, “No aces in the deck, know what I mean?” But Mam wasn’t much either being a divorced woman with a small child. Mam provided a clean house, good meals, and a willing, though unenthusiastic, bed partner.

George paid the bills.

If the child got lost someplace in the midst of all this practicality, she was small and quiet so no one noticed. It became her habit to wait until Mam was preoccupied with some task or the other and she could slip away to the room her parents shared. There was a huge wardrobe that George had built (he was good with his hands) and Charley used to get in it and close the door behind her. She loved to stand in the dark, pressed close by the airless warmth and the smells of face powder and diesel oil. She’d rub her face on the satin cuffs of Mam’s best dress or stand inside the folds of George’s heavy, winter coat. Sometimes she would fall asleep and dream about the things she and Mam and Daddy George were going to do on weekends that never came (she learned early not to wish for things and so she was rarely disappointed.) Sometimes in the closet, Charley felt safe, secure, and loved. Sometimes outside the closet, though not actually happy, she was neat and well fed. What more could any child want?

Once a year, Mam took Charley to Deene to visit Aunt Bay, their oldest living relative. She was a mean-mouthed woman whose farm was a mixture of joy and terror for Charley. Aunt Bay would hit Charley with her walking stick for no apparent reason and the sow chased her, and the chickens pecked her, but the peaches were as big as both of her fists put together and she lost hours lying in the grass pretending she could fly off into the sky.

Life proceeded quietly and predictably from one year to the other until the summer when Charley was fourteen years old. School had been out so recently, she was still rising before she was called and groping for her good clothes. On that day, she’d washed up her breakfast dishes and retired to the porch where she hung over the railing, nodding at passersby. When the gate clicked, she jumped down to get the mail from Mr. Thomas.

He grinned and tapped a thin letter laying in state on top of a stack of envelopes.

“Your mam’s gonna be mighty pleased to get that one, best run and give it to her right away!” Charley was curious about the letter, but she paused to watch Mr. Thomas as he chuckled and shook his head all the way to the Jennings next door. Charley looked the letter over carefully, front and back, but could see no reason for the joke the man was so obviously enjoying. She went inside but didn’t stop to put the mail on the side-board she took it straight to the kitchen table instead, forestalling criticism by waving the letter as she spoke.

“Mr. Thomas say to give this to you. He say it important.”

Mam calmly set aside her fork and then got a good look at the letter. She froze and it seemed like she took root and turned to stone on the spot. Her mouth was opening and closing like the catfish George sometimes landed for dinner, then she snatched the letter and burst into tears.

George paused with his spoon over his second cup of coffee and he and Charley stared. Neither had ever seen Mam cry. In response to George’s gruff question (his first since the necessary prenuptial one) Mam flung up her arms and laughed out loud.

“It from Reeva, she comin’ home!”

Reeva! Charley immediately retired to her closet to think about what she’d heard. Reeva was Mam’s best friend, a woman who’d grown up with her, played in the same creeks, gone to the same school. Both had met, and married, their men on almost the same day.

Charley had heard stories about “Reeva ‘n Me” from the time she was born, but she had never seen this person and eventually came to think of Reeva as Mam’s “Imaginary Friend.” Now it turned out that Reeva was real and was coming to Boston.

Later that night, by sneaking out of bed and huddling near her parent’s bedroom door, Charley found out why Reeva had never been to see them before. It seemed that Reeva shot her husband the day he came home having used their meager savings as a down payment on a lemon yellow Cadillac and matching suit and Panama hat. Reeva told the judge she thought he was a stranger trying to break into the place since her husband had never looked like that a day in his life. The judge didn’t believe her, but he was impressed with the guts it took to tell such a story (and he held an

immutable belief that this was just typical of the behavior of Coloreds) so he gave her ten years for involuntary manslaughter.

When she got out (two years early for being a model prisoner), Reeva turned her back on Beston and figuring that jail had already taken her farther from the town than she'd ever been in her life, she decided to go a little farther before she came back and settled down. No one knew where she'd gone, but now Reeva had finally decided to come home.

The next day, Mam took to cleaning and cooking with a frenzy that left George speechless. He was inclined to grumble at first, watching Mam's glee and energy with a jaundiced, jealous eye, but his spirits lifted as he reaped the benefits of the return of the prodigal. Mam's cooking was inspired, the house shone like a Christmas tree, and Charley was often awakened by thumping and loud cries to Sweet Jesus that came from the main bedroom. George began to wear a self-satisfied smile and he gained ten pounds in three weeks.

When *THE* Day finally arrived, Mam hustled them down to the bus depot an hour early. Charley spent the time watching the buses come and go, reading the exotic names of places she'd never even heard of, and pestering Mam for a candy bar from the food counter. George paced and began to scowl as Mam fussed over his clothing and tried to get him to stop littering the ground with spent matches and cigarette butts. She kept shifting him from place to place, away from the detritus of his habit, but he began chain smoking from sheer cussedness and she had to let him be.

When the bus finally arrived, Mam squealed and ran for the door, her lectures on "Proper Public Behavior" lost in her joy. Not for the first time did Charley wish that George was a different kind of father. She wanted to hold his hand but contented herself with standing near him.

The crowd around the bus thinned and Charley got her first glimpse of Mam's friend. The two women were still hugging in an embrace that made it hard for her to tell where Reeva began and Mam left off. It was kind of hard to find Mam at all. Charley had pictured Reeva as being a duplicate Mam—a thin, quiet woman with a sad smile and a soft way of speaking. Reeva wasn't like that at all. A bear, Charley thought, Reeva looked like a bear from Goldilocks in the book they had at school.

The embrace finally ended and the two women snuffled and honked their way to Charley and George. Reeva grinned and pumped George's

hand while he muttered, "Welcome home," and shoved Charley between them like an offering. Charley sketched a timid curtsy, then put out her hand and held her breath, waiting for it to be crushed in Reeva's huge paw. Instead, she was suddenly swept off her feet and found herself sinking into such a generous softness of bosom and un-corseted flesh as she had never felt in her life. She closed her eyes and squeezed back, trying to capture Reeva's bulk in her arms and keep it forever. It was like her closet had come to life. Reeva finally set her down, took her and Mam by the hand, and held on to them until they piled into George's old Ford. Reeva insisted on riding in the back seat with Charley to whom she gave a huge jawbreaker and two pieces of sticky butterscotch candy. Charley sank her teeth into one of them and wiggled happily in her seat as Reeva and Mam chattered on.

She had a bad moment when Reeva mentioned her children (she'd been spinning a fantasy that Reeva was her "for real Mam" come to get her at last) but the moment passed when Reeva mentioned that she had a boy and girl close to her age and she expected Charley to help them get acquainted with Beston.

Reeva stayed with them a month, holding court as the whole town came to pay its respects. She teased Charley and kept her up way past her bedtime then she and Mam would talk for hours, watering their conversation with gin and Mam's ribs and cornbread. George hung in as long as he could, but once his belly was full, he *had* to sleep.

The women were rarely up before noon. At first, George tried to get Mam up to fix his breakfast but gave it up when a half hour of shaking, stomping, and slamming doors brought not a flicker of consciousness, but the late start was perfect for Charley who was found more than once sound asleep on the floor near the kitchen door.

Visitors told Reeva about this or that piece of property that would be perfect for herself and her children, and she quickly found a place not too far from Mam and Charley (ten minutes at a brisk walk if you were acting like a lady. Three minutes at a flat out, dead run if you were not). George and some of the neighbors helped Reeva paint and fix the place up (though for different reasons) and Reeva and Mam furnished it by going from one thrift shop to another in Portersville, the biggest town nearby.

Under Reeva's benevolent influence, Charley seemed to grow and blossom overnight. She cast off her shy silence, chattered like a swarm of

blackbirds at sunset, and took on the grace and energy of a gazelle. Mam herself began to glow. Lines faded from her face and even her hair took on the sheen of a well-petted cat fed on cream. Every now and then, Mam and Reeva would take off together and not come home until long after suppertime. George complained once but Reeva smiled, put her arm around his shoulders and squeezed while whispering in his ear. His face got tight and he never said another word, no matter how late or how often they were gone.

Charley noticed that Mam and Reeva were quiet after one of their outings and gave each other secretive looks as they shared a cold meal. Reeva caught her watching them and called her into the room. Charley stood an arm's length away, unsure of herself and, for the first time, unsure of Reeva.

“When the last time you seen yo daddy, Charley?”

Charley hung her head and darted a glance at Mam before answering Reeva.

“Daddy George the only daddy I know and he be here every day.”

Reeva smiled at the answer and looked at Mam when she spoke, though she aimed every word at Charley. “You never tol’ this chil’ about her daddy?”

Mam shook her head a little and looked scared in-spite-of-the-fact that she laughed along with her friend. “She tol’ you, Reeva, George the only daddy she know, the only real daddy she got. Leave it be!”

Reeva shook her head and sighed. “Girl, they’s some secrets you don’t keep. You think no one will tell this child about her daddy? Surprised it didn’t happen already!” She rolled her eyes at Mam and handed Charley a piece of sweet potato pie on a napkin then gestured towards the front door. “You wait outside for us now. We gonna go to town in a little bit. And, honey,” she stopped Charley, “ain’t no way to pick and choose what you gonna hear listenin’ behin’ doors. You understand me?” Charley nodded, ashamed. “Somethin’ you want to know, you come ask, okay?”

Charley glanced at Mam, but her mother lowered her eyes, so she turned to Reeva and said, “Yes ma’m,” and took the piece of pie, but she didn’t leave. She straightened her shoulders and glanced once at her mother before she blurted, “I want’a know about my for-real daddy. I want’a know from you, Miss. Reeva!”

Reeva nodded and refused to look at her friend. “That the way it should be. You should be hearin’ the truth from yo family. Ain’t that right Charlene?” Charley dared to glance at her mother who looked away and shrugged her shoulders. Her hands fluttered for a moment like chickens before their necks were wrung but she didn’t say a word.

“Set down, Charley. This won’t take much time but hard news comes best when you settin’ down.” She nodded approval as Charley set her piece of pie on the table and pulled up a chair.

“Now, the thing is, your Mam is a beautiful woman and many mens wanted to be with her. You know what I mean?” Charley wasn’t sure but she nodded anyway and Reeva went on. “Yo daddy, Rufus D. Clarkson, wanted your Mam all to hisself but he didn’t want to put no ring on her finger so yo Mam say, ‘No!’” Reeva shook her finger under Charley’s nose and did her neck in the way Mam would’a slapped Charley for doing. “Well, Rufus hated for anyone to say him no and he swore that he would have your Mam all to hisself.”

Charley looked at her mother but Mam was staring out of the window with all her might so Charley switched her gaze back to Reeva. “Yo’ daddy, Rufus D. Clarkson gave yo Mam one drink too many and *then he had his way with her.*” Reeva raised her eyebrows and checked to see if Charley understood what she was telling her. Charley’s confusion made Reeva slap the table with disgust. “Charlene, how you have this girl child getting’ this big and she don’t know about mens and they ways?” Reeva looked really mad and Charley was glad she wasn’t the one in trouble.

“I.. she ain’t... I..” Mam stammered and settled back in her chair when Reeva waved her to silence.

“Charley, you know mens be made different from womens, right?”

Charley was glad to be able to nod. “They stands up when they pee and ladies set down.” She grinned with relief when Reeva nodded and she boldly added, “They thing makes babies if it get inside a women.” Charlie flinched when she heard Mam gasp.

“Who tol’ you that, Charley?”

It was Charley’s turn to stutter. “El...Ella Green done tol’ me about mens when we was in the choir. She say mens always be wantin’ to put they things in womens so you got to set tight wit’ yo legs together.” She looked at Mam. “If you don’ set tight, you gonna make a baby. Is that what happened,

Mam, you didn't set tight?"

Mam leaned across the table and made her eyes all mean. "Charlese McCrary, don't you be judging grown-ups in they behavior. You don't know nothin' and you needs to keep yo pie-hole shet! Now you take yoself out on the porch and mind yo own bisness!"

Charley cast Reeva a pleading glance as she grabbed her pie and ran outside.

Reeva leaned forward and pushed Mam's shoulder. "Why you treat that chil' so bad? She never did nothin' to you but try to min' you." Mam pushed Reeva's hand aside and acted as if she was going to stand up. Reeva's next words stopped her. "I'm thinkin' you blamin' her for somethin' she can't do nothin' about! You still mad at Rufus, or are you mad at yoself?"

"Rufus! He shoulda treated me like a lady, instead he ac' like I'm some kinda ho!" She jumped away from the table and began cleaning the spotless sink.

"Charlene..." Reeva's tone was placating. "Rufus just a man an' you know how they be. Got no sense when they thing rise up."

Mam threw down her dishcloth and spun to face Reeva. "So, it *my* fault that that man done what he did?"

"No, girl, I'm jus' sayin' he done lost his mine from wantin' to be wit' you and he did somethin' stupid."

"*He* did it, not me!" Mam shouted loud enough for Charley to hear her and ease the front door open to hear more. "He the one give me that las' drink, knowin' I can't have but one. He knew, he knew!" She stomped across the kitchen and Charley almost smashed her fingers in the door in her attempt to close it quickly. Mam turned and strode the other way and Charley went back to listening.

"Then he tol' the whole worl' what he done and took credit when my belly got roun', like he done somethin' to be proud of! Then what happen? Charley come out to be a girl an' he said she wasn't none of his 'cause his stuff only make boys!"

"Now Charlene, you know that was a lie!"

"I know, and you know, but the whole of Beston start lookin' at me out'a the side of they eyes and that Millie Watson called me all outa my name right in front of Pastor Laws!"

Reeva waved a hand in disgust. "Evr'ybody in Beston know that that

Millie Watson a ho' what knows more about mens than all the womens in town put togetha."

Mam burst into tears and Reeva quickly crossed the room to put her arms around her friend. "Now, hush. You got nothin' to be grinnin' for."

"You don't know, Reeva, nobody know that Rufus tol' me he woulda' married me if Charley had been a son."

"Oh, fuck that lyin' sonofabitch!!" Charley almost leaped from the porch. Not only did Reeva use that nasty word, but she said it loud enough so that people in the street heard her and stopped, mouths agape. Charley wanted to shout at them to go away but she was dealing with her own troubles. That Rufus woulda' married Mam if Charley had just been a boy! She wanted to go hide in her closet but she would have to pass the women in the kitchen. She subsided on the porch, scrunching herself down into a corner of the glider swing but she didn't set it in motion. Today even the glider wouldn't be enough to soothe her pain. She sat there until the street lights came on, then calmly walked inside as if nothing at all had happened.

In the kitchen, Mam was sitting in her chair but slumped over with bad posture she had never displayed. Reeva was frying chicken with one hand and stirring pots with the other. She nodded towards the dining room. "You go wash and come set down fo' dinner. Your daddy be home soon," she added in a warning tone. They both looked at Mam but she didn't move so Charley ran off to wash her hands.

The next morning, Mam looked much better though there was still some sorrow in her face, which reminded Charley about being an unwanted girl. She was itching to ask Reeva if it was true that her for-real daddy would have married Mam but despite her curiosity, she kept her mouth shut. "Mam want me to know," she told herself, "she tell me herself." And Charley thereby made herself safe against any further knowledge.

Summer sped past and just before school began, Reeva sent for her children. There were five of them: Jason was the oldest, almost fifteen, followed by Paulette, Michael, Shirleen, and Kenny. Charley was shy with them at first. They were like buzz-saws with their machine-gun fire Eastern speech and street-wise ways. Rumor was that each of them had a different father, and it was obvious Reeva practiced no form of discrimination. The children were black-eyed and brown-skinned, kinky-blonde and hazel-eyed, and copper-colored with straight, black hair. Though they may have

looked like their daddies, it was Reeva's boisterous nature that shone out of their eyes and filled them with high spirits.

Their house was full of loud music and laughter and at any given time half of the people in Boston were there too. The children scrambled through the rooms like the offspring of wild animals and Reeva waded through them, dispensing more hugs than spankings to the oddly assorted group. They rolled over Charley like a heavy wave, turning her every which way but loose. They taught her how to dance and drink and smoke, and they filled her veins with life. Jason filled her with something else, too, and Reeva led her to a place bordered by fields where a woman ended the life Reeva said would take more than Charley was ready to give.

Not too long after that, Charley noticed that Mam and Reeva were arguing a lot. They remained friends but there was a strain between them, and the gin 'n ribs parties stopped. Charley tried to find out what was wrong, but Mam told her to mind her own business and Reeva laughed.

"Your mam always was hard-headed," she said, "but now she old timey too. Stubborn *and* backward is too much for me!"

Charley was nearly sixteen when Reeva once again gave into her wanderlust and decided she had to leave Boston. She'd already been North, East, and South so now she set her sights on the West. California! Land of movie stars, Rolls Royce's, and the high life. Reeva had cut a huge swath whenever she touched down for more than five minutes, imagine what she could do with the grandiose raw material of a place like Los Angeles.

In the weeks before Reeva left, she began dropping by again. She teased Mam and tried to get her to leave George and put some adventure in her life. Mam would giggle and shake her head, but the laughter never seemed to reach her eyes, and her mouth was increasingly set in a thin, hard line when Reeva wasn't there to make her smile.

When Charley saw that Mam wasn't willing to leave, she began working on her mother for permission to go herself. But Mam stood firmly against this in spite of the tantrums that Charley threw for the first time in her life. What made it worse was that George was willing to let her go. He even offered Reeva Charley's travelling money and a small sum each month if Reeva would look out for her.

It seemed the more they argued with Mam, the less she would listen until one night, there was a big fight. Mam threw Reeva out of the house

and refused to speak to her again. She didn't go so far as to stop Charley's visits, but she would sit by the kitchen window and wait until Charley got home, then she questioned Charley as if afraid that Reeva had said something to turn her daughter against her. "Just like she thought I'd steal you away or somethin'," Reeva said when Charley told her about it. Charley was soon exhausted from grief and the need to defend the two women to each other in a game she didn't understand.

On the day Reeva and the kids left Beston, Charley took herself to the small Catholic church in town. She had never been to a service there, but had always found comfort in the silence of the empty pews and the flickering points of candlelight in the near-dark. She went there on those occasions when her pain was not yet ripe enough for the shouting and blues disguised as hymns of her own church.

Reeva was hurt that Charley would not come to see her off but was glad enough for the tearful farewells of most of the town. Mam broke down and ran into the depot just in time to throw her arms around her friend and thrust a hastily wrapped parcel into her hands. Miles away Reeva opened it to find a photograph of Charley (whose tears had raised blisters in the glossy finish) a set of linen handkerchiefs with tatted edges from Mam (because a *real* lady was never without a handkerchief) and a flashlight from George (practical and unimaginative as ever). Charley finally came home and then ghosted around the house for months, coming to life only when a call or a letter came from California. As for Mam, though it didn't seem possible, she got even more quiet than she'd ever been before.

An unseasonable heat-wave hit the next spring and Mam used it as an excuse to sleep alone on the screened porch at the front of the house. George argued with her and tried to visit her in the night, but she would have none of it, claiming that the heat made her tired.

At first Charley paid little attention, but the fights and long silences were finally hard to ignore. She tried to find out what was going on but her mother stared at her for a long minute then said, "You come talk to me when you been in a mens bed long as I have," and stalked away. Things went along this way until the fall and the night George came home drunk.

Mam was down the street caring for Lu Baker whose heart had failed her while she was stacking mail bags down at the post office. Charley was lying on the bed listening to the CD's Reeva had sent for her birthday

while dreamily flipping through the pages of a movie magazine, when her door opened and George walked in. She was more curious than frightened since George had never come into her room before, and then she saw the look in his eyes.

He came close to her on the bed and she could smell the wood oil on his hands and clothes. For just a moment she felt as if she was standing in the closet, wrapped in the heavy security of his coat, and the memory made her ignore his look and speak quietly to him.

“Hey, Daddy, what you want?”

He reached down and took the magazine from her hands and flipped through the pages.

“Reeva sent that to me,” she said. “Ain’t it nice. Them peoples sure kin dress, huh?”

He nodded. “You like them clothes?”

“Well, sure.” Her smile was genuine. “Mam like them too. Any womens would. They makes you feel so fine and pretty.”

George closed the magazine and began rolling it tighter and tighter until Charley winced. She’d been keeping everything Reeva sent as clean and neat as possible. Mam said that people liked to see that you cared for what they gave you, and would be more inclined to do for a person who had some respect for their belongings. Charley had just decided she would tell Reeva she had lent the magazine to Bell Menton, who everybody knew had little respect for herself and anything else, and was wondering how to get it from George when he tossed it on the floor then sat down on the bed beside her.

Charley’s breathing stopped and she felt her whole body seize up. She found it impossible to smile anymore as she looked at George and saw him staring at her thighs where her skirt had hiked up under her on the bed. He touched her leg and she flinched.

“Your Mam’s at Miz Baker’s,” he said, “should be home in a little bit.” Charley took a slow breath and eased away from his hand, pulling her skirt down as she did so. George watched her and shook his head admiringly.

“You grown up to be a fine young lady. Can’t believe how big you are now.” He looked at her chest and Charley gulped and dragged her lips up into a grimace.

“You and Mam taken good care of me, Daddy, thass why.”

“Mam!” The word exploded from his mouth and made her jump. He turned away and squeezed his hands as if he was wringing cloth between them. “She taken good care of us until that Reeva left and then, she forgot her duty.”

Charley tried to laugh and shifted a little farther away from him. “Mam still taken care of us, Daddy. She just tired and sad that her good frien’ gone so far away.”

George’s eyes narrowed and he bent such a look on her that her heart leapt into her mouth. He leaned towards Charley. “You womens all alike, takin’ up fo’ each other, lettin’ the mens work and work and gettin’ nothin’ back fo’ it!”

Charley made soothing motions with her hands. “Mam take good care of you, Daddy, don’t she? Your clothes be clean an’ iron, your house be clean and good food on the table, right?”

Before she could jump out of reach, his hands had lashed out and captured hers, holding them in a grip that bruised them to the bone. “Gal, I know you ain’t so stupid. Takes more than clean clothes an house, more than food to feed a man. Didn’t your Mam teach you that? She been denyin’ me what’s mine by right of the Bible and the law. If she ain’t tol’ you, I’m gonna do it now. A man ain’t the same as a woman. Certain needs got to be met or a man goes crazy!” He suddenly pulled her to him and the smell of liquor on his breath made her turn her head and breathe through her mouth. “You gonna help me, gal, you gonna do what your Mam,” his mouth was wry around the word as if it was bitter, “what your Mam should’a been doin’ for me all this long time.”

Charley shuddered, remembering Jason’s hot breath against her face as he whispered his need for her now, right now! He’d told her the same thing, about a man’s needs, and she’d been frightened and flattered that he’d chosen her to be the one to ease him. So, she knew what George meant but she quailed at the thought. Jason was different, he was Reeva’s boy and somehow that made it all right, almost like pleasing Reeva herself. But this was Daddy George, and the wrongness of what he was saying to her cramped her stomach.

George fumbled at his pants and Charley began to cry. She did it quietly, without hope, afraid to call for help because someone else would see. She did not wonder why she felt guilty about what George was doing,

but shame kept her crying silent and she began to pray that he would hurry and do it before Mam came home. For some reason, she especially did not want her mother to know.

George eased his pants open and Charley squeezed her eyes shut after one look. She had seen Jason many times and believed that all men were like him, but George was bigger and went off so at an angle, she wondered how he was going to get himself inside her. He grabbed her hand and closed it around the throbbing thickness, then groaned at the pressure. Charley cried harder and he flung her hand away in disgust.

“You don’t want to touch me, huh? You an’ your Mam too good to be touchin’ mens, want to close yo’ eyes and preten’ we ain’t here, but I’m here Little Mam, I’m here!” He pushed her down on the bed. She felt her drawers being yanked away and tried to cover herself with her hand, but he fell on her and forced her legs apart with his knee. Then the world seemed to begin and end with a pain that started outside her body and ran clear up to her throat. She screamed and pushed her heels against the mattress, trying to back herself away from the bigness of him but he followed harder and faster than she could retreat.

She heard herself calling for Mam, for Reeva, for Jason. Only later did she wonder why she had not called for Jesus as Pastor Laws said all must do in their times of darkest trouble. There came a sound like an explosion and the weight suddenly left her body. Other screams joined hers and she opened her eyes to a confusion of movement. Mam stood with a broken lamp in her upraised hand, Daddy George was on the floor, and Charley drew her knees to her chest and sobbed with relief. It was over.

She heard shouts and the sound of things breaking but she remained curled in on herself and refused to look. It seemed like hours later when the noise died and she rolled over to see Mam standing in the doorway. As their eyes met, Mam lunged. She grabbed Charley’s ankles and pulled her legs apart, then Charley fought to roll aside as Mam’s fists struck her again and again.

“Mam! Mam! Why you hit me? I didn’t do nothin’, I didn’t!” Charley fell off the bed and crawled across the room until she came to the wall and laid with her hands upraised, begging and protecting herself at the same time.

“Bitch and ho!” Mam screamed. “You a bitch and a ho right here

in my house with the man good as bein' your own daddy!" She slapped Charley, rocking her head so hard it hit the wall.

"How many times? How many times you do this, ho?"

Charley shook her head, trying to clear the ringing in her ears and straighten her vision.

"Never befo', Mam, I swear. He come in my room tonight, only tonight. Never befo', Mam, never!"

"Liar!" Charley's head rocked again then Mam threw her torn drawers into her face and scrabbled at the bed in a frenzy, tossing aside the bedclothes. "Where the blood, then? You see it anywhere? Where the blood?"

Charley was too dazed to protect herself as bedclothes, then mattress were thrown at her. She looked at Mam out of one eye and nursed the other side of her face. It was swelling until it threatened to split. Mam had raised her fist and was coming after her again when Charley screamed, "It was Jason. There was blood when I did it with Jason!"

All movement in the room stopped but the place dipped and swayed so crazily that Charley was forced to close her good eye and rest her head against the wall. There was a roaring in her ears and then silence as the world faded away.



Charley woke up and cried out as she tried to move. The aches in her body told her that she had not had a bad dream. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes and dripped behind her ears. When she was little and that happened, the tickling sensation would sometimes make her laugh. She laid in bed now and tried to pretend that she was small again and none of the things that had happened had come to her yet. She longed to be hiding in the closet, surrounded by scented clothing, safe and warm.

She drifted in and out of dreams for a long time, the pain and heaviness in her body her only sign that she was not dead. At some point the door eased open and Reeva suddenly sat down and gathered her into her arms as if Charley was really the child she'd been pretending to be. Charley sobbed until she cried herself to sleep.

She woke once to the sound of someone else's tears and heard Mam's bed creak and Reeva saying, "Now, now" over-and-over again. Charley's face grew hot as she imagined Reeva comforting Mam as she

had comforted her, and Charley wanted to shout at Reeva to stop, to not waste her love on someone who would betray her and cause her pain. In that moment, Charley realized that she hated Mam more than she hated George, and that she hated Beston which must already be talking about what a ho she was. In recurring nightmares, she found herself standing in the church, stark naked, while everyone jeered and pointed. She wanted to pray, but her hands were tied behind her back and when she opened her mouth, Satan roared from between her lips and people began to burst into flames. The church was consumed by fire and was quickly swallowed up by the earth.

A week later, Charley got out of bed. She was weak and had a hard time getting her limbs to move the way she wanted them to. She staggered to the kitchen, but turned to leave when she saw Mam sitting at the table. When Mam saw Charley, she tried to talk to her, to apologize, but Charley screamed.

“I try to tell you and you don’t listen. You believe him and not me. Why you can’t be like Reeva, she’d a believed me, and she would’a shot him, shot him dead!” She hobbled back to her room and slammed the door. Now it was Reeva’s turn to go from one woman to the other, to try to placate and appease, but Charley lapsed into silence, refusing to be drawn, and Mam stayed drunk and too incoherent to speak.

The day came when Reeva had to leave and Charley found her bag packed too, and standing alongside Reeva’s in the hall. Mam did not come to the bus see them off and Charley sat next to the window with her eyes closed until she felt she was far enough down the road not to see Mam even by accident. She then watched, dry-eyed, as the town slipped past her and she knew, in a place deep inside her, that she would not come back.

When the plane landed in Los Angeles, she struggled to feel amazement, curiosity, *anything*.

On the street outside, she was finally overwhelmed by the people and their cars, and the sun, especially the sun. It melted the sky turning it yellow-white with heat. The thick air tasted like a copper penny on the back of her tongue, and she gasped for breath just standing still. She did not allow herself to think back on blue skies, and breezes that quenched you like sweet water, but instead felt the suitcase between her feet and the five dollars pinned in her bra. It was not enough, not nearly enough, but

Reeva grinned and hugged her, and for the moment, Charley let what she had be all right.

## PET THE BUNNY

Henry Parker shit his pants  
in the front row of the Loew's Theater.  
It happened when the Great Reynaldo  
pulled the rabbit out of his hat,  
and dropped it.  
It hit the floor and made a loud noise  
and all the kids stopped laughing.  
The rabbit hurt itself when it fell  
but it still tried to get away.  
It crawled to the end of the stage  
and went over the edge  
and fell on Henry Parker's feet.  
That's when Henry screamed  
and went in his pants.  
The other kids made fun of him  
for being such a baby  
but I live next door to him  
and I know why he did it.  
Henry's mom comes to his room at night.  
I can hear her because my bedroom  
is on the other side of the wall from his.  
I hear Mrs. Parker say, "Here's the bunny.  
Here's the bunny rabbit.  
Kiss it, Henry, pet the bunny."  
Then I hear the bed squeak  
and it goes faster and faster,  
hitting my wall like it's about to come through.  
Sometimes Mrs. Parker screams at Henry  
for not petting the bunny right  
but most times she just goes away  
after the bed stops jumping.  
When she's gone, I hear Henry crying.  
I used to think Henry was sad  
because his mother took his rabbit away,

but after that Saturday, I figured out he cried  
because he really was afraid of the bunny.

## HE

“I followed her right to her back door and she never saw me. I’m good at that. People don’t notice me, or if they do, they don’t get scared. They should be, especially, you bitches. I got a lot to say to you. Flashin’ around the street with your shit all hangin’ out. Don’t you learn? Been enough stuff in the news so you should know better. But I got a mission to teach a few of you some respect.

“Got this woman last week. Followed her like I followed you, but that time I didn’t stop. I ran up and pushed her in the door. You women don’t know nothin’ about fightin’ someone who knocks you down. You should roll over and kick the shit out of ‘em but you just scream.

I knocked this bitch out when she screamed. I can’t stand that screamin’ shit. Curse me or somethin’ but don’t be screamin’ in my face. When she woke up I was in her kitchen and I had her tied to the table. Went in her room and got her pantyhose to do it. That shit is tough, it don’t break. I tied her hands and legs to the legs on the table.

Had to throw shit off of the table first. This bitch was nasty. Kitchen was a mess, clothes all over the bedroom. She wouldn’t’a been my piece and kept a house like that, I’d’a hit her a lick for every dirty dish. I put the sponge from the sink in her mouth. It was stinkin’. You know how they get when they been sittin’ in dirty dish water? I didn’t even squeeze out all the water so she was tryin’ to puke on the taste. She started soundin’ like she was screamin’ so I slapped her. “Uh, uh,” I said, “I hate that noise. Shut up! I ain’t given you nothin’ to scream for, *yet*.” I took out my knife then. It’s a big one. Man said I could use it to skin an elk if I went huntin’. Bitch pissed her pants when she saw it, started to cry, so I cut her. I didn’t cut her bad, just a little near her eye. “I’ll cut your eyes out, you don’t stop that cryin’,” I told her. She got real quiet and just looked at me.

I saw a cat looked like that once. Man had just hit it with a bat, broke its back. Cat knew somethin’ bad had happened but it couldn’t feel shit, just laid there on the ground lookin’ up and then it rolled over and died. I told her, “You don’t cry, you don’t scream, then you don’t die. Got it?” I saw it in her eyes. She said yes. I cut off her clothes. I could see her muscles movin’ under her skin. She wanted to get away so bad. I grabbed her tit, squeezed the nipple, and she closed her eyes. I screamed at her. “Uh, uh, bitch. You

don't send me away like that. You don't shut me out. Open your damn eyes or I'll fix it so you can't close them again." I showed her the knife cause she was lookin' at me by then. She got it, you know? I put my hand on her tit and rubbed. That's a trick, you know? Squeeze, and it hurts, but you rub the right way and them little suckers stand right up and ask for more.

I had to put down my knife so I could put my fingers in her pussy. She was tight, man, she was tight, and dry—no juice 'cause she was scared. I unzipped my pants, workin' my fingers in her all the time. She kept watchin' me, but 'cause of the sponge, she couldn't say nothin'. I always put somethin' in their mouth 'cause women talk too damn much.

I put my knife on her stomach and watched it go up and down, fast, with her breathin'. I looked at it on her skin. She had nice skin. Course, I don't fuck ugly. You all hear that? All you bitches I took should feel proud 'cause I don't fuck no ugly women.

I had to laugh. Her ass was right at the edge of the table so when I took out my dick, all hard and ready, she was right there. Made me think of them doctor's offices when they look up inside women's shit. I know some of them doctor's puttin' more than their hands up there and you women be likin' it too. That made me laugh some more. I said, "I'm the doctor. I'm gonna fix you," and I shoved my dick right in her hole.

She jumped, man, that bitch rose right up. Lucky I been doin' this so long and knew how to tie her right or she'd a-pulled loose for sure. One of the first ones I did almost got away and I had to punch her out. Pissed me off 'cause I wasn't finished and she ruined it. I like them wide awake. They stay tight that way and that feels good when I'm comin' inside them. This bitch was good. I pushed and pushed, strokin' my thing in her tight cunt, and I told her why I was doin' it to her. "I'm fuckin' you 'cause you stupid. It's my mission to teach all you stupid bitches to be more careful. From now on when you walk down the street you gonna feel me at your back, waitin' to knock you down and take you. You gonna look around before you put your key in the door, ain't you?" I could see her eyes say yes. "I'm here to make you pay attention. You don't ignore no men anymore. You look at them good, show 'em you see 'em. You got that?" Her eyes said yes some more.

I could feel it comin', the big hit. I picked up the knife and got ready. I was pushin' fast. Had to lean over and hold her by the shoulder to keep

her from movin' away to the end of the table I was pushin' that hard. She was tight, she was a good one, and I knew I was gonna come fast and be out of there and not get caught. I started to come. I felt my dick jumpin' and jumpin' and I cut her from her neck to her pussy, made a long line then put a little wing on each side so it would be an arrow.

She started to pass out. I was finished anyhow, but I wanted her to get the lesson. I slapped her and made her look at me. "You see this?" I held up her head so she could see the arrow. "This is my mark. I put it on all the bitches I teach. It's kinda like your high school diploma. This here mark is an arrow and it's pointin' right at your stuff. It's gonna be there till the day you die. I have to do this 'cause you about a stupid bitch to let someone like me catch you. So I put this mark on you. It says, 'I'm a stupid bitch and I deserve to be fucked.' Now you know. You know who you are. School is out!" I got myself together, used her dishrag to clean my knife then I used it to cover the phone when I called 911.

"Hey," I said, "It's me again. Got another woman here needs help. I done all I could and she got a little messed up, you better send an ambulance." Then I left the phone off the hook. I walked out, feelin' good. The cops would come. I been doin' this for a while now and they know to come check it out when I make a call...

## THE CHICKEN ON THE FIRE ESCAPE

Jeanette Marie Mays was molested for the first time when she was twelve years old. It happened in 1934, while she was living on Shoup Avenue in Brooklyn.

It was an old, brownstone building, which meant three floors of apartments. Jeanette, her sister Lillian, and her grandparents, Mama and Papa Mays, lived on the top floor. Aunt Carey, who was a friend of the family, and her daughter, Rosalean, lived downstairs on the bottom floor because they were old and couldn't make it up the stoop. The middle apartment was shared by Mama's two sons, Thomas (who they called "Boy"), and Alvin.

Alvin was the one who did it. He'd been watching Jeanette a lot, staring at the pretty little girl she had become. She saw him watching her, but she told herself it was okay. Uncle Al loved her as much as she loved him, and she *did* love him. He was a good-looking man with coppery skin and straight black hair. He was tall and slim, and fun to be with. She especially loved his big, dark eyes.

Those eyes were beginning to make her uneasy, but she told herself this was because she was a bad person, and she didn't want Uncle Al to see that. Jeanette knew she was bad because Mama was always talking about sin, warning her about things she shouldn't do, things that would make a woman cheap and easy. But Jeanette liked a lot of those things—she liked seeing the ladies wear make-up and frilly, pretty clothes, and she *loved* the movies. Mama said the actors were living lives of sin, and were going straight to hell but she didn't say anything when Papa Mays took the girls to the movie house.

And it wasn't only because of the sinful things that Jeanette knew she was bad. Deep down in her heart, she knew she was no good because her mother, Claudia, had given her up.

Mama told Jeanette the story more than once—how her mother had hated her on sight, had made them take Jeanette away right after she was born because she was covered with hair, even in the palms of her hands. "She looks like a rat!" her mother had said, and would have nothing to do with her. If it wasn't for Mama, Jeanette would have died. She had scaly skin under all that hair, and was really small so she couldn't stay warm. Mama had to put her in the oven on a pillow to keep her from freezing to

death. The hair eventually fell out, and her skin cleared up, but by then, it was too late to go home to her mother.

A year after Jeanette was born, Claudia had another baby. When Jeanette got old enough to figure things out, she knew it was because Claudia was trying to have a light-skinned, pretty child, like she was, one she could love. But it somehow didn't work out then either, and her sister, Lillian, had to be taken in too.

That's how they ended up with their grandmother, and Papa Mays, Mama's fourth husband.

Of the two girls, Jeanette was the prettiest. She was a tomboy, too, and liked to run, and jump, and play. Mama told her it wasn't ladylike but she did it anyway, and Papa stood up for her.

The bad things started happening the summer they got the chicken. It was white, and lived on the fire escape outside the window overlooking the backyard. It wasn't much of a pet, but they loved it. Jeanette liked looking out of the window and seeing it there.

That day, the first time it happened, Mama, Papa and Uncle Boy were at work. It turned out later that Aunt Carey and Rosalean had gotten a few hours of piece work at the First A.M.E. where the new minister had decided to re-outfit the choir, and was willing to pay.

The only one at home was Lillian. She'd been fighting polio, and had won. No iron lung for her for the rest of her life. She was only a little cripple in one leg, which was now thinner than the other, but she was learning to walk again, and without a brace, too.

Meanwhile, Jeanette would come home from school and tell Lillian all about what had happened that day. They shared stories, and Jeanette showed her what she'd learned in school.

This particular day, Lillian was tired, so Jeanette went off to talk to someone else. She explored the house and found that everyone was out.

She was in the kitchen doing her homework when Uncle Al came home.

He wasn't working then. He was supposed to be looking for a job, but it was hard to find a good one. A black man, even as good-looking as he was (sometimes *because* he was so good-looking) got turned down a lot in 1934.

He came into the kitchen looking for something to eat, and at first,

Jeanette was happy to see him. After a few minutes, though, she realized he was staring at her again and she suddenly wished Mama was home, or that Lillian was awake.

She started to gather her things and leave the room, but Uncle Al asked her to stay. She was flattered and happy. He wanted to talk to her! This made her feel good in a way that didn't happen too often. She sat down and told him about her day, all the stuff she couldn't tell Lillian, and he listened.

She wanted him to know how much this meant to her, his listening. She wanted him to know how much she loved him so she tried to explain. She told him how there were so many people in the house, but how so few ever listened to her. She told him how nice it was to spend time with him, how lonely she'd felt when she came home and no one was there except Lillian, who was asleep.

Something changed when she said that. She could feel it happen in the room, in the air between her and Uncle Al. She tried to tell herself she had no reason to be afraid, but she was. In desperation, she started talking faster. She mentioned Mama and Uncle Boy. She said, "This is the longest time the house has been so quiet, but any minute it will be full of noise again." But mentioning Mama, and the fact that people could suddenly come home didn't make the bad feeling go away.

Uncle Al looked at the clock. "It's only four," he said, "Nobody else will be here for a long time, maybe not until six o'clock by the time they get off work and get the bus. We still have a long time to talk."

She didn't know what else to say, and she didn't know what to do. She wanted to leave, but she wanted to stay. It was nice to have Uncle Al all to herself for a change. She thought about Lillian, that she was right upstairs, and that made her relax.

Uncle Al was watching her the whole time. When she relaxed, he smiled.

Jeanette saw Uncle Al smile and then she watched him come towards her. He was sweating a lot. He opened his collar and pulled on his tie to loosen it.

"You look hot, Uncle Al," she said, "Can I get you some lemonade?" She jumped up to go to the icebox, but he shook his head.

"No," he said, "lemonade won't help, but I know what will." He was

standing next to her. He put his arm around her and pulled her close, then he stroked her hair while he talked to her.

“You have such pretty hair, like mine, nice and soft. See?” He took her hand and put it on his head. She’d always wanted to touch his shining hair but somehow, now, she couldn’t keep her hand from shaking.

Uncle Al closed his eyes and his breathing got funny. He moaned as he pushed himself against her.

“Stroke it, baby, stroke my hair,” he said, and she did. She was too scared not to do what he said.

He backed her up against the kitchen table. She couldn’t move away, there was no place to go. Now when he pushed against her, she could feel this hard thing pressing against her stomach. She shifted to get away from it, wondering what it was Uncle Al had in his pocket that was so hard. Didn’t it poke him when he sat down?

But when she moved, he moved too, pushing the hardness even more against her. He began to roll his hips and really let the thing dig into her, and he was moaning louder. “Baby, oh baby, that feels so good!”

He took her hands and put them behind him, on his buttocks, and pressed hard. It was as if she was pulling him to her. She tried to take her hands away, but her struggle just made him breathe faster.

“That’s it, baby, that’s it. Do it. You’re doing it good for Uncle Al.” He looked at her then, and his eyes scared her. They were shiny, like mirrors, like he couldn’t see her at all, and his cheek jumped when he smiled at her.

“You know I love you, don’t you? You know Uncle Al loves you more than anyone in the world, right?” She nodded and he smiled some more, but even his smile began to look funny. His lips were pulled way back from his teeth, almost like he was grinning, but mostly it looked like he was in pain.

Then he said something that made her know he was hurting. He said, “Baby you got to help me, you got to help your Uncle Al. I got this pain and I need you to help me make it go away, okay?” He looked into her eyes and she could see he was serious. This was important, and even though she was scared, she remembered that he said he loved her more than anybody. Besides, there was no one else around to help him.

As if he could read her mind he said, “Nobody but you can help me, and you got to do it right now. I can’t wait.”

She nodded. "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

He looked real happy then. "You're a good girl. I knew you would help your Uncle." He took his hands from hers and began to fumble with his pants. She was surprised and scared, but she figured he was going to take out that hard thing and give it to her to get rid of.

He unfastened his pants, but he didn't take the hard thing out. Instead, he took her hand and put it inside. She jumped as she touched something warm. It felt like skin, but it was hard on the inside, like an arm. He pressed her hand against this soft hardness and began to moan again.

"Stroke it, baby. Stroke it like you did my hair." His hand began to squeeze hers so hard it hurt, and the thing in his pants began to jump like there was a heart inside it. He kept his hand around hers and began to pull, backing away a little so there was space between them for the thing to come out of his pants.

She started to cry when she saw it. It was big and it was attached to him. She finally realized it was his thing, what Mama said a man used to urinate from. That's why they could stand up where girls and ladies had to sit down. But his was all swollen and Jeanette knew then that he had to be sick.

She yanked her hand away. She didn't want to touch the thing. It was sick, and now she would get sick too. Mama was always telling her to be careful, to be clean and not bring any diseases into the house. Look what had happened to Lillian. They'd been extra careful after Lillian got the polio to wash their hands good, and now look.

She wanted to push Uncle Al away, but she also didn't want to touch him again. She leaned away and tried to squirm loose, but this just made it worse. He pushed her farther back so she was almost lying on the table, then he put his hands under her buttocks and lifted her up.

She began to fight then, hitting his chest, and he got mad.

"You stop it! You stop that, girl! What'd you expect? You sit alone talking to a man, telling him you love him and touching his hair. You get a man all upset and then you want to fight?" He leaned over her and his thing dug into her hipbone.

"You'd better stop that crying, stop your noise. You're gonna wake Lillian and she'll see what you've done. Do you want that?" He grabbed her hands and leaned down, pressing them against the table. His body was

heavy on hers. The rough wool of his jacket rubbed against her arms. She could smell it, and tobacco from his cigarettes, all mixed with the sour smell of his breath and the sweat on his skin.

The thought of Lillian quieted her. Lillian would tell Mama and Jeanette would be in trouble.

Uncle Al saw her face change. "That's right, you think about that. Mama would be pretty upset the way you been carrying on around here. What you think she'd do if she knew? You think Mama wants somebody around that can't act like a lady? Huh?"

He nodded at the fear in her eyes. "You just be quiet," Uncle Al whispered, "and she'll never know because *I* won't tell." He seemed calm again, not so angry. He slid his hands up under her dress and pulled at the band on her bloomers. She began to cry again, but softly.

"That's good, girl. You be quiet and you help Uncle Al out." He pulled her bloomers down but couldn't get them off over the heavy, high-topped shoes she was wearing. He yanked them as far as they could go, she could feel them dragging on the floor. Then he pushed her legs apart.

His hands were big and rough on her bare thighs. She began to beg. "Please Uncle Al, please don't." But he didn't stop. Her dress was bunched up around her middle, and she could feel the heat of his body between her legs. He took one hand away and she tried to close them, but he put up his knee and kept them apart. He yanked her down to the end of the table, her knees on either side of his hips, and when she was close, she felt something press against her privates. It felt like a knob, and it butted against her again and again, hitting the soft tissue, pinching it sometimes.

She gasped and felt her body jump as he rubbed her nipples through the thin cotton of her dress and slip. For a second, she wondered how he could do this and still be able to touch her privates, and then she knew, and she began to scream.

He bent down and put his mouth against hers. She felt the sharp ends of his moustache on her upper lip, and the stubble on his chin against her face. She tasted the saltiness of his mouth, the stale tobacco-sweetness of his saliva. Then he fell on her and all the breath went out of her body and she couldn't scream even when she needed to because the knob pressing against her became a thick, hot pain that shoved inside her, ramming its way to her middle so hard, she thought she would split open.

Her mouth stretched wide in a soundless scream as Uncle Al banged and banged and banged inside her. He grunted, “Oh! Oh! Oh!” each time he did it, faster and faster until there came a long moment when he pushed and stayed there, thrusting hard. The thickness inside her jerked again and again, and he moaned, “Oh, God! Oh, oh!” And then, it was over.

He leaned above her, his hands on either side of her body, his breath coming in gasps. Nothing else happened for a moment, then there was a small pain that flared sharply and was quickly gone. She felt a gush of wetness, a tickling of the skin outside her body, and the pressure inside her was gone.

Uncle Al moved away. Her head was turned so she saw him as he crossed the kitchen, his hands cupped at the front of his pants. He opened the drawer where Mama kept her cleaning cloths neatly folded. He took one out.

She recognized the pattern. It came from an old nightgown Mama used to wear. When she could patch it no longer, she’d salvaged the best parts of the soft flannel, cutting it into pieces that she used for dusting.

Jeanette watched Uncle Al wipe himself with a piece of Mama’s nightgown, then he fastened his pants and came towards her with the cloth in his hand.

When he touched her, she didn’t move, didn’t flinch. She let him wipe her, then he pulled up her bloomers as far as they could go before they were stopped by the edge of the table.

“Get up, girl, and put your clothes on right.” He’d moved away, taking the stained cloth with him. She had no idea what he did with it.

Right after she’d felt him leaving her body, she’d left too. She didn’t know how she did it, but she was suddenly all in her head. She felt as if she’d been shrunken down to the size of Thumbelina, and was peeking out at the world through the two holes in her face where her eyes used to be. She had to look down at herself through the holes in order to straighten her clothes because she couldn’t feel them.

She watched from inside her head as her two hands pulled up her bloomers then smoothed down her slip and her dress. Then she looked out of the holes in her face, across the room at Uncle Al. He was watching her over the rim of a glass of lemonade. He tipped the glass, offering it to her. “You want some?” She shook her head. “Well,” he said, “you’d better go off

and see if Lillian's awake."

She looked down at her feet, turning them and placing them carefully, step by step, to the kitchen door.

"You remember, now." His voice stopped her, but she didn't turn around. She was afraid she'd lose her balance and fall. "You don't say anything, and I won't. This will be our secret and no one will get hurt."

"He means, you won't be punished," a second voice inside her translated, echoing around her small self, inside the big, empty space. She didn't answer either one of them. They knew she didn't have to.

## SHE

I picked him up in a bar after midnight on Friday. The place was full of people trying to forget they had to work every day just to make ends meet. He was young and small, with copper-colored skin. He was dressed in laborers clothes—green long-sleeved shirt over a white tee-shirt, green pants. A white mark on his hip pocket showed where he always carried his wallet. His hair was shiny and black and grew down to his shoulders. His eyes were black too and his cheekbones were high. “Indio,” I thought when I saw him. He ordered a *cerveza* and staggered a little as he carried it to a table where other men who looked like him were sitting.

I’m no longer young, but I’m still beautiful and I can have any man I want. He was drinking from the beer bottle, his head tilted back, when he saw me smiling at him. He looked confused for a moment and turned as if to look behind him, then he pointed at himself and I nodded. His smile was wide as he stood up. One of his friends tried to make him sit down, saying something to him that sounded like a warning, but he just bowed from the waist and offered me his chair.

I sat down and the other men smiled with their lips but not their eyes. They stood up and beckoned to him but he shook his head “no” and put his hand on my shoulder. They shrugged and walked away. As he watched them go, I dropped the pills in his beer and shook the bottle. I pretended I was drinking from it when he turned around. I handed it to him and watched as he chugged it down.

He sat down across from me. I pointed at myself and said, “Frances.” He nodded and said, “Francisca!” I said, “Okay,” and he pointed at himself and said, “Pedro,” and we laughed at his broken English and my broken Spanish, but we understood each other well enough.

It wasn’t long before he was shifting in his seat and I knew the pills were working. He looked down at himself and then up at me. I pointed at myself then the door and he stood up. Yeah, the pills were working.

There was a motel nearby. The sign near the front door said they charged by the hour and the sheets were always clean. I stood back and watched him pay the man at the desk then he took the key card and motioned for me to precede him. As I walked up the stairs, he squeezed my ass and made kissing noises. He thought it was funny.

The room was neat and when I turned down the bedspread, the

sheets looked clean. I turned to see that Pedro had already shed his shoes and was working on his pants. I went over to help him, brushing against the lump behind his zipper. He gritted his teeth and groaned. I unzipped him and took him in my hand. His penis was short but thick and it bobbed in time with his heartbeat.

I turned to my purse and took out the stockings. Behind me, Pedro jumped on the bed and bounced a few times. I walked to him and gestured for him to lie down. He said, “Why you no take off clothes?”

I said, “*Momentito*,” and he laid down. He looked a little apprehensive as I tied his hands to the headboard then spread his legs and tied his ankles to the foot of the bed. He laughed and I laughed too, then I reached in my purse again and took out the jar of the cream I think of as, “mother’s little helper.” I unscrewed the top, took a blob of the cream on my finger and smeared him with it.

I said, “It feels good, doesn’t it?” He frowned so I gestured at his dick and said, “*Bueno*, right?” and he grinned and said, “*Muy bueno!*” I stepped back from the bed and sat down on the chair nearby.

He said, “You watch, yes?” I nodded, lit a cigarette and watched as he pushed down on his heels raising his pelvis. He thrust at empty space and a bead of pre-cum formed on the head of his dick. Sweat broke out on his forehead and I knew the cream was doing its job. First there would be a tingling sensation then slowly, slowly, there would come pain.

I’d almost finished my cigarette when he raised his head and looked at himself. Panic was beginning to spread over his features. His pelvis began to jerk and fluid dribbled out of his dick. He shouted, “No! No, *señora!*” and began to blow as if he could reach himself with cooler air. He yanked at his restraints, but nylon is tough and it doesn’t break.

I walked over to him and he began to cry. His penis looked raw and he hissed a breath between his teeth as I stroked him from base to tip.

I went through his pockets and took his money. Hmm, must have been payday. I untied him and he moaned, curled in on himself, and started rocking.

My momma taught me, “A man is a three-legged dog. You treat a man right and he’ll walk all over you, treat him bad and he’ll come back for more!” I just never wait for them to come back. They’re not much good once they’ve been with me...

## THE ALPHA OF DOGS

The first time, Benjamin went *into* was at the butterfly exhibit at the Edgewater Natural History Museum. Ben liked going there, the building reminded him of pictures he'd seen of the White House. Inside, in the lobby, there was the giant skeleton of a tyrannosaurus rex. Ben had heard that the skeleton wasn't real because the little museum couldn't afford the real thing, but it looked great and he always growled at it when he went by.

The eleven members of the fourth-grade class led by Ms. Washington, passed through two doors to reach the butterflies. The outer door had colorful butterfly pictures on it. The inner door was made of glass, and was designed to keep the butterflies inside the exhibit. Once inside, the kids oohed and ahed as butterflies fluttered around and sometimes landed on them. Ms. Washington gave a lecture about how a caterpillar spun a cocoon around itself and began to change inside it until it came out as a butterfly. In class she'd told them about "metamorphosis, m-e-t-a-m-o-r-p-h-o-s-i-s," which was changing from being one thing into another.

*It* happened while Ms. Washington was pointing at a cocoon. She said, "Imagine what's happening in there. The caterpillar's body is changing from being like a worm with a lot of legs to being like an ant with big, colorful wings..." Ben was imagining as hard as he could, and he suddenly found himself inside the cocoon! He couldn't *see* the caterpillar; he *was* the caterpillar. He felt it as his body melted and parts began moving around.

Ms. Washington finished her lecture and the class scattered throughout the room, but Ben was frozen in front of the cocoon.

"Ben?" Ms. Washington said, and Ben could hear her, but he was caught up in trying to put himself back together, so he didn't answer. She touched his arm and, just like that, he was back in his human body feeling like he'd awakened from a deep sleep.

"Yes?" he said, and Ms. Washington laughed and said, "Welcome back. You were gone for a little while."

Ben just smiled at her and ran off to find his friend, Tomas, and tell him what it was like being in a cocoon.

"Tomas, guess what I did?" he whispered. "I went inside the cocoon and became the caterpillar while it was falling apart."

"Right, Ben," Tomas said. "You were the caterpillar. How come you

ain't got no wings?"

"It wasn't time yet. It has to change some more before it can have wings."

Tomas shook his head, "Ms. Washington is right. You got too much imagination." He looked past Ben and made a face. "Lookit what Carl's doing!"

Ben turned and saw Carl Pendergast tearing apart the wings on a beautiful yellow butterfly. He dropped the tattered creature and looked up to see Ben and Tomas watching him. He said, "What? The thing got on me."

Ben looked for Ms. Washington but she was busy on the other side of the room talking to two of the girls. He looked back at Carl just in time to see him make a fist and mime punching someone. Tomas grabbed Ben by the arm and pulled him away before he could say anything to Carl.

"Come on, Ben, don't say nothin'. You know that boy is crazy. You don't want to be fightin' him after school."

Ben turned away in disgust, but Tomas was right. Carl was a bully who got left back twice for fighting and missing too many days in school, so he was bigger than the other fourth-graders. He still liked to fight, but he'd learned his lesson and he waited until the kids were a block or so away from school before he jumped them. They were scared to tell on Carl because he lived in the neighborhood and there was nothing the teachers or Mr. Hannon, the principal, could do to protect them once school was out.

Ben looked at Ms. Washington and wondered if he should tell her what Carl had done, but he figured that Carl would know it was him who told. There was no way Ben could fight Carl and win so he decided to keep his mouth shut. Besides, something wonderful had happened to him and he didn't want anything to spoil it.

After the day at the butterfly exhibit, Ben tried going *into* all kinds of creatures: birds, cats, squirrels, rats, dogs, bugs... All he had to do was look at something and *push* his mind towards it and he'd slip inside. Once *in*, he became whatever he'd seen, feeling it from the inside.

His only problem was his real body got frozen, stuck in one position until he got back into it, which wasn't as easy as leaving it. Still, he practiced every day until he was as good at getting back in as he was at getting out.



There was no father's name on Ben's birth certificate, so he had his mother's last name, which was Porter. When he was old enough to ask about his father, his mother told him yes, he had a father, yes, she knew who it was but, "You see, I was on the pill, but you wanted to be here so bad, you came anyway."

She said, "Your daddy's name is Lester Cochran. When I told him about you he got mad 'cause he thought I lied to him about bein' on the pill, but the doctor said it happened sometimes that women who took the pill had a baby anyway. Lester said he wasn't fixin' to get married and I told him I wasn't fixin' to ask him. So, he said, "Well, what do you want?" and I said, "How about a little help with the bills?" then he said, "You should get rid of it, it'll just slow you down. I'm not fixin' to be no baby's daddy. I'm out..." Well, I wouldn't have an abortion and he refused to help so I did not give you his name."

"So, who is Ben?"

"This boy that was in my algebra class, Benjamin Carmona. He was from Puerto Rico and he was so fine all the girls were chasin' after him but he was smart and he had plans to go to college and all. He knew I liked him, all the girls liked him, but I had him to tutor me in algebra, which math is my weakest link. It's because of Ben that I passed algebra and got my diploma."

"What happened to him? How come he's not my dad?"

Clare sighed. "I told you he wanted to go to college and he had a girlfriend and he kept with her and nobody else, not even with me. He didn't fool around like the other boys."

"So, you got with Lester instead."

"Yes. Lester was fun, and he was smart, too, just not like Ben."

"I'll bet if Ben was my father he would've stuck around."

Clare nodded. "No bet 'cause you would be right!"

So, all Ben knew about his father was that the man had not stuck around to be his daddy and the man he was named for, the man he wished was his daddy, was smarter than his real daddy.

Ben was small for his age, which had taught him to keep to himself as much as possible, so he wouldn't get picked on. Well, not a lot. His size was a good thing because he would need bigger clothes one day but for now, he could keep wearing his one pair of jeans and one of his five tee-

shirts. But his feet hurt all the time. His tennis shoes were too small, and he had no way of getting new ones. If his mom had any extra money it went to the King's End Liquor store just a block away from Edgewater Elementary where Ben went to school.

Ben knew that was where the money ended up because his mother gave it to him to take to the liquor store and give it to Bosco on his way to school. Then on his way home, Bosco would give him a bottle of J&B scotch to take to his mother. It wasn't like she didn't know he needed new shoes but when she drank, which was pretty much any time she wasn't at work, she forgot.

She worked at the dollar store on Battlecreek Road on the good side of town. Lots of rich people lived there, "But they love them some dollar store just like us poor folks," his momma often said. The store on Battlecreek had big windows and cut-outs around the edge of the roof that made it look like a castle or like the building was wearing a crown. The dollar store on Ben's side of town looked like a white box with small windows that had bars on them.

It took his mother an hour to get to work by bus, but she refused to transfer to the store close to home. "Uh-uh," she said, "I ain't fixin' to leave them rich, white people. They tip you good if you help them to they car and if you're real friendly-like, they give you a box of them good chocolates at Christmas time!"

Ben knew his mother drank too much but the scotch helped her feel better. Without it she was sad all the time and she would lock herself in her bedroom and cry about how lonely she was. When Ben asked why she was so sad she'd say, "No man wants to be with a woman who has another man's child..." and Ben would feel bad that he was around keeping her from being with a man, from being happy. He tried to be extra good to make up for keeping the men away.

When his mother had something to drink, she was calm and happy. She came out of her bedroom and they would play games and read books together and she would tell him stories about things she said and did when she was a kid. Those were the times he was glad that it was just him and his mom.

One day, Eddie Royale, the owner of the King's End, came over to Ben just as Bosco was giving Ben his mom's scotch. Mr. Royale stood really

close and Ben had to tilt his head back in order to look the man in the face.

Mr. Royale said, "I seent your momma in here las' week. How come she sent you this time?"

Ben shrugged, "She sends me a lot of the time because it's on my way to school and her bus is in the other direction."

Mr. Royale smiled, and Ben decided then and there that he didn't like the man. Rumor on the street was Mr. Royale had done time for robbing a liquor store. The money was never recovered, and people said when he got out, he killed his partner and used the money to open his own store.

Normally, Ben didn't care what people said but when Mr. Royale smiled at him he decided the man looked dangerous. His smile was just on his mouth, not in his eyes. He said to Ben, "You tell yo' momma that Mr. Royale said hello and it sho' would be nice if she stopped by sometime, maybe when she has a day off."

Ben put the scotch in his backpack and hiked the bag up on his shoulder before he nodded and said, "I'll tell her," and he walked away. As he did, he thought about Mr. Royale wanting to meet his mother. Ben was used to men sending messages to his mother through him. The minister at church, the man who ran the dry-cleaning store and even old Sol, the butcher in the kosher market, all asked about her and said to tell her hi. Ben knew this was because his momma was, "A light-skinned black beauty with good hair," which is what Mr. Brown at the dry-cleaners called her before he asked Ben to tell her "hi" from him.

A few weeks later, Mr. Royale shouted at Ben as he and his friends ran home from school. "Come here, boy!" but Ben just looked at him as he ran past.

"Ben Porter, don't you run from me or I'm gonna give you an ass-whippin' when I catch you!"

Ben sucked his teeth and turned back. "Man," he said, "I'm trying to go with my friends!"

Mr. Royale got a mean look on his face that reminded Ben of crazy Carl Pendergast. He grabbed Ben by the shoulder and shook him hard then handed him a bottle inside a brown paper bag.

"What's that for?" Ben asked. "My momma didn't give me any money today."

“My momma didn’t give me any money today,” Mr. Royale imitated Ben in a high-pitched voice. “Boy, you talk like a faggot! Now you just take this and give it to yo’ momma and tell her that I’ll be by there tonight to see her.” Ben took the package. “And what do you say?” Mr. Royale asked.

Ben shrugged, “Thank you?”

“Nah, boy. When I tell you somethin’ you say ‘yes, sir!’ you hear me?”

Ben made a face and said, “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Royale took a step forward and said, “You do that again and I’m a slap yo’ face right off. Trust me when I say that!”

Ben took a step back and said, “Yes, sir,” then he turned away and cursed under his breath. If Mr. Royale was gonna start coming by with bottles of scotch, his momma wasn’t gonna turn him away like she did the others.

Sure enough, when he handed her the bottle she looked surprised. “Mr. Royale sent it. He said to tell you he’s gonna come by here later.”

“He said that, did he? He got a lot of nerve! I should just send this right back!” Ben brightened for a second, but then she took the bottle out of the paper bag, unscrewed the cap, and poured some of the scotch into the glass on her bedside table. She took a sip and smiled at Ben. “Maybe I need to be nice to Mr. Eddie Royale seein’ how he’s bein’ so nice to me.”

Ben’s heart sank. As he’d suspected, his momma was going to accept Mr. Royal’s gift. That meant she was probably going to accept Mr. Royale.

She patted Ben on his chest. “Why yo’ face all frowned up? Don’t you like Mr. Royale?”

“He a playa!” Ben pouted.

His momma sat up straight, grabbed his shirt and yanked him close to her face. “What did you just say?”

Ben repeated himself, “He a playa!” Momma shook him gently and said, “You know better. You say that again and say it right this time!”

Ben sighed, rolled his eyes and spoke with exaggerated correctness. “A play-er, he’s a player.”

She smacked him gently on the cheek. “That’s better.”

Ben pushed her hand away. “Why I got to be better? You say stuff wrong all the time!”

She shook her head and said, “Why do I have to be better? Say it!”

“Why do I have to be better than you?”

“Because yo’ going to make somethin’ of yourself in this world. No child a’ mine is gonna walk around soundin’ ignorant!”

“But, I sound just like you and Tomas and all my friends. They make fun of the way I talk. Mr. Royale even called me a faggot for the way I sound!”

“You know we don’t use that word in this house!”

“Well, he said it.”

“And I’m tellin’ you not to say it! What Mr. Royale should have said is that,” her voice went high-pitched and funny, “you sound gay.” She started laughing and Ben wanted to be mad but the way she said it made him laugh too. The doorbell rang, and they stopped.

She said, “I’ll bet that’s Mr. Edward Royale right now. You go get the door and, Ben,” she shook him a little. “You be respectful and call him Mr. Royale, you understand?” she giggled, “He could be yo’ daddy one day.”

“Yeah, just what I don’t need!”

She pushed him, “Not everything is about you. You just go get the door!”

Ben muttered to himself all the way to the front door. He looked out of the window and saw a tall, shadowy form on the porch. He opened the door and stepped back as Mr. Royale entered.

“Where your mamma at, boy?”

“You mean, where’s my mamma?” Ben said spitefully.

“I said what I meant. You keep messin’ around and that smart mouth of yours is gonna get you in trouble!”

Ben muttered, “Whatever,” under his breath then turned and yelled down the hallway, “Momma, you got company!” He turned back and motioned for Mr. Royale to go into the living room.

The man sat on the couch and Ben folded his arms and stood in the doorway. Mr. Royale laughed.

“You think you a man?”

Ben nodded. “I *am* the man of this house.

Mr. Royale laughed again. “I see. You think you grown?”

Ben nodded again. “Grown enough. I look out for my mamma and she looks out for me. We’re a team!” And suddenly his mamma was there. She was carrying her glass and the bottle of scotch.

“Well, good evening Mr. Royale and thank you kindly for the gift.” She held up the bottle and motioned with it towards the kitchen. “Ben, go get Mr. Royale a glass.”

Ben went to the cupboard where they kept the good glasses. He wanted to give Mr. Royale a plain one but he knew his momma would see it and get mad. He grabbed one of the glasses that looked like cut crystal and went back to the living room to see his momma sitting on the couch next to their guest. Ben offered the man the glass, but Clare frowned at him.

“Act like you got some manners and pour the man a drink!”

Ben did, then went back to his post in the doorway. Clare pointed towards his room.

“Thank you, Ben. You can go now. I bet you got some homework or somethin’ you can do.” As Ben turned away he heard her say, “He thinks he grown. My fault, it’s been just the two of us all this time and I’ve spoilt him.”

Back in his bedroom, Ben sat on the edge of his bed and contemplated the future. Momma was willing to allow Mr. Royale to come into the house. Maybe he *would* end up being Ben’s new daddy.

“Uh-uh, no way. The man got no class.” Class, his momma talked about that a lot how most people didn’t have any. Maybe that would be Mr. Royal’s downfall.



Two weeks went by and Mr. Royale came to the house every night. Toward the end of the second week, he took to walking past Ben and going straight down the hall to his momma’s bedroom.

One night, Ben put his ear to the bedroom door and heard a lot of sighing and then the bed began making a noise like someone was jumping on it, and his momma started shouting, “Yes, Eddie, yes!”

Ben knew what that meant. Kiefer Jones had porn on his phone and his parents didn’t know it. He had shown it to a few of the boys after school one day. Ben saw a man put his thing inside a woman and she started yelling. It made Ben’s stomach feel all funny and he decided he didn’t like porn.

Now, listening to his momma, Ben got mad. His momma shouldn’t have let Mr. Royale put his thing inside her. He wanted to scream at her to stop, but he knew that would make her really mad. When Mr. Royale left that night, Ben slammed his bedroom door as hard as he could, and his

momma shouted at him to “Quit actin’ like a fool.” A little while later, she came to his room and sat on the edge of his bed.

“You mad cause Eddie is keepin’ me company?”

Ben wanted to pretend he was asleep, but he was too mad. He rolled over and gave her a mean look and said, “Yeah! Why you do that?”

“Say it better!”

Ben growled and sat up, pushing away her hand when she went to reach for him. “Why do you do that? Why do you let him stay in your bed?”

She sighed and patted his hand. “You too young to understand it but people got needs. *I* got needs.” She shook her head at the stubborn look on Ben’s face. “I can’t explain it right now, maybe when you get older.”

Ben wanted to say he understood all right, that he knew about men putting their thing inside women, but he knew she would ask how he knew and he didn’t want to tell on Kiefer.

Clare pushed Ben’s chest and made him lie down again. She pulled the covers up to his chin and leaned in to kiss his forehead.

“You go to sleep now, you got school in the morning.” She got up, turned off the light and said, “I love you,” before she went out and closed the door. Ben wanted to cry, but he didn’t know why. It just felt like things were all wrong and they would never be right again.



A few nights later, Ben was sitting at the dining room table doing his homework. His momma was in her bedroom when he heard a key in the lock of the front door. Ben was shocked. The door opened, and Mr. Royale was standing there. Ben jumped up out of his chair and said, “Oh, hell no!”

Mr. Royale put his hand on his belt and in a dangerously low voice he said, “Boy, pull your pants down and bend over!”

Ben frowned. He just knew Mr. Royale was not about to give him no whippin’. His momma didn’t let nobody put their hands on him.

Mr. Royale balled up his fist and said, “What did I say?” and Ben took off yelling “Momma” as he fled down the hall to his mother’s room. He didn’t knock he just opened the door and ran to her bed. She sat up fast, with the covers pulled to her chin, but Ben could tell that she had no clothes on.

“Boy, what the hell is wrong with you, have you los’ yo’ mind?” Her speech was slurred, and she had a hard time focusing on his face. She frowned and said, “I told you to never come in this room ‘less I call you first!”

Ben’s mouth fell open as Mr. Royale slid past him and handed his momma a bottle. It was Chivas Regal, the really good scotch. Then Mr. Royale grabbed Ben and shoved him out of the room, stepped out with him and slammed the door.

His momma was yelling, “Thass’ right, take him on outta here. Comin’ in my room like he ain’t got no sense!” Ben heard the sound as she poured some scotch into her glass.

Mr. Royale shouted back, “Don’t worry, I got this. He won’t go in there no more!” He reached for the buckle of his belt and Ben took off running again. He didn’t get far. Heavy hands descended on his shoulders and Mr. Royale shook him like a dog killing a rat and said, “I’ll teach you not to run from me, boy! Now do like I said, pull those pants down and bend over!”

Ben was trying hard not to cry. He already knew that his mother wasn’t going to listen to him. He slowly unzipped his pants, pulled them down, and bent over. This was the first time in his life that he was gonna get a beating. His momma had threatened it before, but she’d never done it.

“Put your hands on your knees, boy!” Ben did and then Mr. Royale grabbed him by the back of his neck. Ben waited for him to take off his belt but instead, he heard the man unzip his pants and then felt cool air as his underpants were yanked down into his jeans.

Ben tried to turn. “What you fixing to do, man?” but Mr. Royale’s hand held him in place and then Ben screamed as something big and hard penetrated his behind.

Mr. Royale laughed and said, “You scream just like a little girl. That’s what you are, you’re just a pussy!” He drew back and slammed into Ben again pushing harder and farther than before.

Ben screamed again and began to cry, “Momma, momma! No, no, don’t do that to me!” but it happened again and again faster and faster while Mr. Royale began to grunt. Ben said, “Momma,” one more time but her bedroom door didn’t open. She wasn’t coming to see what was wrong.

“That’s right, little bitch, you just take it. You’re my little bitch now,

you hear me? Answer me, boy!”

Ben sobbed, “You can’t do this to me, I’m gonna tell the police!”

“You think you gonna tell the po-lice on me, boy? Tell them this,” and Mr. Royale slammed himself one more time into Ben who felt something warm and wet slide down his leg. Suddenly he was turned to be punched, one time, in the face then Mr. Royale threw him against the wall. There was no strength in Ben’s legs and he slid down to cower at Mr. Royale’s feet.

He heard Mr. Royale zip his pants and fasten his belt. “You little muthafucka, when I say jump don’t you even ask how high you just commence to jumpin’, you hear me?”

Ben was crying too hard to speak so he nodded, and Mr. Royale picked him up by his neck and said, “One more thing. You open your mouth to the po-lice and your momma gonna disappear. You understand what I’m tellin’ you?” Ben nodded again, and Mr. Royale let go and Ben fell to the floor. “You got homework?” Ben shook his head. “Then get up and go to your room and I’d better not hear a sound outta you all night. You hear me?” Ben nodded, and Mr. Royale stepped over him and went down the hall to his mother’s bedroom.

Ben laid on the floor a long time before he could drag himself upright. He took a step and almost fell since his pants were still down around his ankles. He wanted to pull them up but they were wet. He shuffled to the bathroom where he tried to look at his behind in the mirror on the back of the door, but he couldn’t get the right angle to see what it looked like. He finally took some toilet paper off the roll and wiped himself with it. There was slippery, white stuff and blood on the paper. He dropped it in the toilet and flushed it away.

He sat down on the toilet and began to rock from side to side. He wanted his momma, but things had changed. She used to protect him but now it was as if Ben no longer existed. His mother had scotch and she had Mr. Royale, and that was all she needed.

The next morning, he skipped breakfast and left for school early, so he didn’t have to see his mother or Tomas. Ms. Washington almost dropped her coffee when she walked into the classroom and saw him sitting in his seat.

“Oh my god, Ben,” she set down her cup and gestured for him to come to her. When he arrived at her desk she said, “What happened to

your face?”

Ben shrugged and stared at the floor. He took a deep breath to stop himself from crying then he said, “I fell.”

Ms. Washington bent down so her face was near his and she said, “Ben, did you really fall or did something else happen? Did your momma do this?”

Ben wanted to shout but his voice came out in a whisper, “No, my momma didn’t do anything...”

Ms. Washington looked upset, but she said, “All right, Ben, but if you need help you know you can come to me and tell me anything, or you can call nine-one-one. Will you do that, will you call for help when you need it?”

Ben nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

The bell rang and the door to the classroom opened. Ms. Washington watched him go to his seat and saw him wince when he sat down. In that moment, she decided that she was going to tell the principal that Ben was having trouble at home.

Ben kept his head down inside his notebook but one time when he looked up Tomas saw his face and shouted, “What the hell?” The whole class turned to look and there were more sounds of surprise. Ms. Washington jumped up, held up her hands and said, “Everyone calm down. Ben had a little accident, that’s all. Now, go back to work.” She waited until they all settled before she sat down again.

Tomas looked at Ben and mouthed, “Carl?” but when Ben shook his head, Tomas mouthed, “Who?” but Ben shook his head again and looked down at his textbook. He stayed that way until the bell rang for lunch.

Tomas grabbed Ben’s arm and pulled him aside as the other kids went past them. “What happened?” he asked Ben, but Ben just shook his head and said, “I fell.” Tomas shoved his shoulder. “You can’t tell me that lie. I know what it look like when someone been hit. Who hit you, your momma?”

“Nobody, and nothin’s wrong. I just fell down.”

Tomas shrugged. “Okay, be like that but I know better!” He pushed Ben aside and went down the stairs to the cafeteria. Ben was hungry, but he didn’t want to face the cafeteria people and the other kids. He checked and saw that Ms. Washington had left the classroom. He went back to his

seat and put his head down on his arms. Everything hurt all over him. His tears began to fall and roll down his nose, but he remembered Mr. Royale calling him names and he made himself stop crying. He was never going to cry again.

When the class came back from lunch Ms. Washington called Ben to her desk while the others took their seats. She said, “Ben, Mr. Hannon wants to see you,” and Ben started to shake.

“What did you do? What did you tell him?”

She put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it off. She said, “Ben, calm down. I just said you might be having a problem at home, that’s all. Now you go see Mr. Hannon and answer his questions, okay?” Ben didn’t answer but he slowly left the room. As he walked to the principal’s office, he decided that there was no way he was going to tell what happened to him, not if his momma’s life depended on his silence.

An hour later, he walked back into the classroom and took his seat. Ms. Washington looked at him as he took up his book and started reading. She knew Ben wouldn’t tell her the truth and she debated asking Mr. Hannon what happened, but she knew he wouldn’t tell her whatever Ben had shared. There was nothing else she could do but keep an eye on him and be ready to call social services if Ben “fell” again.



After Mr. Royale hurt him, Ben found it hard to sleep. He tossed and turned for more than an hour before he finally dozed off. A week later, he was wide awake when his bedroom door opened. He sat up thinking it was his mother, but the figure outlined by the hallway light was too tall. Ben whimpered as Mr. Royale crossed to the side of his bed and gestured sharply with one hand, saying, “Get up boy!”

Ben crawled to the edge of the bed but when he tried to slide off, Mr. Royale stopped him and gestured for him to turn around. Ben hesitated, unsure of what the man wanted until he shoved at Ben’s shoulder, unzipped his pants and said, “Get on your knees!”

Ben’s legs began to tremble as he knelt on the side of the bed. Mr. Royale pulled down his pajama pants and Ben began to cry, but he did it silently, with his mouth closed as the tears rolled down his face.

When Mr. Royale finished, he wiped Ben with a handful of tissues and said, “Least you know how to keep yo’ mouth shut! You keep doin’ that

and everything'll be awright." He zipped up his pants and left the room, closing the door behind him. Ben fell forward on his pillow and his mouth opened on a silent scream. He was awake the rest of the night.



Life went on. Ben refused to tell anyone what was happening to him, but everyone on their side of town knew that Mr. Royale had moved into the Porter's house. When he found that out, Tomas asked Ben if Mr. Royale had something to do with what happened to his face, but Ben just told him to mind his own business.

After that, Ben stopped talking to everyone and began spending most of his time alone. Tomas hung in as long as he could, but Ben wasn't fun anymore and soon they only saw each other in class.

Ben was still an "A" student, but he stopped raising his hand and only answered a question if Ms. Washington called on him. Ms. Washington worried about him. She knew something awful had happened, something bad enough to change an outgoing, talkative child into a silent shell. He never said a word about what was going on.

At home, Clare began missing so much work she got fired, she couldn't even get a job at the dollar store on their side of town. Ben knew it was because her drinking was out of control. She used to be able to drink a little each night and more on weekends but with Mr. Royale supplying her needs; though he did cut her back from the Chivas to J&B again, she began drinking early in the morning. By the time Ben got home from school, she was often incoherent and could barely walk.

Still, Mr. Royale let her work in the liquor store and she did alright for a while but one evening Ben heard Mr. Royale yelling at his mother. "You stealin' from me? Don't I give you what you need?" There was a noise that Ben recognized as a fist hitting flesh. His momma began to cry, and Ben forgot his promise to himself and he stood outside her bedroom door crying with her.

That night at the dinner table he saw that her right eye was swollen shut. Mr. Royale sat down and Clare jumped up to fix his plate. She'd stopped fixing Ben's when Mr. Royale said Ben was too old to be waited on and that when he got his own woman, she could wait on him. Ben fixed his own plate after that.

When Clare put his food in front of him, Mr. Royale smiled and

said, "Ain't this nice, a whole little family right 'round this table." Ben said, "Yes, sir" and his momma said, "Yes, Eddie," and Mr. Royale poured some scotch into a glass but when Clare reached for it he said, "Uh-uh, not 'til I tell you to." Clare sat back in her seat without saying a word and Ben almost choked on a piece of pork chop, but he managed to get it down without making a sound.



When he wasn't in school, Ben spent a lot of time going *into* things. He discovered that when he went *into* dead stuff, stuff that didn't move, nothing happened. It was best when he went *into* things that were alive and he did it a lot because, when he went *into* life forms, his fear and pain disappeared.

He started going down to the waterfront to watch the ships move up and down the Teha-na river. His favorite thing to do was to go *into* a seagull as it swooped down on the river, rising and falling over the water.

The people who lived near the river watched him for a while, but they finally realized that the boy who stood motionless for hours caused no trouble and they left him alone. One of them was an old man who introduced himself as Danny Conforti. He tried to get Ben to play checkers with him but the boy wasn't interested and soon drifted away to stand with his face up to the sky.

Ben got very good at being *in* other creatures. He hopped from one rat to another in the sewers and joined a cat while it sunbathed on top of a trash barrel. One day he joined a large dog that was the leader of a feral pack. Danny had warned Ben to avoid the dogs. "They ain't friendly and if you try pettin' one it'll take your hand off. Keep away from them wild ones." One day, Ben learned that lesson the hard way.

It was near sunset and Ben was on his way home when he turned a corner and almost stepped on a dead cat. There was a large black and tan dog nosing the carcass but when he saw Ben, the hair stood up in a ridge down the middle of its back and its lips drew back in a snarl. It took a step in Ben's direction, and Ben knew he was in trouble.

There was no sense in him running, the dog would quickly catch him. As it took another step towards him, Ben suddenly found himself *inside* the dog. He could feel it as the dog got more and more angry until it was ready to attack. It lunged for him and Ben jumped back and *changed*.

One minute he was a skinny little boy and the next he was a dog twice the size of the one that was attacking him.

Too late, the dog tried to stop its forward rush and it slammed into Ben's side. Ben growled and acting on instinct, grabbed the smaller dog by the scruff of its neck and shook it. It yelped and when Ben let go, it turned and ran away.

Ben watched it go and began to laugh, which sounded like huffing and puffing as it emerged from his mouth. The streetlight went on overhead and Ben panicked. He was supposed to be in the house when the lights came on. He started to run for home but realized he was on four legs not two! He stopped and looked around for his body and then it hit him. He wasn't just in a dog, he *was* a dog! The shock of that bounced him out of the dog's shape into his own and he stood gaping down at his outstretched hands. There was no time for him to deal with what had just happened, he needed to get home. He ran as fast as he could and was relieved to arrive and find only his mother in the house.

"Where you been?" she asked him. "You didn't come home from school."

"I did homework with Tomas," he lied and was amazed at how quickly the lie came out of his mouth, almost as fast as he'd turned into the big dog. His momma nodded and Ben was relieved when she turned away and headed for her room.

When he got to his room, he threw himself on the bed and put his face in the pillow, so he could scream his excitement. Quick as a thought Ben had *become* something else. He'd read about shape-shifters in stories. When they changed, they ripped apart their clothing and had painful transformations as bones cracked and ligaments popped. Nothing like that had happened to him. He had simply *changed* his whole body!

He did his homework really fast and then spent the time before lights out *changing*. He practiced until he could change into the big dog and back in a split second. He would never again be afraid of the wild dogs in the neighborhood.



Ever since the day at the butterfly exhibit, Carl had been waiting to get Ben alone. The smaller boy had dared shake his head at something Carl did and Carl wanted to teach Ben to keep his mouth shut. He left Tomas

alone because Tomas had three older brothers who would beat the crap out of Carl if he even looked at their little brother. But Ben, Ben had no one.

One Friday evening, Carl saw Ben walking up the street and followed him. As Ben stepped off the curb, he glanced back and saw Carl. Ben took off.

Carl ran as fast as he could, but the scrawny kid was even faster. Ben reached the hanging door of an empty building and pushed past it into darkness. Carl followed a minute later but stopped just inside the doorway. He had to wait for his eyes to adjust. He tried to hold his breath, so he could hear more clearly, but he ended up loudly sucking air into his heaving chest. As Ben silently tiptoed up the stairs to the second level, he could hear Carl panting.

When his eyes had adjusted, Carl looked around and found that Ben was nowhere in sight. He suddenly heard scabbling noises and saw an emaciated-looking, black and white kitten scrambling away from him. He looked around and found half a brick which he threw, hard, but the kitten was on the move and the brick missed. Carl shouted, "Shit!" as the kitten disappeared under a pile of rocks. Carl shoved his hand into the space only to find that it continued deeper than he could reach. He stopped shouting to listen for anything that would clue him in to where Ben might be, but he heard only silence. He wasted some time searching the empty rooms nearby without success.

He stomped his way outside. It was going to get dark soon. In his fury, he started grabbing rocks and other trash, heaving them into the street until there was nothing left for him to throw. It wasn't enough. "I need to kill something," he shouted. There was a flock of pigeons nearby and he whipped out his slingshot and a metal nut, took aim and... missed. He tried four times before one of the birds went down, wings beating against the ground while it tried to raise its ruined head. "Got that muthafucker!" Carl crowed, and it was good, but not good enough. When he got in this mood, seeing blood is the only thing that would satisfy him.

There was a sound behind him and Carl whirled around, hoping it was Ben, but it wasn't; it was a rat and behind it, there was another. Carl had never seen rats this big! They ran past him, into the street and went to stand next to the dead bird. One lunged, grabbed a wing and began dragging the body towards the curb. Carl blinked and there were suddenly

four rats, with more streaming out of the building. They began to chew on the body, yanking out tufts of feathers before they broke into the stomach and began a frenzied feast. Blood and small pieces of gore soon littered the ground around them.

The rats were so engrossed in their meal that they didn't notice Carl until he snatched up one of the feeders and twisted its head, breaking its neck. He laughed at the sensation as the bones cracked. "That's what I'm talkin' bout," he yelled and threw the body down near the bird. In seconds, the others found it and tore it apart. Carl shook his head in disbelief, "That's cold," he said. "Muthafuckers'll even eat each other!" He thought about killing another rat but there were too many of them feeding and he decided to keep his hands to himself.

He stood for a moment, undecided as to what to do next. One of the rats stood up on its hind legs and looked in his direction. Then another rat stood up and looked at him. That seemed to be some kind of signal, because the others stopped feeding and turned to look at him. Carl wasn't stupid. The balance of power had obviously shifted and he took off running. He didn't slow down until he got close to home. He told himself that he needed to go to the hardware store and buy some more ammunition for his slingshot then he'd go back and make the rats sorry for scaring him.

Ben watched Carl run away. He'd *changed* and hidden himself in the pack of rats watching to see what Carl would do next. As soon as Carl took off, Ben ran back into the building where he *changed* again and crept to the doorway to see if anyone else was around. The street was empty of even the rats, so he headed for home while keeping an eye out for Carl. Luckily, the bully was nowhere to be seen and Ben was glad because his feet hurt too much for him to try running again.

It was after dinner when he was about to go to bed and he started to take off his too-tight shoes that it occurred to him that he might be able to change the size of his feet. He sat down on the side of the bed and looked at his feet, then closed his eyes. He thought about what he should do for a minute and then he went inside his body and imagined his feet shrinking and, just like that, the shoes were comfortable.

He fell back against his pillow and laughed. The next time Carl chased him, and he knew there would be a next time, Ben imagined himself bulking up and beating Carl half to death. The image made him laugh, but

he sobered when it occurred to him that Carl would see him *change*. That was no good. Ben figured he was like a super-hero, safe as long as no one knew what he could do, so, no turning into the Hulk. He'd have to figure out something else to get Carl to leave him alone.



That Saturday, Carl watched Ben as the smaller boy headed for the waterfront. He circled the block and arrived in time to see Ben heading into an old warehouse. He waited until Ben disappeared and then he took out his slingshot and tiptoed inside.

The boy was nowhere in sight but something else was. It was a large black and tan dog and as soon as it saw Carl it began to growl and move towards the boy with exaggerated steps. Carl fired off the nut in his slingshot. It hit the dog in the side and it yelped and lunged for Carl who began to run.

He made it to the street before the dog caught up and knocked him down. Carl fell and hit his chin on the ground; the dog, now on Carl's back, got even more excited by the smell of blood. It bit the back of Carl's neck and Carl put his hands there to keep the dog from biting down hard enough to kill him. That just made the dog bite his hands. It hurt bad, but Carl refused to move them.

The dog backed off and Carl laid there waiting for it to attack again when he heard someone shout, "Get off, go away!" He waited for the dog to attack whoever was stupid enough to shout at it. When that happened, he planned to run. Instead, the growling stopped and when Carl sat up, he saw Ben Porter throwing a rock at the big dog. It turned a corner and disappeared.

Carl slowly got to his feet. His face and hands were bloody and he was shaking so hard he could barely stand. Ben walked over but stopped a few feet away from Carl.

"I saw you the last time," Ben said. "You killed that pigeon and the rat." Carl frowned, and Ben said, "That's right, I was upstairs and I saw you."

Carl wiped his lips and winced at the pain in his hand. "So, what? You gonna tell on me? Who cares? Nobody cares what I do!"

Ben motioned at Carl. "You better go to the hospital and get some stitches." He looked off in the direction the dog had taken. "If I was you, and I was bleedin' I wouldn't stand here. That dog can come back and he's

got friends.”

Ben turned and started to walk away. Carl shouted after him, “I’m a kill that motherfuckin’ dog, you wait and see. And this don’t change nothin’, I’m a still kick your ass!”

After that, Ben spent a lot of time running with the wild dogs. As the largest and smartest dog, he quickly took over as the leader of the pack. Ben made sure the other dogs stayed away from people. He taught them to scavenge behind the supermarket and the butcher shop where, checking to be sure no one was watching, Ben changed his front paws back into hands and opened the metal garbage cans filled with bits of fat and bones. He tossed some of the pieces to the dogs and he soon had them literally eating out of his hands.

When Ben wandered the streets near the river, Fred, as Ben called the big black and tan dog that attacked Carl, became his constant companion. The other dogs trailed behind, but Fred made sure that none of them got close to Ben. Ben was *his* boy and when they ran together, Ben was the alpha.



It was late one Sunday afternoon when Carl made good on his promise. He came back to the waterfront and this time, he was armed with more than a slingshot. Carl’s older brother, Doogie, was a drug dealer who carried a gun for protection. Carl took one of Doogie’s guns and went back to the river to search for the dog that had bitten him.

Ben had learned how to go *into* each of the dogs in his pack and use their ears and keen noses to help keep them all safe. He had taken Carl’s words to heart and had taught the pack to avoid humans in general and by watching for him, Carl, in particular. Whenever Ben saw the older boy, he went *into* the dogs and had them see and smell Carl while giving them the feeling of danger. It wasn’t long before the whole pack knew Carl was to be avoided at all costs.

It was Crook-ear, the lowest dog in the pecking order of the pack, who scented Carl first that day. His low-pitched woof signaled danger and Ben slipped *into* Crook-ear to see what was bothering him. As soon as Ben saw Carl, he knew there was going to be trouble. He *pushed* all of the dogs to leave the area, but Fred stood his ground. He would only leave if Ben left too. Ben *changed* and took off around a corner leading the pack away from

Carl. As they ran, he realized that this was just a temporary fix. Carl would keep coming back and with that slingshot of his would kill one or all of the dogs. Besides that, he still had it in for Ben.

There was no one Ben could turn to for help. The dogs were wild and considered a dangerous nuisance. Animal Control officers had been trying for months to trap and kill them but Ben had taught them all to run and hide if they saw the truck coming.

Since they no longer menaced the people near the river, calls to Animal Control dropped off. But here was Carl, even more of a danger than the officers. Ben thought about attacking Carl himself, but he knew he would have to kill Carl to make him stop and he just didn't have the strength or the stomach for it. This time, he led the dogs to their safe place in an abandoned warehouse near the river. There was a chain-link fence around it but someone had cut a hole on one side and it was wide enough for all of the dogs to get through.

Ben changed back and searched the ground until he found an old piece of bone. He gave it to Fred and waited to leave until the dog was preoccupied with gnawing on it. He slipped through the fence and turned towards home but, just as he was crossing into the residential section, Fred came bounding along with the piece of bone in his mouth. He stopped and dropped it at Ben's feet. There was a sound like two firecrackers exploding and Fred yelped and flopped over.

Ben saw blood coming from Fred's side and he looked up to see Carl holding a gun. He was aiming at Fred again when Ben made the desperate move of kneeling in front of the dog, but Carl raised the gun and Ben remembered that Carl had it in for him, too. Right before Carl pulled the trigger, Ben flung himself *into* Carl. It was like being tossed into a grenade detonating. Carl was excited and vengeful. He wanted Fred dead and he wasn't going to let Ben stop him. Ben used his mind to grab control of Carl's hand, forcing it down until the gun was pointed at the ground, but Carl wasn't one of the dogs and it was hard to stop him as he fought to raise the gun again.

Suddenly there was the sound of sirens and in that moment, Ben found it easy to hold onto Carl's hand. The older boy was fighting to drop the gun and run. Red and blue lights splashed across the scene as a police car screeched to a stop behind Ben. An officer was shouting "Drop the

gun,” and Ben released Carl’s hand, so the gun fell to the ground. Carl turned to run and the officer shouted, “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

Ben tried to make Carl stop but Carl was frightened and fear made his mind strong. There was an explosion behind Ben and he flinched and watched Carl fall to the ground. Pain blossomed in Ben’s back and he wrenched his mind away from Carl’s as an officer ran past him.

Another officer stopped beside Ben. “He shot your dog?”

“Yes sir.” Ben looked down at Fred and burst into tears. There was a lot of blood. Fred was breathing hard and whining. Ben slipped *into* Fred, relieved that the dog was still alive. Ben wanted to stop the bleeding, but he wasn’t sure how. Remembering the way he’d changed the size of his feet, Ben *felt* around inside of Fred and used his mind like a plug in the wound. It seemed to help but he was distracted as a second officer handcuffed Carl and rolled him over.

Ben was relieved to see Carl move his legs as if he wanted to get up but the officer put his foot on Carl’s shoulder and pushed him back down. Carl started coughing. There was blood on the front of his shirt and Ben looked away.

“Your friend here needs a vet.” The officer next to him was looking at Fred. “He’ll need surgery.”

Ben sighed. There was no way his mother could pay to have Fred fixed up but Ben thought he could figure out how to heal the dog if he was alone. He was wishing the friendly officer would go away when he heard the voice he dreaded.

“Boy, what’s goin’ on here?” Mr. Royale had come up behind Ben.

The officer turned and looked at Mr. Royale. Ben saw the motion as the officer started to put his hand on his gun.

“That’s right,” Ben said to himself, “Shoot him!” but the officer relaxed and Mr. Royale smiled.

“Is my son in trouble, officer?”

“No sir,” he pointed at Carl. “That young man over there shot your dog.” Ben looked down at the ground. He didn’t want to watch Mr. Royale tell the police that Fred wasn’t his dog, but Mr. Royale surprised him.

“I see,” he turned to Ben. “Is it bad?”

Ben was shocked but he kept the surprise off his face. “I don’t know, sir.”

Mr. Royale bent down and reached for Fred. Ben had just enough time to grab Fred's mind and keep him from biting the man. Mr. Royale rolled Fred over and said, "Only one hole. The bullet's still inside him." He stood up and looked down at Ben.

"What you want to do?"

Ben gulped and said, "He needs to go to the vet. He needs surgery."

"You're right and that's gonna cost a lot of money. You got it?"

Ben shook his head. "No, sir."

"If I pay to have this dog fixed up, what are you gonna do?"

Ben looked surprised. "Do? Me?"

Mr. Royale nodded. "That's right, you. You do what I say. Room clean and homework done with no back-talk!"

Ben's heart leaped in his chest. He wasn't sure what was happening. Ever since the first time Mr. Royale hurt him, Ben had kept his mouth shut and worked hard to keep his grades up. Why was Mr. Royale acting like Ben gave him trouble? But it seemed like the man was offering to fix Fred up, so Ben quickly said "Yes, sir!"

Mr. Royale nodded. "I'm'a keep you to that, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir!"

Mr. Royale turned to the officer. "Officer...uh?"

"Braden."

"Officer Braden, is it all right if I take the dog to the vet?"

"Sure. Your son isn't in any trouble here, sir."

"All right." Officer Braden nodded and turned to Ben. "You remember your promise, you do what your dad says, okay?"

Ben nodded. "Yes, sir." As Officer Braden walked away, Mr. Royale looked down at Fred and smiled. It wasn't a good smile, it was a smile that said he had plans and Ben was suddenly afraid. What price was he going to have to pay if Mr. Royale fixed Fred? Ben looked up and saw Mr. Royale watching him and he shuddered as a chill ran down his spine. The man turned away and went to talk to Officer Braden who was standing next to his partner. The three men looked down at Carl who had stopped moving.

The sound of an approaching siren caught Ben's attention and he watched as an ambulance rolled up and two paramedics ran over with a stretcher. Ben was relieved when they knelt and began dealing with Carl's wounds, it meant that the older boy was still alive.

A small crowd had gathered and one of the men waved at Mr. Royale who walked over to him and asked, "Miles, where's a vet at around here?" Miles said, "I go to Dr. Baum at the animal hospital over on Cedar Avenue. He ain't cheap but he's good." Mr. Royale nodded and turned to Ben. "I'ma go get the car. Officer Braden wants to ask you some questions about what happened." Ben got to his feet and hesitated. Was he supposed to talk to the police now or wait?

Mr. Royale said, "You stay here with the dog. We can go to the police station after the vet."

Ben nodded and said, "Yes, sir," then watched for a moment as Mr. Royale walked up the street to his car. A few minutes later, the car pulled up, scattering the crowd. Mr. Royale got out and retrieved a blanket from the trunk. He and Miles lifted Fred onto it and put him on the back seat of the car. There wasn't enough room for Ben to sit there too, so he got in the front, but he twisted around so he could watch Fred. He didn't need to, he was still *in* Fred and he knew that the bleeding had stopped, but this way he didn't have to look at Mr. Royale as the car pulled off.

Twenty minutes later, Ben ran to open the door for Mr. Royale to carry Fred into the animal hospital. They walked to the front desk and waited to talk to the woman there on the phone. The woman, whose name tag said, "Gracie," hung up and turned to Mr. Royale.

"What seems to be the problem?" she asked as she reached for a clipboard with some papers on it.

Mr. Royale looked down at Ben and said, "Well, what's the problem?"

Ben said, "Fred's been shot."

Gracie picked up the phone and they could hear her voice over the loudspeaker as she called for help. She hung up and said, "I'll need a form of identification and a credit card."

Mr. Royale shook his head. "Don't use credit cards. Pay cash for what I need." Gracie handed him the clipboard and he gestured for Ben to follow him as he went to sit down and fill out the papers. He looked up at Ben and said, "The po-lice want to talk to you, but I got some questions first. That boy, Carl, who shot the dog, did you do something to him?"

Ben shook his head, "No sir, but he was chasing me one day and Fred attacked him and knocked him down. He promised to kill Fred and beat me up. He beats up a lot of the kids in school. I mean, not in school

but he beats up kids in our class.”

Mr. Royale frowned. “Boy that size is in class with you?”

Ben nodded, “Carl got left back twice for missing too much school and fighting in class. Now he waits for school to be out before he attacks.”

Mr. Royale snorted. “I’m a tell you right now. You come home cryin’ cause Carl or someone done kicked yo’ ass and I’m a give you an ass-whippin’ on top of that. You hear what I’m sayin’? Don’t you come cryin’ to yo’ mamma if you get in a fight and lose!” He turned away and started filling out the papers.

Ben stood there for a moment until Mr. Royale gestured at a seat nearby and growled, “Don’t be standin’ over me! You go sit yo’ ass down and wait ‘til I’m through.”

When Mr. Royale was finished, he took the papers to the front desk. Ben watched as he took a roll of money out of his pocket. Gracie was protesting saying that payment wasn’t due until the dog went home, but Mr. Royale dropped some of the money on the desk in front of her and said, “You wanted a credit card, well, here’s my card! Just make sure I getta receipt.”

He walked back to his chair and sat down. Ben waited but Mr. Royale pulled out his cell phone and began texting someone. Ben wanted to pet some of the dogs in the waiting room, but he decided it was better to sit still and not call attention to himself.

It seemed like forever before the vet came out to talk to them. Dr. Baum was a tall, thin white man with an expression on his face like he smelled something bad. Mr. Royale put away his phone and stood up. The doctor backed up a step and held up a hand as if to push the other man away. Mr. Royale ignored the gesture and said, “Well, dog still alive?” The vet started nodding and said, “Fred lost a lot of blood but he survived the surgery. I expect him to be here for at least two days before he’s well enough to go home.”

Mr. Royale frowned and said, “Two more days! On top of the surgery, how much is that gonna cost me?”

Dr. Baum started to stammer and back up. “You’ll need to talk to Gracie about that. She handles all the bills.”

“You the vet, this your hospital. You tell me right now how much all of this is gonna cost me!”

Dr. Baum blurted, “\$300 for the surgery and I won’t charge you for boarding him.”

“So, you sayin’ this gonna cost me three hundred dollars?”

“Plus medication, which will be another forty-five dollars,” Baum said.

Mr. Royale turned to Ben and said, “You got that? You owe me three hundred and forty-five dollars worth of good behavior.”

Ben nodded and said, “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Royale looked him up and down as if he was measuring Ben with his eyes. “That’s a lot of doin’ what I say. You think you can handle that?”

Ben swallowed and said, “Yes, sir,” he figured Mr. Royale was pretending to be his father again in front of the vet. He didn’t know why the man thought that was necessary, but Ben didn’t care as long as Fred was going to be okay.

He sent his mind out to check on Fred. The dog was still asleep from the anesthesia, but Ben knew when Fred woke up he was going to have to be kept calm while he was around strangers. How was Ben going to keep Fred calm when he woke up? He had school the next day.

Maybe he could pretend to be sick? Ben looked at Mr. Royale who was talking to Gracie at the front desk. They still had to talk to the police and thinking about that reminded him about Carl. Was the boy still alive? He decided he would try to check on Carl while Mr. Royale drove them to the police station.

As soon as they pulled out of the parking lot, Ben imagined Carl being in front of him and then he went *inside* the other boy. Carl was in bad shape, but the doctors were preparing to sew up his punctured lung and the holes in his back and chest. When Ben came back to his body, he found Mr. Royale watching him. The man nodded and said, “When I was inside, there was this dude named Roger who got quiet like you. Shrinks said Roger was ‘goin’ away’ because the Joint was too scary for him. I don’t care how scared you get, you stay and face things like a man, ya hear me?”

Ben said, “Yes, sir!” and they drove in silence to the police station where Mr. Royale asked for Officer Braden.

What felt like hours later, Ben was half-asleep and hungry. Officer Braden had asked a lot of questions about Carl and the way he behaved.

Ben told him about the butterfly and the way Carl beat up kids smaller than himself. The officer nodded and almost looked bored as if he'd heard the story before or as if he didn't really care.

When he finished asking Ben questions, Officer Braden pulled Mr. Royale aside to talk to him. When they finished talking, the officer came over to thank Ben, shake his hand and told Ben there wouldn't be any more trouble. He said that once he got well, Carl was going to Juvenile Hall and would be gone for a long time.



That night, Mr. Royale came to his room and Ben went *into* the man. He hadn't planned it, but once he did it, he figured he could stop Mr. Royale the way he'd stopped Carl from shooting Fred again. There was a big problem, though. Carl's mind was like an explosion, but Mr. Royale's mind was like a tornado and Ben was immediately tossed around like a leaf in a storm. His mind was wrenched back and forth from anger to excitement over-and-over again. He was shocked to find that Mr. Royale was like Carl—no warmth, no humor, no tolerance for anything that got in his way. Carl killed small animals, but Mr. Royale killed people. The man cared nothing for anyone but himself. As long as he was obeyed, and he got what he wanted, he held back from his impulse to kill that was always there right under the surface.

Ben threw himself back into his own body and quickly bent over and vomited his dinner over the side of the bed. He kept saying, "Momma, momma," as the memories of the things he'd seen overwhelmed him. She was there in Mr. Royale's mind trying to shield her face as he hit her again and again, and Ben saw himself curled up on the floor, crying as Mr. Royale laughed at his helplessness. The feeling he got as he looked down at himself was a kind of dark joy—happiness over being strong enough to do whatever he wanted to do. There was something else, too, but Ben was in too much shock to understand what he'd seen.

Mr. Royale was shouting at Ben, "Boy, get up and get something to clean up yo' mess! Get up, I said!" Ben quickly slid off the side of the bed and ran to the kitchen for some paper towels. He ran back with the roll and knelt to begin cleaning the floor.

Mr. Royale made a disgusted sound, waved his hand at the smell and said, "Ain't this some shit?" before he stalked out of the room. Ben

finished cleaning up and got back in the bed. He stayed awake all night, but Mr. Royale didn't come to his room again.

When he got home from school the next day, his momma was in the kitchen frying chicken and laughing at something Mr. Royale had said. She wasn't drunk though the bottle of scotch sat on the kitchen table next to two glasses. She actually smiled at him when he came in and gave him a big hug. It was almost like it was before Mr. Royale moved in. Almost...

"So," she said, "It's all over the street that Carl Pendergast shot some dog that turns out to be yours. When did that happen?"

Mr. Royale cleared his throat and said, "Leave it alone, Clare. The boy got himself a dog, now he got to feed it and take care of it. It'll teach him some responsibility."

Clare smiled at Ben. "I'm glad you got yourself a dog. Where did it come from?"

Ben hemmed and hawed then finally told her, "He's a stray. He's been following me to school and home at night."

Mr. Royale said, "You feed him?"

Ben nodded. "I get dog food at the dollar store for him."

Clare frowned. "You can't leave him on the street now. He's hurt. You got to bring him in the house. He house-trained?"

Ben shrugged. "I've never seen him in a house."

"Well," Mr. Royale said, "You'll find out when he comes home tomorrow, and it's up to you to clean up if he messes in the house!"

"Yes, sir."

"You got homework?"

"Yes, sir."

"You sit down and eat your dinner then you go do that."

Ben said, "Yes, sir" again and ran up the hallway to the bathroom where he washed his hands. He was confused. Mr. Royale was hurting him, but he let him keep Fred. Ben had been in the man's mind. He was a killer and Ben knew he didn't care about Fred, so why had he saved the dog?

Ben thought hard. He had no answer for that question, but he suddenly remembered that there was something important he'd seen in Mr. Royal's mind. He stopped washing his hands and focused, searching for the image he'd seen. When it came to him, Ben swayed as if he'd been punched. Once again, he saw Mr. Royale standing over him as he laid on the

floor crying. This time though, the image was accompanied by a powerful feeling of satisfaction. Mr. Royale had finally gotten what he was after. It wasn't Ben's momma that kept Mr. Royale coming back to the house, it was Ben. The man had been after him all along.

Ben jumped when his mother shouted, "What's takin' you so long in there? Come out here and eat yo' dinner!" Ben quickly dried his hands and ran out of the bathroom. At the table, he kept his eyes on his plate. One glimpse of his eyes and Ben knew Mr. Royale would see that Ben knew the truth—Mr. Royale didn't like putting his thing in grown-up women, he liked to put it in little boys.

That night, Ben waited for Mr. Royale to come to his room, but the man didn't show up. When he figured Mr. Royale was asleep, Ben *pushed* into him, invading his body but not his mind. He felt the breath coming and going from Mr. Royale's lungs, the rumbling of his stomach, and the beating of his heart. Ben wanted to stop them all—squeeze the lungs, the stomach and the heart, twist them together into a knot. He could do it, too, he knew he could, because he remembered the caterpillar and how it felt as its organs shifted and changed. But as he imagined Mr. Royale dead in his mother's bed, he realized he couldn't do it, not here at home. In his heart, he knew that there wasn't enough alcohol in the world to help his mother if she woke up and found Mr. Royale dead in her bed.

No, it had to happen while he was away from the house, but how? When Ben left his body, he froze into place. He only felt safe doing that in his own room, but Mr. Royale always left after Ben went to school and was usually at home before Ben got back. Ben would just have to wait until the man was away. He didn't want Mr. Royale to die anywhere close to home.

It would be easy if he could enter Mr. Royale's mind; he'd be able to see through the man's eyes and know where he was—Ben's stomach turned at the thought of being in Mr. Royale's mind again. Then it came to him, he had eyes on the street that could watch Mr. Royale for him.

Ben homed in on Crook-ear. The dog was hungry, cold, and lost without Ben's leadership, but his mind was easy to influence. Ben had him take up a position in the alleyway near the liquor store. Crook-ear wanted to leave and find something to eat but Ben impressed on him the need to watch and gave the dog the image of Mr. Royale. Crook-ear was to wait until he saw the man and then he could eat. Ben gave Crook-ear an image

of a juicy bone and Crook-ear sighed and laid down with his head on his paws. He would watch and wait.

The next morning, Edward Royale lit a cigarette on his way to the liquor store and took a deep drag. Life was good. He had himself a nice place to stay and a woman to look after most of his needs, but the real treat was Ben. The boy was just what he liked—small, easy to manage and deathly afraid of Royale. He knew that he could always manipulate Ben through his mother. Clare was about a stupid bitch, but she was a good mother, most of the time. A little scotch was all it took to shut her down then Royale could do whatever he wanted to the boy.

As for the boy, he loved his mother and would do anything to keep her safe. It was the perfect situation and Royale planned to stay for a long time. And look at this, now there was a dog, something else he could use to keep the boy in line. Yes, life was very, very good.

As he passed the mouth of the alleyway next to the liquor store, Eddie caught a motion inside the shadowed space and whirled as his hand dropped to his pocket. He took a step closer and then laughed at himself as a small dog stood up and looked at him. Eddie told himself that the skinny creature was probably starving. He waved his hands and shouted, “Go on, now, get outta here.” He threw his cigarette at the mutt which leaped aside to keep from getting burned, however, instead of running, the dog stood calmly and watched Eddie for a moment before it turned and slowly walked away.

Eddie felt his temper rise. It was almost as if the dog was not afraid of him, which pissed him off. He reached into his pocket but then stopped himself from taking out his gun and shooting the dog. A gunshot would attract unwanted attention especially after the incident yesterday. He took out a pack of cigarettes instead, shook one out of the pack and lit it, calming himself down. Things were going so well he didn’t want to mess with his luck. He walked to the liquor store and let himself in. If it stayed around, he’d deal with the dog another day.



The next afternoon, Eddie picked Ben up after school and took him to get his dog. Ben was happy but also a little apprehensive. How was Fred going to behave? Ben had taught him, had taught the whole pack, to fear outsiders.

Ben was ready to put a lock on Fred in case he decided he didn't like Mr. Royale. Ben figured he could do it fast and maybe Mr. Royale wouldn't notice him standing still while he did it.

They stopped at the front desk and Ben asked for Fred while Mr. Royale took out a wad of cash and prepared to pay the bill. One thing Ben noticed was that, unlike Dr. Baum, Gracie didn't act scared of Mr. Royale. She took the money from him and counted it again as if she was making sure she was not getting cheated. Mr. Royale's jaw got tight, but he didn't say anything.

By the time they were finished with the bill, one of the vet assistants brought Fred out. Ben had checked *in* on Fred and was relieved to find the dog calm. He watched carefully as Fred approached the lobby and saw Mr. Royale. Sure enough, Fred's lip lifted and he started to growl. Ben quickly grabbed Fred's mind and made him calm down. Mr. Royale had been watching Fred carefully and he didn't see it when Ben froze for just a second.

Eddie was not stupid. He knew what it meant when Ben said Fred had been protecting him from Carl. He'd assumed the dog would want to protect Ben from Eddie, too so he'd been watching Fred when he came out. He nodded when the big dog started to growl. Just that fast, Ben had said, "No, Fred!" and gave the dog a look that stopped him in his tracks. Eddie was impressed.

"It's okay," he said, "Dog's not used to me. We might as well start making friends right now." He bent down and held out a hand for Fred to sniff. Ben wasn't sure what to do. Should he send Fred a good feeling, so he would associate it with Mr. Royale or should he just let things be? He didn't want Fred to like Mr. Royale, but he was afraid that Fred would bite Mr. Royale when the man and the dog were alone together. It didn't take Royale's bloody memories to prove to Ben that that would lead to Fred's death. Ben decided to send the good feeling and hoped it was enough to keep Fred from trying to bite Mr. Royale.

Fred sniffed Mr. Royale's hand and then swung his big head to look at Ben. His tail began to wag but not with his usual enthusiasm. Ben hoped it was because Fred was still in pain.

The vet assistant turned to Gracie and said, "We didn't find a collar or a leash for him back there." Mr. Royale spoke up quickly.

“That’s because he don’t have one. We’re gonna get him some soon. Meanwhile, how much would it cost to keep the one you got?” The assistant looked at Gracie who actually smiled and said, “It’s all right. You can keep that one. We have plenty more.”

Mr. Royale nodded his thanks then took the bag Gracie was holding out to him. She looked at Ben and said, “These are Fred’s. One is an antibiotic and you have to give it to him every day until they’re all gone. The other one is for pain. When you see he isn’t hurting any more, you can stop giving them to him. Do you understand?”

Ben nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am, thank you,” then Mr. Royale led the way to the front door. When they got to the car, he stepped away as Ben climbed in and pulled on the leash to get Fred to follow him. Fred scrambled inside and pressed his face against Ben’s head. He was so glad to see his boy again.

On the way home, Mr. Royale stopped at the grocery store and bought dry and canned dog food and two big T-bone steaks. One was for him, the other for Clare and Ben. The bones would go to Fred, straight from Eddie’s hands.

They parked near the house and Ben walked Fred down the block while Mr. Royale went inside. Ben didn’t have anything to pick up Fred’s poop with, he’d never had to before, but Fred didn’t do anything more than lift his leg a few times on the fences nearby.

When they walked in the house, Mr. Royale was nowhere in sight. Clare turned to Fred and without any hesitation, grabbed his head and scratched him behind his ears. There was a rumbling sound coming out of him but Clare just laughed.

“Listen at him, he likes that!” She bent down and kissed Fred on the top of his head and Ben was relieved that Fred harbored no ill feelings towards his mother.

Dinner that night was almost festive. Clare put the steaks under the broiler while she stirred mashed potatoes in one pot and steamed some broccoli in another. When they finished eating, Fred had gently taken the T-bone from Eddie’s hand and laid down on the kitchen floor with it. They’d fed him a can of dog food and Clare set out a bowl filled with water.

She turned to Ben and said, “I’m doing this for you tonight, but starting tomorrow morning, you’re going to be the one to take care of him.

You need to feed him every day. He can eat when we eat but you need to get him some treats, too. And he needs a collar with some I.D.

“When you leave school tomorrow, you go to the dollar store and get him one. He needs a leash too, that one from the vet is too thin and it will hurt your hand if he pulls you.”

Mr. Royale shook his head. “Uh-uh, there won’t be no pulling. You gotta teach him how to walk right without him pulling you down the street. He needs to go to school and learn how to behave hisself.”

Ben looked at him then at his mother. Was Mr. Royale offering to pay for dog school for Fred? If so, did that mean that Ben would owe him even more money? And, what about the money Ben already owed him? How was he going to pay that back?

Ben turned to Mr. Royale. “You mean I can take him to dog school?”

Mr. Royale said, “You got money for dog school?” When Ben shook his head he said, “You go to the library and get you a book about how to train a dog then you work on Fred until he’s got some manners. You understand?”

Ben said, “Yes sir,” and then hesitantly asked, “Can he sleep in my room with me?” Clare opened her mouth but Eddie shot her a look and she shut up.

“No,” he said. “I know he’s your friend but this here is going to be a watchdog for the whole house. He sleeps out here in the kitchen.”

Ben was upset. He’d been thinking that maybe Mr. Royale would leave him alone if Fred was in the room with him, but that wasn’t about to happen. He said, “I’ll get the book tomorrow.”

“And,” Clare said, “He needs a bowl for his food and another one for his water, and don’t forget his leash. In fact, why don’t you sit down and make a list? You and me will go to the dollar store and get him what he needs.” Mr. Royale cleared his throat and the two of them froze.

“Don’t you be spending yo’ money on that dog, Clare, he belongs to Ben and Ben should pay for his stuff.” He turned to Ben. “You said you had some money left over from Christmas.”

Ben nodded, “But I was going to give that to you for the vet bill.”

“Don’t worry about it. You and me will work something out. You use that money for whatever Fred needs. You got that?”

Ben said, “Yes, sir,” and took the pad and paper his mother handed

him. She said to him, "Since you don't know if he can hold his water, I think you should take Fred out for one more walk before you go to bed."

Ben was glad to comply. It would give him a chance to see the rest of the pack and for them to know Fred was back.



Clare was thinking about looking for a job. Being at home with Eddie had been fun, especially when she was drinking a lot but she'd stopped that. She'd been half sober one night at the dinner table and for the first time, she'd realized how quiet Ben was being. That wasn't like him. Where was her Fourth of July sparkler of a boy?

She thought back as best she could, and saw that Eddie's presence had changed things in the house. She and Ben hadn't had fun reading and talking the way they used to. She missed that and was honest enough to tell herself the truth; her drinking was spoiling the relationship she had with her son. She told Eddie it was time for her to go back to work.

She'd been afraid to tell him because he didn't like it when she didn't ask his permission for things she wanted to do. She'd learned early that Eddie didn't like changes and he'd been okay with her not working because it meant she was at home all the time looking after his needs.

But he'd surprised her. When she went to talk to him, she'd had it all planned out, what she wanted to say, but when he looked at her she just blurted it out. "Eddie I'm thinking it's time for me to go back to work. You been good taking care of us but it shouldn't be all on you."

He actually smiled and then he said, "That's a good idea. You get you a job then we're all three working. Ben works hard in school, I work hard at the liquor store and now yo' gonna get something to do, too. That's awright."

Clare heaved a huge, silent, sigh of relief and never noticed when Eddie did too.



Clare had made a date with Ben to hang out with him on Friday after school. Eddie was at the liquor store and she gave Ben permission to bring Fred into his bedroom, but just until Eddie got home.

They were in the middle of reading, *A Wrinkle in Time* when Ben suddenly turned to her.

"Mom?"

“Yes?”

“If something happened to Mr. Royale, do you think he would leave us the liquor store?”

Clare closed the book on her finger and said, “Are you serious? What made you think of that?”

“Because Tomas’ grandmother died and she didn’t leave a will and the whole family is fighting over her money. Tomas says everybody’s mad at everybody else.”

“Well, even if Eddie has a will, I don’t think he’d leave the store to us. He’d probably give it to Bosco.”

“Not you? You’re his woman, right, and he tells people I’m his son.”

Clare drew back in surprise. “He does? Who’d he say that to?”

“The po-lice...” Clare frowned at Ben’s imitation of Eddie but she couldn’t hold it and she snorted, which made both of them laugh.

She said, “You better not let him hear you saying that.”

Ben giggled as he said, “Why does he say it like that?”

“I don’t know. I think it must be because of where he’s from.”

“Where is that?”

Clare sobered for a second. “I don’t really know. He don’t talk much about hisself. I don’t know much about him except he’s a good provider.”

Ben got serious as well. “Maybe, but he also hits you. I didn’t think anybody could hit you and get away with it.”

“Well, Eddie Royale ain’t just anybody and he hits me when I mess up. Besides, he trusted me and I took something from him.”

“Money?”

“Yes.”

“Why’d you do that? That was stealing and stealing is wrong, right?”

“Right. Sometimes grownups do foolish things, just like kids. What I did was wrong and I paid for it. Don’t you forget that there’s always consequences to your behavior.”

“What’s a consequence?”

Clare corrected him. “Con-se-quence. It means whatever you do, good or bad, causes stuff to happen to you. If you’re good, the consequences are good. If you’re bad...”

“Bad stuff happens to you, like Carl getting shot and going to jail.”

“Yes, but he didn’t go to jail, he went to juvenile hall.”

“Isn’t that jail for kids?”

“I guess so.” She smiled at him. “You are so smart, and I love you.” She gave him a kiss and then rolled him over and tickled him. They were tussling and laughing when the bedroom door flew open and Eddie was standing there glaring at them.

“What’s so damned funny?” Clare and Ben froze. Then Clare jumped up off the bed and put her arms around Eddie but he pushed her away and said, “Why’s that damned dog in here and where’s my dinner?”

Clare just smiled. “Coming right up. It’s all done so you go sit yourself down and I will bring it to you.”

“You telling me what to do, now? You my momma or somethin’?”

Clare stopped smiling. She’d been with him long enough to know that when he was in one of his moods, nothing she said or did would be right. “No, Eddie, I’m not telling you what to do. I just thought you were ready to eat.” She turned to Ben. “Dinner time. You go wash your hands and come to the table.” She slid past Eddie who glared at Ben when she left the room.

“What you looking at? You finish yo’ homework?”

Ben nodded, “Yes, sir!”

“Then go do like your momma said and wash your hands.”

“Yes, sir.” Ben walked to the door but Mr. Royale didn’t move aside. Ben looked up at him and the look in the man’s eye made him shiver. Eddie Royale was mad and if Ben and his mom weren’t careful one of them was going to get hurt. He glared at Ben for a minute before he stepped aside and let the boy go past.

“No consequences for him, I’ll bet,” Ben muttered under his breath as he washed his hands. “Momma was wrong, some people get away with stuff, even murder and nothing bad ever happens to them.” Ben shuddered as he recalled one of Mr. Royale’s memories. There was a man who owed Mr. Royale money and Mr. Royale had told him he would die if he didn’t pay. He was begging for his life when Mr. Royale told him he was going to be an example so people knew he kept his word, then he shot the man.

Ben ran to the table hoping to leave the memory behind.



When Ben got in from school the next day, his mother wasn’t at home. Mr. Royale was sitting in the living room with Fred at his feet. He

said, “Yo’ momma done got her job back at the dollar store. Them white people been askin’ for her. Ain’t that nice?” Ben nodded. Mr. Royale said, “Come here, boy.” Ben slowly walked over to the man stifling his thoughts which were running in all kinds of bad directions. Fred looked up at him and whined so Ben *pushed* him to be quiet.

“How much money you owe me?”

Ben had to swallow twice before he could speak. Even then his voice came out as a husky croak.

“Three hundred and forty-five dollars”

“Take off them clothes.”

Ben toed off his sneakers and unzipped his pants so he could pull them off. He hesitated but Mr. Royale pointed at his underpants and said, “I mean everything!” Ben started shaking. Mr. Royale had never asked him to do that before. He was scared enough to dare to ask, “What you fixin’ to do?”

Mr. Royale frowned and made a fist. “You just do what I tell you to do.” and Ben quickly pulled off his shirt and undershirt. He stood there shivering while Mr. Royale looked him up and down. He dared to cover himself with his hands but the minute he did, Mr. Royale gestured for him to move his hands away. He stared at Ben and then a moment later he began to laugh and took out his phone. He had taken two photos of Ben before the boy realized what he was doing.

“Turn around.” Ben did and stood there waiting to be told what to do next. For the next few minutes, Mr. Royale ordered Ben to strike different poses, then he said, “Get to your room!” Ben bent to pick his clothes up off the floor but when he did, Mr. Royale gestured for him to leave them.

“You got time to do that later,” he said, “Your momma’s working the late shift tonight.”

Ben trailed the man down the hallway until they got to his room. He made Ben get on the bed and pose some more and then, as Ben had feared, Mr. Royale did more than just take his picture. When he was satisfied, he let Ben put his clothes back on, then he left the house.

Ben set himself questing outside of his body and quickly found Crook-ear and the other dogs in the old warehouse. He entered the dog and sent Crook-ear down the street to the alleyway next to the liquor store.

Sure enough, minutes later Mr. Royale came into view and went into the liquor store.

Ben looked through Crook-ear's eyes and saw Mr. Royale step out of the liquor store. Ben held his breath but the man didn't turn towards home, instead, he walked to the corner and waited at the light for traffic to stop. Ben's heart began to beat so hard, he could feel it shaking his chest.

"Now," he said to himself, "Now, do it." Ben left Crook-ear behind and arrowed into Mr. Royale making sure he didn't go near the man's brain. Instead, Ben gathered himself in the chest and surrounded the heart. Ben could make no sense of what he was feeling. He didn't know enough about the heart to target the chambers and the major veins that led to and from them. First, he tried to stop the heart but even though he squeezed as hard as he could, the organ kept beating. He relaxed and suddenly recalled the way the butterfly at the Natural History Museum had felt inside its cocoon.

Ben crept inside Mr. Royal's heart and began to stretch the way the butterfly had begun to stretch until it split its cocoon and was able to escape. Ben felt wings on each side of himself and he began to spread them wider and wider while he imagined the heart splitting in two.

There was a terrible pain and then Mr. Royale shouted and grabbed his chest as he went down to his knees on the sidewalk. Frightened by the pain, Ben left Mr. Royale and came back to himself to find Fred sitting with his head in Ben's lap. Ben threw his skinny little arms around the dog and held on tight for a long time. Fred didn't seem to mind.



Ben was in bed when Clare got home from her shift. She peeked into his room but quietly closed the door behind her when she saw him curled up beneath his covers.

Eddie wasn't home yet and there was no scotch in the house. She started to call the liquor store but on a whim, decided to walk over there. Maybe Eddie was at work. If he was in the store, he would probably give her a bottle for free. She smiled at the thought. He was a hard man, but he'd been good to her and Ben, making sure the rent was paid and there was food on the table. Her momma had told her, "A man is a three-legged dog and he *will* stray, but as long as he brings his money home to you, that's all right."

Clare considered herself lucky. So far as she knew, Eddie did not

stray and all the bills were paid on time. As she turned the corner to the liquor store, she saw an ambulance pulled up outside. For some reason, it gave her a bad feeling. She quickened her steps until she stood in front of the store. Bosco was standing outside, talking to the police. Where was Eddie?

She ran to Bosco and grabbed his arm. He shook his head when he saw her and said, "It's bad. Eddie done had him a heart-attack. They takin' him to the County now." He nodded at the ambulance.

Clare turned to the officer and said, "I'm Eddie's woman. I want to go with him." The officer, whose name plate said, "Braden," took her arm and led her to the ambulance. He told the EMT's that Clare was Eddie's wife and they let her get in. Bosco ran up at the last moment and shouted, "Make sure you get Eddie's money. You know he uses cash all the time. You don't want nobody else takin' it!" Clare nodded and turned all of her attention to Eddie. He looked grey in the light inside the ambulance. They took off smoothly but the road was bumpy and they were moving fast. Clare winced at every jostle.

The paramedic let Clare empty Eddie's pockets. As Bosco had said, Eddie was carrying a wad of cash. Clare slipped it with his wallet, keys, and cell phone into her and shouted at the paramedic over the sound of the siren. "How bad is it?"

The woman shrugged but her face was kind as she shouted back, "We don't know yet. They'll see when they get him into surgery." They rode the rest of the way in silence.

They hustled Eddie inside, leaving Clare waiting near the operating room. It seemed like only minutes had passed when a doctor came towards her. He was removing his mask when he sat down next to her and said, "I'm sorry but he didn't make it. There was a hole in his heart."

Clare screamed once and began saying, "No, no, no" over-and-over again. A nurse hurried over and the doctor made a hasty exit. He muttered to himself as he left, "Never seen anything like it." The man had had what looked like a short incision in his heart. When the surgeon began to stitch it, the muscle frayed and come apart in his hands. It was over in a matter of minutes.

Hours later, Clare sat on the side of her bed, holding the bag with all of Eddie's things in it. She had called the Jennings Funeral Home, the

only one she knew of just blocks away from home, and they had come to get Eddie's body.

She heard the toilet flush and knew Ben was up and getting ready for school. "What I'm'a tell him?" He wasn't a father to Ben, not really, but almost. She thought about not telling Ben until he came home from school but she knew the news would be all over the neighborhood in a matter of hours.

"Ben," she called and waited for him to come to her. He didn't. He stood outside and said, "Momma?" through the bedroom door. It hit her, Ben was afraid to come into the room. Eddie had told her that he'd spanked Ben for coming into her bedroom unannounced. She was sorry about the spanking, she'd never raised a hand to Ben, but she had thought it would do him some good to get disciplined by a man.

She got up and opened the door. Ben was dressed for school. He looked at her face and said, "Momma, you okay?"

Not knowing what to say or how to say it, Clare blurted, "It's Eddie, he's dead. He had a hole in his heart." It shocked both of them when Ben burst into tears.

Clare put her arms around Ben and held him while he cried. "It's okay," she murmured, "Everything's gonna be okay." She dried Ben's tears and when he said he'd rather go to school than stay at home, she decided to walk him there. She needed to stop at the liquor store anyway and tell Bosco what had happened.

As they neared the store, Bosco stepped outside and gave her a hug. He said, "I know. Charles Jennings is my cousin and he called me this morning to tell me Eddie was gone."

"The store," Clare began and Bosco waved away her concerns. "Eddie told me he was thinkin' bout marryin' you and givin' Ben his name. I figure that means what was his is yours. He didn't have no other family that I know of."

She looked down at Ben who was staring, wide-eyed, at Bosco. He gulped and turned to her. "I'm gonna go so I don't be late. See you later, Momma." She bent and kissed him goodbye then followed Bosco into the liquor store.

Bosco showed her the key Eddie used to open the safe in the back room. They used it and Clare discovered that Eddie had a small fortune

hidden away. It was good because she hadn't known how she was going to pay the funeral people.

She counted the money and set aside enough for the funeral then, on an impulse, she divided what was left and gave half of it to Bosco.

"That's 'cause you worked hard for Eddie and you been honest. Someone else woulda emptied that safe and been long gone. I appreciate what you did, Bosco."

Bosco took the money and wept a little bit as he folded it into his pocket.

He said, "I know it's a shock but I was wonderin' what you gonna do with the store? If I had the money, I would buy it from you, but I don't have near enough."

"You thinkin' about yo' job?" Clare asked.

Bosco nodded, "Yeah. You fixin' to sell it?"

Clare heaved a tired sigh and said, "Right now all I'm fixin' to do is go pay Mr. Jennings and then get some sleep. I'll see you later, Bosco." He waved her off and Clare walked the six blocks over to the funeral home.

Mr. Jennings was pleased to take her payment, all in cash. He mentally rubbed his hands together and thought about not declaring it at all on his income tax. "What the IRS don't know won't hurt me." he chuckled. Clare was leaving with the receipt in her hand when Charles remembered to ask her for a photograph. "It's for the program. We like to have a picture of the deceased on the program." Claire shook her head. "I don't have no pictures of Eddie. Oh, wait," her face brightened, "I got his phone, maybe there's somethin' there you can use. I'll look and let you know."

Back at home, Clare set Eddie's phone on the dining room table to remind herself to check for a photo, then she went to bed. She cried over the empty space next to her but exhaustion conquered her grief and she soon fell asleep.



When Ben walked in after school that day, Clare was waiting near the front door. She grabbed him when he stepped inside and shouted, "Why didn't you tell me?" and began shaking him so hard his teeth clacked together and he bit his tongue. "Why didn't you tell me he was takin' them pictures of you?" And then she slapped Ben hard enough to spin his head

to the side. “He took them nasty pictures and you didn’t say nothin’ to me?” She shook Ben again and he put his hands on her arms to try and push her away, but she held on tight. “Tell me he didn’t do nothin’ else!” She slapped Ben again and he threw himself backward hoping to break away from her but she held on, fingernails digging into his shoulders.

“Momma, please!” he shouted, and she stopped to weep with her hands still on his shoulders.

“What else did he do? You tell me.” Ben looked down at the floor and Clare began to scream, “No, Lord, no! I told you to tell me if anybody put they hands on you! This is why you been so quiet?” Ben nodded. “Ms. Washington, did you tell her?” When Ben shook his head no, she shook him again but gently as if she had run out of strength, “Why not, Benjamin?”

When she said his whole name, Ben started crying, too. “He said he would make you disappear. I thought he was gonna kill you.”

Clare sank to her knees and began crying so hard her whole body shook. She said, “I...I laid down with that man while he was hurtin’ you! Why did he do that when he had *me*?”

Ben leaned against the wall behind him, afraid he would fall down if he didn’t. “I don’t know, Momma. I think maybe he was crazy.” Ben flinched away from the memories of murder he’d fallen into when he entered Mr. Royale’s mind.

Clare began rocking and pounding her fists on the floor. “If he wasn’t dead, I’d have to kill him.”

Ben began to shake. “He’s dead, right, he’s really dead?”

Clare put her clenched fists in her lap. “He’s dead. He won’t bother you no more.” She reached for Ben and he threw himself into her arms while she rocked and said, “Sorry, I’m so sorry.”



It was warm out, but Clare was dressed in a heavy black coat. Her arms were wrapped around her stomach. Mr. Jennings had seen more than one person enter holding onto their grief as if it was a physical pain in their body so he thought nothing of it.

She walked up to him and said, “They called, told me he was ready for viewin” Her voice was a husky whisper and he knew she’d been crying for hours. “I ain’t got no picture of him,” she said, “There was nothin’ on his phone.”

Mr. Jennings led her to the room where Eddie's body was laid out, then he stood outside to give her some time alone with the deceased.

Clare stepped up to the casket, opened her coat, and removed the butcher knife she had bought that afternoon. She laid it on top of the body then her hands crept beneath the edge of the corpse's jacket. She unzipped the pants and found that they had not put any underwear on the body—Eddie's flaccid member was exposed. She picked up the knife and began hacking away at it. She began to scream as she stabbed faster and harder. "You sick motherfucker, you hurt my baby."

Hands came out of nowhere and grabbed Clare's wrist as Mr. Jennings tried to wrest the knife away from her. He held on as tightly as he could, fearing that she would turn the knife on herself or on him.

"Marcus, I need help," he yelled and his nephew ran into the room prepared to help someone who had fainted when their grief got the best of them. When he saw the knife, he backed up a step and then he lunged forward and grabbed Clare's arms, pulling her hands apart. The knife flew, struck the inside of the casket and fell on the body.

"No!" Clare shouted. "You let me go. He hurt my baby boy and I'm'a make sure he don't hurt nobody's baby ever again." She fought to reach the body, Marcus wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet. She began kicking the coffin and cursing Eddie's name. The room was suddenly filled with people as employees and curious visitors came to see what the fuss was all about.

Mr. Jennings had the presence of mind to shut the coffin. He grabbed Clare's feet and he and Marcus took her to the empty East Chapel. The minute they entered, Clare stopped struggling. Mr. Jennings set her feet on the ground and Marcus slowly removed his arms.

Clare bent at the waist and began to weep. The men straightened their rumpled clothing then led her to a pew. Marcus sat next to her, blocking her in. Mr. Jennings took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face with it.

Clare's sobs slowly quieted. Her nose was running, and Mr. Jennings handed her a box of tissues.

"Ma'am," he said, "I'm going to ask that you leave our establishment at once. Now, I have the right to call the police and have you arrested for desecrating the body, but I won't do that if you leave right now and do not

return.”

Clare blew her nose. She said, “He hurt my baby. He was a grown man, what did he want with a little boy? I gave him everything he needed and he still raped my son.”

Marcus and Mr. Jennings glanced at each other and shook their heads. They’d heard all kinds of stories about Eddie Royale but this was a new one. Clare’s body sagged and she drew a shuddering breath. “Why he *do* that?” she asked. The two men shook their heads and murmured comforting phrases. Mr. Jennings said, “I can see that your grief has made you overwrought.”

“Grief?” Clare’s head snapped up and she glared at the funeral director. “I ain’t wastin’ no grief on that man.”

“No,” he said, “For your son, ma’am. I meant for your son.” He stepped back and raised a hand. Clare was wobbly but she got to her feet. He and Marcus escorted her to the front door. The whispering crowd parted to let them pass.

Clare had planned to stop at the liquor store on the way home, but her feet slowed as she approached the door. It had gotten dark and she could see Bosco inside, handing a package to a customer.

“I can’t,” she whispered to herself. “Not tonight.” She turned, empty-handed, towards home. Ben was there and she had a lot of things to make right.

