

# Mixed Girl Survival School

By Laurie Panther

## Chapter 1 - Origins

I used to feel so awkward when I divulged that my entire family was dead. Well, pretty much dead. When the youngest of my three brothers woke up from a four-month coma (after a drug overdose), he was a quadriplegic. So out of the seven of us, I am literally the last one standing, and yet I no longer find this embarrassing. In my family there was potential for generosity to those in need, for healing racism, ending poverty and injustice. I think that's what kept us enthralled. We were always at the edge of our seats, our hearts in our throats with hope of beating the odds. But as Joni Mitchell sang: "That was just a dream some of us had..."

I now remember the house I grew up in at 1030 Cragmont Avenue, Berkeley California, as a Petri dish. The medium was both the promise and pains of this country, and we were the cultured cells that synergistically mushroomed into virulent, yet unsustainable lives. My mother was the lead scientist on the project, and ultimately accountable. If only her drive for social justice wasn't narcissistically motivated. She shoveled external praise down the bottomless pit in her heart waiting for the love to pile up and fix her sadness and self-loathing, but it never did. If only my charismatic father, who was the true emotional center for the family, hadn't suffered from a secret. One he couldn't face, and this living lie corrupted his

integrity, and justified his weakness. If only it also hadn't been the nineteen sixties in Berkeley, the city rife with conflict, drugs, and permission to experiment sexually, if only that last match didn't get tossed in the midst of the combustible components under our roof. If....If. If.

I know acceptance is hugely important and often renders the *why* of tragedy unimportant. Traditionally acceptance, letting go, and forgiveness radiate from such blessed folk. But, I guess I'm different. I really *do* want to know *why*. Why, after my father died did the youngest of my brothers immediately try and commit suicide? Why did my middle brother die the next year, and my eldest brother the year after that? Why did my mother go from merely deluded to demented, then dead? And why did my sister slump over in her car seat, dead after driving just a few block from her home?

It truly would have been easier, I've thought, for them to all have perished in genocide, or a plane crash. Then I would have the answer. Hate, bad luck, even random occurrences are straight forward and sturdy enough to hang grief on. I've not had the benefit of such an explanation. For so long I felt only isolation and shame about my family's inexplicable and fatal shortcomings. Those were days when mere survival kept me from taking the ultimate risk of saying the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But taking that risk has freed me. Now I talk about it.

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Parking was always tough on football game-days near the U.C. Berkeley Campus, and especially for the "Big" Games between CAL and Stanford. On this

particular day, the one narrow road running past Memorial Football Stadium, nestled in the base of Strawberry Canyon (no strawberries grew there that I ever saw), was packed with crowds decked out, not with their Bears sweatshirts and gold and yellow scarves, but suited and skirted as they hurried excitedly from their cars crammed in the residential neighborhoods nearby. Meanwhile shaggy haired young men and blossoming girls, who walked from nearby dorms and other communal houses, packed the wooded slopes of Cheap Skate Hill trying improvising comfortable spots on the steeply inclined dirt, and in the clumps of scraggly grasses over-looking the stadium bowl. Some of the braver ones climbed up and perched in the branches of the bent Monterey Pines, hanging up across the road from the last rows of the nose-bleed stadium bleacher benches.

A few clouds hung behind the ridges of the canyon, blocking the sun for a few chilly moments, before shifting to allow the sun to emerge golden and shining warm light down on the scene. When the wind blew towards the hills, the tree-perchers intermittently heard the voice with that famous New England cadence of the man who been leading the country forward, boldly. Today was not a “Big Game”; today John F. Kennedy was in, and celebrating Berkeley.

The President, his brown hair tugged by the swirling gusts, quipped about his first visits to this very same stadium as a younger man for the famous football games, and how he and his East Coast Buddies had gotten not too friendly a reception from their West Coast rivals. Then quickly becoming serious, he spoke about the state of the world on that Spring day: focusing on the break between China and the USSR, and how the cold war could soon be at an end. And winding it

up with listing of all the celebrated persons who had graduated from the University of California at Berkeley; and what grand contributions they had made to this world.

My red-haired mother, with her swollen ankles propped up on her King sized bed just a mile away from that stadium, as the crowd flies up Euclid Avenue, desperately wanted to be in those stands; but two and a half weeks late in giving birth to the baby stretching and filling her abdomen, she was trapped. The Campanile bells rang as she twisted the knob on the portable radio, trying to better tune-in the campus station carrying the speech. The baby she was carrying was the second biracial child she had conceived with her Negro husband Sam, who had left earlier that morning for work with a perfunctory peck on the cheek. She had been so grateful when he had adopted her Red-headed son Larry, who didn't have a real father. Her adopted Negro & Japanese son Joji, was down the street at Cragmont school with Larry in the elementary wing, and blonde headed Lee, her mixed son, played at the Kindergarten. Three boys! Her Negro & Korean daughter, whose name would be determined, was arriving by boat soon to join her Rainbow family—a girl at last!

As she lay back giving up making out the speech clearly, she closed her eyes and imagined Jack, as referred to the president, hearing from an aide that the amazing family she had created, was just a few minutes away; and how Jack then commanded his entourage to make a brief detour on the way to airport; to arrive at 1030 Cragmont Avenue. How he would stride purposefully up past the young ivy and Juniper onto her new front deck; and how he would tell the aide to step aside as he himself knocked firmly on the door. Just then the baby turned inside of my

mother, compressing her bladder unbearably. She rolled over and hefted her body into a sitting position: the first step in yet another trip to the bathroom. That little baby was me. I knew I would have to come out eventually, but things seemed fine just as they were.

One summer day, about six months after my birth (I had waited a few days after Kennedy rolled out of town to finally come out), I rolled up to the edge of our front porch in my new baby walker. From that vantage point, I peered down the side yard where the scraggly flower bushes grew. There were dark green clumps of wild onions out-lining a rough path, with pink spotted Camellia bushes leaning over it. Sun-rays slanting down from the sky and bees whizzed back and forth, getting lit up, disappearing and lit up again. As I gazed deeper into this world, my plastic wheels crept slowly forward until they bumped over edge of the wood planks and into the soft mulch. Pitched forward, I dug in with my tender feet, pushing and leaning back until I regained the firm decking. Then with my little heart pumping, I looked longingly from safety.

A few months later, on an Indian summer day when the Santa Ana winds blew hot valley air over the hill, rather than sucking the cold Pacific current past our roof; I was freed from my walker. Tip-toeing to the edge of the planking, I clutched onto the post while stepping into the leaves, testing my footing before finally letting go. I aimed myself down the middle of the path and teetered to the nearest clump of wild onions where I plopped down on my diapered bottom. Reaching past my toes I grabbed at the white bell shaped flowers. The stems were fleshy angular, sturdy in

my hand. Still attached with deep bulbs, I leaned forward and pulled as hard as I could. Suddenly I was on my back, and blinking my eyes against the bright spots of sun flashing between the ruffling canopy of leaves above. A bug shot by through specks of shimmering dust particles suspended in the beams. I took a deep breath before rolling over on my stomach and pushing myself up to a squat where I rose to an unsteady, but serviceable, stand.

Still clutching the stalks of wild onion in my chubby fists, I held them up to my nose where a sharp hot smell assailed my nostrils. I threw the flowers to the ground. Leaves sticking out of my blond curls, I took my next step down the slightly graded path.

The birds chirped overhead as I stumbled through the red and brown petals of mushy Camilla blossoms on route to the wild yellow rose bush. My hands still jerky and a bit Frankenstienish, batted at the soft looking rose flowers and I was surprised at the tiny brambly sticks beneath the blooms that scratched me. Stepping back and peered deeper into the tangle of shoots and branches, I smelled a sweet odor of citrus blossoms wafting from within and could see dark glossy leave bunched together underneath the dome of rose vines. Following my nose, I crouched and began to crawl toward small white flowers on my hands and knees. When my curls kept getting caught, I dropped to my tummy and commando-crawled. After a moment I reached a young lemon tree. Heavily shaded, it was struggling to produce a few fragrant blooms.

The little tree created a cozy sheltered space. I placed my hands under my face against the earth and breathed in the delicious smells and listened to the bees

buzz . My eyes, at aimed on the ground, saw the fallen leaves shift and move. I pulled one hand out and poked the leaves with a sausagey finger, exposing small gray bugs with feathery legs creeping underneath. When I touched one of the bugs it rolled up into a hard little ball until they felt danger had passed. I lay there and poked them as they rolled and unrolled, until my eyes became hot and my lids dropped more and more often to cool them. I heard the familiar Campanile bell toll a quick two gongs, as I fell into a deep sleep under that bush. I was lucky one of my feet stuck out enough for my babysitter to see it when she came looking.

I continued to enjoy lying on the ground outside, and had developed an interest in clouds. My favorites had a thick and puffy nature. I felt sure they could support my weight if I found a way up there. Nestled comfortably, I knew I would gently rise and fall as they expanded and contracted, shifted and changed in that way clouds do when you watch them long enough. I saw relationships in these clouds, floating by in bunches. The largest and proudest ones leading the way were the Daddies, with dark edges chocked full of rain and thunder. Sometimes they had faces, beards, round noses and high cheekbones. And behind them or connected were the Mommy and child clouds, usually with one or two of the littlest ones drifting away.

I still slept in a crib right next to the big double-wide panes of glass, and I peered upward night after night across the street, over the neighbor's garage roof dimly glowing from the street light, at the thick and thin fog strands wafting by; or at the few city stars shinning through weather permitting. A telephone poll across the

street with wires running to and fro sliced up the sky.

My mother sometimes sat in the room on the other side of my crib slats singing the black-spiritual, *Summertime*. Slowly I was unraveling the secrets in the words. After she wrapped-up with a mournful long final note, I watched her legs move through the door, which she left part ways open so the orange-yellow light from the hall slanted across my floor. Sometimes that band of light was broken as people walked by on the way to the bathroom. I knew everyone's steps and found it comforting to track, except sometimes when my Daddy's step changed to slow and draggy.

I thought about the song. It was a story really, about my Mommy and Daddy, but mostly it was a story about me and what was going to happen to me some day. It said that one of these days I was going to be able to fly. One morning I would wake up and have wings, wings that would spread out and have soft ruffy feathers on them. Birds feathers, but one piece like on angels I saw in picture-book. Then on that morning I would rise up singing. I would have grown my wings and I'd be ready to fly. I could barely wait.

The window and the screen would melt away, I was pretty sure about that, and the act of unfolding of my wings, would lift me up and out of my crib; but I saw a problem after that: those telephone pole wires. I saw myself rising up and floating sweetly and softly, flapping my angel wings until I got to those wires where I would become stuck, and entangled. I am sure of this. I saw my feathers getting torn and how it would hurt, but I always quickly sent those thoughts out of my head. The only thing I dwelled upon was that on the greatest day of my life, my happiness would



only last a few seconds.

When I couldn't be outside, or looking out of a window, I spend hours peering at the pictures in my children's books. The vibrant colors, shadows, and shading fascinated me. There was one story-rhyme that I looked at over and over: *The Highway Man*. It was in a thick book with a lot of others. But whenever I opened that book up, it fell right to the *Highway Man* pictures.

On the first page a pretty black-haired lady leaned out of a window, a tavern sign hung below. The cottage's white washed plaster exterior was hatched with wooden Xs. The shutters on the window, frozen in time, were painted green. Though I imagined heard them banging against the building when thrown open. It was night, and a creamy moon hung heavy, low, brushing the treetops on the other side of the road from the tavern. The lady wore an opaque white dressing gown that strained to cover her round breasts. A dark red ribbon twined through her tousled thick hair and over her exposed white shoulders. Her eyes were violet, lips rosy pink, and her cheeks flushed. She gazed down the road where the hazy shape of a man on horseback, *The Highway Man* loomed. In the stillness of the night, over the muffled laughter from down below, she imagined she heard the hoof beats coming closer.

On the following page, the poor lady was tied up to a wooden post at the end of a huge bed. A long old fashioned gun was jammed up her front underneath the ropes. She stood proud, the barrel between her breasts. The cords crisscrossed her body, cut into her gown, defining her waist and hips. Her arms were tight at her sides, except for the one hand that she had worked free, a little. The fingers of that

hand reached for the trigger. Her eyes were closed, her skin chalky and pale. Two pairs of tall leather boots, polished black with buckles waited to the side, toes facing each other. The hoof beats of *The Highway Man* rumbled outside. I couldn't yet read, so I didn't exactly know what she was going to do, but I understood it was an act of strength and love for *The Highway Man*, and I knew that would do the same thing in her place.

Because I was little, I stayed home while the others from the bustling house disappeared. The best part of my day was when Daddy got home and scooped me up in his arms, his eyes twinkling, he smelled me, petted me; and my heart swelled. But during those long hours alone, I continued to explore. Beyond the lemon tree-rose bush, stretch a whole wide world.

At the end of the path was a sand pit filled with dirt and pokey leaves. It sat above a pebbly wall, with pebbly steps to one side covered knee deep with brown same brown dry pokey leaves. When I went down there I was in pokey-land. It was always shady and cool down there. The arms of The Redwood Giant spread wide over head. This giant waited still and silent next to The Huge Rock, the mother of the smaller one. Wading through the thick brown waves, I entered an open cavern between the two rocks. The smaller one like a lump of hard play-dough left on the table: rounded at the top and bulging out at the base. The Very Huge Rock towered above my head rising next to the Redwood Giant whose lowest branches rested across the table-top of it. Emerging the cavern's end, I arrived at a green tilted basket ball court with a white four-square painted on it. From here I could see the

back of my house rising even higher than The Huge Rock. There were two rectangular windows, one above the other, topped with steep pitched roof with little roof triangle roofed deck poking out from it. My geographic intuition from roaming inside, informed me that my sister beyond the bottom window, the brother most like me lived in the upper, and topping them all lived Mommy and Daddy. But it was The Very Huge Rock that was interested me.

This side near the basketball court gradually sloped, and little shelf-like places I could put my fingers into, and my toes onto. I found I could pull myself up off the green ground, a little. The rock had spongy soft bumps growing all over it like the green fur I had seen on some old food. Only this stuff wasn't stinky, it was soft and friendly. I picked some off, and inspected it's brown and crusty bottom. The fingers on the hand that still held me on the rock began to tremble, and my foot slipped landing me back where I started.

When it was gray and wettish outside, I stayed inside. There was a babysitter in the house somewhere. She came everyday and hovered in the rooms. The house made a circle on the main floor: Come in the front door onto a smooth floor with the hard-to-close closet. Go straight onto a bumpy blue rug and you were in the Dark Blue Room with tall window drapes from the floor almost to the ceiling. There was a smooth place on the wall that used to house nice warm fires. I liked those fire a lot, but Daddy didn't like the mess. Above the smoothed over place was a big mirror that Daddy would hold me up to in his big arms for us to smile. There was a big brown T.V. in the corner and a brown curved couch for me and Lee to jump on. Take a hard left and get to the dinning room. A warm metal grate bridged those two rooms. It

was smooth and looked like a waffle with an edge around it like a picture frame. From down deep, its heart ticked when it was napping, but would boom to life when a grown up turned a switch by the closet door. On these wettish days the dining room always had a pot or two on the floor to catch the water-drips. Sometimes dripping really fast, sometimes just a plip and a plop. From the window sill, I looked out at The Redwood Giant's arm-branches in the wind: swaying, swaying, then all of sudden whipping to one side before springing back hard, showering down armfuls of pokey leaves.

Turning right around, and walking straight, was the hall with the stairways off the side. The stairs went down to my sister, Kim's room and the big brothers (most not-like-me), which was also the stinkiest room. The other stairs went up to my room and Lee's (the brother most like me) room with the bathroom between us. Turn around one more time and climb up the last flight to Mommy and Daddy's room They had just gotten their own light blue telephone up there. The other light blue telephone lived in the corner where the stairs split up and down, so a lot of people ran there.

The kitchen opened at the end of hallway. It had a secret stove that disappeared into the wall sometimes. The cupboard underneath hid the place to throw old food, which dripped on the walls. Turn right around for the last time, passing the refrigerator, sink you were right back at the hard-to-close closet.

I went around and around on those cold days. On my circuits, I always lingered a bit at the heater. The edge of the bumpy blue rug was warm, and the frame of the waffle was even warmer. The middle part was hottest, and I made a

game of edging closer and closer to that hot center. One day I was very cold, and that center was calling to me, so I scootched right on top of it, then remember screaming and screaming until babysitter arms lifted me off. I went to the place where nice people take care of you, and I left with white coverings on my feet and for a while and it was impossible to walk, so I crawled around and around, like I used to. When the white coverings came off, the bottoms of my feet had the waffle pattern on them. I looked at them a lot, using my fingers to trace along the lines.

Not too long after that, my mother began taking me with her in the morning, to drop off at Mrs. Tucker's house. Mrs. Tucker was brown, wrinkly and smelled like French fries. She put me on her lap when she watched TV and petted me. Then she would make me French fries. I went into the kitchen with her as she got out her cooking things. A metal scraper got the brown outsides off of the potatoes. Mrs. Tucker was fast and could scrape a bowl of potatoes white in a flash. Then she cut them into straight long even pieces. After that they took a bath in hot Crisco where popped and crackled in the big black skillet. Then she fished them out onto a toweled plate for us. She put both salt and pepper on them, and they tasted so good! I ate each one with so much happiness, I was always sad when they were gone.

Sometimes when Mrs. Tucker was watching the Looooone Ranger she forgot to pet me, so I climbed down from her lap to go into her bathroom and smell things. She had jars and bottles on the back of her toilet. They were perfume-y: each one different. I like the smell of *Jergens* the best. *Jergens* wasn't flowery, it was clean and useful smelling. Sometimes I would watch Mrs. Tucker put some *Jergens* on her

arms. Usually her brown arms had a whiteness on them. I thought that it was flour from her cooking, but she called it “Ashy”. She pumped out a mini softie-swirl of *Jergens* into her palm (the inside of Mrs. Tucker’s hands were lighter in color than the rest of her. My Daddy was like that too, but his outside skin was lighter, so it wasn’t as noticeable); then she rubbed both of her hands together and crossed her arms in front of her, running her hands up and down. From under the path of each hand, a smooth chocolate-y colored swath of skin would appear, until all of her skin was smooth and even and brown. Then she would smile and ask if I wanted some. I did!

Then it was time for my nap, which I took on her bed. She had to lift me up onto it because it was so high. I looked down over the edge, once she left the room, and hoped I would not fall off while I was asleep. Some times other children would come over to Mrs. Tuckers in the afternoon. They were various shades, and the brown-girls black hair was braided tight, poking out from their heads. They were bigger than me, but nice to me. Then mommy came to get me, and we drove a long ways back to our house.

When I outgrew Mrs. Tucker, I went to Nursery school. Nursery school was much more interesting in a “normal way” like on T.V.. There were high swings, and books, and a very a nice lady named Mrs. Oatman that read to us, and sang with us. It even turned out that Mrs. Oatman lived behind the easier-to-climb side of The Very Huge Rock. Life was full of surprises. It was sunny at the Nursery school playground, and I spent a lot time near the swings on the hot cement, practicing tying my sneakers. My Nursery school friend, named Eva who lived around the

corner on Eulid, was also learning that.

We sat next to each other and: made one of the two long string go under the other, and then pulled hard and quick. If I did that right then it stayed tight as I slowly made the first loop by pinching together the base of a string to the middle of it between my thumb and pencil finger. Then I had to wrap the second string around my thumb, while slowly pulling my thumb out, making a space to stick the middle of that wrapped-around string through. Once I got it through came the trickiest part – yanking it fast enough that the extra didn't slip through as it was tightened shut. When I pulled slow, it tightened slow and then the end of the string came all of the way out, leaving me only half of a bow. Then I had to start all over again.

I also learned how to say things in French at Nursery school, and how to read the words in my books. I learned how to *sound-out*, and from there could figure out most of the story. I loved to read my books. When I got home from Nursery school, I would go over to the Chinese neighbor's to play. They had a daughter my age named Katherine. She became my best friend.

That summer between Nursery school and Kindergarten we went for a long drive to our new vacation home. It was a surprise to me, but a wonderful one. Mommy was a teacher and had the same vacations as us, but Daddy had to wait until the weekends to join us. The long drive was like always. I stared out of the window and watched the to-the-cabin-scenery roll by.

It was so hot, that when we came the little town with a stop light and Foster's Freeze that we begged to stop at but Mommy rushed by. And we flew through next

small town with a stop light until we made it to the big road going up the mountain. The scrubby trees turned into giant pine tree that smelled great through the rolled down window. Then we passed the sign that said Sugar Pine and we kids sang in unison like a Barbar shop quartet minus one, the "We're in Sugar Piiiiiiiiine" song, which made Mommy smile.

We turned off onto the last road that wound down past the country club where the blue swimming pool sparkled in the sun. That road brought us, at last, to the steep driveway that led up to our high brown cabin. There were two cedar trees at the end of the driveway with a propane tank behind them and a wood-pile nestled between them in front of the tank. Unloading the car was a horrible experience because there were so many stairs. My mother and brother Larry, climbed under the deck to turn on the water and the propane. I lugged my suitcase up, peed, and then set out to explore the open plan living area, loft, deck, and even ventured a few steps around the back into the dark woods.

At night came and it got much cooler. After a dinner of Beef Stroganoff Hamburger Helper and 7-Up. I peered out of the big living room window at the endless trees, as they slowly faded into the darkness. The porch light attracted moths and bugs, but beyond that stars twinkled on in the totally black sky. My brothers brought up big chunks of wood, and with barely restrained pyromania, started a fire so we could roast marshmallows. The rosey light illuminated the aluminum deck furniture in the room, and we competed to attain the perfectly golden marshmallow. Lee turned out to be the best at it. Mine usually blazed into a sugary torch that I was happy to eat anyway.



The next day at the swimming pool I made a cabin-friend. She was the girl of a set of fraternal twins: Jana of and John & Jana. She, I, and her brother (he was usually part of the package) played Marco-polo, floated on rafts Larry and Lee blew up (Joji, was too busy looking at girls), and ate melting ice-cream sandwiches. Jana's mom worked in the snack shack and it turns out her grandpa sold my parents the property for the cabin, and started the country club. I had lucked out! Daddy stayed for a long weekend. He made Bisquick pancakes for breakfast instead of us pouring bowls of Cap'n Crunch, and after he played golf and he and Mommy had drinks at the club, there was football games on T.V. and I snuggled up on his lap (though I had to curl my long legs up to fit now). He petted me, and I was happy.

When the summer ended, we returned to Berkeley, where I was finally old enough to go to go to Cragmont school. Lee was used to walking by himself, and anyway, I wanted to walk with Katherine.

Old Mrs. Kirby lived between us, sharing our Camellias and roses, and Katherine's house was on the other side. Even though I couldn't remember it, Katherine's mother had once been my babysitter, so I think that's why I felt so at home in her house. In the mornings I swung open our front gate, skipped down our two bouncy porch steps and hopped, or leapt off the bottom concrete step to the sidewalk. I passed Mrs. Kirby's green double garage doors that had ivy from my best friend's front yard reaching for its hinges. All three of our houses had Ivy growing in the front, with the planting at Katherine's being the most vast because her house was set the furthest back. Her hill of green was divided by a tier of concrete steps

that loomed in front of my face, as I turned up their path.

Dual slope of concrete rose up each side of the stairs. Sometimes the ivy grew over them, and other times, was clipped neatly. I liked those slopes. They were steep, but my *just-as-good-as-Keds* gripped securely enough that with my arms held out for balance I walked right up them. And I usually did on weekends, but on school mornings I marched up the middle of the steps, across the upper path, up *her* two front porch steps, onto the huge sheltered porch where I rapped out "shave and a hair cut...two bits" (Daddy taught me it) on the front door.

I always heard voices responding behind the door while I stared at their doorknob. It was big, took both hands to turn it, and was a dark greenish-black metal. There was a lion's head, or some grapes, or something bumpy underneath the hand rubbed tarnish. Standing there, I often thought about asking what exactly it was, but as soon as I heard the footsteps approaching, I forgot. Just like in my family, I could tell who was who by their sounds. If they were a slow slip-slap, I knew it was Katherine's father coming in his house shoes. He always peered at me through the sectioned antique windows at the top of the door before opening it, just enough to let me in, before closing it. Katherine's mother had light footsteps that reached the door fast. She opened it wide and retreated back to the kitchen leaving me to shut the door. Katherine's little feet were hard to hear at all, but she had a habit of talking to me through the door as she came, so that was easy.

Katherine was always dressed except for her shoes, and unbraided hair. She had long Black silky hair. Captain Kangaroo was on the T. V. in her living room off the foyer (it was fancy with a piano in it), and Katherine's mother shouted hello

from the kitchen from which coffee smells wafted. We were drawn into the living room by "The Captain" and assumed our places on the couch, where Katherine's sneakers and sweater were laid for the final stages.

I put my lunchbox down and moved closer the T.V. watching Mr. Green Jeans and Dancing Bear in front of a barn. After which Captain Kangaroo himself looked directly at us and said, "Children, remember that no matter how cute squirrels look, never, never try to pet them or touch them for any reason. Squirrels are wild animals and can have a disease called Rabbis that makes you very, very sick." I found this to be timely advice because I had been seeing many squirrels on our walk to school, and had been devising a plan to catch one. I sat entranced, slowly picking the crusty ring of boogers from the inside of my nose, and wiping them on the couch.

A moment later, Katherine's mother came out of the kitchen carrying a small lunch box and a hairbrush. She sat down and Katherine, without taking her eyes from the screen, backed up in between her mother's legs. Barrettes (the tortoise shell kind, not the plastic ones like I had) were magically produced from an apron pocket and spread out before the brushing began. Katherine had no tangles that I could see anyway, so of course the procedure went smoothly. Her mother expertly stroked one side, the other, down the middle and then repeated the process. With practiced ease her mother separated three even pieces, weaved them together clipped the ends with one of the barrettes, then repeated on the other side. Katherine rocked back and forth gently with the strokes, never once flinching. As she rose to go back to the kitchen, she said we had five more minutes until we had to start walking. When the five minutes passed we were shooed out the door.

On one of those early school days our kindergarten class went on a trip to the beach. Our teacher brought grown up shovels and buckets for herself and the parent-helpers. We rode a huge, loud yellow bus there. And when we got off it, the world was wet and very, very windy, but we forged ahead. The teacher pointed out little bubbling holes in the sand that appeared each time a wave receded. These, she told us, were how she knew where to dig. Her and the parent helpers dug up clams and by lunch time there was enough to almost fill two big buckets. She scooped up seawater to cover the clams, tied them in garbage bags, and then the bus driver stowed them away.

We kids ate our bag lunches on the bus, not only because it was so cold and windy outside, but a lot of the us had gotten wet and needed to take off our pants. Then we were sleepy and dozed on and off during the drive back to school.

The next day, during show-and-tell time, our teacher brought out the clams, but without the shells on them. They were pinkish blobs in a bowl with water over them. She also took us out to the yard where had a teepee like structure that dangled a metal pot on a chain down between its legs. Later when the music teacher came, our teacher disappeared outside. At recess we raced outdoors and we were amazed to see a fire roaring under the pot. The music teacher came outside too, and she never stayed after music-time. And a parent-helper was on-hand as well.

Against the fence leaned four cartons of milk, a big package of butter, the blue round salt box, and the bowl of clams. Our teacher opened the cartons and poured the milk into the kettle slowly while the parent-helper stirred with a long wooden

spoon. The pot billowed steam, and we stood on our tiptoes to try to see from where we had been told to stand. Then our teacher hefted the clam bowl to the edge of the kettle and dumped it over into the milk. And finally she unwrapped four cubes of butter and dropped them in whole, with a palm-full of salt completing the recipe.

When it was all done, our teacher ladled the soup into coffee mugs and handed them out to us. It was a cold day again, with thick and thin wisps of fog floating past, and I stomped my feet while waiting my turn. Once I got my cup I forgot about everything else while I cautiously sipped.

The soup was creamy, rich, and so hot that the mug not only warmed up my hands, but all of me was warmed. There was just a hint of clam flavor in the liquid part, but then a clam bumped my lip and got sucked into my mouth and when I bit into the sweet meat a drop of salty sea water spurted out; in a completely different way, they were even better than Mrs. Tucker's French Fries. I sipped and chewed until it was almost gone and then tipped my head and the mug way back to get the last drop. As my head came down, my eyes focused across the top of the steaming kettle on a dark haired boy.

His hair was cut evenly across his forehead, and hung down like Prince Valiant in the Sunday comics. His skin was creamy colored like the soup and his eyes narrowed at the corners sort of like Katherine's. His name was Josh. He wore Osh Kosh Be Gosh Over-alls. My heart ballooned for a second before my attention was averted by the parent-helper asking me if I finished, and taking my cup from my hand. I also heard the teacher announcing it was time to get ready for nap, which meant that we were to go inside and use the bathroom. As I walked towards the

building, I felt a tugging in my bladder and remembered that I had had to go when the milk was first poured in the pot. A little twinge at that time, I'd just forgotten about it, but then the tugging feeling came again – much only stronger. I began to run. When I got to the bathroom all of the toilets were being used, with two girls already waiting. I shifted from foot to foot and clamped my hands between my legs to help keep the pee in. But instead I felt the warm yellow liquid come seeping out through my panties and tights. My legs then automatically spread apart and I grabbed my dress up over my waist with one hand and pressed the other hand tighter, as the pee continued to trickle between my fingers and splatter onto the floor. Then I gave up then and moved my hand away and let the last of the pee pour out as I danced on my tip-toes to keep my *just-as-good-as-Keds* away from the spatters and spreading puddle.

The other girls looked at me with sorrowful understanding. One that was watching from a toilet, climbed down and I rocked back and forth on my toes over to it, pulled down my sopping tights and panties, and got on it. When I looked up the teacher was there. She had a towel and said a few nice things to me while she quickly wiped up the mess, and then while still bending down untied my shoes so I could get my wet things off. Gratefully, my dress had been spared and I could be covered with a blanket during naptime, as my rinsed out panties and tights lay on the radiator to dry. I had brought my Disney book to school that day and scanned the familiar pages as the heater ticked behind me. I had read the stories many times, but loved the images from the movies best.

The book was very big and the illustrations sometimes covered the entire

page. Each picture was like a painting. I loved the clouds at dawn in *Sleeping Beauty* when little baby Princess Aurora was born. They were fat and full, tinged pink and lavender on top and sky blue underneath. At the end of the story, when Sleeping Beauty dances with the Prince Charming, the fairy God-mothers keep changing her dress from pink to blue and back again, matching it to the morning clouds. It was so lovely. I wanted a dress like that more than anything, but I knew it wasn't real and I never would have it.

I did, however, have a checkered dress that was the color of Orange Sherbet and Vanilla ice-cream. It was a triangle shape. Fitting me at the top and across the sleeves, but spinning out into a twirling cone. I loved turning around and around, watching it fan out. If it was sunny, I could lift it over my eyes and see an Orange Sherbet and Vanilla world.

## Chapter 2 – Planet Poverty

It was as long ride to Granma and Granpa's house as to the cabin. I spent the time gazing hypnotically out of the window as usual. I recognized some early landmarks to memory: the Mormon Temple (the only castle I had ever seen in real life), a particularly crooked tree, and an old painted barn on the crest of a hill. But after that first half hour or so, we mostly we drove by indistinguishable orchards.. My eyes fastened ahead on a cleared stretch between one of the straight rows of nut or fruit trees, and as the car came abreast of it, I swiveled my head in order to find

the farthest visual edge, and as we left it behind, craned for an instant to keep *my row* in view as long as possible. Then I turned forward and found a new row. Sometimes my head whipped back and forth for minutes when we drove by the large spreads.

My sister Kim and brother Lee, played a game identifying cars types, or license plates. Joji and Larry got to stay home since they were teenagers lives. Larry was even going *graduate* soon. I couldn't see the other cars on the road squished to the corner of the back seat, but I didn't know or care much about cars anyway, so I kept looking at what ever came by my eyes. Finally we pulled off the highway, crossed the railroad tracks, and the road quickly turned to dirt. Soon I saw those old faded square houses indicating, that we were almost there. Small with black tar paper poking out where the roof or siding had either fallen off or had never even been, somehow I knew this was "poor". With the monotony of the highway behinds me, I turned my eyes back to the car's insides. From around the back of my parents' heads, floated the usual words: "air conditioner too cold for my mother", "Vietnam", and of course "Martinlutherking-andbobbyandjackiekennedy-andmalcom" being killed. I looked out the window again.

When the road climbed upwards, I saw the first giant electrical tower standing behind a fence marking the edge of Granpa's part of this world. One of my Aunts lived in the last house on the road before the gate, after which the road turned into a looping drive around a spreading Oak tree. My Daddy pulled our car (a Rambler, the only car I new beside a V.W. bug,) all the way around to the other side of the tree by the path leading to the front door of a small house. After he set the



parking brake, Lee and Kim scrambled out of the far side of the car while I wrestled with my door handle on the house-side.

Grandpa strode up the path as my mother released me from the car. Kim and Lee, heads and backs patted by him were on their way to Granma waiting on the stoop. Grandpa bent over and scooped me up when I got close. His arms were like rocks and I was a little frightened because he was so tall and black, and I really didn't know him. He carried me to Granma and placed me in front of her. She squealed something over my head to my Daddy about me being "such a sweetness" while she mashed my face into her apron front that smelled like bacon grease and coffee.

Inside the front door was the living room, which not only smelled like bacon grease and coffee, but was twenty degrees hotter than the air outside, which put it at about ninety. Granma had diabetes and needed it hot because her blood didn't circulate, mom had explained. She waddled into the room behind me, guided me to the plastic covered couch with Kim and Lee already planted. As I climbed up onto it too, I recalled some of the words my parents had said on previous trips and overheard grown up talk.

Apparently three of Granma's grandparents were Cherokee, who likely peeled off from the Trail of Tears, and the fourth grandparent was run-away slave. Light skind-ed, with thick long hair, Granma was not fully accepted in the share-cropping community, yet she caught my Granpa's fancy. Granpa was strong, and handsome – a good catch for a one of the other many marriageable daughters. However, they infamously eloped with the help of Granpa's brother Levi Lacey,

whose job it was to bring out the mule that the two teens rode to a courthouse in the next county. When the young couple reappeared officially as husband and wife the union was grudgingly accepted. They got some land to share-crop near their folks. Granpa planted cotton, corn in the land...and babies in Gramma. So that Granma had two crops to tend to. I didn't know exactly what miscarriages, still-borns, were, but they came with the story. Within the step-ladder of ten living kids, my Daddy was the fifth and favored with the name of *Samuel Lacey Junior*.

Apparently Granpa worked hard as a farmer growing and tending cotton and corn during all week, but turned to "liquor drinking" on the weekends. I knew people could shift around who they were. When Daddy got made, he changed and used the belt to whip on my brothers (though never on me), so I wasn't too surprised to hear that Granpa beat Grandma so severely that the children had to go get a gun to protect her. And that in the same way he had spotted Granma, he apparently spotted others, roaming further from the homestead for longer and longer stretches. There was even talk of "another wife in California". My Mommy was creating an extensive family-tree research project and had even visited back to Dumas Arkansas where some of relatives still resided on the Bayou of the Mississippi River. It was from her interviews with Granma, and other old relatives, that she learned how Granpa had sometimes sent money, but also seemed to forget about his not-so-little family for long stretches. Though on one extended visit back in Arkansas, during which time the tenth child was conceived and born, Grandpa paid for a family portrait of the twelve of them. They're in their Sunday bests, posed

in a field and looking very serious. Dad however, is beaming with a “I’ve got me some plans...and they don’t include standing around in a field forever” look.

Barely out of her twenties and left alone, in a community where praying, sin, and whup’ns blended seamlessly. Granma was known for making the children go outside and cut young thin branches off of trees (switches) for them to bring to her to whup them with. Daddy said he usually brought two, cause if she thought he’d cut one too small, she’d go cut one herself, a big one.

When young Gramma, received a letter and some money from her husband instructing her and the children to come to California, she hesitated at getting back on the receiving end of the violence. However empty bellies and being at the mercy of other drunk-grabby male relatives anyway, broke her down. She packed up the kids and embarked on a long trip by train and foot to reunite the family. Grandpa in the meantime, was building highways through the Sierra-Nevada mountains, and also working construction crews at the Orville Dam. He was maturing, and as a result cut back on the drink and had decided to settle down with one woman. When his family arrived from Arkansas, Granma was pleased to see that Grandpa had amassed enough relative wealth to purchase eleven acres of land: one acre for the main homestead (a large shack with a kitchen, sitting area, a separate bedroom for her; a chicken coop, outhouse, and bunk-house for the children), and one acre for each child when they grew up.

In his fifties, Granpa found religion, so by the time I was introduced to the tall hard man, he was a respected Deacon who had built a local church, literally with

own hands. He would lay one of those gigantic hands on my head saying “uumm, hum- sho a pretty little thing”, which took the edge off of my innate fear of him.

I was assigned to sleep with Granma. She had a large brass bed that I liked, but the smell of bacon grease and coffee even seeped through her nightly applications of Ponds Cold Cream. I stayed on the farthest edge of the bed, nearly engulfed in her rack of flowered church-dresses. There was a large three-dimensional picture of a Blonde blue-eyed Jesus looking patiently down at her nightstand. Together, He and I watched her settle onto her padded stool, unhook her garters, roll down her thick stockings, and strip out of her flowered housedress. Granma had a deep hole in her ankle that looked like a wide belly-button that she told me was from “the Sugar Diabetes”, and her breasts hung down like flour-sacks and when she climbed into her nightgown and then into bed, the old springs groaned. But the worst part happened in the middle of the night when I was dragged awake by that dreadful tug.

Getting to the bathroom involved a dark journey through dramatic climatic changes. First, I slid down to the floor through her dresses and tip-toed to the door. I let myself out into the living room where the heater glowed red, but a dangerous gauntlet nonetheless due the extended sleeper couch with my parents in it (Daddy snoring after the squeaking and hushed moaning stopped), and their clothes draped over and camouflaging the furniture. I crept by hands outstretched like Helen Keller to find the kitchen door, which was always kept shut.

As I opened it and went in, the temperature dropped a refreshing twenty degrees. Yet as I passed the door to Granpa's room on the way to the bathroom door,

the floor under my bare feet grew cold. The chilled doorknob stung my fingers as I gripped. Going in, I remembered to step down as Granpa had built on this part of the house most recently, and lower to the ground for some reason. From the outside you could see the tarpaper still exposed because he hadn't gotten to the siding yet. Not insulated at all the room was the same temperature as the night air, which was freezing. I danced across the chilled floor to a toilet seat that felt like a block of ice, though sitting on it got my feet off the floor for a while -- until I was ready to retrace my steps back to Granma's comforter.

I was enormously relieved the next night, when after begging to sleep in the Bunk-House with my Lee and Kim, was allowed the honor. As Kim strung up a blanket to section off an area for us girls, Lee and I bounced up and down the rows of mismatched beds, slipping between the cracks, knocking into the occasional headboard, wrecking Kim's efforts, and generally having a blast being away from the grown-ups.

Daddy had been a Military Policeman in Korea, and since Mommy loved school, she made sure he went to college and got a job as a probation officer. Samuel Lacy *Junior* (he took out the "e" in his last name as an act of independence), lived in a big house and was everything his parents wished for. They were flattered by Mommy's interest in their lives, and accepted her as one of those kooky white people that occasionally turned up wanting to join black communities. Granma had prepared a huge spread with all her son's favorites for dinner that night. But I wasn't too fond of collard greens stewed all day with a Hamhock, sweet potato pie,

or reconstituted dry-milk. The only safe food I could find was her fried chicken, accompanied by Kool-aid, which I drank a lot of.

Later that night after escaping grown to the Bunk-House and tucking ourselves, Granpa came to the door holding a cooking pot. "Here." he said, handing it to my sister. "Now sleep good children, see you in the morning." My sister placed it near the door and got back into bed. "What's that for?" I asked her. "In case you have to go." she replied. "Go?" I queried with a sick feeling rising in my stomach as I anticipated her answer. "You know, go to the bathroom." she said.

In the early morning, the Koolaid wanted out. I lay in my bed for along time thinking about what to do. Maybe I could make my way into the main house? *Maybe* I could hold it until it was light and we got up, but I had already been holding it too long. When the tugging turned into a cramp, I was forced to the pot. I climbed sadly out of bed. First I tried sitting on it like a toilet but my bottom slipped inside and the narrow rim cut into my legs, and it was icy cold too. I pulled myself back up and used my leg muscles to hover over the pot as I finally release my bladder. To my surprise the pee shot forward and not straight down, so some of it went on the floor before I could readjust my position. The stream going into the pot made a loud noise and I was afraid my brother and sister could hear it. I didn't want them to catch me doing it, but fortunately they didn't wake up. I jumped back into bed so fast, I did not bother to wipe myself. As I was drifting back to sleep an awful thought entered my mind: What if I had to make a B.M.? I realized that eventually it would happen if I ever came back here again.

The next day our car reversed course and after a few blissfully dull hours, crested the coastal hills where I saw the San Francisco Bay again. Soon, I would be knocking Katherine's door to get some normal food, then retiring to my room for the Sunday evening line up of I Dream of Jeanie, The Beverly Hill Billies, and Petticoat Junction.

### Chapter 3 – Gritty Pink Stuff

The talk about skipping me to the first grade from Kindergarten began when my teacher realized that I wasn't just looking at the pictures in my books and identified me as "A Reader". All of the grown ups thought this was an amazing accomplishment, sparking a sudden interest in figuring out how smart I was. Not only did I get tested at school, but my mother took me to have a special test (easy puzzles, and word matching games at the place by the hospital where Lee had gone for tests where they discovered "his irregular brainwave pattern", and was given pills. They also said he was gifted. It turned out I was also gifted, but thankfully I didn't have to get pills, however, had to leave Kindergarten.

In first grade children were given workbooks. The work consisted of drawing lines from pictures that matched a word, or circling pictures that started with the same letter sound. Then there was copying words from the book over and over on sheets of paper with spaces two inches tall, or adding up groups of pictures and single digit numbers. I sat at my desk and did the boring work quickly. The teacher spent a lot of time bent over the desks of the children who were still at it, so I just reopened another book and did more.

When the bell rang for recess we all ran outside to the big playground. I had seen it before of course, one of the fences of the Kindergarten yard overlooked it, but I was amazed at its real-life vastness. Access to the big playground was the one thing about first grade that I had looked forward to. The main part of it was black asphalt with painted yellow stripes on the ground for races and games. Up above that was another level that was covered with wood chips and had bar structures for climbing and swinging on. Then there was the very highest section. There wasn't any equipment up there, just sandy dirt on the flat part, a few organic garden beds, and a bunch of droopy trees and bushes covering a semi-circular slope surrounding it.

My first stop outside was the girls bathroom. It was cavernous. The ceiling soared over my head, and the toilets were each in their own separate little closets. Also alien, was the round fountain that had thin streams of water sprouting out from the top of a metal ring of tiny holes -- no sinks. The soap was a pink powder held upside down in a can with a knob you pushed upward with your palm, which released a sprinkling of pink gritty stuff.

By the time I was in first grade my soft baby-fine blonde hair had started turning light brown underneath where the sun didn't reach, while the exposed curls transformed into a thick and easily tangled mass. My mother (I didn't call her Mommy anymore) must have seen T.V. commercials for the new invention called *cream-rinse*, which would have been extremely helpful in taming that mass.

Katherine's mother used the product on Katherine's smooth hair, so I knew it wasn't



impossible to obtain; yet not a drop ever touched my head, which meant combing through my tangles was a pitched battle that damaged my hair even more.

My Black cousins' hair was a major project as well, but their moms shared a systemized plan for submission. These girls' huge fans of hair were routinely sectioned, greased, and then sub-divided into multiple pairs of pony-tails that wove around each other like a softie-cone. The ends were clamped shut with a rainbow of plastic barrettes, beaded hair ties, or tiny rubber bands—resulting in a hair-do that said: *my mama cares*.

I remember that at gatherings my aunties used to question my mother in disbelief about why she didn't *grease* my dry hair. And though my grandmother had actually used bacon grease her own hair, what those ladies meant was: why didn't Betty use Black hair-care products, which were full of oils and conditioners, on me.

My hair wasn't exactly like my cousins', however. When my mother chose to have children with a black man, she should have anticipated that she'd be faced with a novel challenge and been ready to adapt. Instead, she steadfastly used her own fine-toothed comb on me on every morning. To begin the procedure I would be clamped between her trunk-like legs. The foundation of the previous morning's duel braids were still be mostly intact, though a halo of hairs that escaped during play and sleeping floated around my head. The combing out of yesterdays braids felt like hundreds of little jerking pulls followed by long dragging, strand breaking strokes that always ended with sharp, neck-snapping yanks. Did she not know it hurt? When the re-braiding began, I locked my upper body at a forward angle to compensate for the backward drag. By the time all was said and done, my scalp was

tingling and pulled so tight that I felt that my eyebrows were arched up like a doubly dubious Mr. Spock, and my neck ached to boot.

I knew I wasn't supposed to complain, or whine, but I did; and the more I did, the harder she would pull. I was mad at her because I passionately did not want my hair braided in the first place. During the summer at the pool, my hair floated out around me in the water like a mermaid's, I felt magical and beautiful. And for hours afterwards, I would be allowed to wear it down or in a simple pony tail; I loved the feeling of it brushing the sides of my face and flopping on my back where it's true length was expressed; it was much longer and heavier than when the shortened braids rested on my shoulders. My anger made perfect sense, but why was she mad at me? The rest of the year dragged on uneventfully until summer rolled around again.

Up at the cabin we all got to do things we weren't allowed to do at home. Mostly, my mother smoked cigarettes out in the open, when Daddy wasn't around. Us kids were allowed to buy candy, and comic books. Kim chose of Archie and Bunny (the Mod Model) comic books, which I alternately read with my brother's Silver Surfer, Superman and Fantastic Four comics. When it was time for Back-to-School-Shopping, I was allowed to choose my own clothes. I chose Go-Go boots--white patent leather and crinkly black vinyl, a variety of tights including Fish-net stocking, and mini dresses. Also before second grade began, my mother decided I would look good with an Afro. Daddy, who loved my hair, argued against it until she agreed to leave it as long if he performed the daily combing and braiding ritual. Soon

I was in hair shop near my mother's school in a poor black neighborhood, being positioned in the chair for the cut. In order to work on my head they put a board across the chair arms and I sat on that.

At first my hair, cut short, would not stand up on end to become an Afro. But then several ladies combined efforts. My hair was curled in little rollers, then teased apart and sprayed with hair spray. My mother bought more of the hair spray, some Afro Sheen and an afro-pick, at their prompting, because the new hair had to be puffed out and sprayed often and regularly to maintain its form.

When I was lowered to where my dangling feet could once again touch the ground, I was able to see my old hair lying in piles around the chair on the floor. The black ladies proclaimed my new style a huge success and converged around me alternately patting and plucking at the helmet of hair. I was overwhelmed and nodded and uttered that I liked it too in answer to the incessant questioning.

### Chapter 3 – The Balance Shifts

That school year, I noticed in each stall was the same drawing on the plastered wall, and the metal partitions. The drawings looked like this: an upper case W but with rounded bottoms and little balls hanging from the mid-section of the curve. Under it, and centered, stood a V. There accompanied this symbol set another cluster. It had two lower case Os with a long U between them. As the school year continued, I learned that these strange symbols were actually pictures of breasts and penises.

One day as I exited the bathroom and bent over the water fountain, I felt someone approach from behind and push into me. At the same time the bump came, I heard a boy's voice chanting, "Pussy, Pussy!" I turned around and saw one of the boys from my class running away with some others. They all laughed and patted, the one who had bumped me, on the back. I suddenly noticed at that time they were all Black boys. There had not been any Black children at school the year before.

I stayed close to the cafeteria for the rest of recess and was happy when the bell rang and I could go back to class. During the next work period, however, I saw the same boy looking at me from his desk. He wasn't working very hard and spent a lot of time whispering to his neighbor. And then they would both look at me.

When lunch time came I cautiously left my classroom, once those boys had gone. I went to the bench by the cafeteria to eat. I sat by myself and looked around at the other children. Being separated by a grade from my best friend had been hard enough, but we had still walked to school together—and were looking forward to eating lunch together once she was in first grade; but there was another major change this year the Nine-o-Clocker/Ten-o-Clocker Program. I was a Ten-o-Clocker and she was a Nine-o-Clocker—our lunches and recesses were at different times too! There were White girls sitting with White girls, and some Black girls sitting or playing jump rope with other Black girls. The White boys were in their own groups; and running around, laughing, and carrying balls were some Black boys.

Sometime the Black boys would approach the Black girls, but the Black girls would shriek and stop what they were doing to face them. Usually it was one Black boy who would boldly reach for one of them, and sometimes one of the bigger Black girls would step up with a balled fist to strike back. I recognized some of this behavior from watching my cousins at gatherings at Granma and Granpa's; but I was so surprising to see that going on at my school. In my world where I lived, not some exotic place where I visited, endured and could ultimately escape from.

No one paid attention to me, so when I was done eating I set off to explore the rest of the playground. I was standing there under a tall tree when I saw Josh, the princely page boy, playing on the yard above me. I had not seen him much since I had left Kindergarten, but now he had the same recess as me as I stood watching him I heard laughing and saw the Black boys from my class coming my way.

When they got close one of them broke away from the group and ran up to me, grabbed me around my back and began bouncing himself against me. He made a sound like, "ugh, ugh, ugh" and the others called out, "ooooo pussy, he's getting some pussssy". I turned around and pushed him and told him to stop it. But when I said that the others all joined him and began pulling on my arms and pushing me from behind, "yo going to the pussy bushes girl." They said. I leaned back and tried planting my boots to stay put, but the plastic sole of my Go Go Boots slid on the asphalt. I looked down at where the princely page boy had stood. He was gone. My

heart sank. I knew he was good, and would have gone back to the pure play of the upper playground—that he would instantly have sensed the alien nature of what was happening to me, and to avert his eyes from such activities. I was sure that he had already thought that I was strange for not having finished Kindergarten. I loved him, and longed to be his love, but felt the stab of truth that I would never be good enough for him.

The Black boys got tired of pushing me and began lifting my legs up off the ground. In a moment they were clumsily carrying me, stumbling and jerking me around reroute to the treed slope which was not that far from where I had stood.

When the boy had bumped me at the drinking fountain, it had been a brief contact that I had considered, for a moment at least, to be an accident. That it had been intentional confused me. My brothers had teased and tickled me before, and I had been bounced, hugged and snuggled by my Daddy, but this was the first time a stranger had touched my body. When the boy had actually held on to me while bumping repeatedly into my rear, I was surprised by how strong his hold was.

I was struggling against these boys but I was not getting free. As they carried me to the trees, we passed other children playing. They looked, and some even giggled, but not one even told the Black boys to stop. They dropped my feet when we arrived in the trees and dragged me by my arms, up higher into the cover of the drooping branches. I had stopped struggling and looked around me. I had never considered

that this sheltered place existed. The trees stretched right to the street corner. I had walked by this place on my way to school a lot of times and hadn't considered it even part of the school.

I realized how far away from the others I was and began to cry. The Black boys pushed me down on the ground and one of them laid on top of me, "uh ugh, uh, pussy" he rolled off, "uhg, uhg, oh" the next one got on, "me, me, next." He said while the others chanted some what in unison, "puusseeee, ooh puusseeee, he's gitt'n some pussee."

When they were done, they ran away and left me there. I looked at my stocking and saw a hole. I felt my hair and it was dented and had some sticks in it. I sat for a moment plucking and patting it, then stood up and carefully eased my way down the hill. There was one more recess after lunch that day. When it arrived I went immediately to the bathroom and stayed there.

When I got home from school, I went over to Katherine's house to play like I always did. When my daddy got home from work he was happy to see me, as usual, my mother asked me about my work books and my teacher like she always did, so I told them about my work books and my teacher. I felt so happy when my daddy gave me a ride on his feet that the unusual part of my day seemed like it happened to someone else and was very easy to forget.

