A GRIOT’S YARNS

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by

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THESE HERE WALLS

Five more minutes of the putrid aromas on this bus and two more seconds of Marique’s nonstop yammering in my ears and I’m going to pull a Mrs. Lovie Whitfield right here on this raggedy green seat. Why did I invite Marique to come along? Again. She’s such a scary cat. We’re twelve and a half years old and she still believes in the boogeyman. Whoever heard of the boogeyman living in the cemetery? Thought they only live in closets.

As soon as the bus stops she’s going to say. “Baby Jean, I’m not following the leader, in that grave yard.”

I bet she’d feel differently if the only place she could talk to her Grandpa was the cemetery. She’d sing a different tune if her nosy ole Grandma Abernathy was battling the spirits of libations. Or if that nasty Booker Maddox old enough to know the Grim Reaper’s first name, was trying to get in her panties. Maybe she would understand better if her walls became infected with lies told long ago. Or secrets kept and held so tight they couldn’t help but fall apart to reveal the truths within their grip. Maybe just maybe she would understand if she had to live within my walls.

The number seven bus from Franklin Flats, known by its residents as ‘The Flats’ made its last straight line stop in the exquisite manicure lawns of Franklin Heights. When my grandparents moved to The Flats from Alabama back in the seventies it was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. According to Grandma when the Jewish people moved into The Flats the whites moved to Franklin Heights. When the Jewish people
started moving to Franklin Heights, the whites moved to the moon. She always laughs when she tells that story. It didn’t make sense when I was younger. The transformation of The Flats becoming the other side of the tracks was slow but sure.

Good, this is our stop.

If I didn’t know that Mt. Sinai was filled with the dearly departed, it would be one of the most beautiful places on earth. For as far as the eye can see its golf course green, flowering bushes, and polished stones. Each season the ground keepers change the large rows of potted plants just inside the gate. The iron cast gates reaching for the sky gives the appearance of long arms waiting for something to drop into them. Mt. Sinai was integrated back in the day when integration had to be fought for in other parts of the county. Guess Mt. Sinai figured if its occupants didn’t care who was laying beside them, why should they.

“Save it, Marique.” I said, saving her the effort of having to make this familiar proclamation. “I know, you are not coming into the cemetery,”

“That’s right, Homey. I’m not. And just so you know, the 4:45 smoking back to The Flats will have me on it—with or without you. This is no place to be when it gets dark.”

“Cut me an hour.”

“One hour.” She punctuated ‘one hour’ as if it had an effect on me. “I can only be on the stroll at Carl’s Emporium so long before they think I’m stealing.”

“We’ll hook back up at Mt. Sinai’s gates at 4:35.”
“I’m not playing Baby Jean. I’m gone at 4:45.”

“If you don’t see me walking down the path, then bounce.”

“I will.”

“See that you do,” I snapped.

“What’s your problem anyway? I’ve been talking at you the entire ride here and you haven’t answered once.”

“What?”

“What. That’s what I’m saying. You’ve been dissing me.”

“Dang, Marique. You can run it a mile a minute. Rest it. Sometimes you are just like Sister Abernathy.”

“It takes one to know one.”

“It takes one to grow one, dork. What did you ask me that’s so important?”

“Why was five-O at your house last night?”

“Oh, yea, the police—” I’ll tell ya when we kicking it home. Don’t have time to explain. Remember gots a one hour meter running. See’s ya fool,” I said over my shoulder entering the gates of Mt. Sinai. The late fall snap hastened my pace to the eternal peace section were my Papa rested beneath the sod. That’s what the church people say instead of saying he was buried there. If he could hear me talking like that he’d flip his lid.

I paid little attention to the other meters that kept time in my life until the one set on my childhood timed out when my Grandpa Herschel Whitfield went home to glory.
That’s what my Papa would say, when people from the church expired. My grandparents brought me home from the hospital at three days old. Loved on me and raised me to be a proper young lady. Their daughter, through whose birth canal I traveled kept on high stepping to her next stop. If given the choice whose absents I preferred, Jeanie Lee would win every time. Papa’s absents blew a hole in my life. The spirits that came to live in our walls the day after his departure for the great beyond complicated my weekly visits with him at Mt. Sinai.

The spirits of libations introduced themselves to me when I found my Grandma Lovie planted on the dining room’s parquet floor like a garden statue. Her shoulders were slumped forward and head drooped so low that it appeared the weight of it would break her neck. Clanking against the glass clutched to her chest was Papa’s wedding ring on her gold chain. Her hair that was always meticulously kept was stiff as a wild jungle bird’s nest. Something besides the fact that her husband passed on was wrong. The gloomy monster movie shadows, cast by the constant dreary rain didn’t help matters either. She was still wearing the clothes worn to the hospital the day before to bid my Papa goodbye. Sitting there rocking, her lips moving, but no words were coming out. It reminded me of a mime on television that practiced his technique and then left his audience spellbound with it. I stood there still as possible, waiting for her to acknowledge me. She never did. So I walked over gingerly and gently touched her shoulder.

“Grandma, what are you doing? Praying?”
“Oh, hi, Sweet Baby,” Her voice was smooth and soothing. “No I’m not praying. Just having a few libations to ease the pain and pass the time. That’s all.”

“Libations?”

“Yes, Sweetie, libations, cocktails, spirits.” She shook her glass. “You’ve probably heard drinks or dranks around The Flats. But don’t you ever say that. Only low downs use those terms.”

“Oh, may I have a libation?”

“No, darling, you may not. But will you please get me more ice, Baby Girl. This has all melted away.” When I left the room Grandma’s sobs grew into great gasps. She carried on like that for a solid month after Papa’s fond farewell. The libations stayed much longer. Seven months later and the rivers of libations still flow. I wish they would dry up. Going to the cemetery to talk to my Papa helps me. His ‘Sugar Baby’, that’s what he called Grandma Lovie among other sweetie pie names, needs me to care for her.

People tell me “Baby Jean you are so grown up and that vocabulary of yours is better than most adults.”

I don’t know why that comes as such a surprise. My grandparent’s home was current events central. They were lovers of the nightly news, trivia and the various usage of the English language. I picked it up from them. At school I won the current event highlight of the week contest just for knowing that Tony Blair was elected the Prime Minster of the UK. That Swedish scientist cloned a sheep and named the lamb, Dolly and that President Clinton banned government money for cloning research in the US. My
three week winning streak ended when the question was about the verdict of the O.J. Simpson trial. Everyone knew that answer.

It seemed natural to go to the cemetery and keep Papa abreast of the current events in my life. People talk to the graves all the time but I still look both ways before starting my conversation.

“Hi Papa. Guess what? The Cleveland Indians made the World Series. You’re surprised about that. Me too. I don’t have much time today. The bus was late. Bet the foliage here looks like a picture on a day when the sun is shining. I should’ve worn a heavier jacket and a hat. My ears are freezing. Don’t worry the plan is to come until the weather gets too bad.

Maybe by then Grandma Lovie will be well enough to drive me here. She’s not sick, sick. Just misses you terribly. Papa something really bad happened last night. I had to drive the car and your Mrs. Lovie found your weapons. Everything’s all wrong. When Grandma goes to sleep tonight— I’ve gotta to find them. Re-hide them. I could’ve joined you last night Papa. Sorry for crying but... but everything’s all wrong.”

Not only did Grandma find the guns, she disarmed one. At me. That’s what my Grandma calls it when people are shooting guns in our neighborhood. She says it’s a military term, my Papa taught her, but he always called guns weapons. I should’ve done a better job of hiding them. She never went in the tool shed, certainly not after we told Papa that we saw a groundhog tunneling under it. He told us that he’d trained ‘Private’
the guard groundhog to protect his trunk of treasures and to keep us out. Grandma snapped that there wasn’t anything in there that would interest her so he needn’t worry his handsome head. The truth was Grandma was afraid of any furbearing creature that wasn’t domesticated. Private would keep her out for sure. When the spirits of libation moved in, it was best that the weapons move out. I put the guns in a pillowcase at the bottom of his military trunk under the books, trophies, pictures of women—probably old girlfriends and papers galore. Bet the spirits told her where they were.

“Papa, it all started when this man with a voice like the bottom of a drum called the house. He said, that he ran a ‘spectable after hours and that he wasn’t standin’ for nobody makin’ threats to kill folks in his place. Then he said somebody better come and get Mrs. Lovie’s drunk ass before he called the police to have them pick her up for disturbin’ the peace. Sorry, Papa that’s what the man said. I had to keep asking him where she was. He finally told me Grandma was at the last house on the dead-end of Adeline Ave.”

I couldn’t allow my Papa’s Sweet Lovie to be arrested. That would have killed him if he hadn’t already been the dearly departed. As I pulled my jeans over my pajamas, I slipped the spare car keys into my pocket and grabbed my jacket. Then ran the four dark blocks to the end of Adeline with no streetlights. When I got there Grandma was much too inebriated to drive. That’s what she calls it, inebriated. She says only low downs get drunk or intoxicated in bars. Huh, an after-hours must be an upscale place. The
last house on Adeline was grey with a black painted porch, black pillars, black banister and white steps illuminated by a dull yellow light. Maybe it’s upscale on the inside.

There were no sidewalks on this end of Adeline just grass and gravel. My footsteps on the gravel made the lady holding Grandma against the railing like a puppet on a string look up. Grandma looked pitiful.

She saw me and tugged away from the lady’s grasp and said, “Fools. Have my babi out in the cold night air. Come on here Babi J. Bunch of low downs. Need to tear this raggadi mess ta the…”

I didn’t know if I was to thank the lady so I just smiled, took Grandma’s arm and we weaved our way towards the open end of the street.

The lady from the porch yelled out, “That’s a crying shame. Don’t you come back here.”

“Don’t you worri yo funni lookin face bout tha. Low down heifer…” She called the lady another name I can’t repeat.

Grandma parked Papa’s car on the lit end of Adeline but streetlights didn’t stop two men from sitting on it smoking. I was so scared, wasn’t use to being out that late, in the dark, with an inebriated Grandma. My pace slowed to toddler steps as we came closer to the car. The two men just sat there. Grandma pace didn’t slow at all. She shot them a dirty look grabbed the door handle and threw up beside the car. They slid off the hood and jogged down the street. As she fumbled with the keys trying to unlock the door, I gently took her arm and led her to the passenger side. Once inside the windows had to be let down. The smell coming off of Grandma’s clothes made me gag a couple times.
Papa allowed me drive up the driveway when Grandma wasn’t looking. In the park, too. Good thing he did cause it prepared me to drive us home. Slowly of course, only hit the curb a few times. The entire four blocks back fear gripped me with the thoughts that the cops would stop us and we’d both end up in jail. They would get Grandma Lovie for public intoxication and me for driving without a license. Or maybe the police would beat us in the street like that King man in California a few years ago.

When we finally made it home the spirits told me, “I bets you think I’m low down. Don’t cha. Cause you have to takes care of me, cleannn me up. Don’t cha Baby Jean?”

“Come on Grandma, let’s get you upstairs.” Too tired and relieved to be home to take that as an insult.

“I…I bet you say my grand momma is a low down cause, cause you pays the bills. Buys groceries, takes care of my Lover Man’s house. Like you du woman. Huh.”

“I don’t say those things.” Libations made Grandma take the stairs like a toddler one step at a time, the wall balancing her on one side me on the other.

“You tells yo friends yo pitiful old Grandmomma broke down all the time.”

“Nope.” I said, bumping into the bathroom door. “C’mon sit on the toilet, please.”

“Well, you probably right. Damn it, cause I had that sorry tail excuse for a motha you got. She ain’t worth an ounce of princess pee in a china cup… miserable butt ain’t here to help you either. Just plain old low down.”

“I don’t need Jeanie Lee. All I need is you Mrs. Lovie my sweet.”
“Your Papa calls me that.”

“I know.” Glad he wasn’t here to see her like this. Trying to hold her in place and remove shoes at the same time took skill. No time to cry, maybe later.

“I’m gonna kill that good for nothing, tarpon face son of a Bugger with my bare hands. Messed over my baby girl. He’d the cause for this whole mess.”

“Grandma,” I interrupted wiping the gelatinous vomit from her sweater and pulling it over her head, then grabbing a fresh towel. “That’s mean. You know that man was going to call the police on you.”

“I wish he would. I’d kill him too.”

“You can’t go around threatening to kill people.”

“Who can’t?”

“Come on now. You need to rest your weary bones.”

Grandma held her head back to receive the warm washcloth moving gently across her face and neck. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Put something warm on you. That way you can sleep comfortably. Alright?”

“I’m not tired, do you hear me?” she said with all the venom she could muster.

“I’m intoixa, intoki, stinkin drunk. Why’d you have to go and leave me sweet man, why—Lawd, why, you know I needed my Sweet man. Can’t take care of this baby by myself. Buck, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Should have told you. You hate lies…know that.”

Conversations brought on by the spirits make about as much sense as Algebra. I managed to get her undressed and settled into bed. Even made sure she was face down just in case she threw up again. This way she wouldn’t choke. She didn’t allow me to stay...
in the room with her when the spirits were stirring about. I would leave her room but sit outside her door until she fell asleep. Then I’d sneak back in and sleep on her floor in case she needed me in the night.

Grandma Lovie must have thought someone was in the house beside us. I got up to use the bathroom and went down stairs to get a drink of cold water before heading back up. My eyes barely adjusted to the white gown blur charging down the stairs to the hallway before Grandma raised the gun in my direction and pulled the trigger. Bullets whizzing past the ears sound like someone blowing a whistle with a bent blower, a low humming like a bee sound. Lucky for me, I wasn’t in the direct line of fire. The china cabinet’s beveled doors caught the speeding bullet and went to pieces. That bullet shot right past Grandma’s favorite burgundy wine glasses. It stuck in the back of the cabinet as if a hammer nailed it neatly into place. I stood flat against the wall listening to my heart beating in my mouth while blood whished through my ears. Mrs. Lovie Jean Whitfield just turned around and staggered back up the stairs and went to bed like nothing happened. When my legs could move I slithered against the walls to my room and locked the door behind me. Locked the door just in case whatever it was that awakened her decided to return and try it again.

“Papa, the neighbors must have heard the commotion. The police showed up at the front door with napkins in hand and pizza sauce on their faces. I had to tell a major lie, didn’t have a choice. I know what you said about lying. “The truth will stand alone while a lie needs a crutch.” It must’ve been a good one. The police officers bought it.
They got back to their cruiser to finish their late night snack while Mrs. Lovie slept comfortably in bed. Marique says that when people engaged in libations too much the liver can’t take it after a while. Then it stops working and the person dies a slow painful death. She calls the condition Cirrhosis of the Liver.

She’s planning on being a Doctor you know. She thinks just because she watches all the medical shows on the cable channels she can diagnose anything. Speaking of Marique, I’ve got to go now Papa. She’s probably at the gate tapping her foot waiting for me. See you next week, for sure. I love you Papa, I love you. Bye.”

Sure enough Marique was pacing like a panther at Mt. Sinai’s gate. “I was just getting ready to book. Have you been crying?”

“No. Let’s go.” Maybe my sour look will keep her from talking all the way home.

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Once, at church I overheard nosey, ole gross hat wearing, long winded, Sister Hattie Abernathy say that our family’s name Jean had a generational curse on it. My name is Lynette Jean, Grandma is Lovie Jean and her daughter my former incubator, is Jeanie Lee. Then she said that we recycle names like some people recycle bottles. I don’t think it’s any more unusual than a son named after his father and his father before him. Maybe she meant Jeanie Lee has a curse on her. As if that was not bad enough Sister Abernathy said that my Papa wasn’t doing his Mrs. Lovie and that gosh awful
daughter of theirs any favors by spoiling them the way he did. That one day, they both would surely break his heart into little pieces. That Brother Herschel was too wonderful of a God fearing man to endure the suffering and embarrassment of their sins and shortcomings. Sister Abernathy pops her gums too much for me. I decided to spare her the severe tongue lashing she would certainly receive from Grandma Lovie by not sharing this overheard conversation with her.

I don’t know much about generational curses. but I’d say it’s Misters Remy Martin, Hennessy, Miss Tangueray along with those Haagen boys that have the curse on them. At least in my walls they do. When the spirits are around, bad things happen.

We don’t go to church much these days since my Papa’s left the land of the living. We only went as much as we did before because my Papa loved church so much.

Every Sunday morning without fail he would get up early make a big breakfast and announce at the bottom of the stairs. “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord. Rise up fair ladies, for a bounty has been prepared for your nourishment.”

Grandma would pass my door on her way to the bathroom hissing “I’d rather sleep than eat. Get up, Baby Jean, before the Bible quoting, Shakespeare wanna-be comes up here and raises Sunday morning hell.”

Mrs. Lovie could take church or leave it. She said those folks at Holy Vine Church of the Living God were a bunch of self sanctified, got no business having, Holy Ghost jerking, tee- totaling hypocrites. That was the nice clean version of what she said. My Grandma Lovie has a talent for stringing expletives together as if they were a strand of fine pearls. She rarely did that around Papa, something about respecting his house.
Church was Papa’s thing. She went to make him happy and made no bones about only
going to make him happy. The ladies’ guilds at Holy Vine involved her if she expressed
an interest in their activities otherwise they knew to leave her alone. She wore her badge
of being just a ‘church member’ proudly. She’d say, Papa met the quota of their house
having one blood-washed believer in it and that was enough.

I like church, but I don’t miss going too much. There’s a man named Brother
Booker Maddox that attends Holy Vine that scares me a little. Correction, he scares me a
lot. According to Grandma, Brother Booker was a reformed procurer of flesh who ran a
house of ill repute. She said he was near fatally shot by a fellow entrepreneur in a dispute
over a woman. That’s how Grandma would talk when she didn’t want to come right out
and tell me things straight. I wasn’t sure what a procurer or ill repute was, so
remembered the words to look it up in the dictionary. She said Brother Booker found
Jesus on his deathbed. When he was raised up from his cot of affliction he marched his
self to Holy Vine to the dismay of a few of the women there. He may be reformed on the
outside, but his insides could stand to be reborn a few more times. He looks at me as if
he can see straight through my clothes.

My Papa caught him looking at me real nasty like that once. Papa told Brother
Booker that if his mind took the notion to lay hands on me, that he would be the
responsible party that sent him from this world without them. He walked up real close to
Brother Booker’s face, like what he had to tell him required their noses to touch and said.
“Brother Booker, eternity in Hell gonna be mighty hard with no hands. Now, here will be
your no hands dilemma. How will you care for yourself?”
“Brother Herschel I’d never—” Sputtered Booker’s lips.

“You might be able to get a few minions to scratch that shiny bald head of yours. You may even get a few to swat flies. On a good day feed you. But you’ll be in a world of hurt when you need to take a dump. Good luck trying to get a minion to wipe your burning behind. Yea, it gonna be might hard in the forever, with no hands. Mighty hard. Do you hear what I’m telling you?”

“Why yes Sir, I hear ya but no need to worry.” Brother Booker must’ve though he was on the witness stand or something the way his hand was in a swearing in position. He tried his best to convince Papa that no such intentions were in his mind.

Embarrassment caused me to look around the room. To my amazement everyone that was in the church basement when this talk stared had left. Papa was so discreet in handling Brother Booker that the people standing around them must’ve though what was going on between them was personal and left to give them their privacy. Even though the message was being delivered softly, it was deadly. My Papa stepped on Brother Booker’s foot and told him, “Contemplate long and hard Brethren. Brethren, I’m asking you to not make me break a promise made to my Lovie years ago to never take vengeance on another man. So you contemplate long, because if you put your hands on my grandbaby, you’re gonna make me break my promise and I will tear your arms off up to the elbow. Then end your miserable life for you. Considered this a threat or a promise whichever works best.” My Papa had quite the imagination.

When Papa stepped back, Brother Booker had droplets of spittle on his cheeks and was batting his eyes like Papa’s breath smelled of moldy onion, stale garlic and
ammonia. Then he offered Brother Booker his hand to shake and said “Amen”, as if he had just read his favorite scriptures and was expecting a response to his call.

As Marique and I rode the straight line bus to Franklin Heights for my weekly visit the topic of the day was Holy Vine. “Did you hear cool Brother Booker is taking your Grandpa’s place on the Deacon’s board?”

“Who gives a care? That’s the only way that old jokka gets on anything. Somebody gots ta kick it over.” Had to make sure fear didn’t show up in my eyes when talking about Brother Booker. Just the thought of him makes me want a shower.

“Yea. Guess who was in Carl’s asking about you? I think he wants ta hook up with my girl.”

“Who dat?”

“Trenton.”

“Fine, Tupac Shakur look-a-like Trenton?”

“Yep. I told him you were in the bone yard visiting.”

“Great.”

“Naw, he thought it was cool.” She was just saying that because she talks too darn much. It doesn’t matter. Don’t have time for boys. But he sure is cute.

“Papa, you would have loved today. The sun is shining, the foliage is at peak. It’s your kind of day. A beautiful October Saturday just the way you liked it. It’s much warmer than when I was here last week. Papa, I need to tell you about something about
Brother Booker. It’s jacked up…I mean it’s unpleasant. Didn’t tell before I was afraid of what would happen. Whenever I see Brother Booker I feel the need to take two showers. Something’s wrong with that man.”

I knew Papa would make good on his promise to send Brother Booker to the lower bowels of Hades with no hands. So, I kept it to myself what he had already done to me a few weeks before his encounter with Papa. One Wednesday night service while on my way to the ladies room, I encountered Brother Booker in the dimly lit narrow hallway by the Pastor’s study. That hallway always needed a light bulb. A church the size of Holy Vine Church of the Living God surely could afford a box of 60-watt bulbs. Creepy Brother Booker came out of the choir door just as I was passing it. He grabbed me tightly, pinned my hands behind me and unholy hugged me. An unholy hug involves excessive hand movements and groping up and down the butt. He tried to whirl me around to get a better look at the rest of me. My resistances made us collide into the stack of chairs stored in the hallway. The chairs bumped the wall but the music in the sanctuary cushioned the sound.

“My, My, My,” he said licking his lizard lips. “Baby Jean you’re turning into a beautiful flower right before my very eyes. Look at you girl. Gettin’ curves in all the right places. Wow.”

“Brother Booker let me…” The more I squirmed and twisted the tighter he held me against his privates.
“Look at you, with those lovely cat’s eyes and that hair going down your back. Just look at those long lean legs. Let me have a look at that tender little roast of yours. Cute, nice and firm.”

“Brother Booker let me go, please.” I said in trembling uneven tones. That’s when he licked my neck. Then he tried to lick my lips but I jerked my head to the side and he licked my hair instead. He smelled like shaving cream, cigarettes and pain ointment.

“My goodness, Baby Jean, you’re just the spitting image of your mother when she was this age.”

“Let me GO.” My narrowed eyes were betrayed by my voice and body that trembled in uncontrollably fits.

“Owee and you’re feisty too. That means the man that bust your cherry gonna take it by force.”

“What!” My heart felt as if it would stop. Bust my cherry. Tender rump roast. What! Brother Booker intercepted my intake of air to scream by placing his nasty hand across my mouth and said. “Scream and you’ll regret it.”

Parts of me were starting to go numb as I shook with fear and anger. The feeling of relief jolted back into my body when the ushers removed the Sister, who managed to become slain in the spirit every Wednesday night to that hallway. Brother Booker’s release of me was as quick as his capture. He tipped down that dim hall faster than any old man could move. From that moment on, I never went to the ladies room alone. If no
one went with me, I didn’t go. Grandma had to make me get out the shower that night. Just didn’t feel clean.

“Oh, Papa, forgot to tell you about my plans. When I get home new tulip bulbs, crocus and daffodils will be planted. Grandma says she may try to help me. Come May, when the flowers bloom, people in The Flats are going to say, ‘Mr. Whitfield’s yard looks as if he did it himself.’

Do you remember that hot summer day Grandma had us digging and planting like field hands? You worked at the plant that Saturday and rushed home early with the hopes of finishing the yard work in enough time to watch a baseball game in peace. Remember Papa? Well, anyway, we had been at it for hours when we thought we were almost done. Here comes Grandma from the backyard loaded down with a stack of flower plaits three deep and sat them where you were kneeling. Do you remember this Papa? You said.

“Good Lawd, Pretty Lovie, where you want me to put all these flowers?”

“Hold on a minute Sweeten.”

“Look here woman it’s hot as the handles on the sun out here.”

“Mister. Can you just listen a sec.”

“No you listen. If I wanted to be filthy like this, working in the unyielding elements, a job picking cotton in the dusty fields of Alabama as a dime a day sharecropper would have suited me just fine.”

Grandma was just looking at you. Then you tried to get tough and said. “Don’t you stand there looking at me like that. I’ll have you know, Mrs. Lady, there’s a ball
game getting ready to come on that television set that needs me in there to make the right calls. Come on here girl, and tell me where you want all these doggone flowers.”

Grandma placed her hands on her narrow hips, craned her neck forward in her stern take-charge voice said, “I am so very sorry for bothering you with all this hoeing and planting, Mr. Whitfield, Sir. Thought you liked a nice yard. If you could have waited one hot minute, I would’ve told you that these flowers are for Mrs. Wallace across the street.”

Papa you were so funny. Your eyes rolled up in your head and you pretended to become sick. You said in a weak voice. “I’ll be if that don’t feel like a heat stroke coming on.” Then you snapped your gloves against your legs and pretended to fall over.

By this time Grandma was worked up real good. She put her foot on your chest and bent over you. “Man, I wasn’t going to ask you to plant them for her. Just take them over.”

You didn’t move and she didn’t either. “Now, let’s get one thing straight and listen up real good you broke down handsome old thing. Don’t you even think, about leaving me.” Those words came bursting from her lips sharp as nails and her eyes were small as slits in paper.

“Just tell that heat stroke of yours to move on before I hose it down.” She was muttering like she does right before delivering me a long promised spanking. I stood there with sweat dripping on a bag of top soil, wide eyed and slack jawed waiting for the real explosion to come pouring out. Instead a grin crossed your face as big as a jack-o-lantern. Grandma couldn’t keep a straight face either. Both of you broke into circus
clown laughter as if you were putting on for me. Then you stood up planted a kiss on your Honey Bun’s cheek, and whispered something in her ear too low for me to hear. Grandma’s impish chuckle betrayed her even more. She said something about you not talking like that last night and the next time she was going to make you beg.”

I’ve heard that same chuckle come from behind the shut door of my grandparent’s room many nights before. Man, my grandparents were old as Adam’s house dust. I know, they didn’t still do, it. Did they? Yuk.

“Papa, remember what Grandma made for dinner that night? I’m getting hungry just thinking about it. She made your favorite barbeque chicken, cranberry coleslaw, red-skinned roasted garlic potatoes, corn on the cob and lemon pie for dessert. You always said your Sweet Thing Lovie could put the best culinary artist to shame.

I’m doing the cooking now. When Grandma eats, she compliments me on how much better at it I’m getting. When the spirits let her have a good day, she cooks a feast. I pack food up for the freezer for the days when the spirits aren’t so generous.”

Sad memories seem to attach to some happy ones. After the game was over and dinner finished, my grandparents’ summer ritual was to sit on the front porch swing and converse with whoever wandered by. Looking busy doing something other than listening to adult conversations was hard. Most of the times, my failure to be discreet in my eavesdropping exiled me to the fresh cut lawn. The mosquitoes in the grass licked my
skin as if I were a delicacy. I heard the phone ringing from the backyard but thought little of it until creeping back onto the far side of the porch. I could sense Grandma’s altered mood. Something was on Sweetie Pie’s mind. She could clink a thirty-minute sonata with a glass of ice tea when something was gnawing at her. Nervous energy she calls it. My Papa never missed his cue, chimed in with concern.

“What’s eating at you Sugar Baby?”

“That was Jeanie Lee on the phone.”

“Oh, how’s she doing?”

“She’s having a little trouble Buck.”

Their good for nothing daughter was in a lot of trouble if Grandma was calling Papa, Buck. That was his Howard University big man on campus name. When all was well, he was Sweet Man or Lover Man, when she was angry, Mister Man, Man or Mr. Whitfield. When things were terribly wrong, he was Buck.

“She’s in needs of some money. Right away. There was a break in at her apartment, someone was killed.”

“Is she alright?”

“She wasn’t home at the time. She wants to move to another state. I told her to come home for a little while. She doesn’t want to, Buck.” Grandma’s voice was soft and sad. Talking or even thinking about Jeanie Lee was a thunder storm on Grandma Lovie’s sunny day mood.

“Call her back, Sugar. Send her whatever she needs. Tell her, I love her.”
Can’t say for sure, because it was getting dark out but I think a tear was running down my Papa’s face. He always had a hurt look in his eyes when it came to Jeanie Lee’s shenanigans. That look in Papa’s eyes reminded me of the look Whippet had when he watched Mr. Wallace back over his puppy. It was an accident but it happened none the less. It’s a sad helpless, hurting to the soul look.

“Papa, your daughter may be in town next week. She hasn’t been here since you went to Glory. DANG, I hope she doesn’t stay long. Sorry Papa. By the way, your hard earned money spent for her acting lesson wasn’t a total waste. She provided a snot slinging, Oscar winning performance at your home going service. Was the talk of The Flats for days. I’m not saying she shouldn’t of cried. I cried so much my eyes burned to blink. But not like Jeanie Lee’s sorry pitiful soul. Anyway, she may be around a few days. Grandma says if luck is smiling, her visit will be short and semi sweet. Things are bad enough. The sprits are coming every day now. Well, I better get going, the flowers, remember. Bye Papa, I love you and miss you really bad.”

In my opinion Jeanie Lee had been pure grief and utter disappointment from the day she escaped Grandma’s womb. My grandparents gave that daughter of theirs the finest of everything, fine clothes, a private school education, nice cars, singing, acting and art lessons. Name it, Jeanie Lee Whitfield had it. Grandma Lovie would say Baby Jean you’re smart as a whip and pretty as a mocha caramel porcelain doll just like Jeanie Lee. I asked Grandma to stop making that comparison when I was seven. Their daughter
went to an all women’s college in North Carolina to get a degree, but managed to get me instead. She decided to drop me off at her parent’s home like a bag of laundry she had no intentions of ever picking up and kept on moving to wherever the wind blew her.

My first recollection of Jeanie Lee’s was of her pinching my thighs and biting the tips of my fingers at four. That should’ve been a clear sign of her mental unbalance. She’d blow into town on an east wind, stay a few days raising high havoc until Papa would tell her that he had enough of her upsetting his walls. Then she’d blow out again. It never dawned on me to question who she was either. Papa and Grandma called her Jeanie Lee therefore, so did, I. They never established how we were related and my inquisitive nature didn’t seem to care. When school started, I noticed that my parents were older than the others. Noticed the other kids called their parents mommy and daddy, too. It didn’t matter and I didn’t care.

At seven the dirty truth as to how Jeanie Lee and I were related filled my walls. My grandparent’s went out to dinner with some old friends and left me in the care of Jeanie Lee for the evening. We had watched a couple movies when Jeanie Lee pulled out what I thought at the time was a funny looking cigarette and a lighter.

“Papa doesn’t allow anyone to smoke in the house Jeanie Lee,” I politely informed her.

“Did I ask you if I could smoke in this house, Baby Jean?”

“No, you did not. Beside, there are no ash trays.”
“Go get me a teacup and put a little water in the bottom. She spat at me. “Then I’ll have a ashtray.”

“I will not.”

“Look, little girl, go get me a cup with some water in it, or else.”

“Or else what?” It was good for me to know what options were available. “Just because you’re my big sister doesn’t give you the right to boss me.”

“Big sister, Ha. I’m no more your big sister than the woman on the moon.”

“You are my older sister.”

“Did you grandparents tell you that I’m your big sister?”

“No. They did not. We don’t discuss you.”

“Then who told you that crap?”

“No one, I figured it out.”

“Well, you figured wrong bucko. I’m not your sister.”

“You are such an awful liar.” Saying liar or even lie was big for me. Papa only allowed me to say something was a fib, a tale or an untruth.

As far as I was concerned, we were on equal terms. Growing up the only child in a house of adults gave me a false sense of confidence. My grandparents encouraged respectful expression of thought. The practice of speaking my mind got me into trouble at school a lot. Jeanie Lee stood up turned off the T.V. and lit her funny looking cigarette.

“You really don’t know who I am. Do you?”

“No, and I don’t want to know because I don’t like you.”
“That’s good to hear. Hell, I don’t like you either. My parents have made a
spoiled little overindulged brat of you.”

“Please turn the T.V. back on before I go call Papa.” I yawned to show my
boredom with the conversation. My grandparent’s left a number by the phone for the
restaurant. Must have figured Jeanie Lee would do a terrible job of taking care of me.

“Jeanie Lee, turn the television back on or else,”

“I’m sure you are not threatening me—or else what?”

“Or else this.”

My grandparents signed collectors hardbound edition of *Sula* missed, but the
signed hardbound of *Meridian* hit its mark knocking the cigarette from Jeanie Lee’s
mouth drawing blood. As she hurried to put out the cigarette before it burned the carpet,
she grabbed my arm and snatched me from the sofa.

“You little…here’s what’s gonna happen. First, I’ll show you I’m your mother.
Then I’m going to whip that little ass for you. Apparently something my parents aren’t
doing enough of.”

“You are not my, Mother, NO!!” Came bursting out with hot tears. Jeanie Lee
dragged me up the stairs dangling by the wrist like a small doll to my grandparent’s
room. At top speed she opened the safe Papa kept in his closet. The burnt orange nails on
her one hand dug into my skin, while the other dug recklessly in the safe and dabbed at
her bloody mouth.
“Ah, here they are.” She said, in a singsong voice. “Birth certificate and legal adoption papers.” Jeanie Lee pulled me to the floor still holding my wrist and held the document before me.

Child’s name: Lynette Jean Whitfield
Date of Birth: May 7, 1985
Sex: Female
Hospital: Glenoak Mercy
Mother’s Maiden Name: Jeanie Lee Whitfield
Mother’s Age: 18
Father’s Name: Unknown

Father unknown.

“You’ve been reading since four, smart butt. What does it say?” Jeanie Lee burnt orange nails held me like a cat preparing to strike its fatal blow on a mouse within its claws. The factual information before me brought on waves of nausea. I refused to answer.

“What does it say, BRAT!”

“It says, father unknown.”

“What else does it say you miserable little...” Jeanie Lee was screaming.

“It says, Mother, sorry tail, low down loser.” That’s when she slapped me in the mouth repeatedly. Then grabbed a slipper from the closet and began hitting me across my bare arms and legs with force. Discipline was no stranger to me, but this was not
discipline. My grandparents charge up the stairs went unnoticed due to my blood curdling screams.

“Jeanie Lee! What’s going on in here? Land sake we heard Baby Jean all the way outside.” Grandma Lovie was holding Papa’s arm rather oddly.

“She needed her butt beat.” Jeanie Lee’s eyes were tight and cold.

“If she needs correcting Daddy and I will handle that.”

“I doubt it. Apparently you two no longer provide spare the rod, spoil the child correction.” Her caterwauling was bouncing off the walls in shrills. The presence of my grandparents made my screams escalate as loud as Jennie Lee’s shrills.

“Turn her loose. Right now.” Papa’s voice boomed as he punctuated “right now”.

When she released me I ran sobbing and buried one eye into his starched white dress shirt.

“Let’s get one thing straight. For as long as you stay in your skin, don’t you put your hands on this child again.” Papa was holding me so close I could hear the juices in his stomach.

“This child? Daddy you must be out of your mind.” Jeanie Lee sprung to her feet and lunged towards Papa. “Have you forgotten whose child this is? She didn’t even know that I’m her damn mother!”

“Why should she?” Now Papa’s eyes were tight and cold.

“What kind of mess is this?”
“Where are you when she’s sick or scared at night?” My transfer from the noise of Papa’s stomach to Grandma’s waiting arms was swift. The line Jeanie Lee drew when she jumped up was a dare for Papa to cross it. They were face to chest.

“Where are you when her hair needs combed? When she needs bathed? Clothes need ironing or she needs fed or loved on?”

“So. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Children attach to whoever provides their care and make them feel secure. Who would that be? YOU? No. That would be Lovie and me.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I had her. I’m her mother!”

“Having a child doesn’t make you any more a mother, than liking honey makes you a bee.” Now Papa’s voice was shrill.

“That’s some bull, Daddy!”

“I’m about two seconds off your butt, Jeanie Lee.” Grandma’s hands were shaking as she held me close.

“Let me handle this Baby. This nut has forgotten who she’s talking to.”

“Oh now I’m a nut.”

“Been one.” Grandma’s laugh gave momentary relief.

“Your mother and I love you. We gave you everything you could have possibly wanted.”

“AND?”

“And, you can’t have this baby. Her discipline is done by us. Not you. The choice to do nothing with your life was yours.”
“I wondered how long it would take before this subject came floating to the top.”

“Shut up.” I never heard Papa tell anyone to shut up. “Seven years ago you made a choice to forfeit the right to be a mother. As God as my witness, if you harm our baby again you will regret it. Do I... make... myself... clear?” Quiet calm.

“Crystal. And just so you know. I already regret it, should’ve sent her annoying tail down the magic tube. That would’ve been one less disagreement we’d have.” As she stormed out of the room she brushed Grandma’s arm holding me tightly.

That night, safe in my grandparent’s bed, my sobs softened into whimpers. Grandma Lovie pulled me onto her lap and pressed my head to her chest. I drew in her essence as Papa rubbed liniment on my arms and wrist. “You won’t let her take me away, will you, Grandma?”

“Never, baby. Papa and I want you more than anything you can know. This is your home and we are your parents’ period. Jeanie Lee was wrong, Sweetie.”

“I don’t like her at all.”

“Just don’t hate her okay, Baby. Maybe someday you will come to like her.” Was the last thing I heard as my grandparent’s monotone voices lulled me to sleep.

An entire year passed before we saw Jeanie Lee again.

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After my Papa went to receive his final reward in Glory, and the dust settled a bit, my great Aunt Lillie Belle from Chicago came for a long visit. Grandma Lovie was the
youngest of five siblings, Uncles Rooster and Bones, Aunt May Lou and my favorite, Aunt Lillie Belle. Aunt May Lou was the oldest, bossiest and meanest person on earth. Grandma’s parents died when she was very young. Aunt May Lou raised Grandma but they weren’t close. Aunt May Lou was also old south black folks wealthy and prone to high fluent airs. When she talked, she held her nose as if everything around her had a bad odor. Papa always treated her extremely kind even though she wasn’t fond of him. The only thing I liked about Aunt May Lou was she never had anything good to say about Jeanie Lee.

Aunt Lillie Belle was the total opposite. She loved my Papa to death and teasingly called him Romeo Rockefeller. Aunt Lillie’s annual summer visits guaranteed hours of card playing, loud laughter and reminiscing. The three of them together was an instant good time.

Aunt Lillie, tall and slender, would tease that she and Grandma were the long lost sister of the movie icon, Lena Horne. My grandparents were into old movies. By default, watching old movies was my past time. Some of them weren’t too bad. They were as beautiful as Ms. Horne, but both a hue darker and Aunt Lillie possessed a much larger bosom. Both were short-tempered, but tender, sassy and smart. Aunt Lillie’s summer visit after Papa slipped away was a mission of mercy. She and Grandma kept the phone company in business over the years with their weekly ritual long distance calls. Aunt Lillie must have grown concerned when it became apparent that the spirits carried on more conversations than Grandma. Maybe things would have worked out differently if
Aunt Lillie could have come when Papa slipped away. She was in the hospital recovering from major surgery.

When Aunt Lillie came for summer visits she’d bring her grandson, Darnell. I think Papa enjoyed Darnell’s company more than I did. He was always taking him places, showing him how to make minor repairs, fishing and how to cook on the grill. Darnell’s nickname for Papa was Uncle Papa. That made Papa grin from ear to ear.

I would have thought Darnell was fine if he wasn’t my cousin. He was two years older, tall, lanky with big hands and amber eyes just like my Papa’s. I’d swear that is if I were allowed to swear, Darnell looked like somebody I knew. He knew a lot of worldly stuff coming from the big city and all. When Darnell was in town, the girls in The Flats competed like Kentucky Derby thoroughbreds for his attention, including Marique. In all the summers Darnell came to visit, he never missed the opportunity to tell Marique how much of a pain in his side she was. I caught them pressed up real close, kissing real sloppy behind our house one evening. Guess that pain moved to his mouth. They made me promise not to tell and bought me off with a pint of my favorite Blue Bell banana pudding ice cream and five dollars. It was Marique’s idea to buy me off. Had she known that she was the fourth girl he had behind the house in two days, she would have saved her money for sure. Busting Darnell and those silly girls all summer became a business.

Aunt Lillie’s arrival made the rivers of Libations in my walls to dry up. Things were almost back to normal. During the excitement of Aunt Lillie’s and Darnell’s, visit it
slipped my mind to send Jeanie Lee her monthly allowance by the tenth. Papa had the wise foresight to prevent his daughter from getting her inheritance in a lump sum. According to him there is no greater parting than a fool and her money. Jeanie Lee could definitely qualify as a fool, and the way she parted with money was criminal. The annuity checks came to Grandma each month to forward. Her condition was not conducive to managing finances, so it became my task to handle on her behalf. According to Papa’s will, if Grandma caught wind that their daughter’s lifestyle was spiraling out of control, Grandma was to determine if a portion or none of the money should be forwarded.

The month I forgot, Jeanie Lee called to inform me that she would be in town in two days and that cash better be waiting on her arrival. She also said that if cash wasn’t waiting, there would be Hell to pay and my butt to pay it with. That was the diluted version of what she said. Jeanie Lee had spared us the misfortune of her presence by not showing hide nor hair since Papa’s untimely departure in March. So we were past due a visit of destruction from her.

About an hour before hurricane Jeanie Lee was due on radar, Grandma Lovie went to lay down with a sick headache. I think that was her way of resting up for the incoming storm. Jeanie Lee was prompt, if nothing else. Sure as a Timex, hurricane Jeanie Lee enters the front door yelling my name as if she were announcing a title fight predicted to only go two rounds. In this corner, weighing in at ninety-five pounds, wearing blue and white stripped shorts, LYNETTE JEAN WHITFIELD!!!
“Baby Jean. Bring your behind here you smart aleck little—” Moving faster than a hurricane set on a trailer park, Jeanie Lee almost walked up on Aunt Lillie Belle’s 44 double D’s.

“Oh, hi Aunt Lillie. I didn’t know you were in town.” The expression on Jeanie Lee’s face melted into instant submission. In a split second, she was my age all over again.

“What a pleasant surprise to see you again. I see you recovered well from your surgery, that’s good. I’m so sorry you missed Daddy’s service.” She was moving like a robot when she kissed Aunt Lillie’s cheek.

“It was a wonderful home going. Did Uncle Bennie come with you?” Jeanie Lee stood there rambling on and making small talk, as if she were conversing with a mere stranger in a grocery checkout line.

“Jeanie Lee for heaven’s sakes. Why would you come in this house raising Cane like you’ve lost what’s left of your mind?”

“Oh, I’m sorry Aunt Lillie. I wasn’t expecting to see you here. I, I, was a little anxious to see Baby Jean and Mother. That’s all.” Jeanie Lee could lie better than anyone I knew. If universities gave out degrees for lying, deceit or betrayal she’d have a Ph.D. When Grandma Lovie appeared, Jeanie Lee bum rushed her and kissed her on the cheek like Judas did Jesus. Thirty pieces of silver should have fallen from her pockets. Then she hurried over to me gave me a leprosy hug and whispered in my ear that I would be dealt with later.
I feigned deafness and said. “I’m sorry Jeanie Lee. What did you say? You’ll kick my tail later?”

Just as she was preparing to launch another lie, Darnell came strolling through the back door right in the middle of the commotion. His presence caused dead silence. Jeanie Lee stood there looking, as if an apparition only she could see entered the room.

At the time, I wasn’t sure what happened. But, that visit of Jeanie Lee was short and sweet. For the two days she was in town, no arguments, no cussing tirades and no more threats of physical violence. Nothing. Just may I have my inheritance please? It was the first time in my entire life I saw Jeanie Lee sweet as humble pie. Maybe she’d decided to be a decent human being as a way to pay homage to Papa’s memory. Or, maybe her true colors couldn’t shine with Aunt Lillie visiting. Come to think of it. Sure were a lot of closed door conversations going on in those two days hurricane Jeanie was reduced to a spring rain storm.

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Franklin Heights had some of the most beautiful park in the area. Every time we past my Papa favorite park thoughts of the good time we had there make me smile.

“Hi Papa, Happy Thanksgiving. I bet you’re having a big ole time up there, this being your season and all. Guess what Papa? Grandma and I are going to Chicago for Thanksgiving. I’m glad too. The spirits were starting to come back. Not real bad, just
occasionally. I think the spirits are scared of Aunt Lillie. When Grandma’s with her they don’t dare come around—at all. Hey, it looks like someone’s moving in across the path. It’s all set up for a service. Two rows of chairs, that awful green mat and a tent. Just like it was for you. Want to make sure they have their privacy. Didn’t like people scaring at us while we said our last goodbyes. Papa, I’ll eat some sweet potato pie for you, and you make sure to eat some Heavenly hash for me. I love you, bye. I’ll talk to you in a couple weeks.”

The Thanksgiving and Christmas after my Papa departed from his life were extra hard on Sweet Lovie. My Papa loved the holidays. He said Thanksgiving was about being with family and treasuring the time you had with them. My Grandma would prepare a tremendous fare that would last over a week. By the time we came to the end of the leftovers, I could not bear to look at turkey, ham, yams or stuffing, let alone eat them.

Every year, the Tuesday following Thanksgiving guaranteed me the delight of some Thacker style burgers at Nick’s. Thacker burgers made famous in Franklin Flats was a greasy lard toasted bun, paper thin patty, loaded with grilled onions and mustard masterpiece. My Papa was never big on hamburger joints or eating on the ‘side of the road’ much. Had something to do with not being able to, growing up in the south. But Nick’s got his business at least once a year, for sure. Nick’s was a greasy spoon, hole in the wall, one call away from the Health Department shutting them down, burger Mecca. The broken brown brick restaurant itself had only five stools and a pick up window just inside the door. Nick’s was always packed. The hamburgers, not individually wrapped
were placed in the brown paper bag one on top of the other. Mustard, grease and onions coating the inside of bag drenched the outside as well. If we ordered fries they were thrown on top of the burgers separated by only a grease-soaked napkin.

Grandma didn’t mess around when it came to wasting food. She would have made a big fuss if she knew we were eating out with the bounty she prepared at home. So Papa devised a plan. To ensure the smell of onions did not betray us, Papa would put the burgers in his fishing cooler in the trunk of his car. Then we would go to the park to enjoy our treasures in the open air. No matter how cold it was outside, we’d enjoy our late fall treat in the park. Papa would bring newspaper to put on the picnic table, place the Nick’s bag on top and tear it open. He would quickly bless the meal laughing that his Sweetie would have a hissy fit if she saw us eating out of a paper bag on newspaper and drinking out of unwashed cans. Year after year Grandma didn’t find out we’d been cheating on her. Papa and I had an after-Thanksgiving standing date.

My Papa was so much fun.

What a relief Aunt Lillie inviting us to Chicago for the Thanksgiving holiday. It helped a little to take Grandma’s mind off of her loss. Aunt Lillie and Uncle Bennie have eight grown children, four boys and four girls all loud obnoxious cussing wonders. Just like Jeanie Lee. So of course they have a gaggle of grandchildren, but Darnell was the only one that lived with them. Not that there was anything strange about a grandchild living with grandparents. For the life of me, I could not figure out which one of Aunt Lillie’s and Uncle Bennie’s children were Darnell’s parent. Asked Grandma once whose
Darnell’s parent was. She went on this long tangent that lost me, five minutes into it. By the time she finished explaining, my confusion and disinterest canceled my concern. Grandma could have told me that Darnell’s parent was King Kong, Mickey Mouse or Mary Poppins, I wouldn’t have flinched or looked up from my coloring book. Therefore, liberty was taken to narrow the selection of Darnell’s parent down to Aunt Lillie’s and Uncle Bennie’s son Glenn Roy or their daughter Gayle Renee. They were twins. What made them my logical choices was an overheard conversation Grandma had with Papa. She said, Gayle Renee was one hot in the socks young lady that babies just seem to fall off of and that Glenn Roy’s mission in life was to do his part to populate the earth. It never occurred to me to ask Darnell directly. The entire weekend in Chicago was filled with loud talking, football games, eating to excess and being reminded that I was Jeanie Lee’s spitting image. Aunt Lillie and Uncle Bennie’s house was filled to the ceiling with relatives from far and near. There were cousins at Thanksgiving dinner, I hadn’t seen in years. Some I’d never met. It felt as if there were so many people in the house we slept, ate and used the bathroom in shifts. Grandma Lovie was in a good mood the entire time we were there. All the hugs and kisses was the support she needed to make it through the holiday.

On the plane ride home from Chicago, I thought that since I was older, more mature and we talked about most things, it was a good time to inquire about Darnell’s genealogy again. “Grandma Lovie,” I said, over the rumble of the engines. “I had the best time with my all my cousins this weekend especially Darnell. You know he’s my favorite. He’s so cool, we get along great. Always have.”
“You two sure have. I’m glad about that Sweetheart. I really am.”

“Grandma, not only is Darnell fun, he gets good grades too. Just like me. Did you know that we have almost the same birthmark? He told me something I didn’t know.”

“You don’t say.”

“Do you know who he reminds me of?”

“Who?”

“He reminds me of my Papa.” Up to this point in our conversation, Grandma Lovie was engaged in our dialogue.

“Really now?”

Then I committed a conversation violation by saying. “Yea, he does. I told Aunt Lillie that, she said the same thing you just did. “Really now.” Then she sent Darnell and me to run an errand. While we were walking he asked me a rather peculiar question.” Mrs. Pretty Lovie’s face became void of all emotions and regular color.

“Oh, did he?” Was all she managed to say. When the spirits were stirring, conversations with Grandma swirled around like puzzle pieces from several different puzzles trying to come together. When the spirits were banned to silence and her mind was clear, clarity depended on the subject matter up for discussion by her design. I’d learned to read her well over the years. But, the past months without Papa, things changed a little. Correction, things changed a lot. She must have thought I was going to say that he asked me if I smoked marijuana, was kissing on boys, or worst. The peculiar question on the tip of my lips caused Grandma to change the subject to the history of the aerodynamic design of the aircraft in which we were traveling. I read that as a flag on
the play, infringement on the adult comfort boundary zone, end of conversation, penalty imposed. It sounds rather silly, but I understood the rules and regulations of conversations with grown folks. When the topic had the potential of making them uncomfortable in their skin, back off.

Mrs. Lovie Jean Whitfield loved me for sure, but I knew not to push her where she didn’t wish to go. Darnell’s peculiar question would have to wait for another day when the asking was good.

It was a gospel fact that mouthing off, lying, disrespect, belligerence and pushing Grandma to far was grounds for heavy doses of that discipline Jeanie Lee claimed I was spared.

* * *

“Dang home girl, we gonna have to take the Rosa Parks seats today. This bus is jammed up.”

I had to give Marique credit. She was becoming more agreeable to our weekly ride to Franklin Heights. Wouldn’t doubt she looked forward to them.

“Yeah. The heater must be busted too. It’s cold as the great outdoors on here.” I said pulling my gloves out of my pocket and tugging my coat up closer.

“Maybe if we get a big enough snow the fight will happen tomorrow.”

“Won’t that be the stuff? Rappin and fightin. Ha.”
“Hi Papa, burrrr. The forecast is calling for heavy snow tonight. Shopping must be on everyone’s mind today. The bus was extra crowded. Marique’s over at Carl’s Emporium. We’re gonna do a little shopping later. One of these days I’m going to get her to come in and say hi to you Papa. What is she’s afraid of? It’s so peaceful here all year round. Even the leafless trees say welcome to quiet peace. Look Papa, it’s starting to snow. Sorry you can’t look. Franklin Flats’ first snowball fight of the season will miss you, for sure. This cold makes me want some of Grandma’s homemade hot chocolate. Her hot chocolate alone made being wet, cold and blasted with snowballs worth it. Dang, I still hate winter. Sorry Papa. Dog, I dislike winter, but you made it so much fun.”

I like thinking about the good ole days and the times we had together. I remember after a heavy snow it seems like the entire Flats would come out to play. The first heavy snow of last winter MoLeeDee and his crew’s rap could have gone platinum, on the underground label of course. MoLeeDee and his boys made rounds knocking on every door announcing.

“The fight sa bout the start,

Tick tock, tick tock,

Thirty minuts that’s what ya got,

Tick tock, tick tock,

Go get ya momma and ya papa’s and yo sweet baby too,

Tick tock, tick tock,

then ya can show us whats you can do.
Tick tock, tick tock,
Don’t be late cause we’z on the clock,
The fights sa bout ta start show us what’s ya got,
Coming ole and young alike, cause we got the shock,
show us what’s ya got.
Tick tock, tick tock.

Marique and I were rapping this on the bus ride to The Heights. We must’ve been too loud because the bus driver threatened to put us off if we did shut the figs up. Only he didn’t say figs.

Grandma said the first snowball fight announcements changed quite a bit over the years. She made sure to take note of the offending door jammers. She’d target them with the first round of snowball for trying to break her front door with all that rapping. The annual snowball fights in The Flats withstood the test of time and the changing of the neighborhood.

When I was really young, my perch for the snowball fights was the cleared top step of the porch. My snowsuit, scarf and boots kept me warm, from my high perch safe above the action. When I was older my job was to round up buckets of snow behind the firing line. Before being released to the fight zone, learning to dodge and build a sturdy fort became of the utmost importance. Grandma Lovie was the best snowball fighter on our street. Papa said that was because she could be mean as a snake and twice as fast. He didn’t fight much. His job was to made sure his Sugar Dumpling had all the snowballs she needed to win a fight. Teamwork he called it. For people not raised in the North, my
grandparent sure loved the snow. When the fight ended, The Flats looked like it should be condemned. Snow ended up in place it would not have naturally fallen. Some yards had ruts dug into them that would create problems in the spring rains. On occasions a few windows would be broken. But the first heavy snow fight was well worth the fun. We’d go inside and Grandma would serve us piping hot chili with all the fixings or lamb or beef stew. With yeast rolls or cornbread. For dessert she would bake fresh peanut butter cookies and steaming hot chocolate. She’d use Pet milk, not Carnation, because her Dear heart didn’t like Carnation milk. Had something to do with him and the war. Don’t get cookies and hot chocolate much anymore, unless I make it myself. The instant kind, of course.

“Papa, guess what? I talked Grandma into coming here to decorate your spot. She’s planning on doing you, like you did the house. She said when she’s done putting lights on you, airplanes may try and land mistaking you for a runway at the airport. She was laughing with tears streaming down her face. Said it would serve you right. She’s been in a decent mood lately. She’s really missing you Papa. Sometimes, talk of you goes on for hours, then other time I can hardly mention you. The spirits don’t come around as much either. I asked if we were going to Chicago for Christmas, she said no. Christmas is for being at home. Well, it’s time to go Papa, the snow is picking up and Marique’s waiting. The manager over at Carl’s told her when she turns sixteen, that he would give her a job. I guess because she’s in there so much. Love you Papa, see you next week. Love you. Bye.”
There was a seasonal ritual at the Whitfield house that was as familiar as *A Charlie Brown Christmas* special. My Papa was a big kid when it came to Christmas all the planning, pageantry and presentation was contagious in our walls. According to Grandma, our house was the reason the electric company employees received end of year bonuses. They argued very little. Decorating the house during the holidays held the best potential for one to happen. The Christmas disputes all started the same but I’ll never forget the last one before he slipped away.

“Mr. Whitfield, I know, whatever’s going under that tree for me better not suffer because we have to pay the electric bill.”

He irritated her by saying. “Woman, I know you aren’t expecting anything special under that tree. Your naughty meter broke in half this year. You’ve been so mean.”

“You haven’t seen mean, if my gifts aren’t right, Mister.”

“Well, how about I give you a chance to redeem yourself to earn a better gift.”

“Earn a better gift, doing what?”

“You should know what. Help me put these last two strands of lights up.”

Grandma headed for the stairs mumbling under her breath.

“He thinks I’m playing. Just let him give me, a jacked up gift and we’ll see if he gets told off.”

“Come on here girl and help me. See that’s what I’m talking about. You’re just plain old mean and uncooperative.” Papa was laughing and put on *I’m Getting Nothing*
for Christmas on the CD player and turned the volume up. Grandma yelled back down the stairs. “You think I’m playing don’t you, Mr. Whitfield.”

The first Christmas without Papa, Grandma Lovie shocked me by suggesting that we start back going to church. At least until the end of the year, she said. Maybe, she felt being in church during the Christmas season would bring her closer to Papa.

Our first Sunday back everyone encircled us with welcome back hugs and condolences. It felt good.

After service, before leaving, we stopped in the vestibule to greet and chat with a few of the good Sisters Grandma Lovie genuinely liked. While she was catching up on the latest hoopla, nosey ole gross hat wearing, Sister Abernathy slithered up like a python six weeks removed from its last meal. Initially she managed to form a smile and say something semi nice, but her uncharacteristic kindness was short lived. Right smack dab in the middle of the group Sister Abernathy said. “Lovie my Dear. How are you getting along these days?” Sister Abernathy’s nasally voice made me want to blow my nose.

“Holy Vine certainly understands the adjustment you are making. We do indeed.”

“I’m getting better every day. Thank you for your concern Hattie. I appreciate that.”

“I really don’t know how we’re managing to get anything done around this church without our Brother Herschel. There’s not a soul here that does not miss that dear man. Not one.”

“He did love it here.” Grandma said looking around and smiling.
“Yes he did. He was always willing to lend a helping hand, anywhere, anytime for anybody. Lawd, have mercy.” She then proceeded to dab her imaginary weeping eyes and clutch her broken heart before she went in for the kill.

“You know Lovie, Booker told me Jeanie Lee was in town a few months ago.”

“Yes, she was here visiting the same time my Sister Lillie and her grandson were here from Chicago.”

“Uh um, that’s what I heard. Well, Booker told me, they met over lunch to discuss a delicate situation. I tell you the truth, I’ve never seen Booker so stressed and upset. He walked around here in a stupor for weeks.”

“You don’t say.” I could see Grandma’s patience with the conversation starting to wane.

“Oh yes. I’m just glad the years have taught Booker how to lean on the loving arms of Jesus in times of trouble. Praise the Lawd.” Church folks must believe that if you praised the Lord or bless somebody’s heart before you gossip about them it provides a pass card to do so.

“Anyway, Booker said that, he didn’t know the—”

“Hattie, if you don’t mind. I really don’t care to discuss Booker’s and Jeanie Lee’s conversation here. Dear, if it’s really a heavy burden on your heart, give me a call. We can talk in private. Alright. Dear.”

“Oh but, Lovie you must admit that daughter of yours travels with drama in her purse. If news like that was sprung on me. My word, I don’t know what I’d do.”
I stood back wondering how much longer Grandma Lovie would allow Sister Abernathy to string along before she snapped her cord. The thought, just milliseconds from my mind must have hit the release button on Grandma’s tongue as it passed in the air. She cut Sister Abernathy off to where she could hardly get another word in edgewise.

“Look here, you cock eyed, sour breath, old crone. If keeping your nose in other people affairs and gossiping in the name of concern is a sin…those droopy titties of your will bust the doors of Hell wide open.”

“Well I never.”

“I’m surprised you ever did too. But, from what I’m told, you did for money. Some men will buy anything. Won’t they Sisters? Did you work for Booker by chance? I’m told he was a good boss. Did you hear that too Sisters?” I stood off to the side gazing at the open O’s with chewing gum in mid chew, cavities in need of attention and laughter held in suspension.

“Lovie that’s too vile even for you.”

“No Hattie, I’ll tell you what’s vile. You trying to drag skeletons into the light. If what you have to share is so earth shaking important, save yourself some shoe leather and get an ad in the Franklin Press. That way everyone can read about it all at once. You self-sanctified, broken down, matted wig wearing wench.”

By the time Grandma Lovie was finished with Sister Abernathy, I saw blue and gold auras streaks in the vestibule. I’m sure the stained glassed windows suffered hairline
cracks from the heat Grandma released in the cluttered space. The other ladies tried their best to do damage control. But it was too little too late. That cat was out of the bag and there was no putting it back. Anyone having done any time at Holy Vine, knew not to push Mrs. Lovie Jean Whitfield. Maybe Sister Abernathy didn’t get that memo. She limped away with that ugly red velvet hat with the green feather, tipped to the side of her wig swaying in the draft of the big oak doors.

As we left the church I thought, oh no, Jeanie Lee strikes again. On the ride home, I picked up tidbits of information from Grandma Lovie’s nearly inaudible ramblings. She was talking to herself more so than she was to me, so I sat there quietly. Took it all in. From what I could make out, something went down about a baby. Something about why the need to broadcast this now. Someone was a low down sorry son of a female dog and I’m pretty sure Darnell’s name was mentioned. Whatever the rest of the details were or whatever it was that Sister Abernathy felt she had on Grandma Lovie, it was distressing enough to trigger the floodgates of libation to start flowing in my walls again.

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“Happy New Year Papa! I know its Sunday. Grandma got me up and told me to get ready. For church I thought. We headed in that direction but drove right past the church. She took me to breakfast and to the store instead. She’s in the car waiting. She would come over but doesn’t have on boots. When I asked her if we could stop by here
she stopped and bought this beautiful arrangement for you. Your Sweetie is something else.

Sister Abernathy and Grandma had a falling out. Then the libation spirits started stirring in our walls again.


After the incident with Sister Abernathy, our church attendance became sporadic once more. However, the New Year brought opportunities for me to become more involved in school activities. I was the only seventh grader selected for the winter play. My grades were all A’s, two B’s and this boy named Trenton at school does like me. We’re in honor classes together. He’s makes being smart, cool and walked me home from school a couple times. I never had to use my pretend slang when I talked to him. He comes around my locker, smiles at me all the time. Grandma said he likes what’s happening to me physically. Then she interrogated me about his last name? Who were his parent’s? Where he lived? Come to find out Trenton’s dad was Jeanie Lee’s first real boyfriend. Grandma says the relationship was getting much too serious when Papa told Jeanie Lee it needed to cool down. According to Grandma the relationship froze to death when Jeanie Lee went to spend the summer before their junior year of high school in Chicago.
The matter of taking care of Grandma Lovie became a more daunting task when the long grey tinted days of winter came. Winter was never my favorite time of the year for certain. But, that first year without Papa what it did to Grandma scared me a little. Correction it scared me a lot.

She became a hibernating mammal sleeping away days at a time. Her door cracked just enough for me to peep in to assure she was still breathing. Grandma emerged long enough to take a little nourishment and shower but wasn’t quite all there. On the good days she’d invite me to bring our dinner up. I’d sit on her bed and we’d have nice long chats. Just like all was well. But on the days when the slate skies and empty icy stillness proved too much, she was distant as a dream. The odd thing was the river of libation froze up during these times. I guess Mr. Remy Martin and those Haagan boys were no competition for the winter sickness, grief and gloom that came to dwell in these here walls the winter after my Papa went to sleep beneath the sod.

One day as I entered the front door, flat thuds spread across the ceiling. I hurried up the stairs thinking the spirits threw Grandma Lovie on the floor.

“Hi Grandma.” I said, not knowing what kind of day would greet me.

“Well hello there Baby Jean, my sweet. How was your day?”

“Long and sickening.” I said hesitantly.

“That’s winter for you.”

“What?”
“Well, in winter we’re deprived of day light and regular sunshine. That mixed with the cold can make you feel rather sick.”

“Oh.” Wonder if that came from a magazine article.

“Winter melancholy, that’s what I call it anyway.”

“Oh. What are you doing?”

“I’m packing Sweet Man’s winter things. Someone can certainly use them. Hand me another box please baby girl.”

“Melancholy, huh?” Marique called it depression. “You’re not giving all of Papa’s things away are you?”

“No Ma’am. I plan to give his hats, the expensive cufflinks and a few ties to Darnell the next time he’s in town. Sweet Man was nuts about that Darnell.” She said removing a sports coat from the hanger holding it to her nose and inhaling the residue of cologne.

“When he was around I had to share my Papa time.”

“Ahh… you poor baby.”

“I wasn’t jealous or anything.”

“Oh. You had more than your share of Papa time.”

“Yea, I know. Just not as much when Darnell was around. They’d included me if they weren’t doing ‘man’ things. I was okay with it.” This was a good day, talk of Papa sweet and Grandma all there in one sober piece.

“Grandma, you know what I’d like to have for dinner tonight?”

“What sweeten?”
“Burgers and fries.”

“From where? That Nick’s dump?”

“How did you know about Nick’s?”

“There are a lot of things I know, Missy. Whenever that Papa of yours frequented Nick’s and he kissed me goodnight… My word, I needed an antacid.”

“Are you angry?”

“ Heck no. I thought it was funny that you two tried to be slick as glass and put so much effort into sneaking. Do you want to eat it in the park or can we bring the burgers home?”

By this time I was rolling on the bed laughing uncontrollably. If that moment could have been bottled and saved for a day when the spirits filled my walls, I would have. It felt good to laugh.

Later that night while sitting on Grandma’s bed doing homework, my attention was drawn to the large white envelope laying on the night stand.

“Grandma, what’s this?”

“That’s your Papa’s will and some other stuff. I haven’t felt like dealing with it too much. I’ve glanced through it but not at any great length.”

“May I read it?”

“Sure, Ms. Nosiness, help yourself. Read to your heart’s content.”

I had previously seen parts of Papa’s will not long after he met his demise. That’s how I knew what to do with Jeanie Lee’s monthly allowance. His provisions for his
Sweetie Pie in life, proved no different in his absence. He left her loaded. As I leafed through the pages of legal jargon looking for my name, one bequest caught my eyes.

“Huh, this is interesting. Papa left money for Darnell to go to college on.

“Really.”

“Yes and a trust fund when he turns twenty-five? Did you know that?”

“I haven’t read the entire will yet Baby Jean. Did I mention that to you? But that was nice of him. What did he leave Lillie’s other grandchildren?”

“Nothing? Darnell is the only one mentioned. Is that strange?” I said out loud meaning to keep the thought in my head. “Why would he do that?”

“He knew.” Grandma was staring at the wall as if in a trance.

“He knew, what?”

“He knew, that’s it’s time for you to go to bed. Good night sleep well.” Change of subject meant it couldn’t be good. Infringement on adult comfort boundary zone, end of conversation, bed-time penalty imposed.

“Hi Papa, sorry I didn’t come last month. February set a new worst winter record. Well it’s been a whole year since you’ve been, been. You know. Do you remember what’s coming in a few weeks? I will celebrate my thirteenth birthday, May seventh. Grandma says there are two birthdays that a young lady should always celebrate. When she leave her childhood behind and when she becomes a legal adult. Papa, I wish you were here to celebrate all my birthdays, my graduation from high school, college and
when I get married. Of course, I'll marry a man just like you. I’m going to make you and Grandma proud of me, promise.

We’ve been back to church. Sister Abernathy steers clear of your Sweetie Pie. Come to think of it Papa, Marique’s been acting rather strange since the fallout between our grandmothers. She didn’t come with me today. Her mom caught her smoking so it’s lock down city for her. Anyway, I told her that what happened between them didn’t have anything to do with us. She claims she agreed but that we needed to talk about something important. But I’ve been real busy.

Papa, Grandma let me read your will. Wow you were really generous to take care of so many. The church, that loser daughter of yours. Sorry Papa. Me, Grandma of course, charities and Darnell. Why did you just include Darnell and not Aunt Lillie’s other grandchildren?

Papa, at the end of the will you mentioned retrieving this letter from the tool shed. Does it have anything to do with Darnell being included? I know it’s for Grandma because it’s addressed “For the beautiful eyes of my Beloved ONLY”. How did you expect Grandma to get this letter? You knew she would never go into the shed. Private remember. Wait, you knew that, I would. How did you know Grandma wouldn’t read the will? Papa none of this is making any sense. Should she have the letter now? Papa, I have to go. Too many questions, not enough answers. You used to say that secrets make you sick. What’s with all the secrets? What do you want me to do? Love you Papa. I’ve have to go. Bye.”
Racing through the gates of Mt. Sinai my head swimming with so many questions caused it to hurt. On the bus ride home, I fell asleep and had my first dream of Papa since he… he…died. I don’t ever recall being able to remember dreams. But this one was clear as if I were wide awake. The dream started with Grandma and Papa filling flower pots for the porch railing. They set three of the pots on the porch beside me, one larger two smaller. My job was to add seeds when they told me to. Impatience’s pushed me to keep asking is it time yet? When the grandparents’ backs were turned, I dropped a hand full of seeds into the largest pot on the porch. This beautiful gigantic plant with burnt orange thorns on the end sprung up and took hold of my wrist. When it pulled me down to the porch it was no longer beautiful and one of the smaller pots rolled off the porch. Papa grabbed the gigantic plant and cut it with the pruning shears. He picked me up and said “Baby, that’s what happens when you don’t wait for the right time.”

My frightened eyes met his questioning when the right time was. Papa kissed my forehead and whispered,

“Wait for the right time. You’ll just know when it comes.”

I didn’t know the smiling face of the sweet older lady whose shoulder I awakened on. But, she looked me just like Papa did in my dream and said.

“You’ll know honey.”

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The hope of spring brought with it the promise of my thirteenth birthday. Grandma Lovie was as big on birthdays as my Papa was about any other holiday. She said that holidays are special for reasons someone else says they are. But the day of your birth was special because it announces to the world that you beat all the odds and earned your place in this here life. Grandma considered herself a birthday genie. I couldn’t remember a time she didn’t make a big production out of granting birthday desires. Waiting on the birthday question from her was torture. There was no nice way to tell Grandma that my birthday desire was for walls with no libation spirits in them, ever. So when she asked I sheepishly said a house party would be nice. When she didn’t respond right away I figured there was nothing to lose and requested that Darnell come for the weekend to help me celebrate. Grandma Lovie looked at me with a twinkle dancing in her eyes as if she came up with the idea herself.

“You know that’s an exceptional idea young lady.”

“Really? A party with boys! My party will be the party of the year.”

Her mind must have been racing because she starting jotting down a list of things to buy at lightning speed. I was tempted to add the no more spirits too since she was so receptive to the party idea but thought better of it and didn’t.

My birthday party became Grandma’s new obsession. She was at the best she’d been in over a year. Her time and mind occupied, the walls filled with humming and singing instead of sniffles and sighs. It was good to see her so happy again. She was half way through ordering an elaborate menu when I had to tell her that kids my age did not like all that fancy stuff to eat.
“Pizza, pop, and chips would be just fine for us.” Then she started going on about ice cream and cake. “Grandma, please don’t get a big ole cake and no ice cream. Can we have cupcakes instead?” I pleaded. Apparently she didn’t know big cakes and ice cream were for baby parties.

About a week before the big day, Grandma surprised me with the news that Darnell would be coming to spend the weekend of my party. She said that Darnell had been having a serious bout of illness, that Aunt Lillie had taken him back and forth to the Doctors a lot since we’d seen him in November. The Doctors ran all kinds of test put him on several medicines but they couldn’t determine what was wrong with him. Aunt Lillie wasn’t going to let him come because he’d been so sick. But then, Aunt Lillie said he brightened right up and gained new strength when he found out about the party and that I wanted him to come so badly. When I see him, we’re going to have a serious discussion about kissing on fast tail girls. Probably picked up a mono virus or something a tad nastier. Too bad there are no condoms for the mouth. When we picked Aunt Lillie and Darnell up from the airport Friday afternoon, I could tell Darnell had been sick. His muscular frame needed more weight on it and his skin looked strange. My tight hug was returned weak. The plan was to eat dinner out but Darnell did look like he would make it through a meal. By seven-thirty he was in the bed for the night. Never knew him to go to bed so early. Even when we were younger, we devised methods to stay up late. Maybe it was the flight.

When the big day finally arrived, I was a little nervous that no one would show up to the party but Marique, Darnell and hopefully Trenton. He was at the top of the
invitation list. I spent a few hours daydreaming about us together and him asking me to be his girlfriend. What made me think it would be the party of the year anyway. Most of the kids in my neighborhood knew that my Grandma Lovie was a force to be reckoned with if her dandruff was up. So would they dare come to these here walls? Even for free food, music provided by the best D.J. in The Flats ‘MoLeeDee’ and dancing until sweat dropped off them. Doubt plagued my mind until the moment the basement was overflowed with noisy teenagers jamming to Destiny Child, *No, No, No*, Will Smith, *Gettin’ Jiggy Wit It* and Faith Hill’s *This Kiss*. When Trenton showed up with flowers, my favorite CD, and something in a small box wrapped really pretty, my day was complete. Wow, my insides got real bubbly. I thought Marique would die from jealousy when the boys started tussling trying to dance with me and the girls lined up to dance with Darnell. When he felt like dancing. I warned him before the party, no kissing, hugs only. Grandma and Aunt Lillie were coming down the stairs bringing more food just as tussling over who would dance with us next was going on. She said in a booming voice. “Wait a second now. There won’t be any of that kind of behavior down here. And if there is, it will be by me.”

The D.J. turned the music off and the basement fell silent. “Am I making myself clear ladies and gentlemen?”

In unison the basement responded.

“Yea. No problem Mrs. Whitfield,” Someone behind me whispered.

“You fools better cut that mess out. She ain’t playing. Mrs. Whitfield keeps heat in the house. Y’all gonna keep it up and catch a bullet.” The basement could have
swallowed me whole from embarrassment. Soon as the music came back on, things went back to the way they were before, without the shoving.

Satisfied her message was received Grandma and Aunt Lillie went right back up the stairs and shut the door. MoLeeDee put on a slow song to further settle the mood. Trenton took my hand, danced me through the other dancers behind the furnace and out of the public view. The lawn furniture made the space extra tight. As we swayed to the music, the cool wall on my back except where Trenton’s hands were, balanced out my tingly very warm front. Trenton was one of only a couple eighth grade boys that had facial hair and wore cologne. I could’ve smelled him all night. Right as the song ended Trenton kissed me. On the lips. Twice. Darnell saw us when we came out. He gave me a crack head look and with a clench jaw said that we would talk when the party was over and to stay from behind the furnace. Or else.

I’ll never forget my thirteenth birthday. My first kiss on the lips and my bomb party for as long as I live. Everything went off without a hitch and my Grandma Lovie was the happiest I had seen her since my Papa’s journey to the afterlife.

In the early hours of the following morning, Darnell became so ill that he was taken to emergency and admitted to the hospital. By midday Darnell’s condition grew worst. The weight of concern on Aunt Lillie’s face was heavy. By late evening Darnell was in intensive care with tubes running everywhere. I did my best not to break down and cry. If I did, Grandma Lovie and Aunt Lillie would have followed suit and that wouldn’t be good for anyone. Darnell was under constant watch by the nursing staff and doctors.
came and went all night. Monday morning, as Grandma Lovie and I were leaving the hospital so that could get ready for school, Uncle Bennie arrived. Aunt Lillie collapsed in his arms from exhaustion and stress. My body was present at school that day but my mind and concentration were miles away at Darnell’s bedside.

By the time lunchtime finally rolled around my concern for what was going on with Darnell couldn’t be contained. As soon as the lunch bell rang I made a beeline to the phone outside the school office. It took the nurses’ station twenty minutes of my thirty minute lunchtime to locate Grandma Lovie and bring her to the phone. The pressure of being mature and not cry about the situation was wearing off. My voice betrayed my grown up act the second Grandma picked up the line.

“Grandma, how is—” Was all my emotions allowed before the flood of tears took over.

“Little girl calm yourself down.” Grandma voice was worn, comforting but stern.

“My word, have you been carrying on like that all day?”

“No ma’am. Can I please, catch the bus and come to the hospital,” escaped my mouth in exhausted choppy bits.

“No sweetie, finish the school day. Darnell has stabilized and the Doctors may know what’s wrong with him.”

“I can’t even concentrate.” Sometime my whining could wear Grandma down, so I tried that. “Grandma please?”
“No means no. You can come this evening. When school is out go straight home, get your homework and chores done. I should be home by five-o’clock.” The strained tones of her voice caused me to fear that she wasn’t telling me the entire story of what was happening.

“I’m not waiting until this evening.” I snapped. “As soon as I hang up this phone, I’m catching the bus there.”

“Wait a minute now. That birthday you just had, may have led you to believe you’re gown, but I’m the only woman in your walls. So watch yourself.”

“Grandma I can’t take this.” Adjusting my attitude might help.

“Listen, there is something. We need to talk about.”

Just then, the bell signaling the end of the lunch period rang overhead. I tried to get Grandma to hurry and tell me but she heard the bell too. “What, what is it?” I said with urgency.

“We’ll talk when I get home at five. Need to take care of a little business first. Get to class. “Homework and chores completed waiting for you at five. Bye.” My entire day was spent praying that Darnell would recover from this illness and everything could return to near normal. That afternoon was the longest three hours in the history of time.

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The walk, well run, home took half its regular time that day. I wasn’t the least bit interested in basting in the glorious discussions that my birthday party was a hit and
the talk of the school. Rounding the corner to our house I noticed an unfamiliar car sitting in our driveway with a man in it. My pace slowed to have a better look. Only child molesters, rapist or serial killers of some sort would sit in a driveway, waiting. Panicked thought told me to walk cross the street to the Wallace’s just in case. But then I remembered Mrs. Wallace would not answer her door for man or beast while Oprah was on. This would have been another forty-five minutes. Murder could have happened right on her porch. She would not hear nor see it if it didn’t happen during a commercial or a live link from the Oprah show.

As I approached our front steps recognitions of the man in the car became clear. Booker Maddox. As he got out of his car terror tired to overcome me. Before Brother Booker could get “a fine day, how do you do” across his lizard lips I hissed.

“What the Hell do you want Brother Booker.”

“My goodness Baby Jean. That Grandmother of your, is teaching you the foul art of nastiness I see. It’s rather cute coming from your adorable little rump. Slimiest covered his face whenever he talked. Where is Mrs. Lovie this fine day?”

With cunning skill I said. “She was standing in the window loading a gun when she saw you get out the car. I’m sure she’s on her way to the door. Wait right there.” There a convincible straight face lie. Brother Booker whirled around in one scurrying motion to his car.

“Great God almighty. You tells that crazy Grand momma of yours that I’s came here in peace. Cause she’d says that we’z needed to talk bout something impotant. Tell
her I ani’t come back over here unlessin we’z can talk without guns on the table. That’s how grown folks do. Lawd, I ani’t bout to get shot, no mo.”

I stood on the top stair on the verge of wetting my pants trying to hold in the laughter. What happened to smooth talking Brother Booker? He sounded like he fell off a truck from the center of somewhere, where broken Ebonics was the secret tongue to safety. As his car sped out of our driveway, he just missed hitting Papa’s favorite old tree at the end of it.

Once securely behind the front door, I collapsed to the floor in uncontrollable laughter at the thought of Brother Booker speeding out of harms reach then busied myself doing what was asked of me until five o’clock came and went. By six-thirty with no signs of Grandma a frantic call to the hospital was made. While waiting on hold again for someone to come to the phone Grandma Lovie walked in. The countenance of her face reflected the strain in her voice from earlier in the day.

“Is Darnell’s condition still stable?”

“Yes,” she replied, “But not for long if a donor match is not found.”

A donor match? Marique told me about a program she watched where this guy needed a donor match. He had a rare disease that threatened his life. All of his close relatives took the match test, but the man died. None of his family matched because it was discovered he was adopted. Darnell had siblings in excess. Depending on which of the parent I thought was his. So if he needed a donor the Doctors would have a lot to choose from.
“Has Aunt Lillie sent for Glenn Roy or Gayle Renee? The strangest look covered Grandma’s face. “I’m going to pray that they will be the perfect match. Then Darnell will get well, go home and get on with his life kissing on fast tail girls.”

“Why would Glenn or Gayle need to come?”

“Well, one of them is his parent, right? Wouldn’t the Doctors start the donor match testing with them?”

Grandma drew in a deep breath as if what she had to say would take all the strength she could muster.

“I wish it were that simple. This is why your Papa hated lying so much.”

My Papa was full of quotes. Most of which he made up himself. Grandma said Papa started his college career off as a philosophy major. He switched to business when he found out the potential to make money was better. Whenever he caught me in a web of lies he would say the same thing. Having to sit through his lecture was as much punishment as the real punishment. He would say. “Baby Girl, walls built with lies and secrets can’t stand when the paint of truth is applied. Before you know it, they tumble down. Just like the walls of Jericho.” Papa warning cross my mind as Grandma was talking.

“Glenn or Gayle Renee won’t be coming. Neither of them is Darnell’s parent.”

“But, I thought—”
“Darnell has three potential donors. Two of them are right here in The Flats. I need to catch up with that tarpon face Booker and Jeanie Lee if it’s the last thing I do above ground today. I’ve been calling them both all day.”

Jeanie Lee and Booker Maddox were two of the last people I ever wanted to have contact with any day. My dilemma was to figure out a way to tell Grandma that Brother Booker came by and nonchalantly include what I did.

“Grandma, Brother Booker came by earlier. He said something about coming in peace and that he wouldn’t be back until the two of you could talk without guns being present.”

She wasn’t totally listening to me just grunted and said she would call him when she got out of the shower. As I was preparing to line up more questions the phone rang.

“Get that Baby Jean.” She said as she headed up the stairs.

“Hello.”

“Happy belated Birthday, smart butt. Where’s Grandma?”

“Thanks for the late birthday, wish. If you’re calling about money, it should be in your account on tomorrow. If it’s not, call back then. Bye.”

“Don’t hang up this damn phone. I’m returning Mother’s call.”

“She just went in the shower. You’ll have to call back.” Irritating Jeanie Lee long distance was the second highlight of the past two awful days.

“Look, I’m not in the mood for you today. PUT LOVIE ON THE PHONE.”

“Keep your hair on. I’m telling Grandma you called her Lovie.”
As I called up the stairs to let Grandma know to pick up the phone, she came to the railing and announced for me to get ready and to remind her to call me off from school in the morning.

“Jeanie Lee’s on the phone. You’re letting me stay home from school tomorrow?”

“Finally,” She said. “Yes, the doctors scheduled your test for nine a.m.”

A greasy queasiness moved up from my stomach when the battery of questions began whirling around in my mind. Something told me that the walls of lies and secrets kept for years was on the verge of having the paint of truth applied.

As I waited for Grandma to reappear from the security of her room scattered pieces of loose information began coming closer together to reveal the truth. All that was needed was confirmation. Suspicions satisfied, the walls would crumble into shards just as my Papa said they would.

Darnell is not my cousin.

He’s my brother.

Booker Maddox not just a child molester, he’s our Father.

How did Jeanie Lee get impregnated by Booker Maddox, not once, but twice? Papa couldn’t have known this…he would have killed Booker…dead as a doorknob. Jeanie Lee was eighteen years old when…that means she was fifteen or sixteen when she had Darnell. Booker had to be one day younger than dirt. What kind lowdown filthy pedophile? How did Darnell end up with Aunt Lillie and Uncle Bennie? What went on
in these here wall? When Grandma Lovie comes down…she won’t change the subject on me this time. I’ll have my answers today if it is the last thing I do—above ground.

As I sat there waiting for Grandma Lovie’s reemergence the questions battled for the precedence to be presented first. “How did this happening?” I murmured to these here walls “how did I end up with this pack of fools?” Just as the words escaped my lips, Grandma Lovie descended the stairs prepared to go to the hospital. She was oblivious of the storm that awaited her arrival. With each approaching step she took my anger intensified.

“Baby Jean, put your jacket on. We’re headed to the hospital. Jeanie Lee will be here tomorrow evening. Thank God.”

“Excuse me, Grandma.” I said curtly. “I have a few questions floating around in my head that need answers. Right now.”

“Well, I beg your pardon Ms. Whitfield. We mustn’t allow you to walk around with you head floating with questions.” Grandma’s cool as a cumber, matter-of-factly voice could be unnerving. “Just let me warn you. I’ll not be spoken to in a disrespectful manner by you. So watch it.”

“Can’t promise you that. Too pissed off.”

“Pissed off. Really now.” If I had good sense as Grandma calls it I should’ve been more afraid than angry. “Alright let’s hear what you got. You’ve been warned.”

“Darnell is my brother…isn’t he?”

“Yes he is.”

“And that low down Booker Maddox. Is he our father?”
“Yes he is.”

“Is that all your going say? This is some crap Grandma!” Backhanding the framed memory of the newly married couple that someday would become my grandparent felt like the right thing to do, for the way I felt. Regret set in when Grandma bent down and pulled the treasured memento to her chest.

“It is a mess Baby Jean. It is.”

“Did he rape her?”

“Statutory rape by law is rape. Whether she consented or not. But, to answer your question no he did not.”

“Papa, did he know?”

“No.” The vague answers did little to ease the gaps of blanks that demanded to be filled in. As she rose to head for the kitchen my panic rose with her. I grabbed her arm and pushed her back on the sofa.

“No Grandma. I’m not dealing with the spirits today! You’re just gonna have to beat my tail all night if you think I’m gonna let you drink.” My hands and legs were trembling. They must’ve caused my brain to shake loose because out of my mouth flew.

“That’s a sorry way to deal with this crap. Just tell me the truth.”

My barely thirteen year old mouth had written a check that my thirteen year old behind would have to cash. I braced myself for Grandma Lovie anger to rise up and accept my challenge. As I stood there waiting for these here walls to come crashing down all over me, broken tears began to form in Grandma’s eyes. Her defensive demeanor set for battle moments earlier melted into frailty when she looked at me. I
could see the weight of her keeping this secret from the exposure of the light was struck its final blow with my words. She appeared too aged by the second as she deliberated how the sordid story should be told. At that moment she reminded me of the wizard from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. I never liked that movie. Poor Dorothy trapped in a far away land with no way home at the mercy of a wizard who would send a child out to do a man’s work. Witch killing of all things. Why would he send a child, to kill a big bad witch with only the help of three ‘men’ more afraid than him? The only thing good about the movie was Dorothy finding out that the wizard was a fake. Grandma, unlike the wizard, appeared relieved to be exposed.

“From the mouths of babes.” She said in sad, soft brokenness and pulled me onto her lap. “Sweet heart, I would not dare punish you for speaking truth. That’s wrong.”

“Papa would say it’s time for the paint of truth, huh Grandma?”

“Yes, he would have. Then he would’ve said deceit will cloud good judgment if you allow it too. Lord, I loved that sweet man. But—he just wouldn’t have understood.”

“You’ll just know.” I said as my dream came back to me.

“What?”

“Grandma, I have something to give you. It’s from Papa.”

My barrage of questions, anger and lack of the entire story seem less important as I rose to retrieve Papa’s letter. In little bits, I understood how she dealt with the despair, disappointment and desperation she had lived with for fifteen years. Papa. The rivers of libation became Papa and flowed to comfort and ease her pain when he was no longer
there. When I returned with the letter, Grandma was sitting on the floor stroking the battered picture of the young them.

“Sorry for breaking that. Carl’s Emporium has some banging frames...”

“They have some what!”

“Carl’s has really nice frames. I’ll replace this one.” Grandma didn’t like much slang. “Here Grandma, This is from Papa.”

“Sweet Man gave this to you?”

“No. Private did.”

“Been out in the shed huh? I almost killed myself out there fooling around with that ole chest.”

“What were you looking for?”

“I was in there looking for you some business.” Grandma soft chuckle changed the whole bad movie feeling that had filled the walls.

“Baby Jean when we get back from the hospital, I’ll tell you the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Please help me God. Alright?”

“What about the letter?”

“Let me see, this envelope is addressed, For the beautiful eyes of my Beloved ONLY. That sounds like me.”

“Yes ma’am it is. But.”

“But nothing. Let’s get to the hospital and see about your brother.”
Darnell’s life hung in the balance with three hopes of promise between him and Glory. A creepy child molester for a father, a sorry tail loser for a mother. And me.

* * *

Grandma did her best to explain the newly exposed situation the best way she knew how, by bedside chat. Bedside chats were common occurrences in the Whitfield home. Most times Papa was a tranquil observer to these discussions. He’d sit in his comfortable corduroy chair pretending not to listen, nose buried in a boring looking book or his Bible. Unless the conversation was about affirmative action, civil rights, women’s right, sports or church, he sat quiet as a tomb. Up until the night Grandma had to disclose what happen between Jeanie Lee and Brother Booker, my sexual intercourse chat held the number one spot in my memory. Followed closely by how menses transforms a little girl’s body into a woman’s. This chat included a presentation of a beautiful floral hat box loaded to the brim with feminine products in every color wrapper, shape and size, chocolates, cookies, teas and a cute purse. Papa was extra quiet during this discussion. Our chat about sexual activity lasted much longer than it should have. I’d hoped it would be as quick as the talk Marique’s mother had with her. “Just don’t do it and if you do, you’ll regret it.” End of conversation. She gave us each a can of pop and pushed us out the back door.

Grandma Lovie didn’t believe in mincing words. That was what she called telling it straight. When I told her what happened with Marique’s mother, she said that was too
inadequate to instruct on how to fold towels. Then she informed me that a proper discussion would be the next bedside chat. Sure to her word the talk started. “Where shall we begin? Let’s see, intimacy that is brought on by respect and love. Or sex that happens due to every lust and perversion known to mankind. Which do you want to talk about first Baby Jean?” My inside voice screamed neither. No problem with the logistic. Got it. I may have watched old movies at home but overnight sleepovers were spent watching what the host house watched. Guess Grandma wanted to make sure I knew there was a difference. One and a half hours later she was still going strong. Papa must’ve cleared his throat a hundred times during this discussion. Grandma shot him her evil eye and said. “Do you want to handle this Mister Whitfield? Or do you need a throat lozenge?”

“No Sweet Thing. Just a little graphic don’t you think? Hope there’s no hat box filled with pictures. Mercy.” Think Papa was as uncomfortable as I was. Grandma said he was the most prudish man she’d ever know. But those two chats combined didn’t even compare to the one we had about how Darnell’s came to be. Even after this long complicated talk I couldn’t help to feel that someone should’ve been to blame. Held responsible, punished even. That’s how it worked when I did wrong. Restitution—swift and firm. There was one good way to deal with it. Make a visit to Mt. Sinai.

“Hi Papa. Let’s see… Guess what? You have a new grandson… Well he not new like a baby or anything. It’s Darnell. You knew that, right? He’s real sick. Might di..not live much longer.
Where to start? This sucks. Sorry Papa. But we have a mess in our walls. Better
give it to you straight. Darnell has a rare hereditary something or another and if he
doesn’t get a matching donor, he’ll…you know, join you. Jeanie Lee, me and Booker
Maddox were tested as potential donors. Did you know that nasty old low down Booker
was my father? Well he is… He’s Darnell’s father, too. Your daughter had poor taste.
Sorry Papa. I’m just a little pissed off. Sorry. I’m ticked off.

Dang, this is a mess…Here’s what went down. Sorry, this is what happened.
Grandma found out Jeanie Lee was pregnant when she was seven and a half months
gone. She says Jeanie Lee carried like her. Real small. Anyway, Grandma said the plan
was to tell you. Then go to the young man’s parents and tell them what had happen. You
remember Jeanie Lee’s boyfriend at the time, right. Don’t you? Come to find out, Papa
Jeanie Lee’s boyfriend is my friend Trenton’s dad. Guess Jeanie Lee was head over
heels about him. Well, anyway here’s where the story gets messy. Jeanie Lee’s fast tail
was screwing—Sorry Papa, I’ll do better. Jeanie Lee was already pregnant when she had
relations with Trenton’s dad. So she had to come clean about who impregnated her. She
didn’t want Trenton’s dad to take the fall. Guess that was kinda decent of her, huh.
Neither Trenton’s dad or broke down Booker knew she was pregnant. Grandma panicked
and claimed she was afraid you would hold her responsible for allowing a forty-two year
old man to knock up, I mean, impregnate your sixteen year old daughter. And she was
also afraid you would kill nasty Booker. Said she didn’t want her sweet man in jail. So,
she sent Jeanie Lee to Chicago and Darnell was born there. The plan was for him to be
adopted. Then life would return to normal. But Aunt Lillie wouldn’t allow it. She
begged Grandma to tell you. Aunt Lillie decided to keep Darnell until Grandma could work up the nerve. She was never able to bring herself to do it. Two years later, presto, like a bad dream it happened again. Grandma told you my father was a young man Jeanie Lee met while at college. Jeanie Lee following Grandma’s lead planned to put me up for adoption too. Thank goodness you laid eyes on me and home I went instead.

How’s that for a messed up story? Papa, it sounds like this came out of a bad book. I’m still a little confused and angry. If you hadn’t left, Darnell hadn’t become ill and the secret started seeping out all over the place, our walls wouldn’t have the paint of truth on them. It was eating Grandma up. I gave her your letter. Wish I knew what you said. You’re not going to believe this Papa. Grandma’s here.”

As Grandma approached me sitting on the freshly cut grass beside Papa’s head stone I saw her a little differently. “I figured you would be here young lady.” Grandma appeared relaxed. Every hair in place no stress on her brow, eyes clear, sober.

“Yea, needed to clear my head. Papa’s a good listener.”

“Ha, bet he is. Just came from the hospital. Darnell’s doctor says you are the perfect match.”

“You mean I could keep him from, from.”

“Dying. Yes. Are you okay with this?”

“Grandma.”

“Well, this hasn’t been a situation where you’ve made your own choices. It’s the least I could do in asking you.”
“Might not if it was Booker. But, I would do it for Darnel even if I didn’t like him.” A smile spread across Grandma’s face.

“Baby Jean, I have a lot of making up to do all around. Need to start with Buck here. Do mind waiting in the car? Your Papa’s letter is on the dashboard. I’m sure there won’t be a moment’s peace until you’ve read it, so help yourself.”

“I love you Papa forever and ever. Sugar Baby here is cutting our time short. Bye for now.” Grandma tapped my rump as I scurried past her. The tear stained envelope resting with the flap lifting in the tepid spring breeze was mine for the taking. Couldn’t help but feel an invasion to Grandma’s privacy. Really didn’t have a right to know what Papa left for her eyes only. Burning curiosity grew greater than my desire for Grandma’s comfort.

My Dearest Lovie,

The material obtainments received from my Father in this life were few. What he gave me more valuable than gold was applications of which I’ve strived to apply. He told me once that village harmony is maintained when short accounts of wrongs are kept. A young man’s whimsy and lack of understanding prevented me from grasping this particular message, at the time but eventually figured out what it meant. It was my goal that any strife that came between us serve only one purpose, to bond us closer together. Somewhere along the way, I lost your confidence in my ability to have an unconditional understanding given any situation. We’ve had an issue between us that has gone unaddressed and the account is now past due. A better man would not have allowed his
beloved to be laden with the burden of concealment but restored her peace of mind with freeing truth. If you are reading this letter, this deficiency in my character has been taken to my final resting place. Sweetheart, anytime I attempted to broach the topic of our grandson with you, the subject instantly changed. I took this as a sign that you were not ready to discuss. My penitent is heavy for not having more persistence.

As I listen to the soft rising and falling of the sweet breath that captured my heart and watch your beautiful face in peaceful slumber, I know such simple joys as this, sustain me. Every day I ever spent lamenting about the woes that besiege me became diminished by comparison to the day you agreed to be my wife and was miniscule to the day I laid eyes on the children of our love. The sweet memories of our journey together should have been strong enough to hold us in spite of any difficulties that plagued us. Whatever reasons you had for not telling me about Darnell must’ve been severe. Your lack of comfort to reveal these facts to me will be my cross to bear alone.

The depth of grief that overcame you the day Brother died caused me to fear you would have shortly followed. Despair masked by alcohol indulgences only dulled the pain, my Love. What pulled us through that desolate place was our enduring strengths and love. After having lived pass the lost of a child, I didn’t believe there was anything that we could not overcome if we handle it together.

I hope my forgiveness Dear heart for having failed you, is swift.

Please don’t be angry with Lillie for she only provided confirmation to my suspicion. I had to twist her arm to obtain the truth. (Tell her I’m sorry about that, again. She’s still my second best girl.)
Tell Jeanie Lee that I love her beyond any shortcoming she possesses. Tell her that I am confident someday she will find her purpose and live it to its fullest. When she’s ready ‘Private’ is guarding a letter for her. I’m sure Baby Jean’s ability to hunt can find it for her.

Darlin, Baby Jean has been my unmerited joy. Tell her restoration came to our walls the day we brought her home from the hospital. Sweet Lovie, there is no doubt in my mind that sweet Baby is destined for something GRAND. Saw it on her the moment I laid eyes on her. Do you remember her telling me every night in a baby voice “I love you my Papa forever and ever” then kissing my forehead? That little girl melted the few solid spots of my heart left by you and Jeanie Lee. Couldn’t help spoiling her rotten. Would’ve walked across molten lava and broken glass to make her happy. Tell her it’s alright to be angry with love-one's but healing comes when she learns to forgive. She so much like you, Sugar Baby...she’s will give some young man the blues. Ha! Kiss her for me every day and tell her I love her forever and ever.

I need you to tell Darnell that the gig is up. He is now free to shower you with grandson affection. Tell him that my sorrow is immense that I will not be there to see him into manhood. But tell him to remember what I said about my expectation of him being a man of honor, integrity, compassion and unconditional love. Also tell him that when he thinks love has captured him because his heart flutters and his loins rejoice that if she does not speak love’s language of laughter to try again— she’s not the right one. He’ll make us proud. That’s a bright young man, he reminds me so much of Brother. Honey Baby, be sure and give Darnell my diamond cufflinks and anything else of mine he
wants. If you’re not with me when he graduates from college buy him a nice watch...have it engraved ‘Great men do greater things.’

Finally Sweet Lovie, your reading this letter means death has broken the cords of love that held us. Emotions consume me to think I will be separated from your tender embrace. Our life together surpassed what I could have hope for and was more than I deserved.

From the moment I laid eyes on you annihilating suitors’ hopes on the yard of Mother Howard, your presences smitten my being. Your charisma, strength and beauty paled in comparison to the essence of your spirit. I love you my darling and will long to see you again on this side of eternity. May the harmony of our village be restored.

Your lover man.

After emptying the Kleenex box Grandma kept in the car, I wiped my nose on my sleeve until it glistened. Papa wrote her a final love letter and took the blame for the mess on himself. Didn’t understand why he would do that. He had a right to be angry.

Why did Grandma let me read the letter? Was it her way of letting me in? Was this her way of having no more secrets between us? Now what?

* * *

Grandma told me that in ancient Africa that the keeper of family stories, history and records of customs and traditions was the village Griot. The Griot’s yarns, as she
called them, were not only meant to keep score of wrongs, wars and disputes, but provided reminders on how to keep village order, peace and family ties. She said the Griots probably earned the job because they were the nosiest person in the village. For as far back as I could remember, every story ever told me stuck in my head. This one will stay only as a reference on how hiding the truth creates big messes.

Grandma’s struggle to keep me safe from the wagging tongues of the fine folks of Holy Vine Church of the Living God and around The Flats must have weighted heavy on her slight shoulders. Right or wrong, she was the responsible party. It doesn’t totally make sense to me. Maybe Sister Abernathy was right. We might have a generational curse. Wonder what the Griot would have said about the Whitfield clan. Or maybe it’s just grownups do things just like kids do to protect themselves. The nightly visits from the spirits were replaced with bedside chats galore in these here walls. We talked about what The Flats was like when the Whitfield’s move to the community. The do’s and don’ts of proper dating, my plans for college and topics like that. One conversation I plan to have when my stomach can take it, will be with Jeanie Lee’s sorry butt. Sure would like to know her side of this raggedy story. It would be worth seeing this messed up situation in a different light. Even though she didn’t make the choice to give Darnell away, she went along with it. Maybe someday I’ll forgive her, understanding even.

But it won’t be today… it just won’t be today.
Without fanfare my Grandmother Lovie Jean Whitfield slipped quietly into the afterlife. She would say to be judged or receive her final reward in Glory. Going home to Franklin Flats to witness her last days as my Grandmother, then make funeral arrangements was the most difficult task of my twenty-eight years of living. In normal families, the arduous undertaking of handling funeral business rightfully is the responsibility of the loved one’s children. Jeanie Lee, Grandma’s only child and the women that gave me life wouldn’t dare assume the burden of such an adult responsibility. It would wreck her custom of not doing anything responsible or purposeful in a family crisis. She does get credit for having moved back to The Flats to provide honorable mention levels of care for Grandma Lovie prior to her becoming gravely ill.

Tending to the serious matters of continuing medical treatment, proving more harm than help was my cross to bear. Grandma’s once majestic caramel skin gave way to the translucent shell that covered her frame. Refusing to succumb to the illness that racked her body was the twinkle of her eyes and the charm of her beautiful smile.

While keeping watch over Grandma’s during her final night, I sat in an uncomfortable chair adjacent to her bed. As I dozed in and out of consciousness with my head rested near Grandma, she awakened. Her eyes full of recognition spoke directly to my frantic heart. I felt what she would say before her lips parted. In weakened fragile articulate tones she said, “No more”.

FRANKLIN FLATS
“Please Grandma,” I pleaded but she responded, “I love you sweet Baby forever and ever” brushed my hair back and slipped peacefully away. The monitors rhythmic beeping and chiming that lulled me to sleep just moments before stunned me with their reminder of the do not resuscitate order I’d signed. The bond made with Grandma when I entered this world snapped as I watched her leave it. The feel of her lifeless coolness will never leave my mind.

Now came the time and responsibility to select a casket, flowers, set the date and time for a home going service, prepare the obituary, process the insurance paperwork and write the checks. It was mine and mine alone.

* * *

Over thirty-five years had come and gone since Grandma Lovie made her pilgrimage to Franklin Flats from Alabama. The distinction of being the first Black family to purchase a two-story red brick colonial on a tree lined street in The Flats was the Whitfield’s claim to fame. When they moved to the predominantly Jewish neighborhood people of color arrived before the dawn of morning put in twelve and fourteen hour days and left in the dusk of night. They were the domestic help, chauffeurs and gardeners whose labor breathed life into The Flats. In peaceful communal harmony the Whitfield’s lived with the Diamond’s, Steinberg’s, Klingenstein’s and Cohen’s. Transformation in The Flats happened in phases. The first one took place in great haste. Working class Whites opted for the sprawling estates of Franklin Heights they could scarcely afford, when the Jewish community engulfed The Flats. When the ‘Chosen’
decided they too wanted to occupy sprawling estates in Franklin Heights, Grandma said, they moved as if it was the great exodus from Egypt. The ‘Chosen’ then sold their properties to poor White-mountain-jacks that kept a piece of job or caught a pony at the tracks, or Black’s fresh out of low income housing projects that hit the street number and had cash in hand. Even people with ill gotten means could buy a home during the exodus. Grandma’s had this theory that White mountain-jacks and Black folks were actually one in the same group of people. She would tell anyone that cared to listen that mountain-jacks were Black folk’s incognito that managed to have their own state of West Virginia. She would dare anyone to disprove her theory. According to her the gamier the meat the more the two groups like it, that they shared the same habits and like family traditions.

The working class Whites’ exit from Franklin Heights was perfectly fine with the Stein’s, Kline’s and Cohen’s who bought their entire neighborhoods. Once settled in they started the relocation process all over again. The Whitfield’s were approached by several neighbors to make the pilgrimage with them up the grand hill. My Grandfather declined the invitations to depart with the Chosen. He had one of the nicest homes in The Flats at the time and was comfortable right where he was. In times of sweet contentment and sad calamity, the Whitfield’s called The Flats home sweet home. Grandma Lovie’s absence in The Flats made it a little less sweet for me.

* * *
I attempted to calm myself with “This too shall pass” the recalled verse only proved momentary relief as I arrived at Take Perpetual Care Memorial Services. My will to leave my shiny new BMW was consumed by the rush of tears that overcame me from just sitting in the parking lot. I didn’t want to embarrass Grandma’s memory with public displays of uncontrolled grief. Thought it would be undignified, if I couldn’t collect myself before going inside. The plethora or restaurant napkins in my glove compartment would have to do, never had Kleenex when needed. With composure on loan, I proceeded to enter Perpetual Care with fiber fragment of napkins stuck to my eyelashes and nose. Didn’t care.

Perpetual Care had not changed one iota since the last time I entered its doors fifteen years ago. When Grandma Lovie made Papa’s funeral arrangements I was the one that went with her. Jeanie Lee was her usual M.I.A. The gold and brown paisley wallpaper, large mansion mirrors, oak desk covered in brochures, Kleenex box, and the funeral Director, hair a little grayer, aged, were all the same. The only thing new to this familiar place was the visual digital boards hung in every corner. Advertising the services offered by Take Perpetual Care had gone hi-tech.

Director Wilson welcomed me into his office with a clammy handshake and a gentle squeeze to the shoulder. “Good to see you again Ms. Whitfield it has been forever. Allow me to say that you do not bear this lost alone. Your Grandmother was a grand dame to say the least.”
“She was indeed, Director Wilson. Thank you. It’s good to see you again. Although I wish it was under much different circumstances.” There, I appear composed, strong and all in one piece.

“Oh, yes Ms. Whitfield. I rarely see anyone under any other”. More patting on my shoulder. “I hear that you’ve grown into quite the accomplished young lady. The last time I spoke with your Grandmother she told me all about your big promotion.” Clearing the air of chitchat must have been a prerequisite for bringing normalcy to a strenuous situation.

“I apologize for that. Grandma’s best topic was me I’m told. If she ever talked to you about anything else you must admit she spoke her mind. Mrs. Lovie Whitfield was a character, with a capitol C.”

“Oh honey, yes. She was indeed a character. But she was also the salt of the earth.” Wilson’s drippy hands flourish in the air as his lips pouted with delight. His career choice as a mortician saved him from a life as a female impersonator. “And if I may say, she was still a beautiful woman even at her advanced age.”

“She was more paprika than salt and yes, she was still the Belle of the Ball.” I fought the tears that were insisting on creeping into the corners of my eyes. “You know, I’m tempted to have her service program just feature a miniature head shot of her and nothing else.” The humorous memory cancelled the standby tears and replaced them with a warm smile.

“I can’t say that in all my years of being in this business… I’ve ever seen that done.” The faraway look in Director Wilson eyes caused me to chuckle. “Do you mind
telling me, why, you would do that Ms. Whitfield?” He looked as if the thought was mortifying.

“It’s a rather comical story. Now, you see, my Grandma wanted to make sure I stayed abreast of current events here in The Flats when I moved away. She appointed herself unofficial bookkeeper of the good and gone.”

“Oh, my.”

“She kept me informed of the latest deaths in The Flats by sending me pictures cut-outs of the heads of the dearly departed in the mail. When I opened the envelope a little head fell out. No obituaries, no note, just the heads. Of course she knew a near empty envelope with a head in it would entice me to call home to find out what the heck was going on.”

“My, goodness.” I could see Mr. Wilson was not quite getting the gist of the story. “You must admit it was a nice way to keep you advised of what was going on here at home,” he said, with a lisp that could have benefitted from corrective measures long before he spoke with people for a living.

“Wait, you haven’t heard the best part. When I bought her a computer, Jeanie Lee, taught her how to maneuver the Internet and the email system. She then sent me heads via the web.”

“Oh, my.” It appeared that Director Wilson’s conversational responses were limited, not sure why more was expected.

“The subject line was always a little different each time; ‘The Line to Heaven is Single File’… ‘Where will You go when the Final Horn Sounds’… ‘Sleeping Beneath
the Sod’. When I told Grandma she was freaking me out with the messages from the Death Angel’s doom, the messages changed to ‘Bought the Farm’… ‘Kicked the Bucket’… ‘Taking a Dirt Nap and Pushing up Daisies’. I could not persuade her to stop and eventually abandon the effort.” The memory triggered a fit of laughter.

“Well Ms. Whitfield, it seems a little unorthodox. But, if that’s what you want. We’re at your service and aim to please.”

“Oh, no, no, I wouldn’t do that.” It was the second time in twenty minutes the need to collect myself became necessary. “Grandma wouldn’t allow me a peaceful night’s sleep if I did.”

“Wonderful, alright let’s get down to business, shall we.”

Once all the service details were satisfied, Director Wilson led me to the casket display room. As we entered the sliding glass doors the story of the River Styx, Grandma Lovie told me as a child, caused my imagination to kick into high gear. I kept picturing Director Wilson as the toll man calling out, “Paid your toll, cross and claim your soul”. As he was chattering away about the features of each casket, my thoughts were in my purse counting up coins. Maybe that was my mental escape from being in a room covered in wall to wall coffins. The strange part was the entire time I fought the flood of tears just under the surface.

As I was saying goodbye to Director Wilson, Darnell arrived and wrapped me in his Papa like arms. For the second time in two hours I went to pieces. We stood in the main hallway of Take Perpetual Care Memorial Services shedding tears of joy and sadness.
“I’m sorry Baby J. It’s just that we just lost Grandma Lillie and now, Grandma Lovie.” He said wiping my eyes with his monogrammed handkerchief then wiping his nose. “I came as quickly as a flight was available. Was just here two weeks ago.” Darnell looked as dazed as I felt.

“You’re here now. That’s all that matters. Thank you D.”

“She was recovering well. Thought everything was going fine. Then bam, she’s gone.”

“I’m so thankful to have spent the last days with her.”

“I’m sure it made all the difference in the world. We had several heart to heart while I was here. She called them come to Jesus meetings. Ha! There was a lot on her mind. Maybe she knew her time was coming to an end.” Mr. Wilson stood mortician still as we took care of family housekeeping.

“I sorry Director Wilson our Grandmother is rolling over because of my manners. This is my brother Darnell Edwards Whitfield from Chicago.”

“My pleasure to meet you Mr. Edwards Whitfield, welcome to our fair city.”

“Thank you, pleasure to meet you too. Just wish it was under different circumstances.”

“I rarely meet people under any other. If you’ll excuse me, the phone in my office is ringing. Please don’t feel rushed to leave. You folks have a good evening.”

I half expected the office doors to creak open as Director Wilson walked towards them. Take Perpetual Care took on an extra eerie aura when night fell. The marble statues positioned in main hallwway gave the appearance of watchful guards.
“Let’s get out of here. You, Nia and the children are planning on staying at the house right?” The thought of being alone in the house with Jeanie Lee one more day would make this bad situation, worst.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way. Nia and the kids will be here in a few days. I’m sure Jeanie Lee doesn’t want to be alone. I called her when my plane arrived. She told me you were here and gave me the directions.”

“Guess it was the least she could do.”

“Ahh come on. She’s not so bad.”

“You didn’t have to live with her.”

“You didn’t either.” Darnell grabbed me around the neck like we were two kids on a playground. He nudged me towards the doors laughing.

“You are a son of a…”

“Yo Momma.” As long as my silly brother is around the burden of our loss will be made just a little lighter. “Hey, is Nick’s Burgers still around?”

“Don’t know. How do you know about Nick’s?”

“Papa.” We said in unison.

* * *

When I left for college ten years earlier, The Flats although showing signs of inevitable decline, would have been classified as stable city urban. Swift as the great exodus transformation, city urban was now economically depressed. Correction, The
Flats was beyond depressed, it was suicidal. Driving in erratic awe with Darnell following me he must’ve thought I was lost. Landmarks once bustling with vibrant businesses now sat abandoned, dismal and dark. Entire blocks boarded up broken glass lay on the ground as if planted there. Stopping in front of what use to be Nick’s almost caused Darnell to run into the back of my car. Throwing his car in park he scurries to my driver’s window. “Looks like Nick’s is popping tonight. Think we can get a couple to go?”

“It’s closed.”

“It always looked like this. Come on park.”

“Look crazy man, get back in that rented car before you are car jacked. Can’t you see it’s out of business?”

“Like I said, it always looked like that. Baby J. I’m starving.”

“Follow me to The Heights whiner, there’re some very nice places that are open at this hour.”

Franklin Heights appeared as if a barricade was placed around it to ward off the blight that consumed The Flats. Separated by only two miles of hill the two parts of the city were as different as the ocean and land. As we passed Mt. Sinai cemetery I whispered, “Hi Papa. Bet you’re the happiest you’ve been in years. I love you forever and ever.”

Fortunately my favorite all night diner in The Heights was open for business, not busy and prompt with the service. As our meals arrived we settled in. I always
appreciated that awkwardness never kept Darnell and me from jumping right in where our phone conversation left off.

“So, how’s Marique?”

“Married—.”

“I know she’s married quick lips. Besides that, how is she?”

“She’s fine and over you.”

“Ha. I doubt it. Let’s just change the subject. You’re a little touchy about your girl. Besides, I’m happily married too.”

“Let’s do that Casanova.”

“Hey, before I forget. Need to get your signature on a few documents. Jeanie Lee has already signed hers. And there are some papers you need to go through.”

It never ceased to amaze me how Darnell’s mannerisms were so familiar. The way he blesses his with his hand hovering over his plate as if divine intervention drips from his fingers, dabbing his mustache with a napkin and tapping at his wedding ring with his thumb, were all so Papa.

“Documents and papers from where?”

“The shed mostly. Grandma Lovie asked me to clean it out and take that eye sore down. Said she was tired of looking at it.”

“Did you run across Private?”

“No, thank goodness. Someone besides Private had been in there though.” He said, taking large greedy bites.
“Slow down. The food isn’t going anywhere. Probably the thug boys or druggies looking for stuff to sell. Was Papa’s military trunk still in there?”

“Surprisingly it was and undisturbed.” Darnell motioned to our waitress. “Sweet heart may I have another soda? Please and thank you.”

“Glad to hear that. Sweet heart? Do you know her?”

“Nope. When I brought the trunk in the house Grandma Lovie went through most of it. She gave me a few things and asked me put the rest in the basement for you to go though.”

“Gee thanks D. Talk about leaving a job undone.”

“Whatever. She also sent me to the safe deposit box to get the land deed and papers from the lumber mill they had in Alabama.” Our petite young waitress anxious expression with soda in one hand and our check in the other signaled the end of her shift. “Can I get you folks anything else before I go?” She sighed.

“Will you put me in another order of fries and a glass of water, please?” Darnell gently took her wrist and pressed a twenty dollar tip in her tiny worn hand. “This is for you, thanks.”

“I’ll be right back.” She said walking away as if her strength was zapped.

“You know that was a twenty, right?”

“While I’m in town let’s see if we can find you some business. Shall we.”

“Excuse me big bucks. You can pay the bill.”

“Planned too. Grandma said for us to either sell the land and split the proceeds three ways or make sure the taxes were paid annually and keep it.”
“You’re not talking about the big wooded field not far from where Aunt May Lou’s use to live. Are you?”

“That’s the one.”

“Sorry this fell in your lap D. Wonder why she didn’t ask me to take care of it?”

“You were in Panama, Puerto Rico, out of the country on business.”

“Paraguay, silly. We don’t have to go to Alabama do we?”

“We do indeed. The major issues have been placed on hold. It’s advisable that we plan to show our faces by the end of the year. Hand me that ketchup Baby J.”

Our waitress returned with a dinner plate of fries, a pitcher of ice water and one piece of apple pie with steam rising from it.

“Wow, thank you Sweetie. But I didn’t order pie.”

“I know. Sherm, just finished pies for tomorrow thought you’d like a slice. Thanks for the tip. Have a good night.”

“You too, Darling.” Darnell was quite the charmer. He must’ve inherited that trait from greasy Booker. “We can talk details tomorrow. This food wasn’t as good as Nick’s you know.”

“Never would have guessed that by the way you inhaled it. Finish up glutton so we can head home.”

“Hope you have a security code to the house, if you don’t we’ll have to sleep in the car. Jeanie Lee sleeps like a brick.”

“Sure I do. Don’t you?”
“Yea, but I can’t remember it. Baby J. you know we’ll need to have a come to Jesus with Jeanie Lee before this is all said and done. Right?”

“Guess it’s inevitable but I’d rather not.”

“Before we have our little talk, see if you can work on a better attitude.” His loud laughter filled the near empty diner. “You know Jeanie Lee can be real street. Hate for her to have to bust you up.”

“Hurry up fool and finish that food. Wish she would.”  Great—a trip to Alabama something else I didn’t want to do.

* * *

The day of Grandma Lovie’s funeral service, True Vine Church of the Living God was packed to the rafters. There wasn’t room in the church I’d remembered being a much larger place, to put all the flowers sent.  It appeared as if all of Franklin Flats came out for Mrs. Lovie’s send off.  My heart was comforted by the presence of my childhood friends.  In the years since I left our get-togethers were hit and miss.  One by one old neighbors and friends filed by the receiving line with hugs and words of encouragement.  Standing behind me patting my back and handing me tissue was the new Mrs. Dr.  Marique Sisneros in her place as number one sistah friend.  My last visit home I stood behind her as maid of honor.  Thought Grandma Lovie would worry me to the sweet release of death with questions of if a wedding was in my near future.  My deliberate avoidance of Franklin Flats weddings was for that very reason.  Grandma made it her
mission to set up blind, old flames and out of the question wedding dates for me. She’d say, every time I walked pass her she heard the chiming of clocks going off. I’d reassure her that the sound was the friction of my stockings. Her come back quick as a whip was, “That’s why you need a husband. Sorry boyfriends and fly by nights don’t do anything to alleviate friction.” Exchanges such as this, usually lead to the resurrection of our bedside chats. If something was on her mind it was out her mouth. This was her declared motto.

When Marique’s nosey grandmother Sister Hattie Abernathy toddled by to pay her respects, I half glanced in Grandma’s direction to make sure she didn’t sit up. Their decade’s long relationship was a no love loss. Noticed Sister Abernathy didn’t take the only seat I’d known her to have. Pew assignments were a big deal at Holy Vine. Seasoned members had favorite spots that they would ask or physically remove offenders from. Maybe someone had the gall to dethrone her.

As the new vibrant young minster approached the pulpit to settle the masses for the service my heart began to sink. The moment more dire than watching my Grandma leave this world was seconds away. Director Wilson would escort the family for final viewing. The ornate bronze casket with its polished handles and regal ivory interior would close holding within its possession the woman that molded me in every way. Rows of distant cousins, children of Grandma’s siblings were quickly ushered by.

As Jeanie Lee and I rose, my feet felt as if the designer shoes on them were weighted with lead. As we advanced towards the altar decorated with floral acknowledgements, stained glass sunlight shone on my mechanical steps. Once at the
casket Jeanie Lee committed to a partial collapse onto my shoulder. Deviant urgings tempted me to step back and allow the floor to claim her. Before I could act, Darnell came behind us and enclosed us in his Papa like arms. Jeanie Lee’s release of a howl similar to the cry of a wounded coyote in a trap startled me. While my face was buried in Darnell’s chest Director Wilson completed his final preparations and his merciful hands closed the casket lid.

True Vine’s young minster’s former life as a world renowned entertainer caused a metamorphosis to the style of worship. Little attention was paid to the band assembling right before the service started. Blaring jazz renditions of holy hymns shook the rafters followed by hip-hop numbers that rocked the floor. Apparently the band hadn’t made the adjustment to church setting and still played as if in a club atmosphere. As young minster collected himself from a dance that catapulted him to every end of the church, he attempted to start his flamboyant eulogy. “I’ve been told that Sister Lovie was a force to be reckoned with. Uh huh… I’m told that she had a way of getting folks straightened out when they got things twisted. She had a way of makin’ folks slow their roll. Yes sir. Could show them how to kick their way—to the curb. I’m told she spoke her mind.” Robust AMEN’s roared through the masses. “All that may be true. Show you right. But I know something else is true…Uh huh. If a dope dealin’, pill poppin’, sheet slidin’, lyin’ lips and all sinner, like ME can claim a change.” Tell it PREACHER rose and fell. “Then I know a woman the caliber of Sister Lovie can make the same claim. Don’t you doubt what she had, was real. Can I get a witness?”
Members that knew Grandma for years stood to their feet and applauded. “I won’t leave here today with my spirit vexed and provoked.”

Don’t do it Reverend, don’t do it echoed from the choir stand.

“Sister Songbird, come and bless us with Sister Lovie’s favorite song. Sing it, like you’re being paid! Help us to rejoice. A soldier has finished her fight and gone home. Glory to GOD! Sing Sister Sing!”

The first stanza of Sister Songbird’s song was heard loud and cleared, but was quickly hunted down by the band’s crescendos which captured her voice and rendered it mute for the remainder of the selection. In an attempt to match the band, Sister Songbird appeared to eat the microphone to be heard. When the band quieted and allowed her to thank the crowd her once strong voice was no more than a squeak of a mouse. The pain stricken expression on Sister Abernathy’s brow explained her change in seat assignment. Grandma would have said. “That music is so loud I can taste it.”

Darnell, sitting beside me with Jeanie Lee and his wife Nia on the other side whispered in my ear. “Hey, when the band takes intermission. I’m going to get a round of drinks. You want a gin and juice?”

“No.” I whispered back, “bring me rum and coke and some wings.” Humor once again had become our instrument of defense against the tensions of the moment. By the time the song concluded tears trickled down both our faces. Not from grief.

* * *
As we were preparing to leave the church for the cemetery, Mr. and Mrs. Cohen’s grandson Max brought Ms. Ruby over in a wheelchair to greet me. Ms. Ruby was worn but supreme as ever. Max’s dad grew up with Jeanie Lee, Max grew up with me. Melvin and Esther Cohen were most likely responsible for the Whitfield’s warm welcome to The Flats. The extra wealthy old Franklin Flats family owned Levenson’s Corporation and the upscale department store downtown. Papa had the utmost respect for Mr. Cohen and often said he was as good as people get. Both Mr. and Mrs. Cohen were short and balding. He liked fine Italian suits, Stacy Adams shoes and wore a scowl of irritation, except when he was in the presence of Ms. Ruby. Mrs. Cohen was an ill-tempered voluptuous woman with dark tucks of cotton candy hair and a voice like a siren. On a clear summer day she could be heard as far as two blocks away, according to Grandma.

Mr. Cohen hired my papa when other companies would not hire what some considered an over-educated, well spoken black man. Papa was treated with respect and promoted often for work well done. Mr. Cohen even sold my grandparents his in-laws home when they moved to Miami Beach. It was never shared with me what happened in Alabama that prompted Papa to relocate his young family to this area. What I was told was that he accepted a lucrative position at this company, knocked the dust of Alabama off his shoes and moved. The unexpected happened the first day Papa arrived at work suited up and smelling good. Papa said the panicked look on the receptionist face when he made his acquaintance should’ve been a heads up of what was coming. Making a beeline to the company owner’s office she nearly tripped and fell. The owner came to the
lobby, greeted Papa with a handshake and handed him a lie with the other. Told Papa that he had been trying to reach him, had to rescind the offer but would surely keep his resume on file for future positions. Mysteriously the job just up and vanished. Papa said he didn’t hear half the excuses the owner was offering. Said his thoughts were clouded with how to tell Grandma what happened. This debacle was going on right before the eyes of Mr. Cohen, who was sitting in the lobby watching it unfold.

Mr. Cohen stepped between Papa and the owner and said. “John, Levenson Corporation has a bigotry clause that necessitates me rescinding our business with you. Sorry you’re such a shmuck.” Then he took Papa by the shoulder and led him to the door with John one step behind begging his pardon. “What is your name young man?”

“Herschel Whitfield, Sir.”

“Are you the same Herschel Whitfield whose name is on that office door there and that new parking spot out front?”

“Apparently not… Mr.?”

“Melvin Cohen. I tell you what. Will you meet me at my office at two o’clock today?”

“Is your company hiring?”

“It certainly is. Here’s my business card.”

Papa said John was on the verge of a mental breakdown and was apologizing all over himself. Grandma told Papa he should have told John to kiss his... boots. Or something more colorful.
Papa and Mr. Cohen often had lunch together after both retired. Grandma always sent a dessert of some sort. Papa understood why others thought Mr. Cohen a tyrant. He could be a hard pill to swallow on the best of days. Max said his grandfather was the meanest man on earth. But one thing he could thank him for was his inherited entrepreneurial drive. Max did maintenance, lawn care, snow removal and sold drugs to the tenants that rented Mr. Cohen’s houses.

Papa said for years he wondered why Mr. Cohen took a chance on hiring him. During one of their lunches he asked his aging employer. “Melvin, you can’t possibly know how much I’ve appreciated your confidence in me over the years. But one thing has puzzled me.”

“What’s that?”

“Why did you hire me given the climate here when it came to employing minorities? You didn’t know me from Adam?”

“I would’ve been a fool not to.”

“Why is that?”

“Herschel, a dear friend once told me that courage and integrity only dwells in the noblest of men. You possess both. As a young man I watched a treasured friend beaten. Didn’t intervene because fear paralyzed me. He later died from his injuries. I went to my friend’s sister distraught with grief every day for weeks, begging her forgiveness for my mortal failing. Everything in my gai platz told me that if that would’ve been me beaten, my friend would’ve protected me or died trying. Ruby told me that I owed her no
debt— that the debt I owed was to mankind. She said for the rest of my life, opportunities to show courage and live by integrity and secure its survival would be mine.

“What a wonderful testimony.” Papa said he was near tears.

“I haven’t shared that story in forty years. Just tried to live like Ruby said I should.”

Mr. Cohen died a few months later. The impression he left on Papa was passed on.

* * *

The second I saw Ms. Ruby being rolled towards me in the church, memories of our last family vacation together flooded my mind. My attempt to show Grandma my gratitude was my excuse for the extravagant vacation we took. No expense was too high or vacation spot to remote or denied. We’d bask in the glory of each vacation taken to Greece, Mexico, Africa and the endless blue hair cruises galore. When Papa died, dealing with Grandma’s alcoholism became my way of life. Her struggle to regain sobriety ended my childhood. She spent the longest trying to make up for the situations she created. I’d moved on, but Grandma had a harder time doing the same. We’d spend the first day together purging her conscience. Guess she wanted to make sure we were still in good standing with each other. Short accounts were kept between us. Transgressions of the past were just that. For her, my forgiveness and forgetfulness was the cure. The only downfall to our vacations was Grandma’s insistence on having Jeanie
Lee included. My relationship with her was lukewarm at best and avoiding her ranked right up there with Franklin Flats weddings. Conveniently estranged, Jeanie Lee liked it that way and I loved it.

Grandma would tell me, “Just because she didn’t raise you doesn’t change the fact that she had you. Women had options back then. She could’ve sent you back to the Maker. Period.” No need to banter a dispute with Mrs. Lovie Jean Whitfield. Couldn’t win.

Acapulco was Grandma’s favorite vacation spot. We took two sometimes three vacations a year and Acapulco was always her first choice. Sitting on the warm white sands adsorbing the glorious shades of aquas greens and blues and sipping endless rum punch Grandma remembered a message she was to deliver from Ms. Ruby. “Baby Jean, before I forget, again…” With the exception of my family and the people in The Flats no one still called me Baby Jean. I shut my laptop to give her my full attention.

“Yes, Mrs. Sweet as honey Lovie Dear.”

“Don’t you dare mock my Sweet man’s memory, young lady!”

“I’m not mocking Papa’s memory. Come on now. You know those Sweetie Baby names still get you going.” Grandma’s attempt to suppress a smile failed miserably.

“Shame on you Baby Jean. Your Papa was the finest man that ever walked this earth. Lord knows, I loved that sweet thing. Mercy, that man could...if I thought I could get another one just like him I’d…” Watching Grandma enjoying her moment was like witnessing a child picking one sweet treat from a case full of sweet treats.
“See now, you have gotten me all moisten up with silliness.” The soft creases around her eyes did little to diminish her beauty. Hope she passed along the good genes.

“Oh Lovie my pet, you’re not being silly. Hey, if you still have the hot’s for a man deceased fifteen years. You just have the hot’s”

“If, I thought I could get away with it, I’d wear your smart mouth out, right here on this beach.” Grandma placed her shades on the bridge of her nose as if acting for a camera. “Be glad I no longer carry on with inappropriate behavior. Now, what was I saying before you started with that stuff… Oh, yes. Ruby gave me a package for you.”

“Oh Lord, Grandma. I hope you didn’t open it, did you?” Panic filled my voice for a package from Ms. Ruby was the equivalent of a friendly handshake with Lucifer.

“As a matter of fact, I did not. For thirty years I’ve had no issues with voodoo Ruby and I don’t plan to start having them at this stage of my life. For the second time in twenty minutes Grandma searched for the resort’s beach waiter. She loved eating on the beach. “When we get back to the suite remind me to give it to you.”

“I’ll try to remember to do that.” That wouldn’t happen.

“Oh, Ruby said to tell you, that people in the mountains need the same important air as the people in the valleys. Did you promise her a jar of mountain air Baby Jean? Great, here comes the waiter.”

“Grandma his name is Raul” Raul didn’t wait to be summoned and slowed his pace as he drew near. Grandma hadn’t allowed him pass us once in three days.

“May I get something else for you Mrs. Whitfield?” Raul’s smiling sun kissed face was a welcomed distraction to the conversation.
“Why yes, Raul, dear you may.” Hopefully Grandma’s resurrected southern charm took the edge off Raul having to wait on her hand and foot so often. “Let’s see. Is it time for lunch?” She said, looking at her watch. “Yes, good. I’ll have one of those wonderful burgers from the outdoor grill station, papas fritas and a passion fruit smoothie. The last one didn’t have enough fruit on it so be sure and tell someone about that.”

“So sorry I’ll make sure it’s done correctly. May I get the other Misses Whitfield’s anything?”

“I’ll have the same.” Jeanie Lee said from her reclined position under her oversized beach hat.

“Nothing for me Raul. Gracias for your attentive service to my Abeula.” I figured sincere appreciation along with extra generous tips went a long way.

“It is my pleasure. I’ll be back in a few moments.” His darn good looks and Acapulcan accent could provoke daydreams.

“Look now, don’t you promise Ruby anything you don’t plan to deliver. That woman’s been known to make folks hair fall out. Someone told me she caused this man’s prostate to rupture.”

“No Ma’am, I did not make any promises.” A package from her couldn’t be good. Her name alone struck instant terror in my mind. Ms. Ruby no last name that I ever heard of, worked as the live-in baby sitter/housekeeper/cook/ for the Cohens. Ms. Ruby came to The Flats by way of Haiti. Her smooth roasted coffee bean skin was dark as the middle of midnight. Her eyes and teeth white as the moon. The fine linens and silks she
wore adorned her thin body like entwined licorice. Every outfit had a colorful scarf she
wrapped her head in as hair fell over it. When she spoke her voice was dense as smoke.

According to Grandma she kept a pocket full of chicken bones and cat’s teeth ready in the event someone was foolish enough to cross her. Whispered rumors assumed that Ms. Ruby was Mr. Cohen’s long time mistress. Ms. Ruby decided she needed a car to run the family’s errands and received a car as nice as Esther’s. She had her own store charge, rumored again, that Mr. Cohen paid off each month. Grandma claims that when the Cohen’s moved to Franklin Heights, Ms. Ruby was provided ‘quote-unquote’, a “house for her years of faithful service.”

Ms. Ruby was the only person I’d known Grandma to make any effort to stay on the good side of. When Ms. Ruby asked Grandma to prepare a German chocolate cake her request was always granted. Grandma rarely baked in the summer because it made the house too hot, but she did if Ms. Ruby asked. Jeanie Lee ran errands for Ms. Ruby just as I did growing up. The deliveries sealed in envelopes, boxes, bags, small packages wrapped in foil and plastic bowls containing drippy concoctions went all over The Flats, daily. Grandma instructed me to never eat anything she offered. If she insisted, my instructions were to thank her generously bring whatever it was home and throw it away. Once, my curiosity of my delivery got the best of me. “Baby Jean, please take this container over to Mrs. Diamond on Fullmont Avenue. Don’t you be stopping along the way pretty girl. Do you understand me?” Ms Ruby said in her heavy barely audible accent.
“Yes, Ma’am I’ll go straight there.” I said trying to hurry out the door. After turning a couple corners, I flipped open the lid. Inside were fish heads, bloody innards, intestines with poop still in them, the tail of a rat, chicken feet with the nails still on and a gray eyeball with veins hanging off it. I dropped the container and managed not to throw up on the contents. Took a stick and pushed everything back in the container, dirt and all.

A package from Ms. Ruby could not be good. I intentionally neglected to remind Grandma about the package when we returned to the suite.

***

After burying Grandma Lovie, I made up my mind that visits home to The Flats would be few and, far between and only for special happy occasions including weddings. My grandparent’s home just didn’t feel the same without at least one of them in it. With my leave of absence from work, extended concentration on settling matters in The Flats and give attention to whatever needed done in Alabama could happen. I suggested to Darnell that he not fly home to Chicago because we could spend time together if we drove him back. The strong need for emotional closure was upon me. We tried sitting down with Jeanie Lee to find out if she was staying in The Flats and wanted the house. She wasn’t in the mood to deal with that kind of decision. No big surprise there.

Jeanie Lee and Darnell got along like long lost friends. She jokingly told him that she was going to start calling him Brother because she was much too young to have a son his age and that being with him was like having her own brother back. Brother? The two
of them would giggle and talk for hours. They even prepared meals together. Darnell tried his dead level best to include me. I just couldn’t get with the program.

Conversations between Jeanie Lee and me were strained on good days. Besides, luggage weighted down with old hurts, distrust and ill feelings had years to ferment and went deep. She ignored me as best she could and I let her.

Our ride to Chicago was epic Whitefield story telling at its finest. My travel itinerary was to go through the contents of Papa’s trunk a bag at time, interpret the navigation system and top the last story Darnell told. “Dang D. and Grandma used to say I was the village Griot.”

“She told me I was the Chief advisor because of my ability to keep a secret.”

“Did she insist you read George S. Schuyler’s Black Empire?”

“You know she did. It was a good novel.”

More questions than answers filled the confinement of the car as I sorted through each document from the bags.

“Hope you have a shredder at your house.”

“Sure do an industrial size shredder. Have to keep it locked away from the kids.”

“Men and their toys.”

“Nia said the same thing. Guess this automobile isn’t a toy uh? Did you see Booker at Grandma’s service?”

“Bank statements, tax filings, payroll records, purchase orders. What went on with this mill?”
“Did you hear me?”

“Affirmative.” Darnell’s mischievous nature would start a controversial topic just to get a reaction. “Booker did not make today’s conversation roster. Sorry. It appears that this mill was a legitimate business. I’ll need details any reference material and sources. Are there any?”

“Wow, you just morphed into uptight corporate troll right before my very eyes.”

“Darnell J. Edwards Whitfield that was uncalled for. Now quit stalling.”

“Yes Lillie B. Edwards. You’re not going to beat me down are you?”

“Come on D. Something tells me this is serious.”

“Let’s see…where to start.” Darnell’s expression became Papa-like solemn.

“Papa had undercover ownership of a lumber mill that also fronted as the syrup mill.”

“Undercover? Was Papa working as a secret government agent or something?”

“Do you want to hear this or what?”

“Shutting up. Go on.”

“You probably shouldn’t get rid of any of any those documents. We might meet with a fight in Alabama and have to prove that we’re the rightful owners of the property. Figure we should scan the documents catalog them by years and create a portfolio of some sort.”

“Who’s morphing now?”

“We’re two of a kind. Anyway, Papa’s mill operated with a front man that just so happened to be his first cousin, Clive Meadows. Clive was Caucasian, but their fathers
were brothers. Papa and Clive grew up together and always got along. Papa’s daddy was his family’s black sheep. He didn’t care to measure up to family standards and his affinity for women of a different shade didn’t help his case either. Papa had a few brothers and sisters throughout the district. A couple of the siblings had their dad’s last name, sued the old man’s family for their cut of the estate and won. Of course they had to take the money and leave town. Papa’s wit and Grandma Lovie’s tenacity was their ticket out. It was acceptable for a black man to own a syrup mill but lumber was out of the question.”

“What kind of...”

“Come on now Baby J. Think about it. They were just barely out of the sixties and we’re talking Alabama. Blacks could own a bar-b-que shack, a corner store that kept the owner broke or Harpo’s juke joint which was a weekly shoot-em up death pit that kept the authorities breathing down the owners backs. The occupations available were pimp or preacher.”

“Wait, before you go any farther where is this information coming from?”

“Papa told me about Clive. Grandma told me about the mill and Jeanie Lee filled in the blanks.”

“Imagine that.”

“By the way, she’s on the conversation roster for today so get prepared. Papa finished at Howard University and went into the service. When he returned Grandma was finishing up at Howard and they quickly got married to the disapproval of Aunt May Lou. She didn’t think Papa measured up to her standards of who Grandma Lovie should marry.
His family didn’t have money. Grandma’s family didn’t either but they had land with timber on it. Uncles Rooster, Bones and Grandma Lillie moved to Chicago with their share of the profit when some of the land their parents owned was sold. That’s how Aunt May Lou was able to give the appearance of wealth. Compared to other folks there, she had it going on. Did you know Marique’s people are from Alabama and were good friends with—”

“Yes I did. Hey, D. stop at the next resting plaza. Gotta go.”

“According to Jeanie Lee, Aunt May Lou and Marique’s people deserved each other.”

“What did we do to deserve her?” I said before the sensor could filter the comment.

“You sure give Jeanie Lee a lot of power and quit interrupting me. So, the lion’s share of the remaining land was Grandma Lovie’s. Aunt May Lou’s sold her share a few parcels at a time and lived off the interest. Papa, being the business man he was went to May Lou and told her what he and Grandma’s plans were. She told him that he was a bigger fool than he looked, which as you know, of course, was like throwing gas on fire.”

“Okay, so how was it kept a secret that they owned the mill?”

“Do you still need to stop?”

“Yes. Do we have time to sit and eat?”

“Baby J. I’m trying to get home. What, we can eat in your car?”

“Look dude, I want to stretch my legs and sit down to eat. It’s not fine dining. It won’t take hours. Don’t make me get ugly with you.”
“You can get uglier?” The whack on Darnell’s arms with the Whitefield’s nineteen seventy-three tax return caused him to veer.

Stopping at the resting plaza was my way of digesting talk of Alabama. As a child trips to Alabama were a no vacation dreaded occasion. I told Papa once that Alabama was too, hot, dark, and too slow. He said I felt like that because of not growing up there. My first encounter with plastic on furniture happened at Aunt May Lou’s museum. Vivid are the memories of being instructed by Aunt May Lou to “sit still on my davenport before I give you something to squirm about…looking like Jeanie Lee spit you out”. The blond brocade monstrosity with claw feet ready to attack faced its haunting high back mate with arm rest hooks held stiff. Both covered with the hottest plastic designed to adhere to the bony thighs of a little girl. My happiest moments in Alabama were leaving it for home. Darnell adored Alabama. He said there was no better food on the planet and the fresh air was intoxicating. As we sat to enjoy our quick lunch Darnell resumed his telling. “Salad, salad, salad is that all you eat?”

“I could say the same for you with meat and some kind of starch.”

“Hey, I’m a growing boy, need the vitamins.”

“Keep it up and you’ll be growing in the wrong direction.”

“Naw, I have good Whitfield genes, tall, lean and fine.”

“Talk about arrogant. Finish telling me about the mill.”

“Ha. What did you ask me?”

“How was Papa’s ownership kept under wraps, Bird brain?”
“Okay, so the mill was named Meadows Miles. This gave the impression that Clive was running it. Now it wasn’t hush-hush within the community that Clive and Papa were related. Initially Grandma’s land was sold to an out of state Corporation not familiar to the locals. One of Papa’s college service buddies was an attorney and set ‘The Corporation’ up.

“Wait. How did Papa get Clive to buy into a business venture without letting him in?”

“Papa told Clive that this new company was coming to town and that he knew one of the owners, which was true. Enticed by an offer to get in on the ground floor, Clive’s interest peaked. The offer to waive any buy-in monies for the use of his name and to be considered for a management position sealed the deal. Clive jumped at the chance to be a big shot and bought it hook line and sinker. Papa was ahead of his time. He had one of his one white service friends come to town posing as a corporate head to conduct interviews and do hiring based on who Papa identified. Both Clive and Papa were employed as managers and Grandma Lovie was hired in the office. It was Papa’s idea to include the syrup mill to deflect from him being a manager. This way there was hierarchy in place that put Clive in the proper pecking order. Clive didn’t buy into this theory and treated Papa as an equal ‘partner’.”

“That was decent.” Where did the money come from to build the mill?”

“It came from ‘The Corporation’. Are you ready to get back on the road?”

“Need to make a pit stop first.”

“You have the bladder of a puppy. Hurry up woman.”
The retelling of this part of the Whitfield’s life filled me with pride. My grandparents calculating cunning tenacity to own a business during a period that would have prevented such an ambition was impressive. As we pulled back onto the highway Darnell informed me that my turn to drive was quickly approaching.

“Okay, the actually mill was built with monies from the sale of trees on the land. It wasn’t a huge structure or anything. The blueprints should be in some of that paperwork you’re going through. This is the best part ‘The Corporation’ offered on-the-job training in carpentry and construction under the condition that blacks be included in the training and paid salaries equal to whites. Clive caught flack, but put the blame on ‘The Corporation’. He eventually found a spine and advised the grumblers that if they had issues with the policy they could quit. This was a major deal because most of the men made their living by the field. Having a skill trade beat farming any day. I couldn’t image having to live by the sweat of my brow. That just wouldn’t work for me.”

“Heaven forbid Mister Fine do anything strenuous for an occupation.”

“Whatever. So once the mill was completed production started right away. Meadows Miles entered into contracts with various companies in the district as a supplier of lumber and lumber products right in their own backyard. The next nearest mill was two days away. Of course, business boomed because of the location. It went over so well that Clive was voted business humanitarian of the year by the rotary club. The honor praised Clive for promoting racial harmony and good will. Grandma added and for allowing his colored cousin to make a few pennies, chickens and a bag of grits in exchanged for pressing syrup in back of his big dollar business.”
“Wow, does that sound like Grandma or what.” I said smiling. “D. I’m missing her.”

“She was a trip.”

“So how did it end that only the property is left? Did the grandparents sell it off?”

“Sit tight. I’m getting there. Things went extremely well for a few years. Then Clive got it in his head to undercut ‘The Corporation’. Buck he said. Did you know that was Papa’s nickname?”

“Yes. Grandma called him Buck on occasion.”

“Oh, well, Clive said there was no reason they couldn’t run the mill as ‘our’ own. He wanted to offer to buy ‘The Corporation’ out, expand the mill and maybe diversify. He submitted an absurd proposal and of course ‘The Corporation’ sent a cordial decline. The original plan was to run the mill five to seven years and sell it out right to Clive. Papa wanted to make sure all the company’s debts were paid off and there would be enough money left over for whatever his next business venture would be. If I ever forget the expression on Papa’s face or the tone of his voice when he told me this next part it’s because I’m old and senile.”

“Maybe I don’t want to hear this part then.” My senses indicated the best part of the story was over and the ending wouldn’t be a happy one.

“Can’t stop now. In the words of Grandma Lovie, fasten your seatbelt Sweetheart. Clive never let on that he was disappointed in ‘The Corporation’ rejection to buy them out. Went on like business as usual. Papa told me that Clive showed up one night at his door with wild eyes, hair all over his head, smelling like several kinds of
accelerants and fumes and told him that he’d shown ‘The Corporation’ how they did business in Alabama. Said the mill was gone. Papa said he nearly ran out the house in his underwear. Baby J. five men died in that fire.”

“Oh Lord. Knew it would be something horrible.”

“They were working overtime doing inventory and cleaning the machinery. Papa had started doing inventory late that afternoon and asked a few of the men to help him. When he called quitting time around ten that night the fellas told him to go home. They told him there was only the basement pit left and once that was finished, they were done. One of the men told Papa. “Buck you go on home, now. Joe, can you hear that hot buzzin’ in the air. That’s Lovie cussin’. She gonna be waitin’ at the doe with a fryin’ pan ‘cause Buck is home so damn late.” Papa said, the men had a good laugh about that and he did too. Papa knew if the men were still in the pit when Clive torched the mill they couldn’t get out. Clive’s truck was blocking both cars in the driveway so Papa jumped in and drove off with him hanging off the door. When they arrived at the mill Papa said he hadn’t seen fire bombs that big. They couldn’t get anywhere near the engulfed mill. Clive was slumped on the dashboard his head looking away from the mill. Papa pulled him out and told him that five men were inside. Papa beat Clive to a pulp. By the time the volunteer fire department arrived at the scene all that was left, was the eerie glow of fresh death over the night sky.”

“That’s enough D.” Opening my glove compartment I remembered my supply of restaurant napkins was exhausted at Take Perpetual Care.

“Let me finish Baby J.” He said softly. “The worst part is over.”
“Go on.” Sniffles filled the space between Darnell and me.

“Papa told me that Grandma picked him up hours later but he didn’t have a clue how he ended up on that road. I asked Grandma about that night my last time to The Flats. She told me Papa looked deranged when she found him on the service road. His eyes were near swollen shut, his knuckles gashed and bleeding, he only had on one shoe and his lips were trembling as if he were convulsing. News in a small town travels so fast that sometimes the facts don’t always go with it. She’d heard that Papa pushed Clive into the fire after he beat him up. So of course she was scared out of her mind.”

“So he and Clive were fighting? My Papa was not a violent man. He didn’t beat him up right?”

“No, he kicked Clive’s skull in. He promised Grandma that he would never take vengeance on another human being ever again. When they saw Clive the next day he was missing teeth, had slits for eyes, nose was broken, arm was in a sling and someone told Grandma, he was urinating blood. Clive never pressed one charge against Papa. They drove to all five of the men homes that night before they went home. Of course the news beat them there. She said they barely made it back to the car each time before they both would burst in to tears.”

“Were all the men black?”

“No. Only two of them were. They went to every single funeral. Papa being the conscientious man that he was made sure all the men had accidental and life insurance policies. Mill work was a dangerous occupation. When the insurance check came for the mill Papa took monies from that and had if forwarded to the family as well.”
“What happened to Clive. Was he charged with arson?”

“Nope. That’s a whole other story. You know he had the nerve to ask Papa if he thought ‘The Corporation’ would rebuild. Clive Meadows was left empty handed. The worst part was the other men loss their decent jobs.”

“So, they left for The Flats after that.”

“Not long after that.”

“So we need to go to Alabama for—?”

“Clive’s son and grandson have staked ownership on the property. They’re contesting that ‘The Corporation’ abandoned and or gave the land to their Dad. Of course they have no proof of this claim, but they are trying to build and sell off some of it. They’ve even gotten a jack leg lawyer to work on their behalf. I’ve had a cease and desist order filed.”

“But we can sell it to them. If we want?”

“Sure, it’s prime land but to be honest with you Baby J. I’m not feeling it. What Papa tried to do was bigger than making money. Something deep within me is saying not to sell that property to the Meadows. He told me, “young man, never comfort a snake because it’s the nature of a snake to bite. If you are wise you will always set your expectation high that some men will disappoint you. Most times they’ll live up to the expectations and rarely disappoint. Then he said that I should always measure a man’s motives.”

“Need a nap D. I’m not even going to try and top that story.”

“I’m on to you. You have no intentions on driving do you?”
“No sir.” The truth was my head was spinning with information overload. Sleep would be the only way to release it.

The week spent in Chicago was just the distraction needed. With family rounds made, enjoying the delightful bliss of my niece and nephew provided a buffer for the unpleasant tasks that loomed. The mischief makers were too young to understand their daddy had two Grandmas that were sisters. Explaining this entangling drama to them will be an interesting story. I’m sure Darnell will tell it in Whitfield fashion. Evenings spent in leisure with my brother and his family caused me to reminisce about the summer evenings long ago in Franklin Flats. With sleeping children draped across our legs exhausted from laughter our conversation became unexpectedly solemn. “D. do you ever wonder what we would have been like if we were raised together?”

“We probably would’ve been like any other siblings. Fights and all. Besides you may have disliked me, just like Jeanie Lee and Booker. Ha.”

“You are such a clown. But you might be right.”

“We did grow up together in a way, just from a distance.”

“I just can’t help but feel that so much time was lost.”

“I think given the situation we’ve made good use of the times we’ve had. Too be honest with you, our situation wouldn’t have been one I’d picked for myself, but I’m the better for it, fortunate even. Baby J. family is what you make it.”

“But Jeanie Lee.”
“No buts. Give her a chance. By the way thanks again for the donation and my chance at life.” Darnell pulled his daughter closer to his heart and kissed her head.

“With the way you’re siding with Jeanie Lee, I might want my donation back.”

“I’m serious Baby J. If you hadn’t been there, I’d be your long lost cousin.” Talk of a transplant that sealed our bond felt as if it belonged to another life. “You can think that was a circumstance, it wasn’t. It had a purpose.”

“But didn’t you ever long for a mother and father?”

“Sure I did. But what I had was just as good. Bennie and Lillie Belle Edwards showed me how big hearts work. Their great nephew was raised as their grandson.”

“Yea, but didn’t you think it was strange that we didn’t know about each other until I was thirteen?”

“I knew you were my sister when you were seven.”

“What?”

“I was nine when Papa told me. He gave me the option to come live in The Flats. Don’t know how that would have happened, because I was still Grandma Lovie’s little secret.”

“Why didn’t you want to come?”

“In my child’s mind Papa and Grandma belonged to you. We grew up in our rightful villages. I got the better of two villages.” Looking down at Darnell’s son asleep on my lap something deep within me knew he was right. “Help me put the kids to bed. Nia loves it when you’re here. The children get their Auntie J. and Nia gets a break.”

“You’re a good father D., but you better be a good husband too.”
“Look, I had two of the best husband models ever. Herschel Whitfield or Bennie Edwards won’t have to get out the grave to have a come to Jesus with me.”

“Good, you make sure they don’t.”

“Speaking of husbands… Ya think maybe I’ll get a brotha-in-law and a few nieces or nephews myself?”

“Grandma put you up to that didn’t she?”

The sting death delivered was dulled by my brother’s love. This wasn’t luck, fate or coincidences. Papa would have called it a blessing. Grandma would have called it the best of living. Boy, did I miss her.

“Hey, by the way, put Booker on the story roster for our Alabama trip.”

“Sure, then we can flush the toilet of conversations about our donors.”

You’re just mean, Baby J. Just plain ole mean.”

* * *

The itinerary for the ride home was to come up with an amicable approach of dealing with Jeanie Lee. Darnell and I spent several unproductive hours working on a reconciliation plan. He insisted that Jeanie Lee was worth getting to know. Doubted it. I did however want to know how Jeanie Lee hooked up with ole Methuselah Booker Maddox.

As we embarked on the daunting task of going through Grandma’s belonging we stirred around each other like pit bulls too old to fight. Stifling back tears I caressed the
remnants of grandma’s life. Jeanie Lee must have detected the nostalgia on my face and broke into my fragmented thoughts. “Baby Jean, Do you …”

“Jeanie Lee, my name is Lynette, Jean or if you simply must have a pet name for me Lyn, will suffice.” This was the first time the two of us had really been alone without a referee. Long as Grandma was between us we knew better than to fly at each other’s throats. The runway was now cleared for takeoff.

“Oh, excuse me most important exalted one. Please allow me to try again. Ms. Whitfield, how’s that? Your mother, would like to inquire if your plans include keeping contact with your former associates?” Jeanie Lee’s sarcastic grand airs were a welcomed alternative to the obscene vulgar verbal assaults she could deliver when threatened or disrespected. Jeanie Lee’s take on putting people in their place bordered on character assassination.

Amiable efforts weren’t working for me so I responded with. “The privilege of calling someone mother is reserved for women who actually raise their children, unlike sea turtles, spiders, and of course you.” The old harbored ill feelings for Jeanie Lee floated for as long as my memory could take me. Sitting on Grandma’s bed, the levee that held back the tides was breaking.

“You know, Lynette, Jean, whoever the hell you are…let it go. My parents gave you as good a life, if not better than I had. Had I raised you, you self important, condescending, arrogant Queen-B you could hate me for justifiable reasons. Ms. Prissy ass, wouldn’t be the woman you are today.
“Certainly don’t have you to thank for that, now do I.” For some reason the walls in the bedroom felt as if they were closing in on us.

“Mother was so proud of you that she bragged about your accomplishments around The Flats and at Holy Vine shamelessly. Sister Abernathy’s face was rubbed with your success and promotions so much that it’s a wonder she still has a nose. And poor Ms. Ruby’s ears must be made of Teflon. Instead of getting her latest dose of gossip from Mother she had to hear about your career and how you were climbing the corporate ladder.”

“Jeanie Lee, let’s not get into this now. We have a lot of work to do here and I don’t want to be in your company anymore than you want to be in mine.”

“Surprise Baby Jean… you can’t shut me up. So fasten your seatbelt, Sweetheart. Ms. Ruby was so impressed that she sent you a gift. I may have been a sea turtle mother in your eyes but so what. The sun don’t rise or set on your opinion of me. And since you feel the need to cast stones, allow me to toss a few.”

Jeanie Lee voice was beginning to crackle and pitch. It wouldn’t be long before the real cussing would start. “From what I’m told you went up a couple rungs on that ladder, on your back oh, holy one. That would’ve broken Mother’s heart to know that.”

“If that was true—you’re a fine one to question my morals, Jeanie Lee. As Ms. Ruby would say, “Before you tell somebody their slip is hanging you better be sure yours ain’t tore.” Need I remind you that rusty ole retired pimp daddy child-molesting Booker Maddox donated spermatozoon for Darnell and me! Without a test tube.”
“Oh no, don’t waste your breath, darlin’ “scratching the dirt for bones” also Ms. Ruby. Ancient history is just that. If you haven’t done any loser time, or made any mistakes, keep living, Boo-Boo. And if that’s the best you’ve got, I’d say we’re done with the conversation. But take note, because this is the last time I’m saying this. What was done for you and Darnell was for the best. Therefore, I won’t beg your pardon or plea for your forgiveness. The statute of limitation on my failure has run out. So get your narrow ass off the cross, ‘Baby Jean’ I’m sure someone could use the fire wood.”

Couldn’t quibble with what Jeanie Lee was saying. It was truth. Releasing me over to her parents was the best thing she could have done. She adjusted the Ohio State baseball cap on her head, took a sip of her tea and continued with her line of questioning, as if she hadn’t just told me off in kick mud fashion.

“As I was saying, it was nice to see your friends together at mother’s funeral. Do you guys plan on staying in touch?”

I played along. “We said we were going to try.”

There was so much more disdain still floating in the harbor but it was as good a time as any to allow all the junk to float out to sea and wait for another day when a bigger battleship and better ammunition was available. If ever.

I had taken on the chore of clearing out Grandma Lovie’s closet. As I sat on her bed emptying all her purses, I came across her beach bag from our last vacation. As I turned it upside down the box from Ms. Ruby tumbled out. Frozen fear. Jeanie Lee continued emptying Grandma’s hat boxes.
“Wow, I haven’t seen this hat in years. This was mother’s going to the bank hat. Baby Jean, did I ever tell you the story about this playhouse back when we lived in Alabama? Well my Brother, Drew.”

“Your, Brother, Drew? Why didn’t Grandma Lovie ever talk about Drew?”

“Don’t know. You should have asked her. Anyway, your Grandpa owned this mill and on occasions made special order projects…”

First the box from Ms. Ruby and now no clear answers about Drew. I had enjoyed protective walls of security in my home in Franklin Flat, the city of my refuge, safe in the arms of my grandparent. Now, I’m left with trying to build a relationship with what’s left of them...Jeanie Lee.

* * *

“Hi Papa and Mrs. Sweet Lovie. Can’t stay long, I’m sure you two don’t want me to anyway. Just want to let you know that Darnell and I are going to Alabama next month. Don’t worry we can handle the Meadows. Jeanie and I had a blow up. Think we may be in for a few more before it’s all said and done. She’s a piece of work. I still don’t like her. We are however trying to work through our differences. Darnell on the other hand thinks she’s cool. Go figure. Papa, Darnell is so you. Jeanie Lee decided to stay here in The Flats. Since she decided to stay Darnell and I made holiday plans. Home to The Flats for Thanksgiving and we’ll all meet up Christmas at Darnell’s. Grandma,
maybe I’ll bring one of my fly by night boyfriends at Thanksgiving. Maybe we’ll even
relive a little friction in your room. Just kidding Grandma, don’t get your dandruff up.

You can’t image how much I miss you both. Have to go now. This is really hard
for me. Bye, I love you both forever and ever.”
THEM THAT HAVE

The new South may have introduced a new pecking order holding the wealthy on top regardless of race but the remnants of the old South lingered around just in case a resurrection happened. Within the walls of St. John’s Deliverance Lutheran School all God’s children were welcomed with open arms. The children of lawyers, doctors, mill owners and the near-homeless Kelveys were forced into harmonious existence. Outside the walls was a world all together different. The lines between the haves and have-nots, were drawn right down the faces of the people. And while the children were taught to recognize the lines as a way of life, some choose to draw fresh ones. Good for them.

Some formal learning starts long before school learning, some along with it. Drew Allen Whitfield, also known as Brother, wise beyond his fourteen years, became the first official teacher of his seven-year old sister Jeanie Lee. First major lesson taught was revenge isn’t always a sweet relish. Second, some people need time to change the way they think. If ever. Third, a promise given should be a promise kept. Fourth, old people don’t know everything. Fifth, knowledge is power, but don’t lord over others with it. Sixth, if you don’t like bad treatment from others, others won’t like it from you. Seventh, be comfortable in your own skin. All lessons taught to his impressionable little sister.

When not assigned to plantation duty at their Aunt May Lou’s house, summer classes were in session at Meadow’s Miles. Brother received advance knowledge from the mill’s men of all ages who took delight in teaching and informing the boss’s son
about things he shouldn’t and should know. He in turn tempered what was shared with little sister.

One sticky July afternoon a buzz went through the mill over the completion of an unusual project. Brother helped the men load trucks while Jeanie Lee made a nuisance of herself hanging from her father Hershel’s belt loop. Avoidance of the office where her mother Lovie worked was a constant challenge. The phone rang too much and she was always telling Jeanie Lee to sit down somewhere before she got her dandruff up.

About noon, Hershel, opened the office door pushed Jeanie Lee in, stuck his head inside and told Lovie, “Sweetness, get the invoice ready for the woman from the house, she’ll be here any minute. Thank you, beautiful.”

With a scrunch up nose she replied, “The house. The house of ill-repute. Don’t you try and sweet talk me, Mister. You’ll do business with anyone. Maybe the new sign should say, ‘Need a monstrosity built? Bring it to Meadows Miles we can bring your nightmares to life.’”

“Ha, I bet you spend that monstrosity money the second it arrives in the bank. How that lady, earns her living is no business of mine. Besides, she’s just a broker of happiness. If I’m lucky maybe she’ll give me a coupon for services or something.” He loved to his wife all worked up by teasing her.

“If you don’t stop talking like that in front of my child, I’ll be forced to do something rash.”
“I like rash. Oh, here she is now. Have to go. I’ll be back in a few minutes, with my new girlfriend. So, you better be nice.” He said closing the door grinning.

Chuckling, Lovie threw the tape dispenser in his direction. Brother told his little sister that curiosity killed the cat but satisfaction brought it back. She took this as gospel and went to great lengths to have her curiosity quenched.

“Mother, what’s a house of ill-repute and what does a broker of happiness do? Jeanie Lee asked then watched Lovie turn two shades of grey.

“Mercy. Here, go to the lunch room and get me a soda, please.”

The absence of answers coupled with the quick dismissal meant the questions were off limits. Leaving the office without further delay or insistence was wise. It would have been safe to say college degrees in concealment were earned by Herschel and Lovie Whitfield, because anything they didn’t want their children to know about was cloaked in talk over their heads and unfamiliar words. This just made Jeanie Lee develop a trap door memory. Anything she didn’t understand was stored for later, asked of Brother or found in the dictionary. The route to the lunchroom went right pass the dock. Herschel’s clipboard with project blueprints lay on the bench where Jeanie Lee inconspicuously slid. Engrossed in conversation with the extravagantly dressed lady he failed to notice her presence.

“Oh, Mr. Herschel, what a beautiful artistically done job. It’s exactly what I wanted. But—Honey, it is much bigger than I expected. When I gave you the dimensions apparently my understanding of size was off a tad. I’m usually pretty good about sizing things up.” The lady’s eyelashes were fluttering like mating butterflies.
“Well, if it’s not exactly what you want, we aim to please, Madam, I mean Ms.”

“Oh, I appreciate that. You did just as I asked. I’m going to pay you for it. So, don’t you worry. That’s the right way to do business, Mr. Herschel.”

“That’s great. Come on back to the office and let’s see if we can work out the details for the right size replica. My wife should have the invoice for this one ready.”

As they left, the workers gathered around the project as if it were an exhibit at the fair. Brother took a break and joined his sister on the bench. She scooted close to him and in a whisper said, “I need to ask you something Brother.”

“Dang, Sissy let me catch my breath. Some of us don’t get to walk around doing nothing all day.” The group of men congregating within earshot began discussing the project.

“God-dog, Roy Kelvey, you sure did a really good job here boy.” One of the older men said.

“Well, thank ya. Ha, worked mostly from the pictures Buck gave me. Can’t read no blueprint you know. Oh, and the visit to the house didn’t hurt none either. Hell, up til walking through and seeing things with my own eyes, I wasn’t sure what to do. Take this Lion’s heads for instances. When me and Buck went to the house, I had to wait in the parlor while Buck went around taking picture and drawing up the blueprints. The girls served me little sammiches and tiny petit .. four…cakes on fancy plates and wine in the middle of the day. Buck acted like he was stone embarrassed to be there. I coulda stayed all day.” The men were hanging on his every word.
“Anyway, I ask the lady what the purpose of the lion’s was. She said real sweet like, ‘well sir, the only way to find out, is to pull the ring and see fo yo self.’ Pulled that ring and I be damn if a rubber didn’t popped out on that lion’s tongue. Liketa scared me to the grave. Stepped back so fast on Buck’s foot, dang near broke his toe.”

Loud roars rumbled across the dock in waves. Men were pounding their knees with their fist and hitting each other’s backs howling. One man with tears streaking down his face was running in little circles like a top. Even Brother was laughing. The nudge off the bench signaled for Brother to meet Jeanie Lee outside.

“Brother, what kind of playhouse is that?”

“It’s not a playhouse really. It’s a replica.”

The puzzled looked on her face caused Brother to explain. “A replica is a copy or a model of something, you know, like a play plane or boat or, in this case a house.”

“Oh, so there is a real house like that somewhere?”

“Yep.”

“Where?”

“Don’t know. Around here somewhere.”

“Okay, since you know so much, what’s a house of ill-repute, a broker of happiness and a rubber and why was one coming out of the lion’s mouth?” The looming questions in the air caused Brother’s cool cocky manner to disappear.

For the second time that day the ashy grey look appeared. His eyes were bucking and he had difficulty swallowing.
“Oh, no, Sissy. Mother and Daddy will never kill my ass over some mess like this.”

“Oowee. If they kill you, it will be for using profanity. You’ve been on the dock to long.”

“I’ve been on the dock just long enough to know… how to stay out of hot water with our parents. There’s something you could learn to do.”

“Brother, please, please, tell me. You know what mother says about ignorance.”

“She’d be alright with your ignorance on this one. If you want to know so bad, go ask them yourself.”

“I already ask Mother. She sent me to get soda. Besides, you’re always teaching me stuff. Maybe you want me to find out on the lane.”

“Yea, that’s a good place to start. Do that.”

“Forget it. You don’t care about me.” Brother’s blank stare meant he had no plans on budging. Jeanie Lee however, learned to wrap her brother and Father around her little finger with tactics that usually worked. The trembling puckered lips and eyes on the verge of tears were followed by self loathing.

“If you want a stupid sister, than that’s fine. Maybe I’ll have better luck asking someone that doesn’t give a hoot about me. Let me think. Who hasn’t been mean to me today. I’ll go ask May Lou. Since my big brother who is always teaching me things prefer I be ignorant and won’t tell me, I’ll take my chance with May Lou.”

“Uncle, Sissy damn, I give. Your whining could raise the dead. Look, if it gets back where your information came from and my butt ends up in a sling. You and me are
through. You understand me, little girl? Do you?” His poke to her chest was meant to
drive his point home.

“I promise, Brother. Cross my heart, hope to die, stick twenty needles in both my
eyes, if I tell a living soul. My lips are sealed. Promise.”

“Where, do I start?” He was biting his lips and rubbing the creases on his
forehead.

“Start with the rubber, what is it?”

“A rubber is a… prophylactic.”

“Mother and daddy taught you to do that, didn’t they? What’s a prophy.. prophyla”

“It’s a condom Jeanie Lee. I’ll be dang if you don’t know anything. They are
going to kill me, dead.”

“What’s a condom used for?”

As the Whitfields walked the house lady to her car, the conversation with Brother
stopped in mid sentence. She stopped at the bench where the two sat to admire the good
looking, well behaved children.

Gawking oddly at Brother she commented that he was extra easy on the eyes.

“That young man there is gonna be a real heartbreaker. My poor heart goes out to
the girl he cut his teeth on.” She said, winking her butterfly lashes at Brother.

“You know what, Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield. I just had the best idea. It would be a
pity and pure waste to destroy that wonderfully made house. If you want, please give it
to that cute little daughter of yours. It would make a splendid playhouse.”
Lovie’s clinched jowls didn’t betray her polite demeanor of keeping a paying customer content. She was sweet as pie when she told the house lady that Jeanie Lee had an ample supply of toys including a playhouse. She thanked her generously for the offer and the kind gesture. Hershel opened her car door and as she slid in she said with an air of disappointment, “Well, alright, but it’s a darling house. Your little girl would be the envy of the neighborhood. It’s just a girl’s dream. Bye bye now. See you in a couple weeks.”

Hershel always eager to please, told the house lady that they would give her offer some consideration. As she drove away Lovie told her husband that if he brought that mess home she would divorce him.

He tapped her rump and laughingly said. “I just might. It could keep you motivated knowing there’s competition.”

Brother tripped back inside the mill with his eyes rolling back screaming at the top of his lungs. “Yuck! I wish you two would act your age!”

Jeanie Lee went back to the dock to have another look at the house.

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Two weeks after school started, during recess, Jeanie Lee’s nemeses Staci and Traci Abernathy were surrounded by a circus of barrettes, braids, and ribbons at the news of a spectacular gift they received. News of the gift spread across the school like a dry prairie fire. Girls pushed and shoved within inches of fights trying to press in close enough to put their arms around Staci and Traci. Jeanie Lee went to great lengths to
avoid the dreadful Abernathy girls. They were often forced into each other’s company, because of a lifelong friendship. The Abernathy’s mother’s was like a daughter to Jeanie Lee and Brother’s old money Aunt May Lou. Many summer days were spent with Brother and Jeanie Lee laboring in the sweltering southern sun outside May Lou’s house with the delicate Abernathy’s peering at them from the windows dripping with cool air. Payment for their hard day’s work was usually a three day-old stale pastry and a dollar each. The Abernathy’s were lavished with tokens of appreciation for any little thing they did.

The spectacular gift that was the center of attention at St. John’s was given to Staci and Traci for the care May Lou received when she convalesced at the Abernathy’s home after her gallbladder surgery earlier that spring. May Lou elected not to stay with people with whom she shared blood because her cantankerous temperament was not conducive for such arrangements.

Lovie’s sister Lillie Belle may have provided recuperative care, but she and May Lou were subject to fall outs. While in the throes of confrontations, the sisters would not spit on the other if one were ablaze. They loved each other, sure, but each kept a pocket full of “go to Hell’s” ready for when they got on each other’s nerves. May Lou, of course, would not even consider convalescing at the Whitfield home. She considered them the ‘poor relations’. The Whitfield in actuality had way more means than May Lou. She often made that comment in the presence of the Abernathy’s as if the words would not find their way back to the Jeanie Lee’s ears. Staci or Traci never missed any opportunity to reminded Jeanie Lee who they thought she was.
May Lou raised Lovie as her own spoiled child when their parents died. She sent her to Howard University to get an education and a good, meaning wealthy-husband. Herschel and Lovie officially met at Howard University in Washington D.C. although they grew up in the same rural sticks of Alabama and sort of already knew of each other.

Lovie knew that May Lou sent her to Howard to major in husband selection, but courtship was the farthest thing from her mind. She was there to get an education and she planned to do just that. With jocularity filling her voice Lovie would say, “Mother Howard was ripe for the picking. Without even trying, I got the pick of the ‘litter’. The girls in the Quad were pea green with envy when the eyes of the sweetest, smartest, most dignified, drop-dead good looking man on campus were on me. Saw him in at the Stacks in Founders Library, it was done for him. I knew he’d be my husband from the start, even though he was dating some trollop.”

Herschel’s story was slightly different. He would say Lovie Jean was an exquisite beauty to behold without question. But that she possessed the sharpest tongue and the shortest temper he’d ever seen in a woman. That he watched for weeks the flock of young suitors’ pursue the prize of her heart. He said, “That gorgeous dolly made grown men cry drops of precious blood with the way she carried on and mistreated them. She left so many carcasses at Rankin Chapel and on Mother Howard’s yard that President, Mordecai Johnson had to increase the grounds staff. Until I came along that is. I made that mean little woman, work like a rented mule to get me.”
Their romance was a whirlwind fairytale. Black people do have fairytales romances, even though the books don’t claim them as so.

May Lou’s disapproval of Herschel’s and Lovie’s relationship was shared with anyone who cared to listen.

She told Jeanie Lee once, while she was in getting a drink of water, from the Mason jar she gave her that, “Love, don’t trump status. Don’t you make the mistake your momma did, little girl. Your Daddy may be good looking, hardworking and smart…but so what. I rather have an ugly man with money any day.”

Lovie assured Jeanie Lee that despite what May Lou considered her fall from grace, love trumps status on a bad day. She told Jeanie Lee to allow May Lou her backwoods stupidity and to cut her some slack. That it was alright for May Lou to think like that because she was a bitter-mouthed old woman with no man in her future ugly or wealthy and that until further notice she and Brother would continue to go and work for her.

Nevertheless comments made by May Lou made working at her house hard. But what was worst, by far, was the irritating relentless bragging Jeanie Lee had to endure as the Abernathy girls went on about their spectacular gift from May Lou.

* * *

The walk to St. John’s went right past the Abernathy’s house. Brother and Jeanie Lee filed in behind the Abernathy entourage as Staci boasted with details about the
exquisite possession in their backyard. With each step, her story became more embellished and bigger than life itself.

“It’s just so lovely! It’s almost too wonderful for words, but, I’ll try. Well, it’s large enough to walk into and it has three little rooms. The walls are covered in expensive oriental brocade. One room is soft red with yellow stripe wallpaper with ladies in beautiful gowns sitting on gentlemen’s laps. Oh, and another room is teal with little flying babies all over it.”

“Staci, momma said those were cherubs, not babies.”

Staci shot Traci a look that could shatter crystal. Holding the attention of a captive audience with her storytelling made her the boss. For as long as Jeanie Lee knew them, Staci was in charge.

“Traci, if you open your mouth one more time. I know what they are. Anyway, the last room is pink with large creamy white flowers and a little bay window. The bay bench is covered in soft pink satin. And, here’s the best part, every room has a gold lion’s head attached to the wall with a ring in its mouth. When you pull the ring the lion’s mouth opens and its tongue sticks out.” Every girl around them was oohing and ahhing with delight.

Jeanie Lee kept one lock step behind Brother during the morning march of the braggarts when he stopped in his tracks, she walked upon the heels of his new shoes smack into his back. Sliding under his muscular arm and pressing close to his ear said,

“Did you hear that? The lion’s head, with the …”
“Shh, be quiet Sissy. Don’t you say another word.” Brother’s eyes spoke volumes. They danced with the delight of a boy whose punishments for his mischief was never enough payment.

“Let’s hurry up. The bell is getting ready to ring. We’re not being late for this mess.”

“But, but, the lion’s...”

“But nothing, Jeanie Lee, get going. Besides, if your lips start feeling loose, maybe twenty needles will help them stay shut. Get it moving, let’s get to school.”

Mrs. Douglas, the third grade teacher, always started the day with scripture readings, discussion of current events and prayer. Glad it wasn’t her day to recite Jeanie Lee became lost in the recollections of the Abernathy’s gift. She remembered the day she saw it at the mill. She recalled how when she walked into it the smell of fresh paint caused her to sneeze. The feel of the velvety wallpaper rough, raised, caked with glue and still wet. She remembered the slippery bay window seat that sent her sailing to the wooden floor. She touched the babies with no diapers and not all of the ladies wore gowns some were dressed in short frilly bed clothes. She pulled the lion’s ring and its mouth flew open like a deranged jack in the box. Her reminiscing was interrupted by Mrs. Douglas’s calling her to the front of the classroom to deliver her author’s report on Katherine Mansfield. On her way back to her desk, she overheard Staci telling a couple girls that missed the morning recital that they could have lunch with her so that she could fill them in.
By the time Staci held court under the mature poplar trees at lunch time, the story’s retelling was the biggest production St. John’s school yard had ever seen. Daisy Kelvey, daughter of Roy Kelvey the builder of the house and Staci’s personal flunky, lingered around the perimeter until she was summoned. She proudly pushed her way into the inner circle.

“Who would like to come and see the gift- first?” Staci said. Hands flew up as fast as they did at the bingo hall or winter auction. “Maybe I should have a lottery to see who gets to come first.”

Staci tapping her front teeth was looking about, as if she was picking a subject from the loyal peasants. Poor Daisy rushed to Staci and begged to be first. She was waving her arms like a flag in a windstorm.

“Oh, please, Daisy. Your momma would not approve of you stepping one poor precious foot in my yard. Poor White trash, don’t come to Black people houses for anything.” She said.

“If she knew you were always lapping at my heels the way you do, she would whip the pink off of you. Here, I’m done with this,” Stacy tossed crumbled wax paper an empty milk carton and a brown bag in Daisy’s direction. “Now, who else wants to be first?”

The snickers from the other girls in the circle were stinging. The crushed look on Daisy’s face as she stumbled out of the circle while others loaded her down with their trash hurt Jeanie Lee’s feelings. As Daisy littered the ground with her burden on her way to the trashcan, Jeanie Lee decided to pick it up.
“Hey, Daisy, you wanta go play jacks?” Jeanie Lee said hoping the invitation would be a balm on the stings. Normally, she paid little attention to the constant ill treatment dished out by the horrible Abernathys on the girls she thought were poor, Jeanie Lee included.

The Kelveys attended St. John’s because they were the poster family of poverty. The kind donations of others that paid their way did not entitle Daisy to be treated as if she had no feelings. Her humiliation and ejection from the circle loaded down with the trash of others was just the motivation Jeanie Lee needed to plot mischief and revenge on Staci. She told Daisy that the gift was no more spectacular than a regular rainy day. Jeanie Lee failed to mention that Staci did however have a point about Daisy’s momma, Mrs. Kelvey. Cut the confederate flag tattoo on her wrist and she would bleed old south, do or die.

* * *

Every August right before school started the have donated any uniform with an ounce of life left in it to St. John’s Care Closet for the have not’s. The Care Closet was also known by the children of St. John’s as the,—“Come All Ye Poor Closet.” Lovie would launder, press, and neatly fold any of the previous year’s uniforms that Jeanie Lee and Brother didn’t manage to soil or rip beyond recognition to the Care Closet. The supply was usually generous because they had so many and Brother was growing like a weed. In addition to giving clothes she would send them to volunteers for sort and distribution day.
She would tell them, “An honest day’s work never hurt anyone. Besides, giving back and helping others builds character.”

Brother retort was, “Builds character my eyetooth. Children ‘volunteering’ at St John’s in any way are working off tuition.” His Mother would ignore the statement, it wasn’t true.

Lovie would drop her privileged brood off early, murmuring loudly and kicking dirt on the brass angel winged doors of St. Johns.

The August right before the gift became the center of attention Brother and Jeanie Lee got to see Mrs. Kelvey in action at the Care Closet. Mrs. Douglas worked the window and Brother and Jeanie Lee were assigned the jobs of runner and packer. Mrs. Kelvey appeared at the window with her clan in tow, minus the newest Kelvey. She looked like the nineteen-seventy-five limited edition of Alabama Raggedy Ann. Her thin mousy brown hair, banged and pulled snugly back into a pigtail, was held by a beige rubber band, large enough to hold a Sunday paper. She was wearing a multi-stained Coke-Adds-Life tee shirt and a pair of lint covered too short blue stretch pants.

Brother jabbed Jeanie Lee’s in the chest interrupting her humming of the war is over, the land is dry, why do you wear your pants so high.

“Stop it.” He gritted through his teeth. “Mother would not approve of that. If you do it again, I’ll be sure to tell her. And you know, what will be in store for you.” Little puffs of air from his lips hit her forehead.

“They would do it, to us,” She said with eyes narrowed tightly on Brother released all the venom she could muster.
“Don’t matter, little girl, besides, I like JimmyB. Kelvey and he wouldn’t do that to our mother.”

“You make my tail hurt, Drew Allen Whitfield, always trying to boss somebody. Betcha the next time Daddy corrects you, I won’t shed one tear.” The use of brother’s given name was ammo launched when no other arsenal was available.

“See that you don’t. Now, go get one of the good bags with the handles, Sissy.” Jeanie Lee hated it when Brother reminded her that he was older, in control, and the boss.

Everyone for miles around loved Brother. May Lou said, he looked like Herschel spit in a glass and poured him out. Lovie would say that his handsome good looks better not make her a grandmother before she was old enough to be one. He was a good heart and a meek soul to everyone he came into contact with. His greatest flaw was that he tried to protect his little sister from others whether she was right or wrong. Correction of Jeanie Lee was done by Lovie, Herschel and Brother. As he hurried to the backroom to help Jeanie Lee with the bags Mrs. Douglas waited the window.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kelvey. Children, how y’all doing this morning? Where is that fine baby? I bet he’s really getting big,” Mrs. Douglas used her pleased-as-punch voice.

“We’s all fine, Mrs. Douglas, thank you fo asking, the baby in the truck with Roy.” Mrs. Kelvey said in her best practiced English.

“Well, good, good. Now, how many uniforms will you need Mrs. Kelvey? Coming early like this gives you the best selection of the closet. We didn’t have an abundance of items this year, but what we did get are in exceptional condition. Hopefully
we have all the sizes you’ll need.” Mrs. Douglas did her best to live up to the school mission statement of celebrating diversity and welcoming all with brotherly hospitality. Unfortunately, her kind nature was wasted on some.

Even with the humidity of The Closet reaching record high temperatures she was helpful and pleasant. The Closet as hot as a furnace, had several large steel helicopter blade fans in opposing corners exchanged the molten air from one end of the room to the other. Brother and Jeanie Lee spent the down time singing close to the blades. Their reverberating yodeling fell off every wall. Mrs. Douglas would lean her head just inside the door to tell them to tone it down but made her appearance scarce in the backroom because she said it threw her into a hot flash. As they came into the doorway for cooler air, Mrs. Kelvey was just getting around to placing her uniform order.

“Mrs. Douglas, I’s has a question for ya.”

“Sure, how may I help you?”

“Did any of these here uniforms come from the likes of them?” said Mrs. Kelvey tilting her head in Brother’s and Jeanie Lee’s direction.

“The likes of them…whom, Mrs. Kelvey?”

“They.”

Mrs. Douglas did not turn to look, “Does it matter where the uniforms came from? They are clean, gently used, and available without charge. I don’t recall this ever being an issue with you in the past. Of course, you are free to purchase new ones for all your children if you would prefer.”
Mrs. Douglas voice dripped with indignation. Apparently the rising heat in the ‘Come All Ye Poor Closet’ triggered her hot flash which caused her brotherly hospitality to evaporate.

“I’ma just saying, Mrs. Douglas, I’m sure yos has uniforms that wasn’t used by nig, I mean, Colored, uh, Black children.”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Kelvey, but the fabrics fails to divulge that information.”

JimmyB. Kelvey caught Brother’s eyes and cast his own on what was left of his shoes. He and Brother played football, baseball and basketball together. Brother was the supplier of all JimmyB.’s sporting equipment. Without it, he could not play.

Jeanie Lee never one for holding her tongue much because she knew she had her brother to back her up said— “Why can Brother share his equipment covered in nasty ole sweat and blood with JimmyB., but clean uniforms are a different story? That’s just plain ole backwoods stupid. If the clothes don’t care, why should she?”

Her arm was grabbed and her feet left the floor. She landed in the sauna of the back room being held up by Brother irritated hands.

“Look, I’ve had enough of you today. Dang, you’re as bad as Staci and Traci rolled together.” Brother snarled.

“I’m nothing like them. Take that back or I’ll… I’ll. Mrs. Kelvey is wrong. She doesn’t have a problem with Mr. Roy working at the Mill. When the notion to work moves him. She comes in here acting high and mightier than the Lord God himself.”

Tears were gathering in her eyes.
“So what! You can’t change the way some people think, but you don’t have to think like them, either.”

“You just don’t have any pride. If you can get used to people treating you any kind of way and always acting as if they are better than you, then go right ahead, dookie face. You ain’t the boss of me and I don’t have to do what you say. Leave me alone, you make me sick.” The explosion of snot and tears joining forces made one glistening stream under her chin.

“You are not the boss of me. Waaa! Look at the baby.” He mocked. “Look, no one can give me my pride and no one can take it, unless I let them.” He pulled Jeanie Lee into his arms and offered her the tail of his shirt.

“Here wipe your face. Stop all that crying, little girl, you’re just angry because you’re wrong. Couldn’t you see her children were dying of shame for the way their momma was acting?”

“They should be ashamed. Next time they need to pick a better momma, one that acts a whole lot better and not as tacky for sure.”

They burst into the kind of snickering that comes up in the theatre when something inappropriate appears on the screen or the kind that can’t be controlled in church. From the backroom window, they saw Mrs. Coleman of Coleman’s Furniture standing in the doorway of the closet listening to the exchange at the window. Her parents donated the land and money that opened the doors to St. John’s Deliverance Lutheran School. In the sixties their housekeeper was murdered on her way home from a
Freedom March. Lovie told her children that the Coleman’s were always salt of the earth type people, but their housekeeper’s death forever changed their lives.

The housekeeper name was engraved on a plaque in the prayer chapel with the inscription, “\textit{iEst autem fides credere quod nondum vides; cuius fidei merces est videre quod credis - In Non sibi sed suis.} Let not your death be in vain.” Translated it meant, “Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe,” which was said by St. Augustine. Followed by the Latin phrase, “Not for one's self but for one's people.”

Every child that attended St. John had to know the interpretation of the Latin phrase and had to write an essay on what it meant to them before they graduated eighth grade. The housekeeper’s children attended St. John’s and went to college at the expense of the Coleman family. To say they were wealthy was an understatement.

Mrs. Douglas noticed Mrs. Coleman standing in the doorway and excused herself from Mrs. Kelvey with exhaustion. “Oh, Hi Margie, you’re making a drop off? Children, please get those bags from Mrs. Coleman.”

“Sorry, for dropping these off a day late, Gloria, but when we got back in town yesterday I was beat. Well, hello, Brother, Jeanie Lee. How are Lovie and Herschel doing? You two are volunteering, that’s really sweet of you. My, why didn’t I think of that? Those boys of mine should be here helping too. These are all ready to go, just take them out of the bags, please. Be sure to tell your parents that I said Hello and we’ll be paying them a visit real soon.”
As they stepped forward to take the bags, Mrs. Kelvey intercepted and cut them off.

“II’ll take them there uniforms.”

“These uniforms are much too large for your boys,” Mrs. Douglas tried to explain. The Coleman boys could have easily been mistaken for grown men at a glance. Both were well over six feet tall at fourteen. There wasn’t a food on the planet they didn’t like and never was a meal missed. The only time Jeanie Lee ever recalled her Mother praying audibly or making up cuss words was when the Colman boys came to their house after some sort of practice to eat. Lovie would clear out the freezer to make sure the Coleman boys were full. She would tell Brother that she needed twenty-four hours notice when he planned to bring the Coleman eating machines home. She needed time to shop for groceries and rest up for all the all cooking it required to feed them.

Mrs. Douglas, at wit’s end leaning against the doorjamb said, “In all my years working in the Care Closet this is the most ridiculous situation. Mrs. Kelvey, I’m really trying to be patient, but I...”

“Oh for heaven sakes, Gloria, give them to her,” Mrs. Colman cut in fanning herself. “It’s obvious she would rather her children look a disheveled mess than get uniforms for them that, fit. I have never seen someone so destitute have so much prideful insistence. This school was built because of people like her.”

She walked out mumbling something about the sooner the earth was rid of that kind the better and look at the nerves of this low life trailer something or the other. After the August incident, the Kelvey children embarked upon a campaign of proving to
anyone that cared to know, that they were not their momma and went out of their way to be decent.

Times were changing. What was once a socially acceptable way of behaving had to settle for the undergrounds of people’s minds and conniving actions. Maybe this was why Daisy was willing to take the horrible treatment the Abernathy girls dished out on her regularly. She had a reputation to live down. Jeanie Lee on the other hand, felt no such debt. Staci horrible as she was, spoke truth when it came to calling Mrs. Kelvey what she was.

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In the weeks that followed the announcement of the extravagant gift, Staci held girls as captive hostages with the ongoing hope of being invited to see ‘the house’. It wasn’t until the hoopla started wearing off that she actually did. With intensity rejuvenate appointments were made of a select group of girls. Jeanie Lee’s promise of sealed lips was a daily trial made worse by having to watch Staci and Traci annihilate poor girls like Daisy. Every day some poor sap would runabout doing whatever the Abernathy’s demanded. Their every wish was catered to.

Jeanie Lee held her tongue when Staci made one girl lick the bottom of her shoe and spoke not a word when Traci lifted another girl’s pleated skirt exposing her much worn panties. She even managed to keep the peace the Saturday Lovie sent Jeanie Lee and Brother to rake leaves and pull the harvest of peanuts at May Lou’s. The day was
spent with the tormenters breathing on the nape of Jeanie Lee’s neck. They knew better however, than to pull certain antic on Jeanie Lee because of her volatile temper and lack of ability to control it.

When Mrs. Abernathy came late afternoon to pick up her daughters, Jeanie Lee was near the end of her patience. Her clinched mouth sore from teeth grinding all day started feeling relief at the sight of Mrs. Abernathy. Jeanie Lee told Brother she didn’t understand how Staci and Traci had such a nice mother and they were the worst people ever. When Mrs. Abernathy took it upon herself to invite Jeanie Lee for a play day at their house, Staci threw a hissy fit right in the middle of May Lou’s yard. Stomped her mums, kicked a pile of gavel out of the driveway and was screaming at the top of her lungs. Jeanie Lee was in the process of telling Mrs. Abernathy that she had no desire to see the house because she’d seen it when Brother shove her from behind into silence for the last time.

As late fall approached the excitement about the playhouse had settled. In order for Staci to stay Queen of the playground new attractions had to be created. Jeanie Lee and Daisy became fast friend, at school.

One chilly fall morning as Lovie dropped her children off at school she notice that Jeanie Lee had not grabbed her sweater as instructed. Jeanie Lee being her head strong self decided that if she could not wear her favorite red one she wouldn’t wear one at all. The sweaters from the year before were given to The Care Closet and only one of the new ones had the school patch sewn on. When they arrived at school Brother and
Jeanie Lee quickly got out of the car to stop Lovie’s fussing about how motherless they looked. Brother had on the wrong tie and Jeanie Lee had no sweater cool as it was.

By midday it was much too cold to play outside in just shirt sleeve so Mrs. Douglas took Jeanie Lee to The Closet to get a sweater. Mrs. Douglas being the concern soul she was told Jeanie Lee. “Now, you bring this back tomorrow in case someone else needs it. I know you have plenty of brand new sweaters to wear.”

“Yes ma’am.” She said heading for a jump rope game thinking nothing of it. While awaiting her turn to jump in, Staci and her crew slithered up like vipers. She ordered two of the other girls to grab Jeanie Lee and hold her arms while she flipped the collar of the sweater down. “HA, I knew it! I thought this sweater looked familiar. Jeanie Lee is wearing my hand me downs.”

“This sweater is not yours” Jeanie Lee said, flailing about.

“It was, but now it yours. I rubbed a hole in the elbow mama put the red leather hearts on to make it look classy. Look my name is embroidered right here in the label. We gave it to the Come All Ye Poor closet this summer and now you are wearing it. The Whitfields’s are as poor as the Kelvey’s.” The laughter coming from everyone’s mouths seem to magnify by the second.

“For your information, I have new sweaters Staci. I just didn’t wear one today.”

“Sure you do you poor thing. You don’t have to pretend to have a new sweater for us.”

Staci started singing a chapel song, “The poor you’ll have with you always please be kind to the poor”. The other girls joined in on the chorus. Jeanie Lee was struggling
to get free which only made the other girls tighten their grip. Staci calmed the crowd that was gathering and said,

“It’s okay Jeanie Lee having to wear hand me downs is not the worst thing that could happen. You could be poor and ugly like Daisy there.”

“Well you should know about hand me downs Staci, that little playhouse of your is a hand me down whore house!” Someone in the crowd gasped from the word whore. That didn’t stop Jeanie Lee. “It’s good you love the house so much. Maybe some of the older boys will help you practice for your future job as a Hooker. I’m sure there are worst things than just being a regular ho like being an ugly ho. Oh and be sure and to keep a supply of condoms handy for the lion mouths, trollop.”

When Jeanie Lee’s senses reclaimed her in the Principal’s office she was shaking like a leaf with Staci sitting besides her crying hysterically. The two were promptly delivered there by the teachers on playground duty drawn to the commotion. The obscenities that flew uncontrollably from Jeanie Lee’s mouth were electric. Jeanie Lee interrogation regarding the source of the vulgarities ended with her being sent home to the waiting arms of Lovie for the remainder of the school day.

She was met at the door with, “if you care anything about that little butt of yours… you’ll take it to that room and shut the door.” Jeanie Lee’s attempt at trying to explain what happened only made matters worse. Lovie took her daughter by the shoulders escorted her to the bedroom door and push her in.

“You and Brother both will have plenty of time to explain to Daddy when he gets home.”
Then she shut the bedroom door mumbling something under her breath. Waiting for their Dad to come home to execute punishment, was new. Lovie was a discipline specialist, waiting to deliver it never happened. Jeanie Lee’s panic set in when she remembers the promise and that Brother didn’t know about what she had done that afternoon. He only provided the basic of details about prostitution the rest was compiled from the library, the older kids at St John’s and the dictionary. Poor Brother would walk into a parent ambush when he came home from football practice.

When the Executioner arrived he was already equipped with all the grimy offensive details of the first accused provided by the Principal. The second accused would stand trial. Through due process, both were found guilty as charged. The administering of sentencing was swift, firm and fair.

When Brother resumed speaking to Jeanie Lee a month later, they had a good laugh about the school yard incident. But he reminded his little sister of the lesson taught and should’ve been learned.

First revenge isn’t always a sweet relish.
Second, some people need time to change the way they think. If ever.
Third, a promise given should be a promise kept.
Fourth, old people don’t know everything.
Fifth, knowledge is power, but don’t lord over others with it.
Sixth, if you don’t like bad treatment from others, others won’t like it from you.
Seventh, be comfortable in your own skin.
The lesson Jeanie Lee wish her big brother would have taught her was how to live without him. How to fill the void his absence would create. How to process death, that came to soon and far too often.

When Brother died, a year later Lovie’s sole comfort became spirits that ease the pain. Herschel turned to the God of his mother and fell into the church. Jeanie Lee’s hurt turned inward and her journey to find a brother’s love would begin and end in the arms of an older man years later.

Daisy Kelvey lost her father when the mill burned to the ground. The Whitfield’s lost their mill and their only son within six months of time. A new life far away from the sad memories that threaten to destroy them, would serve as the balm to ease their pain.