

Land of the White People

~Prosaic Wisconsin~



Volume 3 • BEFORE BARACK: My Life Among White Folks

Bernestine Singley

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~ Dedicated to ~

**Kolleen Egan Kellom
Lucile Ebisch Gibson
Aberdeen Richardson Speights
Genette McLaurin**

I love you. Keep cracking the code in the Land of the White People.

And as always, for Odessa Roberts Singley
for the fire in my blood

for Gary Isaiah Reaves
for enduring love, seamless loyalty, legendary patience, pan sautéed trout, a place
on the beach, & the fence around our house on the mountain

for Freddie McGriff, Sara Mokuria & Annette Lawrence
for reading every word, for seeing my heart, and for always giving honest, critical,
encouraging feedback

BEFORE BARACK: My Life Among White Folks

Volume Two

Land of the White People

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 COLLEGE GIRL

Parting Shot • 6

First Days • 9

Computer Date Dance • 13

CHAPTER 2 OBSERVING THE NATIVES

Aliens • 17

Allies • 25

Vicissitudes of Sex • 30

A Friend in Jesus • 33

CHAPTER 3 FALLING FROM GRACE

The Reckoning • 38

Hard Pressed • 41

Siberia • 46

New Habits • 49

The Afro-American Association • 52

Doomsday • 56

CHAPTER 4 LOST AND FOUND

Not Black Like Me • 60

Abby & Genette • 63

If This Is Thursday, It Must Be Collard Greens • 67

Bitches Brew • 70

Shining My Star • 72

Junior Counselor • 74

CHAPTER 5 ESCAPE

Hatching a Plan • 77

Paris: American Me • 81

La Plus Ça Changent • 86

The Poconos: Pledging Allegiance • 88

Chicago: Fighting Repression • 96

CHAPTER 6 RE-ENTRY

Back Where I Started • 101

Losing Touch • 103

White Girl • 104

Breakdown • 110

Interlude • 113

Geese • 115

Final Stretch • 116

EPILOGUE

The Confession • 119

One Story: Two Versions • 121

ENDNOTES • 123

CHAPTER 1
COLLEGE GIRL

Parting Shot



High school graduation...with honors (1967)

“Don’t come bringing no white boy back here.”

I was eighteen, a virgin, standing in the front door of our apartment, listening for a taxi horn. True, I was headed for the Land of the White People, but what would make her say something like that? It wasn’t like we had been discussing my romantic future and certainly not my romantic past since I didn’t have one. I was a classic cat-eye-glasses- wearing-head-buried-in-a-book-Miss-Goody-Two-Shoes. A *bona fide* nerd.

Plus, I wasn’t even gone yet and there she was telling me how not to come back. Decades later, her injunction would stand out as much for its singular focus as for its clarity and

specificity. In that moment, though, when I cut my eyes to hers, she was already in position, head slightly tilted, the better to aim that genetic Jackson gaze. I conceded reflexively.

“Ma, please. I’m not even thinking about any white boys and I’m sure they’re not thinking about me either.”

”Oh, you just wait. You’ll see.”

“Aw, Negro, white, what difference does it make? It’s just skin. It’s not *that* big a deal.”

“Is that right? Well, now that you’re going off to college, I guess you know everything. Maybe you’ll even come back here and teach your old dumb mama a thing or two. Okay? Well, you’re not out the door yet, so I suggest you watch your tone and remember who you’re talking to.”

Her blue-veined pale skin, thin lips, straight hair, sharp nose, and flat butt were proof that white men had been all up in our family for generations. It wasn’t something we had ever discussed specifically in terms of her looks, but it also wasn’t a secret. And even though picking a fight seemed to be one way my family knew how to part, I didn’t want to leave like that. So I eased back towards reconciliation.

“Those white girls who wrote to me this summer seem nice.”

“Well, maybe *those* white girls are a new kind, the kind I don’t know anything about. Here. Your Bible.” She handed it to me, a slightly chastising shove, then folded her arms across her chest. Her eyes circumnavigated me in search of crooked ways to be made straight, fissures to be plugged. On the morning of my departure, I stood in front of her, at long last eye-to-eye.

“Go back upstairs and take another look around, make sure you haven’t forgotten anything,” she directed, signaling I had passed her inspection. When I moved past her, stumbling over my luggage, she caught me and stood me back upright. Then, with one hand on my shoulder, she yanked the hem of my garment, a seamstress’ careful ministrations to her craft. Her palms flat

against the center of my back smoothed fabric across my shoulders, each hand pressing in short quick motions in opposite directions.

“Hurry up,” she said, slapping gently my bottom as she turned to the door. “The cab will be here in a minute. If you’re not out there at the curb, you know they’re not going to stop in the midst of all of those winos and rag heads. Can’t blame them either. If I didn’t have to live out here in this filth, I’d keep going too.” I walked backwards up the stairs, already remembering the back of her, the screen door propped open by her foot.

First Days

Kolleen Renee Egan, a white girl, requested a Negro roommate and I was the one she got. Not only did no one bother to ask me my roommate preference, they also failed to mention that all the girls around me had been given a choice to opt out of the Negro Roommate Experience.

In fact, Ed Wall, the Dean of Admissions, fed me a totally different line from the script for their social experiment: "*Lawrence University does not discriminate on the basis of race.*" According to him, I had been randomly assigned a roommate just like everyone else. So, thinking I should spare Kolleen a huge shock, my first letter to her coyly mentioned that I had a surprise, which would be revealed when I sent her a photo. "That's okay," she wrote back, "I think I know what you mean."

Indeed she did. And a lot of what Kolleen knew I wouldn't know for another thirty years, most of it tied to the university's policy in 1967 of making decisions for its Negro students while giving its white ones the right to choose.

The Room-with-a-Negro option, available to whites only, was just one example. There was also the Meet-and-Greet-Your-Negro-Before-Classes-Start option, which the university encouraged for the forward-thinking freshmen who had ticked the Negro roommate box. Consequently, when Kolleen graciously invited me to come visit her at summer's end, I eagerly accepted. In early September, I set out for Wisconsin to meet her in the comfort of her familiar surroundings.

The gut-churning Air Wisconsin flight from Chicago to Wausau couldn't land soon enough. Nearly doubled over inside the cabin too small to stand up in, I crept towards the exit, still working the gum the pilot had passed out to us just before takeoff and straining for my first glimpse of Kolleen. She and her grandmother were easy to spot, all smiles and warm Wisconsin

welcome. The fifteen miles to Merrill flashed by in a flurry of chatter. Up in Kolleen's bedroom, we talked over each other nonstop until Mrs. Egan broke in to send us on an errand. We went to the grocery store and landed on the moon.

She was somebody's mother, somebody's wife, minding her business, leaving the store with two armloads of groceries, so it took a moment for her to process me. When she did, she shrank back and dropped all her bags. Groceries rolled everywhere. Kolleen and I stepped past the woman's sputtering outrage and silently picked our way past her purchases to enter the store. Canned goods, gleaming fruit, fresh vegetables, milk cartons, and meat wrapped in cellophane calmed me. If we ate the same stuff, how different could we be?

I had made it halfway down the aisle before I noticed them: a pile of heads, one stacked above the other at the end of the aisle, peering around shelves of food, jostling to get a look at me. I pretended I didn't see them. But they kept staring. I wheeled around and kept going until I found Kolleen one aisle away. At dinner that night as my meal clogged my throat, she ridiculed the hostile ignorance of the woman who had lost a grip on her groceries. I was humiliated by all the attention, as much by Kolleen's earnest empathy as by having to relive the experience. So, I brushed it off, assuring my hosts it didn't matter.

For the rest of my stay, Kolleen was funny, smart, and full of wry observations about her life, her family, and their town. She bent over backwards (she was head cheerleader after all!) to make me feel at home and to show me I was an eagerly-awaited, honored guest. At her urging, the Superintendent of Schools hosted a dinner for us at his home where I continued behaving as though being a raisin in a pot of rice was nothing new. By the time we got to Appleton a week later, Kolleen and I were a duo of mouthy dynamos, moving in sync.

We had finished lugging our belongings up to our dorm room and Kolleen was downstairs seeing off her folks. Finally, away from her rapid-fire chatter, I was able to survey my situation: I was surrounded by strangers, every one of them white, while all things familiar and comforting were a galaxy away. I had never spent a night away from home when my sister wasn't there, too. Except for visits to see Grandma or our country cousins and two weeks at a summer camp, we had never slept anywhere Mama wasn't.

Until I spent my first night at Kolleen's house, my sole experience in white folks' personal space had been defined by Edith Rembert, one of Ma's primary employers. We entered and left by the Remberts' back door, ate off paper plates in their backyard, and I stayed silent and invisible if I ever accidentally ended up in the Remberts' presence. Now I was surrounded by what felt like the Remberts' children and I was supposed to study, eat, sleep, and bathe with them as if I had done that all my life.

Even with my eyes closed, I could feel Kolleen's perky energy filling her side of the room, transforming it into what looked like a page from a teen fashion magazine. Photos, cards, ribbons, and buttons covered the corkboard above her bed which was draped with a gaily colored spread; pillows formed a perfect backdrop for the stuffed animals that sprawled contentedly among them. Atop her dresser, a cheerleader's pompom lay between photographs of her boyfriend's smiling face and her own beaming likeness beneath a beauty queen's tiara.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I propped my feet on the shiny cheap trunk that held all we could afford to give me a stake in my foreign outpost. Next to it sat my most prized possession: the brand new sky blue three-piece American Tourister luggage set that was Ma's high school graduation/going-away-to-college gift to me. A sleek, low profile, six-year old portable Smith-Corona typewriter, a gift from my father, rounded out my sudden leap to sophistication,

worldliness, and adventure. When sobbing seeped in from outside our door, I got up to trace it down.

She wept openly. As if calming an infant, her mother patted circles in the small of the girl's back, then stopped to lift hair tears had glued to her daughter's face. As his wife brushed the moist mass from their child's brow, the father stood off to the side, face flushed, flicking tears. Her room was between the bathroom and mine, so I sneaked a peek and crept back to my end of the hall.

Eventually, the grieving girl settled down to bouts of nose blowing and her family's voices moved into the corridor outside my room before fading away, murmurs behind shuffling feet. In the midst of the Sunday quiet, the distraught girl's sobs had shaken my resolve. Studying the dents and scratches on my trunk, a tiny quake flitted across my chest and I felt like crying, too. Instead, I fished the trunk key from my purse and unpacked.

With the last of my belongings in place, the room crept up on me. A sea of black tarpaper roof shingles spread out beneath our only window, separating my bed to the left from Kolleen's to the right. We had matching bedspreads and curtains, but my side of the room looked different, *felt* different. Her side was fluffed and gay with White Girl Stuff. All of the girls on the hall had White Girl Stuff: cheerleader pom-poms, boyfriend photos, senior portraits of them framed by foliage, Carnival-sized stuffed animals, contact lens cases, plastic boxes for metal orthodontic retainers, clever bulletin boards with a theme. My side of the room had none of that.



Early days...happy times

Suddenly, the crying girl's sorrow revved up again, disrupting my inventory of lack. Who the hell did she think she was, so determinedly inconsolable, so freely spreading the noises of her distress? She needed to shut up and leave me alone. I jerked myself up to march across the hall to find out if

she intended to lie there and cry all damn day or what. Just as my hand touched the cool metal doorknob, Kolleen's pounding footsteps sounded her return. Instead of confronting the girl on the crying jag, I aborted my mission and new resolve rushed in to take its place: No matter how lonesome I got, I would never let them know it. In the mirror above the sink, Siamese twins gave birth to themselves: fearless Race Warrior and terrified Connie Coed. The end of freshman orientation week was about to give us our first public airing.

The Computer Date Dance

We survived the ritual humiliation of Freshman Orientation Week and were finally headed for the thing that had all the girls talking from day one: the Freshman Computer Date Dance. Technology in service to romance promised to issue each of us a computer-matched escort for a dress-up affair. To prepare themselves, the girls flew into an astonishing frenzy of beautification.

I had grown up in a household where natural beauty and little money for cosmetics trimmed our primping to a few tools and a few minutes. Face powder or liquid foundation (never both), a dab of rouge (Mama only), lipstick, and that was it. Although my father was handsome and my mother was beautiful, I was the ugly duckling to my swan sister. My makeup regimen mimicked that of my sister and mother, though with far less impressive results. Compared to me, these white girls were pros.

They spent the entire day racing to and fro, washing, conditioning, setting, drying, and combing out their hair; painting themselves new faces with the wizardry of watercolor artists; plucking eyebrows and—something I had never before witnessed—using small tongs to curl mascara-lathered eyelashes. I observed all of this with no small amount of envy as I possessed neither the expertise nor the incentive to drag out my prep time. I figured if my date could get past the fact that the computer had matched up him with a Negro, he probably wouldn't be too picky about what about what I looked like. Anyway, I simply refused to emotionally invest in an experiment that I seriously doubted would survive the evening. Even though my entire dating history consisted of a few dates with one boy during my senior year in high school, I knew enough to expect the worse.

Bzzzz! Bzzzz! Bzzzz! The first buzzers detonated on a dorm room wall down the hall. After that, they fired off in rapid succession in room after room. One buzz meant you had a message waiting; two, you had a package; three, you had a male guest. This was a three-buzz night to remember. Well-trained in Pavlovian response from our first day on campus, each girl rushed out the door, and floated down the corridors amidst a haze of squealing, scented well wishes. She descended the staircase into a sea of upturned white male faces.

Bzzzz! Bzzzz! Bzzzz! My long-awaited trio finally ricocheted around our room, beckoning me to my computer doom. Thankfully, most of my floor mates had already gone, so I walked down the deserted hallway and started down the stairs with what I hoped was calm sophistication.

Face framed by my new imitation-tortoise shell, stylishly oversized, octagonal glasses, I scanned the crowd for my computer-selected mirror image. What if he spied me before I saw him and hauled ass at seeing the computer's joke on him? I had no face-saving plan if my computer date flaked. But, just as my terror began rising, a tall, handsome, blond guy stepped

forward to claim me. Holding my number aloft in one hand, he extended his other, introducing himself as though he routinely picked up the only Negro girl in sight. The throbbing knot beneath my ribcage subsided.

For reasons I still can't recall, we did not leave through the front door like everyone else. Instead, we turned left down a hallway and pushed open the emergency side door exit. As soon as the door slammed shut behind us, we were locked outside in blinding darkness. Crashing through bushes and groping vines behind the dorm, we saw the light from tennis courts and a sidewalk many feet below. With both of us clutching my umbrella, we slid down the steep mud-slicked hill as drizzling rain turned to a downpour. Eventually, we sauntered into the student union where we danced—soaked, muddy, and awkward—without touching.

At first, I could not find the beat in the white folk's blaring, arrhythmic music. How was that possible? Even white folks knew all Negroes could dance better than they could. But, until then, I had not realized we needed our own music to beat them on the dance floor. White music had never been part of "Genial Gene's" playlist on WGIV, Charlotte's only Negro station, so the music that fueled the flailing arms and jerky contortions of the white students around me was totally foreign. My confidence resumed when I finally found a beat I could keep.

Every now and then Dave Simmons, my escort, and I brushed glances and when we did, we leaned towards each other and yelled to be heard above the music. Unlike the flat round or square, mostly unremarkable faces I thought typical of the Midwest, his was angles and contours with a prominent nose and an interesting mouth. As the night wore on, I decided his eyes, slightly brooding, had it. I sensed he was shy and kind, probably someone like me who loved books. Maybe we really were kindred spirits. At least the computer thought so. My heart twitched at the possibility. Our evening ended pleasantly uneventful.

Days passed and pulled me with them as one lesson repeated: My past couldn't hold me back unless I let it. Swearing and hanging out with beer-guzzling white kids, I had definitely rounded a bend. Then, one glorious moment late on a Friday afternoon, I got a chance to be the girl I had always wanted to be. Neither a partygoer nor a good dancer in high school, I would've sooner sat naked on the pulpit at Sunday morning church service than enter a dancing contest back home. Where I came from, if you couldn't dance, your place was holding up the wall on the sidelines. If you had the nerve to get up on the dance floor anyway, you were begging to be ridiculed.

Always too tall and too skinny, my gangly body was simply not a reliable pool of cool. But even though even my closest friends didn't know it, I boogied endlessly in the mirror at home, earnestly imitating my sister's smooth twists and slides. On the Friday of my transformation, I brought that girl in the mirror out onto the floor. I was Connie Coed, recent arrival on campus Mars, and the right music on the student union jukebox was just begging *that* girl to shake her ass. I figured I had nothing to lose in an impromptu dance contest because most of the people standing around were white and I was certain I could fake it good enough to fool them. So, I flounced onto the floor with my Negro partner. And, soaked in sweat, I bounced my butt as couple after couple dropped out, felled by onlookers' applause that chose the winners of each round. When it was over, my partner and I were the two left standing and took our winners' bows to catcalls and ear-piercing whistles.

As fall wore on, it turned out to be a winning season for more than the dancing jock and me. Gwendolyn Baptiste, a very light-skinned black freshman from New Orleans, snagged the grandest prize when she was voted homecoming queen a few months later.

CHAPTER 2

OBSERVING THE NATIVES

Aliens

Even though I was in the phone closet with the door closed, I whispered into my hands cupping the receiver. I couldn't afford to call home every weekend like many of the girls, but every now and then, I'd squat in that airless cubbyhole to tell Ma about the strange goings-on in the Land of the White People. No matter what I reported, she was never shocked.

Eleven black¹ freshmen and three black transfer students had enrolled at Lawrence University in the fall of 1967. Along with two black upperclassmen already there, we were *it*, the entire black population not only on campus and in Appleton, Wisconsin, but also, it seemed, in the ten towns that comprised the Fox River Valley.

For most of the white folks, we were the first Negroes they had ever seen up close and in person and it showed. They were definitely the first white folks I had ever roomed with, ate with, and lived with, but unlike them, I did my best to keep that from showing. Even so, being marooned among twenty freshmen women and our two junior counselors had a major benefit: I could reinvent myself whenever I felt like it.

I came from a long line of black folks genetically imprinted with centuries of expertise on being human in spite of the devastation orchestrated and sustained by white folks. Consequently, I was certain I knew more about life than all twenty of those white girls put together and I intended to take every opportunity to teach them a thing or two. That I might learn something from them had never crossed my mind, which explains why I was having a hard time keeping up with what they were teaching me daily. That's why I was on the phone with Ma, updating her on my latest discoveries.

The hall mate I had just told her about wanted desperately to say yes to a guy who had asked her out, but she couldn't. Or as she put it, "Whoa! Jeeze, my folks would kill me!"

"Ma, do you know what she said when I asked her why? 'Because he's Jewish!' What kind of sense does that make? What's so wrong with being a Jew?"

"The Jews killed Jesus. They crucified him on the cross."

"So what, Ma?! Sue can't go out with Aaron because somebody killed *Jesus*?!"

"Not somebody, honey, *the Jews*. People don't like the Jews because they killed Jesus." Ma said this like she was talking about a murder that had captured national headlines the day before.

"But, Ma, how could something that happened a zillion years ago make any difference *now*? And anyway, wasn't Jesus Jewish—you know, King of the Jews? I don't get it."

"You just keep on living, honey. I have to leave some things for you to figure out on your own. Riiiiight?"

I was a devout Christian, a narrow-minded Baptist Southern girl who almost never spent time around people who didn't go to church every Sunday like my family and friends did. And the only Jew I'd ever seen was on the front lawn of the federal courthouse in downtown Charlotte. He was a light brown-skinned man with a white mustache, wearing a funny looking hat and what looked like a long black dress. He was standing under an ancient tree reading a book. When Ma saw me staring at him, she said, "Honey, it's impolite to stare."

"Is he Filipino?" I asked. We had classmates who were half-Filipina, so Filipino became our catch-all for everyone who was not all black, but also not quite white.

"No, honey, he's a Jew," Ma instructed. After that, to me "a Jew" was that man in that outfit on that courthouse lawn. I had seen Aaron and he didn't look or dress like that man, and my inability to make it make sense had me shriek-whispering in the closet. When my friend's

religiously intolerant parents also forbid her to date Catholics, even Ma couldn't explain that one to me. And so began my list of Stuff Stupid White Girls Did (or Didn't Do):

Left toothpaste spit all over the bathroom sink. And then just walked off without even bothering to rinse it down the drain. I soon learned to wait until most of my section mates had completed their morning ablutions before I showed up to be greeted by the porcelain garden of glistening toothpaste globs they left in their wake, chunky deposits that had crusted over by midday. The white girls provided both the experience and a new word to describe it: *gross*.

Didn't wash their hands even after using the toilet.

Didn't flush the toilet and—in what was the most profoundly offensive act to prudish me—flopped down in a bathroom stall and dumped bowels and bladder without reserve, sometimes with the stall door open as they continued their conversations amid a symphony of flatulence. Ironically, the bathroom became a site of both refuge and trauma for me.

Raised in an extremely conservative household, nakedness in the presence of others was simply not part of my upbringing, nor was being forced to look at naked others. All through school, our gyms had shower stalls with curtains or at least a partition for privacy and even the “loose” girls carefully covered themselves. Consequently, I was stunned by butt-naked white girls traipsing to and fro. Who raised these hussies who had obviously never heard of modesty? Yet, the bathroom turned haven whenever I pushed through the doors to find no one in sight. Then, my stomach unfurled with relief. If I was lucky, I could make it in and out in total solitude.

Eventually, my hall mates' libertine prancing wore down my Victorian sensibilities. I realized that, as much as I resented their oblivious abandon, I envied it even more. I longed to know what it would feel like to simply let go no matter where I was, no matter who was around, with total disregard for what anyone thought of me or what I was doing. Though my moment of total

abandon never came, as time passed, I inched further from the clinched state where I started and closer to the relaxed position they occupied.

I was always on the lookout for places I could go to get away from them, the white folks. Everywhere I went, they watched me and simultaneously acted like I was invisible. I felt like a camel having tea at The Plaza: Everybody stared because they didn't want to miss such a remarkable sight, but nobody would meet the camel's gaze much less strike up a conversation with it.

They didn't know how to do things I had been responsible for doing since I was nine years old, things that were considered fundamental to good home-training. For instance, they didn't know how to wash their own clothes. That included not knowing to sort whites from colors, how much detergent to use, or even where to put it. One day one of them side-eyed me washing a few things in the sink. She surreptitiously attended my movements as though I were demonstrating soufflé-making techniques from the Cordon Bleu. Then, apparently deciding to apply what she had just learned, she washed her cashmere sweater set in the sink. When she finished, she hung both sweaters, sopping wet, on a wire hanger and watched them streeetch several sizes until the weight of the water pouring from them bent the hanger and the sweaters slid off onto the floor.

They didn't know how to iron. Actually, a few did though even they didn't know how to position a garment on an ironing board to press it or what was the proper temperature for various fabrics. As a result, they routinely ruined brand new irons—their own *and* other people's—when scorched or melted fabrics ended up stuck to the iron faceplate. So what? They'd just go out and buy another iron or another blouse...or another whatever.

After the first week or two, few even bothered with ironing, choosing instead to walk around looking, and sometimes smelling, like they had pulled their clothes from the bottom of a heap. Some had. They called these grungy outfits *grubs*.

Then there was meal time, which provided another whole set of revelations: *No one said grace*. They just flopped down and dug in, elbows on the table, talking with a full mouth. Gradually, I learned White People's biggest secret: They were uncouth heathens. As my incredulity subsided, I began acting just like them.

I learned how to deftly section a grapefruit the rare times it hadn't already been done by the kitchen staff; to tip the soup bowl away from instead of towards me; and to break off and butter a bite-size piece of bread instead of slathering the whole slice at once. When I really wanted to be pretentious, I handled my flatware in the manner I associated with the globe-trotting preppies: fork in my left hand, tines turned down, with my knife in my right hand as the fork's constant companion.

They neither knew what their fathers did for a living nor how much they earned. Rarely was a mother mentioned in her income-earning, most seeming to enter that equation, if at all, as people who "didn't work." That was the hands-down shocker for me. I came from a home where Ma enlisted my sister's and my help to strategize and practice her demands for pay raises. I had filled out my own college financial aid forms, listing the details of Ma's earnings and our household expenses. None of our particulars was news to me, but an accumulation of knowledge gained over the years that had started as early as I could remember. Our family talked constantly and about everything.

Not only did we know how hard Ma worked to earn a living, we knew exactly what she did to bring home the bread and the bacon. We knew the names of all the people and pets who lived in

the houses she cleaned. We knew their most personal habits and kept a running comparative analysis of the families, their internecine wars, their foibles, and their triumphs. We updated our database daily during dinner. So, I couldn't fathom what kinds of households would produce 18-year olds who were so witless about the details of how life worked in the Real World.

The more I learned about what they didn't know, the better I felt. Seeing such deficits in them reduced to a manageable level my swirling anxiety about never being able to escape them, about always being weighed and measured, and feeling like I always fell short of the cut. The white girls might have known how to clear customs, but they didn't know squat about making a bed. Ma had been right all along: When it came to looking out for themselves, white people were clueless. Still, when I complained, she was sympathetic—to them.

“Don't be so hard on them, honey. How can they know if nobody taught them? A lot of them had parents who sent them away to school to get rid of them, so they really didn't have anyone to raise them and they've ended up raising themselves. If I hadn't taught you to pick up behind yourself, how would you know what to do? If you can show them how to do something, go ahead and show them. It's no skin off your back. Anyway, all that stuff you're describing that they don't how to do, that kind of ignorance is the luxury of being white. I bet most of them think the only reason we're here on earth is to do all that for them.”

There was one white person I felt a connection to early on: the maid. I ran into her one day when I returned before she had finished. She complimented me on how neat and clean my side of the room always was. I was so grateful I began timing things so I'd be around when she was there. She'd chat with me a few minutes and move on. We exchanged Christmas gifts and at the end of the school year, I left a goodbye present for her on the foot of my bed.

Meanwhile, Ma was a constant chorus of pep talks reminding me I was an alien in a world set up so white folks could simply slide through. As far as she was concerned, anything I accomplished beyond daily survival was a testament to my superior breed, more proof of my talent. It was up to me to find my place in their world without losing sight of who I was before I landed among them.

“Honestly, honey, I don’t know if I could go out there, in all of that cold among all of those strangers that don’t want you out there anyway, and do what you’re doing. But don’t forget you come from sturdy stock. If you feel like you’ve got it hard, just think about me lugging these vacuum cleaners around day in and day out, bent over the ironing board, slinging brooms and mops, and putting up with a bunch of stink and foolishness so you can concentrate on your studies. If you do that, you’ll hang in there because that’s your guarantee that you won’t ever have to push filth for a living like I do.”

And when I called home tearful and in despair, Ma’s advice was always the same. “You don’t have to stay out there if you need to come home, but you have to make sure that you’ve really given it your best shot. If you feel like you can’t take it anymore, just come on. We’ll figure out something else. Now say your prayers and go to sleep. I’m proud of you.”

Created a hundred years before I was born, Lawrence University was established as the frontier school on a bluff above the Fox River to “give gratuitous advantage to Germans and Indians of both sexes.”² While the advantage to Indians remained buried, the advantage to “Germans of both sexes”—and other descendants of European immigrants—was impossible to miss in 1967. Nowhere was the sense of entitlement to this “gratuitous advantage” more evident than in the racially segregated Greek organizations on campus.

The arrival of black students on campus had sparked a rancorous debate between fraternities and sororities on one side and the university on the other. The issue crystallized the attitudes and practices black students still faced: whether Greek organizations would voluntarily desegregate or be forced off-campus. My response to the brouhaha was to pretend that I didn't give a rat's ass about the folks who "went Greek." I argued that any black person who wanted to be in a white supremacist fraternity or sorority deserved whatever they got—they should just have to go off campus to get it. The embarrassing truth, however, was a bit different: even though I never could have afforded to join a sorority, I still wanted one to look me over during "rush." And I wanted them to invite me to pledge. The more embarrassing truth was not one sorority did either.

Eventually, of course, the Greeks succumbed to the times and opened their doors to the previously dreaded black folks, thereby preserving their campus facilities and keeping their snouts in the trough of university-subsidized living. And so the scene was set for Gwen, the homecoming queen, to add another jewel to her tiara of "firsts." When she joined the glittering embrace of the sorority tagged "the rich bitches," Gwen became Lawrence's first black woman Greek.

I couldn't really blame her. The fistful of black students on campus always became tokens of one sort or another because there were too few of us to be anything else. If a sorority had wanted to anoint me as their honorary white girl like they did Gwen, I doubt anything could've stopped me from accepting that embrace. The only thing that separated me from Gwen was lack of opportunity. So, still smarting from being passed over by the Greeks, I decided to go find the community that shared my world vision, the folks who would welcome me as insider and friend.

Allies

Back in high school, I had streaked with the smartest and biggest fishes in a segregated black pond. But now adrift in a tank with sharks who tossed their hair, dieted obsessively, and studied in secret, I could neither rise to the top nor find footing on the bottom. I reached out for my new friends and began treading water, trying to keep my head above the surface.

As much as Kolleen and I had liked each other in our barrage of letters over the summer, we had already begun drifting apart. She was a “Connie,” a student in the music conservatory, which took her to the far edge of campus and a slightly different course of study. She practiced long hours outside the room and her time in the room was more often than not spent bent over a book studying. In what would become a lifelong pattern, I expanded my reach and established relationships with many girls who were friends with me, but not each other. Laurel Hacker, Marilyn Runge, Gail Toycen, Lucy Ebisch, and Sarah Calkins became good friends with whom I created pockets of warm memories among many experiences that were otherwise alien, hard, and bitter.

Sarah Elizabeth Calkins, a fourth generation Lawrence woman, came straight from a Pennsylvania boarding school and, in keeping with her East Coast preppie origins, was openly disdainful of all things Midwestern—except for Lucy. Rosy-checked and Rubinesque in stature,



Sara was medium height with long black hair that flew free and was often undisturbed by a comb. She took the Lord’s name in vain with such frequency and volume that even a doorknob could tell she was no parts a Believer. As soon as the first signs of spring warmth permitted, she joined the other pasty, scantily-clad bodies in a row up on the roof

deck to “get a line” back in the days when that was a clear reference to ingesting sun and not cocaine. Sara was always among the first to achieve the highly revered olive tone of tan.

Lucy hailed from Menasha, a nearby paper mill town so tiny that, next to it Appleton was a teeming upriver metropolis. Despite our merciless teasing about her hick town origins, however, rumors of Lucy’s perfect SAT scores preceded her and elevated her status. We heard she had been wooed by all of the Seven Sisters and the Ivy Leagues, but for some unfathomable reason had chosen Lawrence. A solid, squared prototype of German stock, Lucy was medium height and build and wore glasses that constantly slid down her nose. Her hair, brown and medium length, was cut in a pageboy, though usually secured by a rubber band at the nape of her neck.



Then there was me, acerbic, still largely Negro, emerging Afro-American, feigning gruffness and confidence that soared after classes and on weekends. As Lucy, Sarah, and I tightened our bond, I became the ringleader of our trio, spit-shining our outsider status. As far as I was concerned, we were different from—and absolutely superior to—the other girls, so I was usually the one who initiated my favorite pastime: making fun of the girls around us. We found plenty of ammunition in books and articles produced by the growing feminist movement.

When Lucy bounded in from literature class one day, sat down on the foot of Sarah’s bed, and read aloud a passage from George Bernard Shaw’s *MAN AND SUPERMAN*, I knew exactly what to do with it. I copied it by hand and tacked it to the bulletin board in the hall. Then we listened gleefully to the disapproving cluckings of girls who clearly did not agree with the scandalous gist

of the quote: that social-climbing mothers were mercenary hags cultivating their daughters for sale to the highest bidders in an auction called marriage.

Lucy played the bassoon, I played the dozens, and Sarah played “You and I Travel to the Beat of a Different Drum” —a shiny black 45rpm that spun endlessly on her turntable until Lucy and I crept into her room one day and stole it. Our theft was the alternative to breaking Sara’s fingers or wrecking her stereo.

It seemed Sarah spent most of her days in her robe, sitting in the middle of her bed, eating chocolates and chain-smoking Salem menthols or the fashionably thin brown twigs Benson & Hedges designed specifically to appeal to “liberated” young women. Mick Jagger, lips puffed like a blowfish twenty years before the collagen rage, cavorted, hairy and pencil-legged, on a huge black and white poster on the wall above her head.

Every night she spent most of her time outside her bed, upside down in the phone closet, talking for hours to her boyfriend still in boarding school on the East Coast. To me, she was wealthy, worldly and profane and I envied the ease with which she trampled boundaries.

Although she seemed quite vague about how her father earned his living (“I think he’s some kind of corporate executive...or something.”), money was not an object.

One day, after tiring of trying to untangle a mass of freshly washed hair, she grabbed a pair of scissors and calmly whacked off chunks of offending mats. Then, realizing she needed an outfit for a date, she removed herself to Prange’s Department Store, returning shortly thereafter with a long-sleeved, green velvet dress with an empire waistline, trimmed with a white collar and black cuffs. She had charged what I thought was an astonishingly expensive dress to her American Express credit card. After her date, the dress promptly joined a bedside pile of clothes and I never saw it on her again.

Lucy's sheltered life had produced in her a willingness to extend the benefit of the doubt as a first response to everyone. In that way, she was my polar opposite. She approached life with great hesitation, as though certain there were many around her who knew things she didn't and were just waiting for the moment to tell her. I, who knew everything, tried not to disappoint her. Though we all competed to make each other laugh, Lucy was the most quick-witted and usually the first to break. If life on the periphery was our glue, it worked. Lucy and I bonded for life.

Though they didn't know it, Sarah and Lucy witnessed my tumble into a new sense of self that was, initially, intensely intoxicating. I was drunk on the possibilities of re-creating myself and felt a bit deceitful as I tried out various personae. Being tall, skinny, slim-hipped, and brown counted for nothing on the beauty front in my all black high school. So, I was in awe that crossing several state lines, with no further effort on my part, had suddenly transformed me into a piece of near-beautiful exotica among my dorm mates. No way that would last. In the meantime, I was thrilled with no longer being ordinary. The most visible sign of my arrival was my panoply of white acquaintances, different ones for different occasions.

There were those who smiled brightly during our brief encounters and could be counted on to find something nice to say. They were graduates of the Thumper-if-you-can't-say-something-nice-don't-say-anything-at-all charm school. How else to explain the hazel-eyed, chestnut haired all-American teen queen's throaty confession one day?

"Oh, Berni, I wish I had your skin," she sputtered spontaneously. "You're so bronze all year long!"

"Oh, yes," I said imitating her husky tone, "I wish you had it too—and everything else that comes along with it."

Another girl, fine-tuned in the arts, entertained me with graphically astonishing details of her sexual exploits with a not-white boyfriend whom she identified as the son of a powerful, high-ranking Negro. She was an elegant and startling counterpoint to a swaggering, surly, foul-mouthed neighbor whose normal conversation level was stuck at one level—yelling—and whose top lip tented with meanness when she drank heavily. That top lip tented often.

Then there was the girl who parsed her steps and speech as though she had no right to take up space, to have or utter a thought; as though by daring to do either, she was certain to be slapped back into submission. Yet another one was twitchy and skittering, surviving literally on crumbs—bread crumbs, cake crumbs, cookie crumbs, pizza crumbs—never, it seemed, an entire morsel. There were the other girls, like me, born south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Who would they would be, I wondered, if I ran up on them in their natural habitats—i.e., their southern hometowns? Finally, there was one girl who seemed newly resentful upon awaking each morning and discovering, yes, it was true she had not won admission to an east coast Ivy League college, but was stuck there with us, suffering the further indignity of life on a campus that called itself “the Harvard of the Midwest.”

In my mind, I functioned as those white girls’ Unusual, a possession in transit upon whom they bestowed compliments and sometimes gazed with studied curiosity. In their presence, my floating status dropped anchor and I belonged. Moving outside their circle of ownership and into the larger campus community, however, I lost my moorings anew.

The further I roamed from my dorm, the less visible I grew.

As winter neared, when I passed the row houses halfway across campus where fraternity men frolicked in testosterone-induced fervor, I was reduced to a vapor. By the time I reached the door of the student union, I could be spoken of in the past tense, having disappeared altogether.

Strapping myself to Sarah and Lucy—the Fourth Generation Daughter of Privilege and the Genius, respectively—I thought I could survive. Had they known how desperate I was, there was still nothing they could do. They never had a clue that I had become both The Diva and The Disappeared.

The Vicissitudes of Sex

I never heard from my Computer Dance date again and no one else ever asked me out. Still, my girlfriends and I found reason to stay out late enough so that we routinely raced past male students leisurely strolling along while we nearly broke our necks to fling ourselves through the dorm door before curfew. It took a while for me to notice the klieg light inequity of a situation where women had to be locked down, but guys could roam free of any restrictions.

One of the first lessons of Freshman Orientation was that the university was *in loco parentis*—my substitute parents. Because repressing my untamed urges was the major goal of the only kind of parenting I had ever known, at first I didn't mind that the university had stepped into Ma's shoes and had replaced her rules with its own scheme for keeping me in check. But the more obvious the gap became between our constrained female existence and the guys' unfettered freedom, the more I chafed. It was girls as vestal virgins who bore the burden of the myth in which the university was heavily invested. And what a myth that was.

In addition to Ma's warning about white guys—"Don't come bringing no white boy back here"—she had also told me what I should expect from white girls. Even though black women and girls were routinely portrayed as being oversexed and morally loose, in fact, it was white girls who fucked freely and without compunction.

Back in the days before legal abortions, such libidinous frolic was risky business. So "tonsillectomies" and other mysterious surgical procedures related to "female problems" cropped

up as a few of the medical solutions available to pregnant women and girls with money. Poor and working class girls who got pregnant got babies.

In my high school of 1200 students, everybody knew which girls were “doing it” and we definitely thought less of them for that. This included the “nasty boys” who were doing it with them. And while the girls who had been doing it were the exception among my friends in my black, segregated high school, on my almost lily-white college campus, it appeared the opposite was true: Not only did it seem most of the white girls around me had done it, they seemed eager to do it every chance they got. Having seen no parts of a penis and having no yet acquired any interest in curing my ignorance, of course I was appalled.

The university responded in several ways. First, there was curfew: 10PM Sunday through Thursday, 11PM on Friday, 12 midnight on Saturday. Then there was The Fishbowl, a six by twelve-foot glass enclosed entryway in each dorm that was a terminus each evening for things male and female. That was where heterosexual college men and women tethered themselves to each other, feverishly clutching, groping, and tonguing in a sloppy frenzy until the clock chimed curfew at which point the thoroughly aroused coeds, with fully flushed faces and lips sucked swollen, needed to be on the inside behind locked doors while their male counterparts, similarly stiffened and swollen, found themselves literally out in the cold.

It was a steamy corridor of sexual dalliances that had usually begun somewhere else on campus and reached tsunami proportions in the Fishbowl in the countdown to curfew. The dorm mother stood just off to the side, keys in hand, waiting for the appointed hour when she could slide the dead bolt into place and, in that flick of the wrist, separate the chaste believers from their slutty sisters.

For the perpetually dateless like me, there was only one way to run this gauntlet: head down, eyes averted, seeking a clear path past the bodies locked in passion. As soon as we, the Undated, cleared that fetid space, we exchanged information about who had been seen doing what to whom.

If I had had a boyfriend, would I too have tarried in the Fishbowl slobbering him down in public view? Probably. After all, doing time in the Fishbowl raised your social status and elevated you above lesser beings resigned to using it only as a portal for coming and going. It was easy to be disgusted since I had no juicy, libidinous opportunity for face-sucking. Yet, despite my straight-laced upbringing and black folks' general prohibition against public displays of affection, I imagine I would have succumbed if given the opportunity.

From time to time, the most pulchritudinous among us would burst from the Fishbowl and run screaming down the hall after curfew, sobbing and joyfully announcing that a most hoped-for event had indeed occurred: She had been lavaliered.

This meant her fraternity boyfriend had laid claim to her by stringing his frat pin around her neck. This marking of territory was a pre-engagement ritual, which also signaled that sex was not only expected, but required. With great solemnity, the other girls on the floor would dutifully hold a candlelight ceremony in reverent homage to the ascension of the newly yoked.

In the fall of 1967, women could receive men visitors only in the parlor off the first floor lobby. By spring 1969, students and administrators battled over "visitation rules" that governed when girls could have boys in their dorm rooms, for how long, and under what conditions. Around the same time, a big brouhaha broadcasting the perils of underage drinking did not slow the flow of beer consumed in the deafening din of the Rathskellar, party central in the basement of the student union.

The sexually charged borders between men and women produced two other spectacles so foreign they were difficult for me to comprehend: sorority girls in games of “Powder Puff Football” and frat boys on “panty raids.”

Girlie football seemed primarily the purview of former high school cheerleaders. They screamed and sweated amid tangled arms and legs and heaving chests in cut-offs and t-shirts while male admirers watched appreciatively from the sidelines. I never played the game nor did I ever witness a single black female student joining in. And so it was, too, with the panty raids: It was a white thing.

Fraternity boys swarmed girls’ dorms, racing from room to room, snatching underwear from dresser drawers. Why they couldn’t just settle for the panties left on their floor the night before, I didn’t know. Some girls jumped up and down, clapping and shrieking, while others collapsed on their beds, squealing “victims.” The more athletic girls perched on rooftops and pelted their marauding visitors with water balloons. Standing silent surveying the melee, I planned a different response if any guy dared enter my room and try to make off with my hard-earned underwear. My historical imperative would not let me mimic the white girls feigning helplessness. Any white boy trying to snatch anything from black me would get his ass kicked. It had nothing to do with feminism; it was strictly about race.

A Friend in Jesus

Lucy and Sarah were my best all-around friends, but I had another best friend—Gail. As awed as I was of Sarah’s brave blasphemy, I was still enough Ma’s daughter to believe that God would let a rich white girl get away with things that would make him strike me dead. So, I continued dutifully engaging in Christian fellowship and Gail was my best friend in Jesus.

I had been raised in the church, drilled in the wrath of God, three times a day on certain Sundays. Southern, black, Baptist congregation took the Bible exactly at its word. An eager sponge for these teachings, I mastered the major concepts early and recited them often.

Mama, my sister, and I kneeled in prayer beside our beds every night. We said grace at every meal. We tithed, visited the sick and shut in, and put our money in the offering plate to support the church building fund, the preacher's anniversary, and the Lott Carey missionaries in deepest darkest Africa. Corseted by these traditions, I arrived on campus aware that the worse fate that could befall me, as far as Mama was concerned, was that the devoutly Christian girl she sent off to Wisconsin would return to her an Infidel.

But, again, no one needed to tell me that I shouldn't try to get away with things that Sarah took for granted. I knew, for instance, that if God struck her with some horrible affliction, her parents could afford the best medical care available. If, on the other hand, some divinely instigated plague befell me, I'd probably be pus-filled and abandoned on some hospital's segregated charity ward. Certainly if Odessa had any inkling that I had brought it on myself by flirting with the Devil, she would not offer succor or supper.

So while I continued to laugh at Sarah and matched her swearing word for word, I still got down on my knees at night to say my prayers. And I rose very early three mornings a week to join Gail in her trek across campus where a small ethnically diverse group of students, united in religious fervor, held a prayer service that ended early enough for us to be on time for 8AM classes.

Gail was farm fresh pretty and popular and she practiced her faith religiously. She also attended me with the missionary zeal characteristic of the charismatic faith in which she was raised and I thrived on her watch. In the tiny town where she was raised, her family—her

grandparents, parents, and their heirs—seemed to me to be lords of the manor: the hardworking, charitable, and God-fearing American ideal. Gail and her big brother, Dave, a junior on campus, were gleaming examples of Christian teachings. So when school breaks rolled around and I never had money to go anywhere else, Dave and Gail took me home with them.

There amidst acres and acres of rolling farmlands near the Minnesota border, the Toydens embraced me not only as a child of God, but, far more importantly, as though I were a child of theirs. Their seamless graciousness created a safe space for my race through a multitude of first experiences that began with me eating high on the hog or, as it turned out, on the cow.

“What’s this?” I asked during my first visit, staring at a huge slab of grilled meat that left no room on my plate for anything else.

“Steak,” Dave answered, offering me a freshly baked potato. Later that night when I gave Ma my phone report, she laughed out loud. White people even had their own *steak*?!

“Honey, what they gave you was a *real* steak, the kind rich people eat. All we’ve ever had was cube steak, poor folks’ meat, that mess we have to beat and beat and beat before we can cook it. That’s why we have to eat it while it’s piping hot because when it gets cold, it swells up big enough to choke a horse!” We laughed together. I was eighteen.

With Gail at my side, sometimes encouraging and sometimes goading, I quickly lost count of the horizons I explored, courtesy of the Toyden family. Dodging mooing cows stomping in place while tethered to milking machines; careening across acres of snowy family pastures on a brand new snowmobile from the family’s premiere car dealership; near tears after dropping and punching a hole in the gas tank of a brand new motorcycle from the same showroom inventory; being cheerfully ushered away before I could calculate the damage and hoisted atop a gentle horse instead. Other times, lazing on the river in a canoe.

A swarm of fresh-faced, farm-bred siblings and cousins clowned with me while picking apples in sunny lush orchards; later, hustled me through various stages of canning fruit among mothers and aunts in the kitchen; coached me as we filled grain feeders for the beef cows or tramped among the fetid dairy cow stalls, checking the automatic milking apparatus in the predawn darkness.

Come Sunday morning, we filed into church, properly subdued and respectful.

As it was for me, so it had to be for them, this stitching together of lives begun on opposite sides of race, class and cultural divides. Even so, our tapestry unfolded without pause or fanfare. I never once saw another person of color during my visits, and yet I cannot recall a moment of feeling alien or unwelcome among their extended family who lived nearby. In places with names recalling the indigenous stewards of the land and populations too small to warrant mention in most US road atlases, it seemed I was, at most, a mobile curiosity.

It was a short hop, eucharistically speaking, from the campus Christians to the Baptist church in town. Unlike the five-hour morning worship service at the black church where I grew up, the white Baptist service was flat and short. Though the words to the hymns were the same, the music was barely recognizable when stripped of the rhythm and enthusiasm I was used to. Nevertheless, every Sunday for months, like a gnat resting on a salmon filet, I perched on the pews with the rest of God's children.

Eventually, I became the Sunday school teacher for a class of nine-year olds. Odessa was happy that I had found a church home and I routinely recounted the details of my churchgoing activities, knowing that this would relieve any fear she might have that I was straying from the flock. She remained ignorant about my new penchant for swearing.

There was something else I wasn't confessing. I was pressed flat up against a wall of defeat and for the first time in my life, I saw no way over it. It was too wide to go around, too dense to drill through. If even prayer couldn't dent it, what good was all that Jesus, church, and Christian piety? Maybe I had sinned and was being punished. For sure I was doomed.

CHAPTER 3

FALLING FROM GRACE

The Reckoning

I had arrived in the fall certain I would be the Favored First Negro, worthy and welcomed. Even before Thanksgiving, though, College Girl was fast skidding towards college disaster. In the fourteen years since I entered kindergarten, I'd had no experience with academic failure, but Professor Ready, my torturer, was about to change my script. He relished his role. Three times a week, I turned myself over to him a bloodless slaughter. In class after class, using a Romance language, he worked me over in a ritual of humiliation silently witnessed by my classmates.

Lawrence's college catalogue had touted its low faculty-student ratio and had promised professors who would take a personal interest in my academic success. These stewards of knowledge in our small, supportive liberal arts college community would be kind, nurturing, and on my side—more white people who were happy to see me coming. They would represent a different kind of humanity than the twisted face cracker congregants I had left behind at Southern Bell. How, then, to explain Prof. Ready? As the Wisconsin chill plummeted to bitter cold and finally settled into an unremitting wintry blast, my French descent followed suit.

I had enrolled in Intermediate French believing my two years studying it in high school French were adequate preparation. Apparently, Ed Wall, the Dean of Admissions who recruited me, and Mary Morton, the Dean of Women who was my advisor, didn't know any better either. Evidence of our mistake wasn't long in coming.

It was clear from my first day in class that I was in way over my head because Prof. Ready conducted the class entirely in French. Panic gobbled even the simple instructions I thought I should've been able to understand, but I was too proud to withdraw, so I kept dragging myself to

class where I cowered beneath Professor Ready's contemptuous gaze. His pink pouty lips were perpetually taut with disapproval. Every class, there he was, hovering above me, arms folded across his chest, seconds dragging by while he and the class waited for answers I never had to questions aimed, only and always it seemed, at me.

His eyes glowed faint, familiar, roping me to him with the intimacy peculiar to cornered prey and sport stalker. I sat paralyzed and speechless beneath his glare until finally he would twirl and sashay back to the chalkboard to punctuate his conquest.

How could he know? What source his power to reflect with such exquisite precision what I felt about myself? We loathed me. Ignorant me. Defeated me. Disgrace to the Race me. Living proof that Negroes could never measure up me.

Too young and powerless in Ready's realm, I had not yet acquired the language—not even in English—to capture what I knew he was doing. Such a clever brute, the prissy little man. He scored again and again, each blow feral, evil, twisted. *So, this was what racism felt like in the classroom.*

As first term ended, I fantasized my deliverance. Perhaps, like Job of the Bible, my struggles were simply a test of my faith. If I prayerfully poured every bit of me into studying for final exams, maybe I could still stay my slide, could start the climb back to the star status which had landed me on campus in the first place. Prayer and determination had diverted doom before and they could deliver me again. As far as I knew, Ed Wall and Mary Morton were oblivious to my situation. They didn't ask and I didn't tell. Their crash test dummy, I was headed straight for the wall.

If I were a mute loser in the classroom, I was not that back at that dorm. My vibrant, vocal other self strode freely up and down the corridors hiding my shame. No matter the academic

disaster swelling beneath my façade of successful assimilation, I would not let them see me weak. As close as I was to Lucy and Sarah, they had no idea I was terrified and despondent.

Figuring that my only hope of passing was to spend every waking hour studying, I stopped going to class and developed a new routine: I'd pop a handful of No-Doz, mix a mug of black instant coffee, spread out my notes and books, and promptly descend into a deep, exhausting sleep. Just thinking about studying knocked me out.

White students met in study groups, but like most of what they took for granted, study groups were not an option for me. Nobody invited me to join one and I wasn't about to ask. After all, who could trust what information I might bring to the table? Further, I had no experience with such collaborative efforts, so how did I know I could trust what someone else would tell me about what I needed to know? Despair pinned me to my bed.

Appleton was driving me crazy. I wanted desperately to see any black body. I didn't care who they were or what they were doing; I just needed to see black people. For the first time in my life, I had not laid eyes on a single black family, nor even one black adult for nearly four months. There was nowhere I could turn for solace or counsel. Of all the things I had imagined about life in Wisconsin, it had never occurred to me that I would be so completely severed from every thread of blackness.

Lawrence's thirteen black students—1% of the student body—had vanished in a sea of whiteness. I assumed none of them were suffering like me. Charles Tillman, my classmate and fellow church member, had chosen Lawrence as well. Because our dorms were on opposite sides of campus, we never ran into each other and we rarely spoke by phone. A language genius and musical prodigy, Charles was an orchid who had finally found his hothouse, so as I shredded, he blossomed.

He was finally free to reveal an identity that had never been publicly discussed, albeit one impossible for him to conceal from the day he walked into my second grade classroom. While I worked desperately to keep my academic disintegration a secret, Charles let go and came out as gay. Had it occurred to me to ask for his help, I might have saved myself because French was one of the languages Charles spoke fluently.

By December, I was buried in an ice chest of white folks, an invisible integration token and a towering academic idiot. Nothing had prepared me for that. Even so, thirty pounds heavier and one ego lighter, I might have been limping back home fat and dumb, but I wasn't about to go back ugly.

Hard Pressed

“Want me to fix your hair?” Rita gazed sympathetically upside my head.

“You know how to do hair?”

“Girl, I got a hot comb *and* some pressing cream.” With those words, Rita Gatlin, a slim, 18-year old, smart black girl from Memphis, Tennessee, carved herself a permanent place in the story of my life with hair.

Rita and I were two of six black coeds on campus, which made us one-third of the university's black female population *and*, as far as we knew, one third of the total black female population in Appleton, Wisconsin (pop. 50,000). Fortunately, Rita had come armed with the proper grooming tools for her foray into the Land of the White People.

When I headed for Wisconsin, I was wary about integrating the campus, but a much bigger concern was what I would do about my hair. Stuck out there in the middle of nowhere with all of those white folks meant no black beauty shops. How on earth would I be able to go from mid-August to Christmas without getting my hair done?

Even though black women have never had the clean hair fetish that seems to plague white American women, the story of us and hair is still one full of twists and snags, wrenching and pulling, lotions, potions and kinks. When I was little, I was easily satisfied with the few hairstyles Ma thought were age appropriate, all of which involved my natural hair plaited into two or three braids. But, adolescence launched my campaign to persuade her to let me “get my hair fixed,” straightened out stiff and shiny with grease and a hot comb. My sister was my example: A teen with a job, she regularly spent part of her earnings at the beauty shop. I desperately longed for the time when I could do the same. Ma tried to talk me out of it with her usual reproach. “Nothing God made needs fixing.”

Easy for her to say. She had naturally straight, long hair that hung in loose waves when she unfurled it, which she never did, not wanting to flaunt the kind of “good hair” black women fried, died, and burned themselves for. From her privileged hair perch, she looked disapprovingly at women who used heat or chemicals to destroy their gift from God and she ignored my entreaties to join them. So, as soon as I got my first paycheck, I made a beeline to the beauty shop.

The first lessons in mane-taming were the cruelest. After all of that time, sweat, money, and wincing, natural elements could wipe out my investment quicker than I could say, “Go back”—two words I loathed to have spoken in reference to my hair. I never, ever, wanted my hair to “go back.” But it always snapped right back to its original, coiled kinks.

The first signs of the inexorable retreat appeared at the roots and along the edges of my hairline where fuzzy, furry new growth betrayed its older siblings which, when my luck held, would still lay plastered flat in total submission for weeks, sometimes even months. My hairdo’s otherwise leisurely retreat could also be hastened with heartbreaking speed by water. Whether in

the form of a rainy day, sweat from exertion, or steam from a faucet, moisture was death on my fixed head. Hair straightened with a hot comb in a standoff with dampness became a mass of puffy hair, fat hair whose volume expanded exponentially as the moisture content increased. Like others of my tribe, I was wonderfully creative at keeping water away from my hair.

Many anthropologists think African Americans don't know how to swim because we're afraid of water. That's only part of the story because while many black women are afraid of water for its drowning potential, far more fear its mutilation potential; its relentless propensity to make our hair go back to the very place from which we have, at great effort and expense, rescued it.

Early 1960s chemical technology ushered in a new wave of nappy hair relief euphemistically dubbed "the permanent." Not only would a perm waterproof your hair, water on permed hair would make it even straighter! It would be a few more months before college introduced me to an even more shocking discovery: white girls got perms too. Where white girls used the lye-based hair processing technique to curl life into their flat strands, black girls—and white ones with "curly" hair like ours—used a perm to flatten out our curls.

In fact, the "permanent" was only short-term relief as it had to be repeated at six-week intervals. Also called a "relaxer," it was not that either. The ordeal began for me with a scalp-strafting white creamy mixture of chemicals slathered onto my scalp where it remained as long as I could stand it or until I began silently weeping, whichever came first. At that point, I'd be whisked to a sink for a shampoo and rinse underneath a stream of cool water that would've been soothing if it hadn't felt like it was peeling off several layers of scalp the chemicals had just loosened from my skull.

Depending upon the style I wanted, the beautician used various size curlers around which she stretched my hair as tautly as humanly possible, stopping just short of bracing her knee against

the small of my back and ordering me to “Pull!” Thus trussed, my head would then be guided into a high wattage hair dryer—a small head furnace equipped with a metal bonnet and blasting heat—where it would bake for 3-4 hours while I tried to ignore my hammering headache and the scorching heat that was soldering my scalp flaps back to my skull. Hard plastic “flesh colored” caps were available upon request to keep my ears from melting and sliding down the side of my face.

Prohibitively expensive in the early years, perms were also enough of a novelty for me the summer before college that I wasn’t about to try one for fear that I would leave for college bald. So the weekend before I left for Wisconsin, I got my hair straightened—pressed with a hot comb and curled— one last time and prayed it would last until Christmas vacation. As the holidays rolled around, though, it was clear my prayer had not been answered, which is why my hair had caught the attention of hot-comb wielding Rita.

“I can fix your hair right now if you want me to.” Water had not touched my head for nearly four months. My scalp was raw along ruts dug by fingernails trying to scrape away the itch borne of a head direly needing a shampoo. The once effective scratch-inspect-flick routine no longer worked. My scalp was so sore it could hardly bear the weight of a thought. I gratefully accepted the salvation Saint Rita offered and floated behind her over to her dorm.

From my chair facing the mirror, I gazed admiringly at the accoutrements of my deliverance lined up on a towel on the desk: fat, black plastic comb, nylon bristle brush, and jar of pressing grease. Rita snapped a white towel in the air beside my head and draped it around my neck. Then she wet her finger with spit and gingerly touched the tiny stainless steel oven, plugged into the wall, that housed the straightening comb. When she pulled the comb from the oven, I inhaled the familiar curl of warm blue smoke wafting towards the ceiling and closed my eyes.

At first, we talked and laughed while Rita parted, greased, and straightened small chunks of my hair. Eventually, though, I nodded off. From time to time, I'd open one eye and see my fat hair gradually being replaced by a glistening shoulder-length mane plastered to my head. Hours passed before I was roused from my light slumber by the comb gliding through my hair, followed by the light pressure of Rita's hands smoothing my head. Thinking she was done, I started to get up, but she pushed me back down.

"You want a hard press, right?" A hard press? I had no idea what that was, but I was so overcome with Rita's skill and generosity that she could've offered to attach a third ear to my forehead and my answer would've been the same. "Oh, yeah!"

Extracting the hot comb from the oven, she started on me again. This time, though, instead of using the teeth, Rita used the back of the comb to press a smoking path the length of my hair. An hour later, she really was through and my helmet of hair was patent leather flat. I gazed at my reflection, using the big mirror and Rita's pocket mirror to check her handiwork, front and back. So *that* was a hard press. Perfect.

Suffused with pleasure, I put on my coat and pranced back across campus with my head bare despite December's wintry blast. Further stiffened by the cold, my hair hung in a motionless wedge by the time I burst into my dorm and bounded up the stairs to my room. I slowed to a saunter down the corridor, eager for my floor mates to catch sight of my new 'do. Sure enough, they started calling out after me, puzzled by the specifics of my transformation. "Berni, did you go swimming today?" "Why is your head wet?" "Did you cut your hair?"

Did I *cut* my hair? Stupid white girls. My hair was hanging at least a half-foot longer than it had been four hours earlier and they wanted to know if I had *cut* my hair! I waved silently and

speeded up. Perched on the side of the sink in my room, I leaned into the mirror above it. I was still stuck there admiring my slick transition when Kolleen burst in.

She stopped short. “Oh, Jeeze! Is that *grease*?! You put grease *in* your hair?!” She stuck her head in the hallway to recruit more witnesses. “Hey, you guys, come see what Berni did to her hair! She’s got it all gunked up with grease!”

Siberia

“Girl, get your crazy ass up off that floor!”

“Why? You see somewhere else to sit?”

“Lord, help your child. She’s been stuck out there with those white folks so long they’ve got her crawling around on the damn floor.”

My best friend since seventh grade, Sallie hissed her directive while scanning the room. Dalphne, on the other hand, offered up her intercessory prayer while glaring at me. Then she had backed off a few paces as if to say, “Don’t look at me. I’m not with the chump on the floor.”

Home from college for Christmas, we had circled the dimly lit room several times searching for seats at the party. Seeing none, my girlfriends had shifted their purses and coats and propped themselves against a wall. I had rolled up my coat, dropped it on the floor, and sat down on top of it. Now shamed into standing, I settled in with them against the wall and shrugged my apology. “Hey, hanging out with honkies can make a nigga act strange.”

After only four months away at college, I was still new to the shape-shifting required to fit in again once I was back home. My lessons kept coming.

“Hold it right there. Where on earth do you think you’re going looking like that?” Ma had stopped what she was doing and was giving me The Look.

“To the grocery store like you just asked.”

“Not looking like that, you’re not. You are not stepping foot out that door until you put on some clothes and fix yourself up. You might run around out there in Wisconsin looking like you’re motherless and fatherless and got nowhere to live, but as long as you’re staying in my house, you’ll leave here looking like somebody.” She stepped closer, sniffing the air as if seeking a scent that might explain my egregious loss of decorum.

The unfit outfit was my “grubs,” our campus uniform of faded jeans and a bleach-stained rumpled sweatshirt. Stylishly threadbare and rarely washed, grubs were one of the white folk’s novelties I liked, but Ma wasn’t having it. I made myself presentable without further discussion.

Where I came from, black people did not wear grubs and no one in their right mind would have chosen the grungy look the white kids on campus carefully cultivated. In high school, we had all worn freshly laundered, coordinated outfits and polished shoes. Even our white canvas lace-up sneakers were maintained throughout the day, if necessary, with a bottle of white Kiwi liquid shoe polish stashed in lockers among our books. Clothes made the boys and the girls and we, in turn, made much of clothes.

I had never heard of “dressing down.” We dressed up. The more financially strapped you were, the more important it was to signal your worth by wearing your money on your back. Further, middle class Negroes—whom E. Franklin Frazier so brilliantly dissected in *THE BLACK BOURGEOISIE*³—had always been among the most conservative Americans and since Ma had raised me to be a model Negro with middle class aspirations, I rigidly observed the dress code. As conservatism has always been bent on tying down women to control them, female attire—especially, our underwear—drew close attention. Item by item, it was designed to keep women and girls—and, by extension, men and boys—in place.

When I turned twelve and nearly six feet tall, I used my height to successfully argue my case for wearing high heels and stockings on special occasions. Since Ma thought a garter belt was “too suggestive,” I had to wear a girdle⁴ to hold up my stockings because at 5’10” and 110 lbs., I certainly didn’t need it to hold anything else in place. A bra and a full slip rounded out the foundations for being properly dressed.

Like women and girls generally, I was an early slave to convention and welcomed all manner of corseting. Girls thought it made us more grown-up and women believed it made them more ladylike. As Ma explained it, girdles shaped us and stilled unseemly jiggling. That way we could be more enticing to men yet remain respectable. So I had arrived on campus properly suited up as a decent young woman and I was expected to remain that way right into my grave. Bra, panties, girdle, slip, and stockings—all were required as long as I was living and getting dressed where Ma was paying the rent.

The dreaded letter with my grades finally arrived, containing alphabets that had never before applied to me: C+ in Freshman Studies, C- in Introductory Psychology, and F in Intermediate French. I got an A in horseback riding. I was inconsolable. No matter what came my way, I was the one who was supposed to be able to take it, give it back, and keep going. Instead, I had fallen apart in a face-off with white kids I knew were nowhere near as smart as I was.

A crash test dummy for an entire nation’s experiment with equal opportunity, I hadn’t even made it through the first quarter of the first lap before I skidded off track and hit the wall. It wasn’t over yet, but I was hanging on by a thread called academic probation.

New Habits

While I was gone, campus had settled into a Wisconsin winter tundra. Frozen mounds towered overhead, piled there by snowplows and stretching from one end of campus to the other. “You’ll need a heavy winter coat and several pairs of wool slacks...skirts and sweaters,” a sophomore Lawrentian had wisely advised the summer before. What she forgot to say was that I would need to wear them all together to stay warm.

Despondent and dragging myself through the bitter cold, I tried to regroup. I dropped biology and switched to Ronald Tank’s geology class because it was rumored to be the easiest of all the science courses. I started all over with French-I and slowly regained my language skills and my confidence. Bit by bit, I grew savvier about how to navigate on planet Lawrence.

For instance, I discovered that students with more advanced foreign language skills routinely took courses beneath their level of competence, thereby ensuring they could get good grades with little effort. I discovered that those fluent French speakers in the class I had failed had probably acquired their beautiful accents and impressive vocabularies while living and studying in France or Switzerland. Ma had promised me I would do better when I learned how things worked, but what I was learning just made me more angry and hopeless. I felt like Sisyphus, trying to roll my rock bottom grades uphill.

The white girls of summer had pretty much vanished after their initial flurry of welcome-to-campus visits. Competition for grades was supreme, so they, like everyone in the know, had presumably retreated to hit the books. Gone, too, were the resourceful professionals who had recruited me, apparently with no thought to what kind of assistance—emotional or otherwise—I might need as a black girl marooned in the Land of the White People.

My campus intelligence quotient made a steady ascent, but my bad grades burden began barreling backwards again. I had begun college as a hopeful, naïve Negro, drafted to fight my country for my own and my people's freedom, to continue pushing for our nation's race redemption. Six months later, the best I could do was lie curled up in a tight knot in bed with the covers over my head. With no one around to make me get up, soon I had missed so many classes it was impossible to catch up.

When winter term grades were posted, it was clear my best had not been enough. I had performed abysmally again. Despite dropping back to Beginning French, I had still earned only a B. My Freshman Studies grade remained the same C+ as first term. My A in Horseback Riding II still didn't count. To make bad matters worse, I had flunked Geology, "the easy course." It had been a class with a lab requirement, which meant I needed a lab partner. No one selected to work with them and I did not ask anyone to be my partner. After everyone paired up, I was the odd person out. Prof. Tank never called on me in class and I never volunteered. And once I discovered that I couldn't learn on my own what I seemed incapable of grasping in class, I simply stopped going.

The thread from which my college career dangled kept shredding. Yet, I had no choice but to follow Ma's edict to get up and face the music.

March 20, 1968 – Dear Berni: Thank you very much for your thoughtful note of March 14. I was disappointed that you hadn't come to see me, but knew that you had good reasons for not doing so.

You have nothing to be ashamed of, Berni. In fact, I am very proud of you. We knew when we admitted you last spring that Lawrence would not be easy for you, but felt that you had the necessary gumption not only to stick it out, but also to succeed. Thus far, although you've had some rough going, you have lived up to our expectations. We won't let you "give up". Please drop by the office as soon as you return. I hope that you had a good visit at home. WE could do with a little Charlotte weather around here!...With kindest personal regards, I am as always, Edward B. Wall, Director of Admissions.

March 22, 1968-Dear Bernie, We were sorry to find that you failed geology last term. This means that you will have to repeat it at your earliest opportunity or else switch to another science next year. Although your other grades brought your average to .789, the fact that your cumulative average is still .631 caused the Committee on Administration to vote that you be continued on probation.

You know what probation means at Lawrence, but I am enclosing a copy of the faculty academic regulations for your guidance.

I hope you will be more successful in your work next term. Please make an appoint [sic] to see me during the first week of classes to discuss ways to achieve that goal. Sincerely, Mary Morton, Dean of Women

So there it was, word from both my advisors: Ed Wall, the perpetual one-man pep rally, pumping gumption while Mary Morton, the Administration's marionette, talked goal-setting. I didn't believe either one of them gave a damn about me or felt any responsibility for the travesty they had lured me into. The one thing I did know was I couldn't count on them to help pull me out.

Back in Appleton, I was still stopping traffic. Entire families of grown men and women, old folks and children plastered their faces against steaming car windows when I walked down the street. I dragged store clerks in my wake decades before it became a national pastime to tail black shoppers.

On campus, I had assembled little pods of succor among my new white friends, each one functionally specific. Though one group of friends had nothing to do with the other, they all worked well for me. Yet, flitting from encampment to encampment, something was missing. So, when I first heard that a group of black students wanted to form our own group, I thought that might be the answer, that it might be the community where my hopes and dreams could drop anchor among friends who also shared my heartache and fears. My power to petrify was the one

thing I shared with every other black student and early in the fall, feeling like a freak had seemed sufficient foundation for a colored coalition. By the end of spring, it was clear that it wasn't.

The Afro-American Association

Doug, Lester, and Leroy were the BBMOC—big black men on campus. They were the tallest and oldest among us, which made it easier for them to anoint themselves our leaders. I started out a willing initiate, but a far more reluctant follower. They were unlike any guys I had ever known, so city slick, full of themselves and what I thought were worldly wiles. I had grown up in a female household that was orderly and restrained, with neither raised voices nor even slammed doors. With no significant experience in the world of boys or men of any age, I found them all unsettling. I didn't trust them. Consequently, I wasn't about to jump up and follow them simply because they stepped out in front. Where were we going? And to do what?

Yet, when the Big Three called us together, I was right there along with the rest of Lawrence's black students. The only one missing was a guy who was like a phantom. He was one of two black students on campus when we arrived and, as best I could tell, was quite content to have little or nothing to do with the rest of us. At our first gathering, we agreed to call ourselves the Afro-American Association, "AAA."

Like the three-legged stool of West African tradition, the AAA leadership triumvirate visually represented our triumphant past and our gleaming future. They also represented a harsh new reality for me: black guys who seemed enthralled by white girls.

Doug, a wrestling champion, was the other upperclassman. A finely chiseled mass of muscles and *basso profundo* articulation, he was enormously popular, revered among white and black students. He was the Brawn. Leroy was an arrogant, rhetorically Afrocentric transfer student. His Navy surplus jacket and his hairstyle together were his trademark that made him easily

recognizable from a distance. Even though his tiny voice was a jarring counterpoint to the rest of him, it didn't stop him from being the Mouth. Lester rounded out the testosterone trio. Always impeccably draped in Brooks Brothers suits, starched white shirts, a silk tie, suspenders, and wing tips, he was the king of cool. It was not his intellect as much as it seemed to be his almost menacing demeanor that kept his loyal followers in line. He was the style, the attitude, the juice of the Alpha male pack.

If they were the legs of the royal stool, Angelina was the seat connecting them, the platform on which they elevated themselves to educate the rest of us. She was, as black women always were in such setups, a multi-talented, multi-headed hydra: the Brains, the stenographer, and the court linguist. Angelina was the only woman anointed with access to their inner circle and she was extremely well-versed in the language of Black Liberation struggle. On her rare campus outings, she was known to speak in page-long paragraphs without punctuation when the men weren't present. Slight and demure, Angelina seemed content to serve as the amen corner for Leroy's and Lester' endless, impromptu political monologues.

Angelina was also a recluse, skilled at lurking in the background. When we did catch sight of her, often we were looking at the top of her head as she bent over a notebook, scribbling furiously. In lieu of verifiable information, we wove her into myth: She aced all of her classes, tutored the testosterone trio (some even claimed she wrote their papers), and determinedly plugged propaganda into the yawning chasms between the men's words and their actions.

Unlike Negro me, Angelina apparently arrived on campus fully identified as Afro-American. It took me a while to catch up with her and history has recorded my stumble.⁵ In a letter to the editor of one of Charlotte's daily newspapers, I argued that "Negro" rather than "Afro-American" was my preferred racial descriptive. It was my first time being published outside of

my school newspapers and I was thrilled to see my name in print over the Christmas holidays. My glee turned to horror, however, when white conservative white readers applauded me in print for being a Negro who knew my place. That experience taught me the perils of having and publicly airing my opinions, so when I returned to campus, I kept my mouth shut about my moment of hometown glory. And by the time Afro-Americans turned straight up Black, I was moving smoothly with that flow.

Nor did we settle for naming only ourselves. We renamed a lot of other people and situations, too. Whites became “gray boys and girls,” “honkies,” “Charlie,” “The Man” and “Miss Ann.” Black folks were “bloods,” “brothas and sistas” who didn’t take or put up with any shit. Definitely down for the cause, black was “bad” and that was “good.”

Leroy broke it all down for us, the rhythm of his rap recalling the cadence of every preacher who had ever stood over me. And just like those ministers, Leroy’s mission was to enforce men’s right to control women’s minds, the better to control our bodies. Listing from side to side, he laid the first plank in the platform of acceptable Black conduct: the Right of First Refusal.

It was simple: If a gray boy asked a sista out on a date, before accepting the offer, the sista was required to check with all six of the brothas first to see if a brotha wanted to take her out. If the brothas all took a pass, the sista was then free to do as she pleased. When Leroy finished strapping the brothas’ yoke to our backs, the room was silent.

I waited a while before raising my hand, allowing for the possibility that shock had shut down my brain and caused my confusion. As if the matter were settled, Leroy was about to turn to other business, so I spoke up.

“I didn’t hear you say anything about the brothas calling the sistas before you ask a white girl out. If we’re supposed to call you first for your permission, are you gonna do the same with us?”

Leroy and the brothas exchanged glances, part amused, part annoyed. Then Leroy squeaked their explanation.

The sistas in the entering class were bait brought to campus primarily to divert the freshmen brothas away from the gray girls. But the Man's plan had gone a bit awry, when eight brothas, but only six sistas showed up: Rita from Memphis; Rosemary from Ft. Lauderdale; Edith from Cleveland; Angelina from Los Angeles; Gwen, the homecoming queen; and me. Consequently, this Negro male surplus not only created an opportunity for the brothas to have a go at white girls, but it also excused the brothas from having to get pre-date clearance from the sistas pursuant to the Right of First Refusal.

Maybe it was because I was friends with the white girl Leroy routinely snuggled up to at the end of the day and I liked her a lot more than I liked him. Maybe it was because outside of church, I had no experience kowtowing to men and so had never learned the dance of deference taught to husband's wives, brothers' sisters, and fathers' daughters.

Maybe I felt compelled to resist that male-constructed constraint because I had traveled such a long way to remove myself from every kind of tyranny—including Ma's—so I saw no reason to simply hand over to Leroy and the AAA that which I was still winning: the right to truly think and speak for myself. Whatever my motivation, my question hung there, unanswered. So I answered myself as I rose to leave. “You *brothas* can kiss my ass.”

Censure followed swiftly. Severed from “the bloods,” I drifted deeper into enemy territory, which was basically anywhere white folks were and brothas and sistas were not. But since I was already seeking refuge away from the omnipresent White People, I had finally backed myself into a corner and had nowhere to hide. I was still reconfiguring my reality a few weeks later

when a bullet in Memphis blew a hole in the nation. With that blast to a brave man's face, on April 4, 1968, my world collapsed.

Doomsday

April 4, 1968. A short mind-video marks the day. Motion without sound, it rolls, then stops where it always stops, then starts the loop again. Gail and are I walking. Walking. Walking. I am suffocating in tears.

Shuffle a few paces forward in twilight. Stop. Head thrown back, eyes closed, my tear-grimed face to the white folks' sky. Silent weeping. Pain beyond sound. I am hanging, folded at the waist. Snot and tears choke off breath.

Straighten up. Broke down again.

Bent beside me, Gail's hand presses the small of my back. She wipes her face. Frozen inside my force field of grief, deafness descends. In the gloom, my heart breaks so I can breathe. My light years of loss. Gail, my witness. From the far side of the abyss, she watches. I am alone, a long, long way from home.

Dr. King was buried by Easter. Then, Robert F. Kennedy, younger brother of slain President John F. Kennedy, was gunned down in Los Angeles on June 6, 1968 while campaigning for President. Police riots, race rebellions, and Vietnam War protests continued igniting cities and college campuses across the nation.

Meanwhile, the empire fought back, waging more wars for domination and control around the world, wars that looped back to fuel our campus struggles. Students wrestled power from faculty and administrators, women overthrew men, blacks confronted whites, gays backed down homophobes, radicals tossed over conformists, peace activists pushed up on warmongers as

“different” laid tracks down the back of “normal.” I kept dragging myself from one day to the next.

Had I retained a fraction of the math aptitude that had won me a summer school slot for the academically gifted the summer before I started eighth grade, I might have figured out the statistical odds working against me in my drive to become the “A” student I had been all my pre-college life. Instead, I was incapable of discerning the depth of the hole I had dug for myself. I actually felt the stirrings of an academic comeback as spring term ended.

I had earned an A on an essay in my English literature course taught by the toughest English professor. In French, after starting all the way over, I had worked my way up to being eligible for intermediate level courses the next fall. And despite my disastrous experience with Introductory Psychology, I hadn’t yet relinquished my dream of becoming a psychologist. I had taken another course called Theory and Measurement of Personality. Certainly this would all add up to good news come grade time.

My B in English was as thrilling as my C in French was disappointing while the D in Psychology shut the door forever on my fantasy career as a shrink. I had nevertheless achieved the impossible: I got an F in golf and flunked Phys Ed! So the verdict was in: my GPA was still stuck below C and even if I aced all of my classes for the next two years, it would take a miracle to get it above a C by my senior year.⁶

Nine months earlier, I had arrived on campus luminous and expectant. If I had been pregnant and simply kept breathing, I would’ve at least had a baby to show for my labor. But after the hardest fight of my life, I had failed three classes and ended up on academic probation. Not only was my scholarship in jeopardy, my enrollment as a student was in question. The academic affairs committee would have to decide whether or not I could return in the fall.

To make matters worse, even though I didn't know it then, every time the college mailed me my grades, they mailed a copy back to my high school Mr. Champion, my high school counselor. Consequently, he knew what I knew when I knew it: that the gulf between my gumption and my grades was enormous. He never breathed a word.

It would also be another thirty years before I learned exactly how I had ended up with Kolleen as my freshman year roommate. She had specifically requested a Negro, so we had been matched by our eagerness to live as racial equals, by our daring to believe we could actually make it work. As for Dave, my "computer match" for the Computer Date Dance, his cooperation, too, had been solicited. And just as Dave and I never spoke to each other again, after Kolleen moved out, I never spoke to her again either. What I had believed were two random pairings had actually been careful selections from a tiny pool of white students who had checked boxes on their forms agreeing to be matched with a Negro: one for a night of dancing and the other for a year of living warily.⁷

Who knows? Had Dr. King lived, perhaps Kolleen and I might have survived in 202 Colman Hall. But he didn't and neither did we. Despite my, Kolleen's and Dave's initial acts of racial bravery, we were not equipped to sustain them. I left campus in early June 1968 angry, confused, and bitter.

As summer approached, though, there were some things I knew for sure. I knew I had been sent out and left unprotected by people who saw their future in me. I knew I had naively left my orderly Negro environment and stupidly turned my grinning self over to white life at Lawrence. I knew white and black Lawrence had stomped me into a stain on the asphalt of emotion. I knew I was headed home humiliated, an officially documented failure in a world in upheaval.

Race riots set city after city aflame that summer. Every time I heard of another one exploding, I danced a jig of jubilation. Folks who looked like me had had enough and were fighting back, seizing control by being completely out of control. Fierce, powerful and dangerous, we had white folks scared to death and running for their lives. It was way past time and it felt good.

CHAPTER 4

LOST AND FOUND

Not Black Like Me

The letter came as summer of 1968 ended. The Committee on Administration had decided to give me one more shot even though I was still wallowing in GPA purgatory. And, even more miraculously, they were letting me keep my scholarship and work-study package. Relief battled dread over my new sentence: another round of torture to work off the sin of being black and believing I could make it in the Land of the White People. Smoke curling from riot-torched cities still darkened their skies as I loped back up the road to Appleton.

Neither Lucy nor Sarah came back. Alumni and donor preferences notwithstanding, Sarah had never wanted to be at Lawrence in the first place; Lucy had transferred to an engineering program at the University of Wisconsin; and Gail had moved to the other side of campus where she seemed to sink quite comfortably into sorority life.

Of the five black women who had entered Lawrence the year before, Rita Gatlin, my hairdressing wizard, was the only one who did not return. Although Gwen Baptiste, the Homecoming queen, Rose Jackson, and I had a cordial enough relationship, all of us had formed much stronger bonds with our white friends. Esther from Cleveland was a sista with whom I had formed barely a nodding acquaintance. But by the time classes started, Esther and I were roommates.

We were each other's last resort. I had been so certain I had flunked out that I hadn't bothered to jump in the roommate and room choice lottery in June. Since she was in the same predicament, Esther had one choice—me. Beyond sharing a room in Colman Hall, being black

and female were the only other things we had in common. In every other identifiable respect, we were polar opposites who did not attract.

Having dived from grace—and Afro-American Association membership—over the arrogant idiocy of the dating “Right of First Refusal,” I knew the black folks’ ritual of retribution would resume. I knew I was returning to unfinished business inside and outside the classroom.

Elaine Brown, the gun-wielding, revolutionary black feminist who ascended to Chairman of the Black Panther Party in August 1974, has personally chronicled the patriarchal, misogynist underpinnings of the Black Power Movement.⁸ Desperately longing to be seen as fruit of that tree, Lawrence’s Afro-American Association suffered similarly: the brothas had voice while the sistas gave ear; the brothas directed while the sistas deferred; the brothas spoke, the sistas took notes. Furious at being everywhere marginalized, nothing could make me sit, stand, or roll over for that version of Black—male only—Power.

In the fall of 1968, Lawrence’s black student population skyrocketed from thirteen to thirty students, from 1% to more than 2% of the total student enrollment of 1300. Consequently, the Class of 1972 entered a dramatically different campus racial environment than had greeted us a year earlier. Although still a fledgling organization, the AAA created a more hospitable environment for the newcomers even as its members became more openly hostile to me. The AAA was an instant rallying point for many—even most—black students. My split from it the preceding school year, however, marked me as pariah. I couldn’t tell if the new black students had figured me out on their own or if they had been cued. Whatever the explanation, it was with them as it was with Esther: I wasn’t feeling them, nor they me.

Esther was a loud-talking, urbane, finger-snapping, gum-popping child of the Black bourgeoisie for whom Miles Davis’ “Bitches Brew” was a personal anthem. I responded to the

gale force of her presence by hugging the wall of convention, determined to be a polite, calm, respectable counterpoint to her rude, boorish self. I was a tight-assed, Southern Baptist church-going girl looking to please whoever was in charge. Rigidly toeing the line made me an easy target for Esther's scathing ridicule and we did our time locked in low-grade warfare in the nine-by-twelve cell that was

I couldn't compete among the social elite who traded on wealth or good looks and a wide range of preferential treatment built on generation-to-generation handouts. I had burned the bridge that might have connected me to black comrades. Now I needed to quickly find another way to create a reputation that would make me stand out. I needed a campus leadership position where being opinionated and mouthy would work for instead of against me. Getting elected Vice President of Downer Women's Association (DWA) put me on that path.

For a century, Lawrence had maintained separate colleges for men and women. Nowhere were things more separate and unequal than women students' opportunities for sexual encounters and DWA was our border patrol. Instead of challenging the rules of containment that targeted us, I became an enforcer. I began my rise by helping keep the lid on women.

Abby & Genette

Even though I still missed Lucy, Sara, and Gail, things were beginning to look up. In fact, looking up one day is literally how I found Abby and Genette. I was leaving the dorm a few days after classes began and stopped to hold the door for two new black arrivals on campus. Without



Abby

Genette

thinking, I spoke. They spoke back. I was stunned. Didn't they know I was the one to be shunned? Even now, I cannot explain why Aberdeen Richardson and Genette McLaurin decided their world was big enough for my AAA nemeses and me, but for the next three years, they welcomed me into the tight embrace of their sisterhood. Smart, cute, and from Chicago, their love and loyalty kept me sane and made us friends for life.

Just like Abby and her roommate, Genette and her roommate lived in peace. After my own disastrous uncoupling with Kolleen, I marveled at my new friends' ability to live so comfortably with white strangers who seemed to genuinely like them. Abby's roommate was an intensely disciplined student who spent most of her time studying somewhere else, so their room became our retreat. A good thing, too, because we rarely spent more than a few minutes in the torture chamber Esther and I shared.

Quintana Billingsley rounded out our crew. A brilliant, sixteen-year old Georgia beauty deeply rooted in Atlanta's black bourgeoisie, she had arrived on campus during the summer and was already settled in when fall term started. A prodigy in more than one area, Quintana had won early admission to Lawrence. She blazed through her first year, wowing her classmates and her professors.

Quintana had it all and wore her entitlement without explanation or apology. She wore her blackness proudly even as she transcended it. Like Abby and Genette, Quintana was also friends with the AAA loyalists and me. Most of her waking hours, though, she spent practicing flute and studying Japanese, preparing for studies she would continue in Japan. I had never met anyone like her.

I was thrilled to have my wonderful new friends, but their presence also troubled me. They got along with their white roommates and I, who didn't make it through one school year with my white roommate, now couldn't stand my black one. They went to class every day and studied diligently every night. They seemed to thrive in the classroom and adjust well outside it while I continued struggling academically. They liked Esther and she liked them even as she and I pushed our simmering enmity to full boil. The hostility between other black students and me was my burden alone. Abby and Genette had cordial relationships with the others while Quintana basically ignored them.

Lively chatter suddenly ceased at "the black table" in the dining hall when I walked by. Strolling across campus, clumps of sistas were suddenly seized with facial tics and glares when I passed. Derisive snorts and mutterings turned into loud laughter upon my approach wherever two or three of them were gathered. Outraged and self-righteous, I made them disappear with my eyes. I'd had plenty of time to learn that skill the preceding year watching white students who grinned in my face until their parents came to visit, at which point they acted like they had never seen me before. I used my new weapon to defend against the black folks' hazing. And, yet, I could not escape that my multiple estrangements seemed to be telling a single story: *I* was the one with the problem.

A truce was never an option. Every chance I got, I chose escalation. I had joined the campus newspaper, *The Lawrentian*, as a reporter and quickly landed my own column. Armed with a familiar weapon, I routinely gored my ox of choice—the university President and faculty, the President of the United States, the War Department, and, of course, the AAA.

Despite the stress of these strained race relations, there was one ironic bonus: the white folks couldn't tell one black person from another. So despite being disowned by my sistas' and brothas, as far as everyone else on campus was concerned, black students were all the indistinguishable same. So, whether we wanted it that way or not, at least I had plenty of company in the freaks tent at the circus.

Abby and Genette stayed on good terms with my black foes even as they never once wavered in their roles as my nurturing and loving sisters of the heart. With them, I recreated the kind of friendship network that had sustained me throughout my life. Big city girls raised by both parents with sisters and brothers in homes they owned, Abby and Genette enjoyed a bond with each other that was different than the one they shared with me, which made me even more grateful that they made room for me. Having them eased the grief I still occasionally pushed down over losing Lucy and Sarah to other campuses and realizing Gail had peeled off to better exploit her path of privilege.

Finally, college was fun. With Abby and Genette to hang out with, laugh with, commiserate with, gossip with, dream with, I was no longer alone. I didn't need to figure out which face to put on before I left my room every morning. I could talk to Abby and Genette about any and everything, knowing they understood all I said and whatever I didn't bother to say. We shared a world that looked like the college life I had imagined: shopping, movies, hanging out at the

student union, the pizza joint, Conkey's Bookstore, and Prange's Department store. We discussed class selections, politics, read each other's term papers, and dreamed up our futures.

We saw the white girls around us as characters in the soap opera of our tiny campus life. We talked about who dated whom, who was seen cheating on whom, which girl walked around swollen-eyed over a loss that was another grinning girl's gain. We dissected, analyzed, and measured "white skin privilege" decades before the term came into being. Because we had each other's razor minds, we didn't need to wait for a new vocabulary to describe what we saw. Not only did we see it, we knew exactly how it impacted us. We understood how high the odds were stacked against us on a playing field we knew better than to ever expect would be level.

We made a game of predicting which white girls would ignore us and how, when their parents showed up and we passed them on campus. We ran endless scenarios predicting when various white students would cut their hair, wash their feet, put on their shoes and business suits, and bury their counterculture past on the way to becoming the next generation of rightwing oppressors. While it was clear some white classmates had parents, relatives, and other "lucky" connections who had carved paths more clearly for them than for other classmates, one thing was true for them all: It was nothing more than their whiteness that put all of them further along whatever path we thought we shared and there was nothing we could do about that.

If This Is Thursday, It Must Be Collard Greens

Buoyed by a two-hundred percent increase in membership, the AAA devised a strategy to exploit its critical mass. Along with a few radical white students rumored to be undercover government agents, black students took over Main Hall in 1969. Like many others did that morning, I woke up to the sounds of the takeover on campus radio.

The AAA was nothing if not exhaustive in its list of demands: Black studies courses, a Swahili class, black professors and administrators; a cultural center, more aggressive recruiting, tutoring and counseling programs; rented buses to deliver black students to social events in other cities and to other campuses with large black populations, rented buses to bring blacks from other campuses to ours, a travel stipend, in lieu of the buses, for black students who preferred to handle their own travel arrangements; a floor in each dorm for blacks only, a permanent seat for a black representative on the student-faculty governing council; black speakers, black entertainers, black symposia.

Then there was the food. More specifically, soul food: biscuits, grits, ham and sausage for breakfast. Cornbread, collard greens and ham hocks on Thursday; black-eyed peas, pinto beans, or lima beans on Wednesday; macaroni and cheese on Tuesday; fried chicken on Sunday, fried fish on Friday, pork chops, neck bones and barbecue ribs on other days of the week. And, oh yeah, someone black to teach white cooks how to fix soul food.

The real testament to enterprise and forethought, however, was an appendix to the demands, a checklist detailing the furnishings required for the black cultural center, the oasis-to-be of racial sensitivity and cultural preservation, the black island in an ocean of whiteness where black folks and empathic others would drop anchor and, safely tethered, plumb the depths of America's disgraceful racial past, its troubling present and still questionable future.

The list of items needed and acceptable as donations was a telling, and sometimes humorous, mélange of social class identification, politics and personal taste. It included:

- Place settings of cups, saucers, soup bowls and plates; spoons, forks, knives, and serving utensils; napkins (cloth and paper) and napkin holders; red and white wine glasses,

champagne flutes, cocktail and juice glasses, water pitchers, tea pots, kettles and coffeemakers.

- A stereo with freestanding speakers of specified dimensions, albums, 45s, a color television, slide and movie projectors; books and bookshelves.
- Typewriters, ribbons, paper, pens, pencils, paper clips, copier; desks, chairs, desk lamps, floor lamps, light bulbs.
- Sofas, armchairs, coffee tables, rugs, folding chairs, folding tables.
- Beds, sheets, pillows, pillowcases, bedspreads, blankets, quilts; bath towels, hand towels, face towels; curtains, curtain rods, shower curtain and hooks, venetian blinds, and window shades.

Money, of course, was always welcome.

I had no problem with the philosophy behind the takeover and I definitely was down for the grits and fried chicken. I agreed with the folks camped out in Main Hall that it was past time for black students to have a place to get away from all that incessant whiteness, past time for the administration to stop dragging its bureaucratic feet and make that happen. The way I saw it, the AAA was just a black coed version of the white fraternities and sororities. After luring our naïve black asses to the Land of the White People to give their white kids a taste of “the real world,” the university owed us for our trouble and they needed to ante up.

My biggest problem with the black protestors was that I refused to have them speak *for* me when they weren't even speaking *to* me. The total number of black students on campus was still small enough for us to make our individual voices heard. As much as the university preferred to think of and treat us as one black bloc, I was determined I would have my say.

Quickly dispatching myself to the office of the school newspaper, I mounted my own counter-offensive in the *Lawrentian* where I had moved up from reporter to managing editor. Abby and Genette joined as signatories to the piece I published, pointing out that just because we were black didn't mean we were all the same and we demanded that the university recognize that. Soon afterwards, Leroy confronted Abby and Genette and accused them of mindlessly following my lead. We were, he said, "crazy (Abby), crazier (Genette), and craziest (me)." That ranking suited me just fine.

Despite incurring such temporary rancor, Abby and Genette remained my closest friends and continued enjoying a cordial relationship with my black nemeses. Independent thinkers who kept their own and each other's counsel, sometimes the two of them agreed with me; often they teamed up on me when they didn't.

Despite the sobriquets, Abby and Genette stayed right by my side. Unfortunately, their proximity did not make their academic prowess rub off on me. Both strong performers from jump, they remained top students straight through to graduation. I rejoiced with them when it was clear, after their first term grades were posted, that they did not suffer from my academic debilitation. To the contrary, their near perfect class attendance and disciplined study habits paid off impressively and reinforced my shame over my continuing inability to perform up to par, much less excel.

Later, I would understand how the severe isolation and emotional trauma of my first year had played a huge part not only in my initial fall, but also in my failure to ever completely recover.⁹ The mathematical odds were literally stacked against me. But back then, watching Abby and Genette come in, keep pace, and keep peace only emphasized my pitiful situation. At the end of

winter term, I had an alphabet soup of grades: *A* (Physical Education), *B* (Intermediate French), *C* (English Literature), and *D* (Christian Traditions).

Bitches Brew

Even if I couldn't get a grip on good grades, I had a firm grasp on what I had to do regarding Esther: There was no way I was returning from Christmas break to a room with her in it. Though it was not my nature to back down, I had run out of energy for combat.

At first, she had been satisfied with bursting in when I was studying and blasting her stereo while humming loudly and dancing around the room. Soon she added her friends to routine late



Happier times in Roommate-ville

night, smoke-choked revelries, staged a few feet away from the bed where I was trying to fall asleep. Just before the holiday break, however, she outdid herself when she blew into our room with her drinking buddies, two smirking fat white girls from Chicago reeking of cigarette smoke and beer. Sprawled across her bed, Esther was

suddenly seized with the need to demonstrate an orgasm. Moaning and groaning, she launched into her pretend-ecstasy, growing louder and louder until she “climaxed” in shrieking yelps. The white chicks grinned. Abby, Genette, and I watched in horrified silence.

A major obstacle to getting rid of Esther, however, was university policy, which discouraged transfers for roommates having problems early in the school year. The thinking was, given time, roommate discord would resolve itself. Since Ed Wall had recruited both Esther and me, I thought he could help me negotiate a room transfer. I was still furious with him for abandoning me my first year even though I had never asked him for help. I figured freeing me from Esther

was how I would let him redeem himself. That's when I discovered the chronically cheerful Ed Wall was gone.

Without warning or even saying goodbye to me, Wall had headed east to become Amherst College's Director of Admissions. There wasn't a damn thing he could do for me now that he was halfway across the country.

Before parting, however, Wall had passed me off to my new advisor, Mary Morton, Dean of Women. Where Wall was a warm, Herculean cheerleader who could spout off the name of every student, the age of all our siblings, and our parents' social security numbers, Morton was a no nonsense drill sergeant of a woman, a tight-lipped, 50s-era spinster roped to decorum. A woman's woman in a time when being that required secrecy, raised questions, and provoked whispers and frowns. Asking Dean Morton to bend the rules to get me away from Esther would've made as much sense as asking an anorexic to join me at her favorite all-you-can-eat buffet. She was constitutionally incapable of even comprehending that. I didn't bother.

In the end, my relationship with my black roommate ruptured, perhaps as inexorably, as had the one with my white roommate the year before. This time, though, I was the one who fled. Even though my move took me to the far side of campus away from Abby and Genette, I landed in a single in Sage Hall. Finally in the peace and quiet of my own space, I put myself back on the road to recovery...again.

Retreating to a hermit-like existence worked. Though my academic performance was nowhere near what I demanded of myself, within three months of being free of Esther, I had raised my GPA for spring term to a B- average with a B+ in Introduction to Political Science, B- in Introductory Anthropology, and C+ in Christian Ethics. Finally, my overall GPA was a solid C and I stood as tall inside as I stood outside.

Moving to Sage Hall meant I was again living close to Gail, a proximity that allowed for our rapprochement. As sophomore year ended, we applied to be junior counselors in the fall. That meant we would live with around twenty freshman girls in a cluster of adjoining rooms and serve as surrogate “dorm mothers.” Competition was stiff because counselors were definitely an elite crew. Being selected was an affirmation that you were a responsible role model with good judgment, a capacity for nurturing, and observed proper Lawrence decorum. Gail and I weren’t counting on simply being chosen as counselors, we were also planning on being counselors together.

When June 1969 rolled around and the envelope bearing my grades arrived, I hid it for two weeks before I opened it. Ma kept asking me what was bothering me and I kept lying: “Nothing.” If I had fooled myself again by conjuring up my improved performance, I intended to drag out my delusion as long as I could. Worn out from worry, one day when I was home alone, I tore open the envelope with tears already forming. But my redemption had held. I had even managed to raise my overall GPA a tiny bit with a B in French Independent Studies Seminar and in Soviet Systems and a C in Anthropology. My overall B- GPA was closer to my former glory than I had ever been and it had been an excruciatingly long haul to get there.

Shining My Star

I might have bitten the dust with AAA, but I had gotten good at shining my star other places on campus. Being Managing Editor of the *Lawrentian* kept me in the thick of things as did my friendships with other students confronting their own racist and sexist behavior. Our conversations about power, protest, peace, and liberation were often loud and stimulating. We had a lot to talk about as the body count mounted in Vietnam and increasingly hostile and volatile student audiences confronted campus recruiters cruising for fresh meat for the military.

After one such heated conversation, the women staff of the *Lawrentian* decided we should do more than talk about our solidarity with war resisters. So Nancy Paulu and I were among the women *Lawrentian* staff who signed our names to an anti-war editorial with a headline that declared what our position would be if we were men who were being drafted: “We Wouldn’t Go.” When FBI agents showed up on campus shortly thereafter asking our classmates about us, I was proud to learn I had done something that warranted even passing government surveillance.

Meanwhile, students were challenging the faculty and administrators’ chokehold on every aspect of student life. The resulting slugfest eventually led to the creation of the Lawrence University Community Council (LUCC), a brand new governing body with students and faculty sharing power. When I was elected a student senator on the nascent LUCC, I climbed another rung and added another accomplishment to my resume.

Beyond the ego boost, I was serious about trying to help Lawrence reflect our fast changing times. I had worked my way off academic probation and was almost back where I was before my campus life brought me crashing down. Whenever Lawrence needed to finger or photo a Good Negress, there I was, stock footage, obliging and smiling. Game face upfront; miserable behind the mask. Two years of being ground down had absolutely lowered my expectations, so I tried my best to be satisfied with my barely B average.

Although they were only across campus, Abby and Genette seemed far away. Living in different dorms, we no longer ate all our meals together and I missed us hanging out in Abby’s room. Without their steady assurance, I had more time to brood over the differences between them and me. I replayed old tapes: They had hit the ground running as freshman and were still flourishing. No roommate wars, no AAA shunning, no failing grades for them.

If I were the only one Lawrence and Appleton had thrown for a loop, maybe my problem was me. Maybe I really was in over my head, just couldn't cut it. Maybe I really was inferior. Maybe that was my true lot in life. But, I had become such a hydra-headed survivor, I wasn't about to confess those feelings to anyone, not even Abby and Genette.

Junior Counselor

Finally freed from my stamp of academic failure, I strutted back to campus in September 1969. Gail and I had gotten exactly what we wanted and were going to be junior counselors together. Only an extremely sensitive, careful observer—or a black student battling the same demons—could have seen mine was an act because, despite accomplishments that should have lifted me up, I was terrified that at any moment the bottom could drop out...again. Feeling good was fleeting, my wary response to random events I felt were completely beyond my control. Even if no one else knew, I knew only a series of fortunate accidents had gotten me that far. But fake or flake, I still had an image to uphold and a job to do. More chances to polish my act.

Gail and I settled into our rooms on either end of our freshman section in Sage Hall and prepared for our young charges' arrival. Our first order of business was getting them through freshman orientation week, which included the ritual finale, the Computer Date Dance. From my new vantage point, I learned more of how Lawrence oiled its myth-making engine. Although we still called it the "Computer Date Dance," computers had nothing to do with matching freshman girls with their dates. After we, the counselors, matched tall girls with taller boys, the pairings were a crapshoot.

That small insight was surprisingly relieving: I could finally stop feeling rejected by Dave, my Computer Date Dance "match." After screening for his racial tolerance, the only thing that had matched him with me was our height: I was nearly six feet tall and he was a few inches over that.

So, I hadn't run off my "perfect match" and whatever connection I had imagined I felt with him was just that—my imagination. Dave had vanished from my life after he dutifully performed his public service that wet, steamy night. Finally, at least I had solved that puzzle.

Women students demanding more freedom of movement had continued making small gains. Even though coeds were still on quasi-lockdown like so many Rapunzels hanging halfway out the tower window, guys were working their way up the "visitation" ladder. We won a major concession that allowed our male visitors to move from the lobby up to our dorm rooms as long as light showed around three sides of the door and both feet of each person were on the floor. Men in dorm rooms did not require a lot of my and Gail's attention because our freshmen girls were, for the most part, young innocents grunting for grades and often tearfully figuring out who they wanted to be.

I had a pretty good fix on who I wanted to be—a woman on my own, as far away as I could get from where I was. I was sick of being a model citizen on the outside and a tight coil of intense uncertainty on the inside. Sick of being shunned by the brothas and the sistas. Sick of being stuck in a hick town putting up with the smug gowns' putdowns. Sick of choking on river stench. Sick of swatting curtains of "love bugs" flaunting their excess of the one thing that had never been there for me. Sick of beer and brats, beer and pizza, beer and football, beer bashes, beer barrels, beer breath, and beer bellies. Getting drunk was pandemic on campus, but I was too much of a "good girl" to drink. Drugs were completely out of the question. I was terrified the escape they'd provide would be so intoxicating, I'd never snap back. So with neither liquor, drugs, nor sex to anesthetize me, I continued wandering among Dairyland's thick, pale sons and daughters.

What possessed me to think I had enough emotional reserve to play mother hen to twenty white girls most of whom were away from home for the first time? What did I know anyway? Although I seemed confident, gregarious, and nurturing, I was only twenty and still a virgin. I had worked hard to win a junior counselor position and, three months in, I was already sick of the job. Abby and Genette helped me hatch an escape plan.

Chapter 5

Escape

Hatching a Plan

My ticket out was a first-class seat on a plane to Paris. When I boarded the first leg of my flight in Appleton's Outagamie Airport in March 1970, I thrilled to the thought that I would not step foot on Wisconsin soil again until January 1971. Five months after that, I would graduate with a college degree, the first in my family to do so.

In calculating their own exits, Abby and Genette had showed me how I could extend mine. They had mapped out course schedules that took them out of the country for study on Lawrence's campuses abroad for most of their junior year. After studying together in Germany, Genette would head for London and Abby for Spain. They'd travel and perfect their skills in two languages while earning credits towards their major. Always willing to share the knowledge, they burst into my room grinning with their news: they had figured out how I could be gone from campus twice as long I had originally planned.

I had already been accepted into the Urban Studies Program in Chicago for the fall term of my senior year. So, they explained, if I added Paris to my itinerary, I would return to campus a few months before graduation. Thanks to them, instead of settling for fall in the Windy City, I boarded an Air France flight in the spring of my junior year and turned twenty-one in Paris.

My Paris arrival was triumphant. For one thing, it marked my full recovery from flunking French two years earlier. After crawling back to Beginning French, I had worked my way up to an Independent Study in French, a hard-earned status that qualified me for a one-on-one class with my sweetheart of a French teacher, Professor Gervais Reed. *En route*, I earned enough

credits and became sufficiently fluent in French to qualify for participation in the launch of Lawrence's first Paris Seminar.

The polar opposite of the cruel Prof. Ready, Prof. Reed was an incredibly kind, thoughtful, endlessly encouraging teacher whose respect for his students matched his love for French language and culture. Reed's calm, consistent guidance was my oasis. His concern stood in stark contrast to my other professors and the administrators who didn't notice—or didn't care to know—that “The First Negro” treadmill was wearing the feet off one of their little race guinea pigs. I was determined Prof. Reed's belief in me would not be a waste and landing a spot in the Paris program was a testament to his dedicated efforts and mine.

I had declared Government as my major because it was the department with the courses that most interested me and in which I earned my best grades. Spring term in Paris, however, posed a dilemma. To graduate on time, I had to have enough credit hours in Government and to do that, I needed to take Government courses every term. Unfortunately, the Paris Seminar offered only French courses. So, I had two choices: skip Paris, stay on campus, and earn enough credits to graduate with my class in June 1971 or go to Paris and postpone graduation until fall 1971.

As far as I was concerned, there was no choice. If the university had offered me a straight-A transcript and promised to wipe out my entire student loan debt, even that would not have enough to persuade me to remain on campus one day past my June graduation. My Paris sojourn had taken a nosedive before the plane even got off the ground.

Prof. Reed rescued me with a question. “Why not design a research project that can earn you course credit in French *and* in Government? Prof. Povolny speaks and reads French fluently. If you and he can agree on a topic, you could research and write it in French and submit it to him and to me for dual credit.”

Prof. Mojimir Povolny was chair of the Government department and my advisor. Once I declared Government as my major, Povolny replaced Dean of Women Mary Morton as my adviser. A Czechoslovakian immigrant with an accent as thick as his portfolio, Povolny was always attired in three-piece suits and spit-shined shoes. A strictly by-the-book professor, he was not even mildly interested in helping me figure out how I could go to Paris and still graduate on time. Although I had performed respectably in Government courses and my grades had improved each term, the stumbling block was still my overall GPA. Off-campus programs and the unorthodox accommodation I sought were rewards Povolny thought should be reserved for star students. In his eyes, I was not one of those. “You need to be more realistic,” he advised.

I left his office in a tearful fury and raced to Prof. Reed. Crying and cursing, I blubbered through my pitiful Lawrence history that kept reaching out and snatching me back every time I thought I had finally broken free. My Paris plans were simply the latest dreams dangling just out of reach. Prof. Reed fed me tissues and waited. When my sobs subsided, he gave me a steaming cup of tea and a catalogue and pointed to a soft chair in the corner. “Let’s see if you can’t find one course in comparative government or international politics that *we* can turn into an independent study that addresses Prof. Povolny’s concerns,” he said gently.

Sure enough, a few days later, I had fleshed out an idea to my and Prof. Reed’s satisfaction: I would examine the French Social Security program, compare it to US social security and welfare programs, and contrast how each nation dealt with their poor. I would conduct all of my research in French in Paris and I would submit my senior paper—in *French*—for credit in French and in Government. Impressed with my solution, I walked triumphantly back to Povolny’s office to press my case again.

He wasn't convinced. No one had ever done such a thing before and he was not interested in being the first to try it. As department chair, he was responsible for setting an example, which included following the rules. What if every student decided to create their own research project and demanded "special treatment"? What if I tried and failed? That would make him look bad, like he had not been a good adviser because he had allowed me to take on a project that was obviously too tough for someone with my well-documented history of academic problems.

Back to Reed I went, furious and despondent. He called Povolny and spoke, first cajoling in English and then angrily in French. Povolny wouldn't budge. His answer was still, "No." I turned to my war council: Abby and Genette.

What should I do? When would I ever get another chance to study in Paris? Instead of falling into the sleep of the dead, my normal response to this kind of defeat, I felt strangely energized. The next day, I announced my decision: I was going to Paris. I would complete my research project as designed. I would submit my paper in French to Povolny and Reed for dual credit, and thereby force Povolny to reject it. I would let them defend their decision to reject the kind of independent scholarship and creative initiative they should've welcomed as a hallmark of my liberal arts education, *especially* from someone who had struggled as hard as I had to reach that point.

What's the worst that could happen? If I couldn't get Povolny to accept my work for course credit towards my major, I would just make up the credits when I returned. To graduate on time, I already knew I'd have to pile on courses my senior year to compensate for all those grades lower than C that had been dogging me since I first set foot on campus. What difference would it make to add a few more classes to that load?

It was a risk and I was taking it.

~ ~ ~

Paris: American Me

My second day in Paris, I was standing in the courtyard of the *Alliance Française* chatting with my classmates when I crumpled like a puppet with her strings suddenly cut. I am told I was quite elegant in my descent.

Having flown first class nonstop on Air France from JFK International, I had arrived in Paris twenty-four hours ahead of my classmates who were taking a more frugal—and much longer—route: coach class via Lufthansa. In case my first trip to Europe turned out to be my last, I figured I'd do it right. Then, too, I preferred flying solo rather than spending twenty hours traveling with a bunch of giddy white girls.

Before boarding Air France, I had flown maybe half a dozen flights from Charlotte to Chicago and a couple more from Chicago to Appleton. By the time I disembarked just after dawn at Orly International on the outskirts of Paris, pampered and intimidated by my first time in first class, I fancied myself an adventurous sophisticate.

So, not long after I lugged my bags up several flights of stairs the Hotel de la Rue du Vieux-Colombier, I hit the streets. I was passing through the lobby when the desk clerk motioned towards a small tray on a table set for one. It was *le petit-dejeuner*, my breakfast: a crusty baguette, a pat of butter, a tiny jar of preserves, and a tiny steaming cup of a bitter dark brew. I polished off my first French meal and my first cup of espresso. Then, armed with street and subway maps, I set out for a stroll through the neighborhood. I had studied my new surroundings each night for weeks leading up to my arrival, tracing routes on the map, over and over, from my hotel to various locations.

Five minutes outside the hotel door, though, I was hopelessly lost. Speeding vehicles and blaring horns ran me off the main boulevard and fast-paced pedestrians pushed me deeper into a maze of narrow, twisting cobblestone streets. Not one of them showed up along the fluorescent pink route I had carefully highlighted before leaving the hotel. Undaunted, I kept walking. And walking. And walking.

I had gone to great lengths and expense to leave Lawrence on another continent, but I had still managed to bring my Lawrence baggage with me. I was so used to being stared at in Appleton that I assumed I was also being watched in Paris and I did not want to look like a foreigner, much less a lost foreigner. I plowed ahead as though I knew exactly where I was going.

More hours passed as I loped along. Forlorn and distraught, eventually I was also hungry in a city wallowing in food and drink. So what if my purse was stuffed with French francs and traveler's checks purchased at a bank in Appleton? I stared straight ahead as I passed by cafés, restaurants, bakeries, fruit stands, and food pushcarts. I wasn't about to open my mouth so the legendary Paris snobs could put me down.

Near tears at dusk, I followed an old lady inside a church. As she made her way towards the flickering candles on the altar up front, I sat down on a pew just inside the door. I kept an eye on her as I began practicing for my next move. *Excusez-moi, Madame, ou est la Rue du Vieux-Colombier, s'il-vous plait? Excuse me, ma'am, can you please tell me how to find Vieux-Colombier Street?* She genuflected, rose, and left. By the time I reached the door, she had vanished.

Frantic again, I started back in the direction I had just come, then paused at the curb, searching the streets and buildings for anything that might help me get my bearings. Then, in clear view, engraved high up on a concrete wall, words I had missed my first time through: *Place St-Sulpice*.

I pulled out my map and held it up to a shop window's light. More than ten hours later, I had ended up around the corner from where I had started.

Exhausted from my ordeal, I stretched out on the bed, which is where my roommate found me, still fully clothed, when she and the others arrived in the wee hours of the morning. Following a few hours of sleep, we were up again and out the door to take placement tests at the *Alliance Française*. We were all gathered in the school's courtyard in the early afternoon when I flopped to the ground. The next thing I knew, I was sitting on the grass staring up at a sea of concerned faces.

Professor Reed's swift interrogation led to an equally swift diagnosis: I hadn't had anything to eat for more than twenty-four hours. Someone shoved a pair of sugar cubes in my mouth and hustled me off to lunch. Just like that, the girls I had been so eager to escape suddenly became deeply appreciated, welcome company.

Somewhere between nursing espressos at sidewalk cafes along Boulevard St-Germain-des-Prés and shelling out *centimes* to rent a chair in Luxembourg Gardens; somewhere between eating couscous in the Latin Quarter and browsing art stalls along the banks of the Seine, Parisian disdain for all things not Parisian blew off my dusky cover. Suddenly American me completely eclipsed Negro me. It was deliciously startling. From then on, whether I was dodging bloody carcasses strung from butchers' rafters in les Halles or gazing at *haute couture* in shop windows along the Champs-Élysées, I was a woman with a country, an American.

In the US, I was colored, first and foremost. A common, garden variety Negro. *Afro-not-American*. In Appleton, I was invisible on campus and a walking neon sign on the street. In Paris, though, I was *simplement une Américaine*. Dark-skinned immigrants from France's former colonies—Senegalese, Cameroonians, Haitians, Tunisians, Algerians—were everywhere, many

who looked like my relatives and me. Yet, not once did anyone ever mistake me for one of them. Paris knew and Paris made me know there was no doubt that I was an American, “an American black” to be exact.

I was being routinely reviled as a capitalist pig, *une imperialiste*, an ignorant boob obviously benefiting from my country’s rape of the rest of the world—an American. I knew I should be horrified by the charge, but I wasn’t. So what if being American made me contemptible to the French and the Africans? It was a heady persecution, made more so by its breathtaking novelty. So this was what had hooked Richard Wright, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Chester Himes, and countless other black Americans who had fled to Paris so they could simply be human.

Three months shy of my twenty-first birthday, this revelation about my exalted status was an early, priceless gift. This presumption of entitlement tossed me on the heap of the presumptively rich and powerful worldwide. Hated, true, but certainly envied, too. I imagined that was what being white felt like every day in the USA. Then, one warm spring day, French fury forgot about me and turned violently on its white own.

On 5 May 1970, French student activists spilled into the streets to protest the US invasion of Cambodia. Posters, bottles, and bricks proved no match for police who swooped down on the students, beating and stomping them three stories beneath our hotel balcony. We huddled in horrified silence, hearing the thwap! thwap! thwap! of police batons smacking flesh as dusk descended. We watched the helmeted *gendarmes* stuff their prey into windowless vans, some still shrieking and flailing, but most of them limp when tossed onto the other captured heap.

After they silenced all sounds inside the paddy wagon, the cops jumped back out on the street and then beat the side panels with their fists to urge the driver forward—*Vite! Vite! Vite!* Hurry! Hurry! Block by block, they made their way down the street—stopping, stomping, stuffing

protestors, bystanders, even scurrying street vendors unlucky enough to trip over their strewn wares and land in the cops' path. Tear gas fumes finally drove us, weeping and shivering, back inside our room.

I had never seen anything like that, though most other students had. Two years earlier, goaded on by Mayor Richard Daley, rioting Chicago police and the Illinois National Guard had beaten and dragged white students through Chicago streets in full view of the world during the 1968 Democratic National Convention. At home for the summer in our apartment where television—"the stupid box"—was banned, I did not see that massacre unfold on TV. I was still too numb from the April assassination of Dr. King and the June murder of Bobby Kennedy to let it seep in some other way.

But Paris was supposed to be different: the City of Light, civilized and separate from that kind of American madness. Paris was supposed to be succor for America's wave of black exiles and me, the place I roamed fearlessly, day or night. *Maintenant, pas encore*. Not anymore.

Flushing tear gas from my eyes, what I did not yet know was far worse than what I had just witnessed. We had no access to a TV in our tiny hotel and the *International Herald Tribune* always came a day late. So, nearly twenty-four hours passed before I read about National Guard troops gunning down four student protestors—all of them white—in broad daylight on Kent State's campus: Allison Krause and William K. Schroeder, both 19; Sandra Lee Scheuer and Jeffrey Glenn Miller, both 20 just like me.¹⁰

If white cops would murder white students, what wouldn't they do to black ones? The answer was not long in coming.

Ten days later, Jackson, Mississippi policemen and Mississippi State troopers opened fire on a rioting crowd of seventy-five students at all-black Jackson State University. When the bullets

stopped flying, Phillip Lafayette Gibbs, 21, a junior pre-law major and father of an 18-month-old son, lay dead near a dormitory. Across the street, behind the line of police and highway patrolmen, James Earl Green, 17, was sprawled dead in front of the campus dining hall. Green, a high school senior, had taken a shortcut home from his job at a local grocery store when he stopped to watch the fateful action.¹¹

~ ~ ~

*La Plus Ça Changent*¹²

“Girl, where the hell have you been?!” It was late in the afternoon and I had just run into Carla outside *le drugstore*. Although we had never even had a conversation back on campus, she and I had become instant chums in Paris. A spaced-out child of rightwing suburbia, Carla moved through the world with envious oblivion. It was Monday and I hadn’t seen her since Thursday.

“Remember that party I told you I was going to Friday night? Well, I went. Met this really cute guy and he kinda took me back to his apartment. You just missed him. He rode the metro back here with me. Hell, that’s the least he could do, the bastard. He wouldn’t let me leave after I got there! Kept my ass in bed all weekend. Shit! I’m so sore I can hardly walk.”

We squealed and laughed throughout her detailed account of her weekend exploits: no food, no fresh air, no bathing. Just chain-smoking cigarettes, bottles of wine, and frenzied fucking. She made fun of herself for ending up in the situation and at him for failing to display any trace of the skilful lovemaking French men incessantly claimed was their *forte*. We were still cackling when a guy stopped at our table.

“*Ca va, mademoiselles? Vous-etes Americaines?*” (*Hello. Americans?*)

“*Mais, oui, monsieur, et vous?*” (*Sure are. You?*)

“*Moi, aussi.*” (*Me, too.*)

Although I was the one who answered him first, Carla was clearly the object of his desire. He was not rude, simply focused. So, after a few minutes of bantering interrogation—his name was Truman—I patted the back of his hand and declared him safe enough for me to leave her alone with him. I rose, tapped her lightly on the temple, and excused myself. As I turned the corner headed towards the American Library, I saw them standing to leave. Carla stayed gone for another three days. I realized then that was what Carla did, who she was. Apparently, I wasn't the only American girl who had brought my back-home ways with me.

My trek to and from the research library took me past the drugstore almost daily. As I passed by several weeks later, Truman waved me over. Hunched over a cup of coffee with cigarette smoke curling from his nose, by daylight, he looked much older and his hands trembled slightly as he lit a fresh cigarette with the stub of his old one.

“I knew you and your girlfriend were Americans before I walked up to you,” he confessed. “Whenever Americans are around, their voices carry above everyone else's, almost like they're using a megaphone. It's not that you talk all that loud. It's just that somehow English stands out from everything else. Anyway, before I ever spoke to you, I heard everything she told you about her weekend with that other dude. And I saw that look you gave her when you left. Believe it or not, I thought you both were fine, but I could tell from looking at you that you weren't, er, what I was looking for. I knew she was because I wasn't looking for anything complicated.”

“Yeah, right. You and all the rest of the brothas. All you niggas looking for the same piece of white ass all over the fuckin world.” He jumped back in mock horror.

“Girl, does your mama know about that mouth?”

“Boy, do you even have a mama?” We parted amiably. Neither Carla nor I ever mentioned him again. A month later, I was back in the USA and on my way to summer camp.

The Poconos: Pledging Allegiance

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” he said standing up and tucking in his shirt. “They didn’t abandon you because you were wrong. They fell back because they were weak.”

Mr. Al, the director of the open air summer camp, was trying to make me feel better. His benign attitude was ironic considering he had just masterfully crushed a group of camp counselors who had taken a run at his authority. I was part of that group or at least I was part of it until everybody else in the group wimped out when Mr. Al showed up to hear our grievances.

Barely a month had passed since I had flown from Paris back to NYC; since I had spent the weekend with my cousins Buck and Prissy at their flat in Bedford-Stuyvesant, watching children playing in the looming shadows of ramshackle buildings. The sax solo on the vinyl 45rpm of Jr. Walker and the All-Stars’ “What Does It Take to Win Your Love for Me” played over and over in the background, the soundtrack for the American me who emerged in Paris reshaping herself to the reality of being Black in America. By the time I boarded the bus in Manhattan, that American she had crawled back inside Black me.

The bus was already full of camp counselors and other staff headed for the Pocono Mountains to spend the summer, in successive one-week stints, with some of NY’s most “underprivileged children.” Having pretty much severed my relationship with church-going and with Christians, it made a perverse kind of sense that I’d found a job as a camp counselor with a bunch of bible-thumping, born-again believers out in the Pennsylvania woods. I had leaned heavily on my religious past—as distinct from its nonexistent present—to get a competitive edge.

I knew it was going to be a stretch for two reasons. One, I had been to camp once in my life when I was around ten. All the kids were poor and from the projects like me. They were also

cruel and the camp counselors were mean. I think it was the Spam, which was part of every meal. Spam was our appetizer, entrée and dessert. Between meals, it was our snack. I'm sure if they could've figured out how to sew Spam, we would've worn Spam. I had been desperately homesick and miserable. Consequently, I hated Spam and I hated camp.

The second reason I knew camp would be a challenge was because not only was I not a swimmer, I was terrified of water too deep to stand up in. But I needed a summer job and the magazine advertisement recruiting camp counselors appealed to me despite my horrid camp experience and my water phobia.

On the trip from Manhattan to the Poconos, I sat on the front seat of the bus so I could see where we were going and so I could be near Belinda and Raul. A few years younger than me, they had walked up and introduced themselves which made me like them instantly. They looked like regular black folks, but they spoke English with an accent. And then when they broke into rapid-fire Spanish, I was really confused. Life in Charlotte, Appleton, and Paris had not yet shown me the pigeonhole for Belinda and Raul, a duo everyone knew because they had started out as campers and had finally worked their way up to being counselors. Belinda was petite, blue-black, with huge soulful eyes and an intense, nervous energy. Raul was short, stocky and muscular, toasty brown with blue-black curly hair and a thin mustache. He was also the camp heartthrob.

For a week before the campers arrived, a clinical psychologist talked to us about the special needs of "underprivileged children": They were traumatized by poverty and violence, exacerbated by surging adolescent hormones. Although there would be some kids who had been to our camp before, for many this would be the first time they had ever been outside the city. Even though we, the counselors, saw this a week for them to have fun frolicking in the great

outdoors, she said, this new experience was likely to hit them as simply more trauma.

Consequently, as tempted as we might be to go easy on them, she warned, “Don’t. That would be a serious mistake. These kids need discipline and structure. They don’t need you to be their friend.”

I was annoyed at the hyperbole. Twelve and thirteen-year old girls were coming to camp for a week. Big deal. How terrifying could they be? I gazed out over the lake, ticking off time until lunch when I could grab a sandwich and get a break from the cautionary tales and Christian simpering. I barely stifled yawns while waiting for her to shut up.

During a break, I walked up on Belinda and Raul chattering away, so I just blurted out my question. “Where did you learn to speak Spanish like that?” “At home,” they responded in unison, grinning and resumed their conversation. Later I overheard someone say Belinda was Puerto Rican, but I still didn’t know exactly what that meant.

At college under Abby and Genette’s tutelage, I had gotten very good at telling Poles from Germans, Italians from Greeks, Greeks from Armenians, east coast, southern, or Midwestern WASPS from blue collar Irish, and Jews from everyone else. After Paris, I could even tell a *Parisienne* from her country cousin, but no one had schooled me about Puerto Ricans. I was instantly envious that two black people spoke another language so effortlessly, which also let them have conversations in our presence that completely shut us out.

The day the buses rolled in with our first group of campers, we all trooped out to meet them. As they chugged to a stop under huge shade trees along the edge of the lake, we yelled and clapped and sang the kids off the buses. Their response to our thunderous greeting was to swagger down the steps as if we were invisible and they were already half-dead from boredom. Once every camper had been assigned, the boys piled into canoes and rowed themselves to the

other side of the lake. Except for meals, evening vespers, and other closely supervised occasions, the boys and girls remained safely out of each other's reach though never out of each other's mind.

Ignoring the psychologist's warnings, I immediately set about wooing my girls. I was determined to make them like me, determined to be a popular counselor. Less than twenty-four hours later, that blabbering psychologist suddenly became a stunningly brilliant predictor of adolescent behavior. My attempts to rule by consensus and to treat them as equals were disastrous. They repaid my fawning attention by walking all over me.

One afternoon when yelling wasn't working, I pulled out something I knew would get their attention: a *Time/Life* book entitled "Where Do Babies Come From?" These 12- and 13-year old girls whose every sentence seemed laced with sexual innuendo, who teased each other incessantly about getting laid, and who devised intricate plots to put themselves in the hands of the boys across the lake, kneeled before the book, embarrassed into silence.

Their noses practically touched the pages as they examined the pictures in the book. Occasionally one would let loose an "unnnnhhh" or "ooooohhh," but mostly they listened wordlessly with their hands clapped across their mouths while one of their cabin mates read aloud. When the reader turned the page, the others seized the opportunity to vent by collapsing into a giggling heap.

Susan, another counselor, and her eight girls occupied the other half of our cabin. She was a gentle, intense, guitar-playing white girl from upstate New York, an outdoorswoman who wore hiking boots everywhere and exuded an earthy Greenpeace cool. Like me, she attended a tiny liberal arts college in the Midwest where she was entering her junior year. After lights out each

night, we met to talk and unwind in the small vestibule in the middle of the cabin. Her wise, thoughtful counsel went a long way towards helping me keep things together.



My second group of campers—loving and much loved—discovering how babies are really born!

All of us counselors started out with such missionary zeal, determined to introduce our underprivileged minions to the wonders of God’s glory as manifested in three meals a day, arts and crafts, and the great outdoors. But after a month or so of devoted service, it became apparent that our needs as staff were not being as diligently attended as we desired by the people who employed and supervised us. Increasingly vocal about our plight, I joined a handful of others in convincing most of the staff to join us in seeking redress.

We decided the best approach was a meeting with Mr. Al, a black, extremely popular elementary school principal who had been the camp director for many years. He was a beloved father figure to many campers and staff, so I was not surprised to see some in the group begin losing their nerve as we sat there waiting for Mr. Al’s arrival.

As soon as he got there, he led us in prayer. “Dear God, please don’t let us get so far down a path that there’s no way back.” Sure, he was talking to God, but we the people heard his threat. And when Mr. Al asked who had called the meeting and why, our strategy fell completely apart. In what was to become a pattern for the rest of my life, I stepped into the silence, accepting that

what had been *our* case was now *my* case. Looking neither right nor left, I knew I was out there on my own.

When Mr. Al spoke again, he was brief and to the point. The children were his priority, he said, and as long as their needs were being met, he would continue to pay us to do our jobs. If, however, we found the situation intolerable, we were free to leave. But if we chose to stay, nothing was going to change.

He asked for questions. There were none. He declared the meeting over and we filed silently down the aisle toward the exit. “Miss Berni, may I have a minute of your time, please?” I sat down where I was, staring straight ahead. When we were the only two left in the chapel, he began fiddling around with a fresh cigar.

“What do *you* want?” Perching on the back of a pew with one foot balanced on the seat in front of him, he seemed genuinely puzzled. “What are we doing to make you so *unhappy*?”

I was still stunned that the group had collapsed so quickly, so I was not at all prepared for his concern over my discontent. I looked down to hide my tears, realizing I, too, had been masterfully out-manuevered.

“Look,” Mr. Al leaned forward conspiratorially, “why don’t you take a couple of days off? You can have my car, go to New York, Philadelphia, spend some time with your college buddies. Invite your family up from New York to visit. You can have my cottage. Just let the housekeeping staff know when you want to use it so they can get things in order. And relax. Stop taking everything so seriously. You work too hard.”

“I’m not tired and I don’t want your car or your cottage.” I refused to look at him and instead gazed at the floor-to-ceiling chapel windows which the starless night had turned navy blue. When I pulled my eyes back to his, a smile flickered across his face in the flame from his lighter

as it licked the end of his cigar. He puffed a few times until the tip glowed orange and blue smoke curled around his head.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” he said standing up and tucking in his shirt. “They didn’t abandon you because you were wrong. They fell back because they were weak.” He kept talking as he headed for the door, his arm around my shoulder.

“Most people can’t stand up to power because they’re too afraid. It’s a rare person that has the strength of their convictions. Only thing is you don’t know who they are until you look around and they’re not there. Let that be a lesson to you.” He held the door open while I walked past him.

“If you believe something is right, you better be prepared to stand by yourself, come what may. You did that tonight. Your mamma would be proud of you. If you weren’t standing up to me, hell, I’d be proud of you.”

He left me standing in front of the darkened chapel. I watched him disappear into the shadows, listened to his footsteps crunch along the tree bark path, cross the road to his yard and climb the stairs to his front porch. The screen door slammed behind him.

I was still angry and bitter about the Vietnam War, our government’s role in Southeast Asia, and the campaign of lies and distortions they had used to keep the American public ignorant. I was still seething at Mr. Al’s blatant—and extremely effective effective—ploy to buy me off even as he made it clear I was powerless to change things in his kingdom.

Lined up with my campers facing the flag at sunrise the next morning, though, it hit me. *One nation under God indivisible?* What a toady little butt-kisser I had become, spouting horseshit about *liberty and justice for all* when I, and certainly all the adults around me, knew better. Hadn’t Mr. Al just refreshed our memory the night before?

A quarter of the boys who graduated from high school with me in 1967—all of them black—had been killed in Vietnam a year later, most of them during the Tet Offensive.¹³ They died in place of those whom privilege—wealth, political connections, or white skin—had granted an automatic deferment. Poor folks and men of color were shipped off to die by the hundreds of thousands, courtesy of the rich powerful white men who sacrificed my classmates' lives to keep their children and their friends' children alive and safe.

What stage dementia accounted for my willingness to stand, there morning after morning, swearing fealty just because someone had taught me to mouth those words when I was still young enough to bend for my branding?

On the dew speckled lawn facing the lake, I thought of Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics,¹⁴ two black athletes whose actions had turned them into the living image of what Ma meant when she taught me to stand up for what I believe. I thought of how their decision to lift their black-gloved fists in protest—instead of saluting the flag—had cost one the gold and the other the bronze medal they had spent their lives training and working so long and hard for.

And, just like that, I knew what I had to do. Just like that, I stopped saluting the flag or saying the pledge of allegiance. Instead, I stood silently with my hands clasped behind my back. I had no idea then that stance would remain the same for the rest of my life.

I waited for Mr. Al to confront me, especially once my campers followed suit. He never did. I was satisfied that, at least where I was concerned, he might've won that battle, but we would always be at war if he expected my total submission.

I cried a lot that summer. I was lonely and sad, but constantly surrounded, so there was no place to *be* lonely and sad. I was like a sponge soaked to capacity. Tears seeped out whenever I

thought no one was looking. Despite my burdened spirit, though, I learned a lot. After the first group of campers took me through hell, I learned my lesson; I learned how to get the jump on my girls by giving them hell first, then easing up as time went on. By summer's end, I had turned into a pretty decent counselor.

Chicago: Fighting Repression

Commies, Catholics, and Lincoln Park Zoo. The Loop, the El, and shoe leather, too. It was fall and after summering in the Pocono Mountains, I was living on the north side of Chicago. I still had another three-month reprieve from the Land of the White People, thanks to the Urban Studies Program into which Abby and Genette had steered me. 1208 W. Wrightwood was the site of my US liberation in September 1970. My roommate and I shared a two-bedroom flat with sliding French doors, a tiny kitchen, and a parlor in a neighborhood of new immigrants.

Lawrence was part of a consortium of a dozen small private liberal arts colleges in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, and Indiana—the Associated Colleges of the Midwest (ACM). Like Lawrence, Carleton, Beloit, Grinnell, Cornell (Iowa), and Coe were among the highly regarded ACM dozen, though pretty much unknown to everyone except the students who attended them. ACM member colleges pooled resources to expand program offerings for their students. Launched in the fall of 1969, the Urban Studies Program was one of their earliest offerings, which made competition fierce for the few slots reserved for Lawrence students. In my application, I leaned hard on my urban roots to beat out other contenders.

Each student worked as an unpaid intern with a grassroots organization devoted to social justice. And three mornings a week we all gathered to debate the issues of the day and to report on our internships. At the end of our term of independent study, we would prepare a term paper synthesizing what we had learned, but the rest of the time we were free to Experience Urban

Life. I usually walked the three miles from our group sessions to the Alliance to End Repression where I worked, organizing my thoughts and writing my paper in my head. The Alliance, like Chicago, was an exciting, thought-provoking place. Because I had never met white folks like the ones at the Alliance, I decided it was a Communist front organization and every day I walked into the office, I felt quite daring.¹⁵

Father John Hill, a Catholic priest, and Betty Plank,¹⁶ the gentle, smart, devoted nun who was his right-hand, were the Alliance. And they were also aliens, albeit wonderfully refreshing ones: white, adult, Catholic, religious, radical. I had never heard of—much less been in the presence of—such people. These were not the loud-mouthed, self-righteous demagogues from campus who were passing time until they got a shave, a haircut, and a job at daddy's company. It was clear Father John and Betty were veterans who had been chipping away at racist and political repression for a long time. The Alliance's doors were open to all who shared our vision.

In “Chicago Red Squad: A Case Study of the *Alliance to End Repression v. City of Chicago*,” Chicago-Kent College of Law Students Esther Lim, Jonathan Rhodes, and Jacob Shorr describe how the Alliance came to be:¹⁷

The Alliance to End Repression was created in the early 1970s as a response to the ongoing violations of civil liberties occurring in Chicago at that time.¹⁸ Though these abuses were widespread, the assassinations of Black Panther leaders, Mark Clark and Fred Hampton, specifically triggered the formation of the Alliance.¹⁹ On December 4, 1969, Clark and Hampton were brutally murdered in their sleep in their own home by the Chicago police.²⁰ These assassinations were carried out by the Chicago police, but planned with the aid of the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as with the aid of an informant placed within the Black Panthers.²¹

According to John Hill, the executive coordinator of the Alliance, these assassinations were regarded as the “ultimate in repression” and necessitated a response from the community.²² As a result, the Alliance was formed as a broad coalition of various religious and community groups.²³ The Alliance was created with the sole aim to “attack repression wherever it was” because “[t]here were so many wrongs that needed to be righted.”²⁴

I was enthralled by these white folks who were glad to see me coming and who took their politics seriously enough to devote their entire lives to radical change. John and Betty proved Ma had been wrong about something else: It was possible to combine religion and politics and not make a mess of both. I passed my days in an easy rhythm of working, walking, and thinking, triggered by the steady stream of characters passing through our office. As it turned out, I wasn't the only one who found them worth watching and listening to.

George was a frequent visitor and had been fingered as a Communist long before I began wondering about him. A tall, gaunt fellow, his hip pocket was always stuffed with a worn, bound reprint of the session that contained his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Established in 1934 by the US House of Representatives, HUAC evolved into the anti-Communist witch hunt ginned up by Sen. Joe McCarthy (R-WI) in 1950 with his investigations through the Senate Committee on Government Operations. Fueling "the Red Scare" following America's falling out with the Soviet Union, HUAC and McCarthy ram on parallel tracks, targeting left-wing "Communist subversives." McCarthy claimed he had a list of hundreds who had infiltrated the US State Department, the Army, and the Hollywood film industry among many other organizations. He lied. Still, many careers and lives would be destroyed as a consequence.

McCarthy had been dead and enshrined in Appleton for more than a decade by the time I got to town. Even so, townspeople still held a parade in his honor and marched to his gravesite on his birthday. So, working for the Alliance to End Repression made me feel like I was personally fighting back against McCarthy's legacy of lies, persecution, and oppression. Like Father John and Betty, George inspired me.

George proudly performed his HUAC testimony by reading from the tattered pages of text containing the many questions to which he had given the same answer: “I refuse to answer on the grounds that it might tend to incriminate me.” Hearing how he faced down the television cameras and a hostile panel of investigators piqued my interest in the Communist Party. So, when Sylvia Kushner of the Chicago Peace Council came through our office, I watched her closely. Was *that* what a real Communist looked like? Was she wearing jewelry and lipstick?!

Larry Diamond was another Alliance colleague, young, smart, handsome with black curly hair and ruddy cheeks. His megawatt energy and rapid speech were infectious and made him a natural at grassroots political organizing. A Chicago native, Larry took me on sightseeing jaunts during which we walked many miles around the city. En route to introduce me to his family in the home where he grew up, Larry taught me what it meant that his parents kept kosher. I dragged him to the primate house at the Lincoln Park Zoo, one of my favorite haunts.

The huge silverback gorilla in the corner cage was my draw. I whispered apologies to him on every visit because I felt his sadness and shame at his captivity as keenly as I felt the scarf around my neck. My visits never lasted longer than a few minutes and routinely ended with me near tears. Every day I left with a heart heavy from witnessing the gorilla’s mute agony. In all those trips, it never dawned on me *why* I felt so drawn to the big, black, imprisoned animal constantly on display with nowhere to hide.

Communist propaganda described white folks working on themselves to get rid of racism and working against the repression of blacks worldwide. It sounded like a recruitment appeal to me. Apart from revering the Communist company my Alliance folks kept, I liked the idea of doing something as scandalous as returning to campus a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. I had already morphed from straightened, shoulder-length hair to a cropped natural “Afro”

hairdo. My recently purchased wire-rimmed glasses completed the intentional resemblance I bore to my heroine, Angela Davis, an avowed Communist. So, why not go all the way and join the political party of a real revolutionary?

I chickened out. My the White People sobered facts as I knew them:



L-R: March 1970 December 1970

were oppressors. And just

impending return to the Land of me up and forced me to face the White folks all over the world

because I had met some exceptions

at the Alliance did not change the rule. To continue rising above them, I had to keep my head on straight and my nose clean. I could not afford to jeopardize my future by a flight of Communist fancy. So, when Christmas vacation ended, I had nowhere to go but back to the Land of the White People. Only six months—two more academic terms—stood between graduation and me.

CHAPTER 6

RE-ENTRY

Back Where I Started

I had left campus in the spring of 1970, but was returning to Wisconsin's interminable winter in January 1971. To delay my reentry as long as possible, I flew to Chicago and stayed with Abby and her family for a few days.

Abby was second youngest and the only girl among four brothers, creating what I jokingly called her "Black Princess origins." Genette was from an even larger family, equally divided between sons and daughters, and, like Abby, she had grown up with her mother and father. Next to my tiny family of three, their families seemed exciting and visiting them helped me understand my mother's disappointment that she had not raised my sister and me as part of a larger brood.

The wool coat and patent leather pumps that were cute and fashionable in Charlotte's mild winter were a dumb choice for waiting on the Greyhound bus station platform in Chicago in January with Abby and Genette. They were warmly, sensibly, and fashionably dressed while I was freezing even when the wind wasn't blowing. And when the Hawk squawked, it sliced right through my cute, thin layers of clothes. Snow in my open-sided shoes had turned my feet into blocks of ice. So I prowled the bus station like a bit player in a Grade B horror flick, trying to generate warmth with movement, dragging my numb stumps, one after the other.

By the time we changed buses in Milwaukee, I had partially thawed. When we were momentarily confused about which bus was our connection, a helpful passerby looked at our tickets and shooed us onto the bus headed for Appleton. I was so grateful for his assistance and

his offer to load our bags beneath the bus that I tipped him five dollars. That was the last I ever saw him or my luggage.

I arrived in Appleton in the dead of night in the middle of winter with a small tote bag and the clothes on my back. My two large suitcases and everything in them were gone—my custom-made suede dress from Germany; the four outfits Ma had made me for Christmas, copying every detail of the designer fashions in the holiday magazines, right down to the almost impossible to find buckle on one sleeve; all of my souvenirs and other mementos from my European and Chicago sojourns. Gone. But that loss was only a harbinger of things to come.

After counting the credits I needed to graduate, I was nearly right back where I had started. All those bad grades from my first two years had rolled themselves into one big wad that was now lodged between graduation and me. The only way I could graduate with my class in June was to load up with extra classes and earn enough credits to raise my overall grade point average to a C, the minimum required for graduation.

Before college, I'd never spent any time calculating grade point averages. I was an A student and that was that. The few times I got a B, it was an annoyance, a personal challenge. The other letters of the alphabet had no personal relevance for me. But by spring of 1971, I had developed a whole new appreciation for my ABCs.

Instead of the triumphant senior year I had fantasized, I was back to being humiliated. I had one last shot to recover from my dismal academic performance so I could break out of Lawrence for good.

Losing Touch

I had been gone from campus for nearly a year, but now it was clear that hadn't been long enough. Nothing that had held my attention before I left was of any consequence to me when I

returned. In my absence, things had changed and so had I. I was even more angry, bitter, and disillusioned than before. Abby and Genette described a black first year student who had succumbed to her malaise and painted herself blue from head to toe. She had then traipsed around campus proclaiming, “I’m not black. I’m blue.” I envied her clarity and her flair.

From the dozen black students who had started Lawrence with me in 1967, our numbers had risen dramatically so that by the time I left for Paris, there were around fifty of us. When I returned in January of 1971, it seemed that there was a sea of black students—maybe more than a hundred—whom I knew neither by face nor name. Despite not knowing them personally and without ever having a conversation I can recall with any of them, I decided they were the reincarnation of the snickering, snide, segregated, black bourgeois congregation I had loathed in high school and their mirror image, the black students I had left on campus the preceding spring.

And, suddenly, I had a whole different perspective on Jerry Nightingale, the lone black senior on campus when we showed up four earlier, multiplying by more than tenfold the black presence on campus. I understood why he chose to give wide berth to us new black students and continued life on campus as he had known it before we invaded. I understood why, to the younger black students, now I *was* Jerry Nightengale. And that suited me just fine.

The black students, though, were the least of my problems. Despite their exponential increase, I could easily avoid them if I just didn’t hang out where they gathered. But, avoiding white folks in the Land of the White People was impossible. Like gnats, they swarmed everywhere. Agreeing to share an apartment off campus with Gail provided some relief. She was still my best white friend and she would share her room with one of her friends, which gave me a room to myself which meant I could close the door and make both of them disappear. I closed the door a lot.

Our cute cozy apartment was sunny and close to campus with only one major drawback: It was the upstairs part of a two-story house and our nosey landlady and her unassuming husband lived downstairs. We were immaculate housekeepers, so that was not a problem. She apparently had nothing else to do and no sense of boundaries or respect for our privacy, so as soon as we left, she was upstairs in our apartment, rooting around in our belongings without our permission. She was such a chronic snoop that she checked—and complained—about how much toilet paper we used and the number of times she heard us flush.

She finally confronted us one time too many with her cumulative evidence of our wasteful ways. I had had enough and decided to make a deposit and leave it behind for our landlady's edification about true waste and the smelly alternative to frequent flushing. Gail begged me not to, so I didn't.

Snowplows clearing paths along wintry campus walkways had, as usual, left mountains piled in their wake, entombing us in icy whiteness. I felt so hemmed in by the cold, the snow, the winter-faced white folks, and my march to GPA redemption that I couldn't even look up when I walked to and from class. I kept my eyes on my feet as I walked and once I was in class, I focused on my hands, my desk, anything that wasn't white. I even began using colored paper to take notes because white paper infuriated me.

White Girl

At first, I began staying away from the apartment whenever I thought Gail or our other roommate would be there. Even if they were gone, there was still the problem of the pathological plunderer, the busybody permanently planted behind her curtains, popping up to spy on my coming and going. Eventually, I taught myself to ignore her prying eyes (and feet and hands) as I cased the place, waiting until Gail and our other roommate left. Then I'd creep upstairs, lock the

door, turn off the light, and sit there in the dark. When they got back and knocked on my door late at night to see if I were there, I refused to answer. Huddled in the darkness, I listened to them live like normal people.

They prepared and ate meals together. They studied and dated. They sometimes eagerly, sometimes anxiously, planned for life after college. Our other roommate, pinched, drawn, and obsessively ambitious, was headed to grad school; Gail already had an apartment and a job waiting for her, her path having been prepared for her, as usual, by her siblings. Gail and our other roommate's futures were set: They would work for a while, get married, and raise families—live the proverbial American Dream. They were white girls doing what white girls did in a world tailor made for white girls.

My roommates were no bra-burning feminists. They listed more towards the iconic apron-&-pearls-wearing-please-your-man ilk. I prided myself for my place on the mini-skirted Gloria Steinem side of the cultural eddy, churning up ideas about what a woman was and could do. Gail and our other roommate did not seem at all chafed by the prevailing expectation that they would work until a husband and children called them home for housekeeping and childrearing. Never once did I see myself stuck in that scenario.

Sure, I had won the Betty Crocker “Homemaker of Tomorrow” award my senior year in high school, but, I had also vowed I would never marry or have babies. And none of the women I had grown up around ever had to fight their husbands or any other man for the right to work. I was in college to get an education to earn a living to support myself, not to find a husband.

Gradually, I came to loathe the sounds from the girls on the other side of the wall. Over the years, I had alternately adored and envied Gail. But now I resented what she had come to represent, which was basically all that I felt life did not hold for me. If we were cars and our

college education was fuel, Gail was in a cushy sedan flying past me on her highway of privilege while I was stalled in the breakdown lane with a nearly full tank. Through my prism of hopelessness, my caution lights were blinking, but I knew help was not on the way.

Early in our relationship, I so grateful for the loving attention of Gail and her family that I blinded myself to the details marking the gap between her college life, her future, and mine. She had followed her revered big brother, Dave, to college. A star athlete and campus leader, he was there to welcome her, comfort and guide her through our first-year jitters. I had figured things out on my own.

During sorority rush our first year, she had been heavily recruited while I was ignored. She had signed on with the pretty, rich girls' sorority while I drafted a narrative to justify why no one even bothered to look me over. When Dave graduated in June, their younger brother entered Lawrence the next fall, preserving Gail's link to her family's support and protection.

For four years, I had watched her get ready for dates, smoothing on mascara, curling her eyelashes, taking one last critical look, left eyebrow raised just so while I made my lonely way back to my room and, later, to Abby and Genette's room for popcorn, sad stories, and tears. Gail had come to me for comfort from time to time. We had been junior counselors together. She had introduced me to good wine.

So, of course, she would graduate and be transported to the security of her big sister's apartment and hired into a job by her future brother-in-law. When had it *not* been that way for Little Miss Rebecca-of-Sunnybrook Farm?

In four years of close observation, it was clear to me that, despite her undeniably hard work, most of Gail's river of good fortune was not anything she had earned. At first, I was bemused to discover this. Then I was envious and embarrassed for being so. After a while, I was angry,

outdone at the grotesque unfairness of it all. In our final stretch, I holed up in my bedroom and curled myself around misery and hopelessness until they became a small tight ball of hate.

I hated Gail for what she was, for what flowed to her in the midst of all her oblivion, for not seeing black, desperate me battling demons beneath a tsunami of inequities to which she was also blind.

I hated her because life's best lulled Gail, white, blonde, wealthy, in a sea of contentment. We were not side by side as she liked to pretend and as I had once happily pretended right along with her. The fact was we were separated by a continental divide of probabilities. My toil was no match for her entitlement. As she waltzed expectantly towards graduation, I despised her because life had made good on its promise to her and she'd done nothing except reach out and take it. I turned myself into a jackhammer of mute rage.

How could she not see me, see it? Generous and kind, she was also trusting and open like those who presume acceptance and are constantly affirmed in their expectations. As far as I knew, Gail had no enemies except for the one with whom she once shared food and confidences—me.

Gail and her family had been a finishing school of sorts for me. I had taken driving lessons in high school, but Gail was the one who had taught me how to really drive. Under her watchful eye, I drove all around Appleton, up and down the Wisconsin highways between campus and her family's farms, on sorties through neighboring states with her beside me, coaching and occasionally yelling cautionary instructions. When I failed my first road test, she comforted me by turning it into a joke. With her encouragement, I tried again and when I got my license, she produced a bottle of good wine to celebrate. It had all unfolded in her cars, using her gas, on her dime.

With her arm draped across my shoulders, Gail was the one who had guided me through the despair and hopelessness of Dr. King's assassination. We wore each other's clothes.

Abby, Genette, and I had nicknamed Gail "Pollyanna" and "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm" because her life was the polar opposite of ours. We wondered aloud what it must feel like to be so solidly positioned. Constantly comparing Gail's life to mine was driving me mad. Holed up in my room in the dark night after night in our apartment, I started unraveling the old myth of Overcoming and piecing together a new one based on my reality of Being Overcome.

Despite Mama and my teachers' best efforts, they had been wrong. Being colored was being inherently and permanently inferior. White people belonged on top, coloreds on the bottom. From the moment I could form a thought, I had never once had the luxury of not knowing, not comprehending, not responding to that order of things. Still, I had volunteered to enter the Land of the White Folks, to go toe-to-toe with them, to show them and myself that not only was I as good as them, but that I was better.

I had done the very best I could do, but that was not enough. No matter how schooled I was in their ways or even how much I excelled in the things that mattered to them, it was clear I was present on a visitor's pass. I was to Gail exactly what I was to the rest of the white folks—a passing curiosity, a cultural way station in a national experiment, a university anecdote, a historical reference they might have noted, but had definitely moved past. At best, I was a topic for a classroom or dorm room conversation.

I deserved better. Armed with my college degree, like the white girls, I was supposed to be following my rising star straight through the stratosphere, limited only by my ambition. Instead, sealed off in my room, I listened to Gail's life ripple along as mine got sucked down a toilet of despair.

Over and over, the lesson hammered itself in: Gail was all that I would never be, but what I had been led to believe we could both become.

I didn't want to *be* her. I wanted the chance to *not* be her and to also not be the circus freak, not be either The First or The Only. I wanted to be Subject not Object.

Even as I piled on, I knew I was being unfair. Gail's oblivion was only part of what enraged me. She had been born with the white girl chit and she had played it from the start. It wasn't her fault I had refused to see it. Why blame her because I was sealed in some integration anteroom while she and others like her were stepping off into a horizon, all white and without boundaries?

I finally saw Gail for what she was, what she had always been: one of Them, the victor. I saw myself for what I had always been: Not Them, the vanquished. I had to get away from her.

Without Gail's halcyon existence as a daily counterpoint to my hopelessness, I thought maybe the disparities between her life and mine would not be so wrenching. Freed of her life as measure and mockery of mine, maybe I could still imagine a future that had me doing something other than simply surviving. But she *was* there, all gilded and glowing, in my face every day.

I had had all I could take of white folks in general and Gail in particular. I had fought with all I had and was still a loser, about to disgrace my family, my friends, and myself by falling completely apart when the end was in sight. If the white folks had wanted to teach me that the world and all that was in it belonged to them, they had succeeded. I required no further instruction.

Breakdown

To save myself, I moved out. Behind me, I left a letter for Gail, cutting her off. Having determined she was my enemy, I killed her in the only way I knew how: I wrote her out of existence.

We will never be friends again. Because you're white and I'm not, I've always been forced to understand your reality while you have never had to— never even tried to—understand mine. And, because you can't understand my life, I no longer want to understand or be a part of yours. As far as I'm concerned, from this day forward, you do not exist.

Back on campus, I was right back where I had started my first year: in the same dorm, even on the same floor, where my college life had begun. After nearly four years serving the university and my country on the front lines of the Race War, I was the shell-shocked, walking wounded. In our moments of deepest despair, Abby, Genette, and I would sometimes comfort ourselves by saying, “Oh, well, thirty years from now, it won't be like this. We have to take all this shit now because we're the first. But, thirty years from now, it won't be nearly this bad. We're doing this now so the ones who come after us won't have to.” Then we'd cry some more or get up and go get pizza.

Soon after I stopped going to classes, I stopped leaving my room at all except for toilet runs in the wee hours when everyone else was asleep. I didn't eat because I couldn't bear to be around white folks in the dining hall and I had no money to buy food anyplace else. If I had to starve to keep from seeing them, fine. I joked constantly about going to the top of Main Hall and picking off white folks like Charles Whitman, the University of Texas Tower sniper who killed 16 and wounded 32 in a 96-minute shooting rampage in the summer of 1966.²⁵ I laughed bitterly about not being able to afford the bullets if I'd been able to borrow a gun.

Abby and Genette brought me peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and food from the “seconds” table in the dining hall. Each time I let them in, I had to first move the wet towels I had stuffed along the bottom of my door to block out the sound of any white person saying or doing any white thing. I kept my window blinds drawn against their sights, smells, and sounds. Then, one night, I hit bottom.

As usual, I had been holed up in my room all day. Long after midnight, when no one was stirring, I crept across campus to the library’s all-night reading room, normally a haven I could count on to be empty at 3AM. But that night, a couple was there, their blonde heads bent low over their books, blocking my moment of respite. I stumbled outside, sobbing, searching in the dark for a boulder to heave through the window. Yeah, that would make them flee in terror or, better yet, confront me so I could bash in their skulls. As usual, the targets of my mayhem fantasy never even knew I was there.

I needed help to finish college without going crazier or killing somebody. The middle-aged white male shrink I sat across from was trying to provide that help. A psychology major, Abby didn’t have the aversion many black folks, including me, had towards psychology. So she and Genette had finally prevailed on me to go for counseling.

I had been raised to believe that I could always take my burdens to the Lord and leave them there. Trotting them out before some other white man was nothing anyone I knew had ever contemplated. Even a lapsed Christian like me still knew God was supposed to be the answer to everything. A psychologist had no place in our salvation hierarchy and seeing a shrink was absolutely white folks’ foolishness. Confessing my pain and anguish to a white male stranger was anathema to my upbringing. Who knew how or when he would use it against me later?

Despite my mental, emotional, and spiritual fatigue, I was not too far gone to know that some official record of my disintegration might be useful. If anyone ever came looking, it might look better if they found a note in my file that said, “She was here and she was *definitely* off her rocker.” Being at Lawrence is what drove me crazy, so the least the university could do was independently corroborate that I was nuts for good reason. Then, too, I needed an official excuse for having missed a month of classes, so that was a major impetus for seeing the shrink.

I sat there with one thought on my mind: What the hell did he know about guiding me back to wholeness? I felt like a grizzly bear applying for a bank loan. A Yerkes Institute escapee waving my arms and flapping my lips, using sign language to impress the head suspended a few feet in the air on the other side of the desk. I was a point of fascination, but what did it all mean to him? Thankfully, he had no frame of reference for what ailed me, which was probably all that saved me from being institutionalized. After a few visits, I tossed him on the pile of white folks who had no clue about my black life among them. My malaise deepened.

If the shrink was clueless, Odessa had the solution: Say your prayers. Get up and get your degree. You have to finish what you started. I obeyed. I even tried to switch things into fast forward.

I begged Professor Povolny for permission to take my comprehensive exams early so I could leave campus as soon as possible. He refused. This time, however, he wasn't concerned about setting precedence, he was concerned that I might tell other graduating political science majors what was on the exam. For that, I cussed him out.

Since Dean Mary Morton was still my advisor, I appealed to her. As flexible as granite, she sided with Dr. Povolny. I decided to back down and try again later.

Until those altercations with my department chair and the dean, anyone who knew me at all thought of me as a model campus citizen, a student leader who was going somewhere. What they didn't know was that I had gone somewhere alright—berserk.

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Interlude

One spring evening around dinnertime when the library was deserted, I was hanging out again in the dark, dusty stacks among the periodicals. I picked up an issue of *Ebony*, a monthly paean to capitalism and black bourgeois conspicuous consumption. A card fell from between its pages and landed at my feet. I stooped to pick it up.

It was a tear-out announcing a six-week summer pre-law program for economically disadvantaged students. Sponsored by the Council on Legal Education Opportunity (CLEO), there in writing was an unbelievable offer: Everyone who successfully completed the program would be awarded a \$1500 scholarship and was guaranteed admission into a law school.

To complete my CLEO application, I needed to list the law schools to which I had applied. So I applied to law schools. Not just a few, but a lot of them and not just any, but the best of them. Because I was so poor—"economically disadvantaged"—they all waived their standard application fees.

I had suffered through four years of college at a university most people had never heard of ("no, not Sarah Lawrence...no, it's not in Lawrence, Kansas...not Lawrence College, Lawrence *University*...). Despite our collective campus inferiority complex, our academic stature as a university was secure among educators in the know. There just weren't enough of them around. So, if I had to go through hell to get another degree, this time around, my credentials would come from an institution whose name spoke for itself: Harvard, Yale, University of Michigan,

University of Chicago, Duke, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Columbia, Rutgers, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Odessa would later tell me that I had announced at age 12 that I was going to be a lawyer. In 1961 that would have made sense as Negro lawyers were highly visible in the televised, violent march towards racial equality. Then, too, I was a devotee of *Perry Mason*, a TV drama starring a rather swarthy, handsome lawyer who weekly outwitted criminals through a combination of brilliant trial strategy and charm. Single-handedly, he forced them to confess every time.

But ten years later, among the college library stacks, it was not *Perry Mason* that motivated me. Only months away from graduation, with a major in political science and no master plan for my life after graduation, I had devised a fallback plan in keeping with a Lawrence tradition: I took education courses I would need to get my teaching certification.

Ben Sager, a caring, sensitive professor who chaired the education department did not bludgeon us with his absolute superiority as was *de rigueur* for traditional LU student-faculty relationships. He truly loved what he taught and, because he respected us and our potential, believed he could teach us to love it too. Students repaid him by derisively referring to his education classes as “Mickey Mouse I” and “Mickey Mouse II.” Disdainful but pragmatic, I too took his courses for one reason: job insurance.

But the chance to become a lawyer was immediately way more appealing than teaching. Law school admission would be prestigious and put me on the path to money and power. I would storm one of the most elite domains, one that was still a white male preserve. It was a long shot, but I was taking it. Why the hell not?

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Geese

It is said that as geese fly, each bird flapping its wings creates uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V" formation, the whole flock adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own.

Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go at it alone, and quickly gets into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird immediately in front. When the lead bird gets tired, it rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point. The geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

Finally, when a goose gets sick, or is wounded by gun shots, and falls out, two geese fall out of formation and follow it down to help and protect it. They stay with it until it is either able to fly or dies. Then they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with their group.²⁶

“Berni,” Genette called out, “did you check your messages?” I hadn’t. I never did. Any twinge of desire to do otherwise had been thoroughly trounced by my latest season of nothing but bad news.

“Yeah, Berni,” Abby piped up. “I think you got some messages.” Behind their twin masks of innocence lurked something more, but I didn’t have the energy to ferret it out.

“Yeah, right,” I said and turned back towards the stairs.

“No, seriously, Berni,” Genette insisted. She stood and leaned over the counter and plucked two slips from the message board. “Here they are. They were here when we came on duty.”

“For real,” Abby nodded. I took the two folded pieces of paper that Genette held out to me. “*Harvard Law School! Way to go! Congrats!!!*” read the first message. I opened the second one: “*Columbia called. YOU’RE IN!*” I recognized their handwriting immediately and couldn’t help but laugh.

“See?” Genette said. “Told you.”

“Now, put them back,” Abby directed.

“What?”

“Put them back on the board, please. Other people need to see the good news.”

Our target audience was the black girls who lived in other dorms, but ate in our dining hall and who exhibited an intense interest in messages with our names on them. Based on the regularity with which a few of them routinely read my messages, apparently just because they didn't like me didn't mean they weren't interested in what I was doing. Consequently, our ruse worked. Within hours, my nosy nemeses were broadcasting news of my meteoric rise, thus sparing me the double trouble of lying and self-promotion.

Throughout college, Abby, Genette, and I supplemented our scholarships with jobs on campus. We worked the reception desk in Colman Hall, the dorm where we also lived. From this vantage point, we were able to keep close tabs on other dorm residents, an opportunity I relished and exploited. And so, as my law school rejections poured in, the power of our position created a new opportunity: re-scripting narratives. Decades ahead of their time, Abby and Genette simply took the evidence of my demise and reshaped it to invent my epic comeback.

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Final Stretch

The truth was something else altogether. In fact, every law school I applied to had rejected me. I hadn't convinced a single one of them that I had what it took to get that job done. So what if doubling up on courses at the end would earn me enough credits to graduate on time? The miracle it took to achieve that was lost on whoever was reading my exhaustive law school applications.

So what if I had passed my comprehensive exams for a major in Political Science with enough credits for a minor in International Politics? Simply not enough for the highly competitive law school crew.

But even if I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do next, one thing was certain: As soon as I finished my last exam, I was getting the hell out of Appleton. I absolutely refused to stick around for the graduation ceremony.

When I announced my plans to my advisor, Dean Morton delivered one final piece of bad news as she patiently explained that university policy and tradition required that I don cap and gown and march with my classmates at graduation if I wanted to receive a diploma. Then, she sat silently peering at me as I loudly, explicitly instructed her how to roll up my diploma and specified the orifice into which she should shove it.

"I'm through being your guinea pig! Through letting you use my black face to make this place look like something it's not. You think you can make me march just to get my fucking diploma? Well, surprise, lady! I already got what I came for—the chance to leave here sane. So you can take that goddamn diploma, ram it, and rotate it!" Lips pursed, hands clasped atop her desk, Dean Morton's watery, pale blue-eyed gaze ushered me from her office.

I was still smoldering when Genette brought me a Sunday *New York Times* with a guest column by none other than Ed Wall, our former Dean of Admissions. She might as well have squirted kerosene on an open fire. He had been gone more than a year, but he was the guy who had tricked me out to the Land of the White People and then left me stranded while he went traipsing off to spray other unsuspecting black children with his empty promises. His smarmy milquetoast liberalism oozed through his *Times* op ed piece.

I whipped off a letter to him calling him a "fucking carpetbagger." He promptly responded with a letter thanking me for writing and offering his "listening ear." I scrawled my response with a thick red marker in the margins of his note, detailing which organ he should use to

perform a sexual act on his listening ear. Abby and Genette wrestled it away from me to keep me from mailing it.

Greater than the miracle of making it to graduation was the fact that I had done it without committing murder, mayhem, or other bodily harm. So, as the rest of the Class of 1971 giddily prepared to walk down the aisle in early June, I fled Babylon by plane. A few months later, my diploma arrived by mail. By then, I had already started law school.

EPILOGUE

The Confession

Dallas, Texas, 8 October 2003, Café Brazil. All that separates Kollen and me are thirty-three years and Maxine Hong Kingston who is sitting between us at a restaurant table. An hour earlier, Maxine and Gary, my husband, wrapped up his two-hour interview of her before a live radio audience.

Although more than three decades have passed since I saw Kolleen, we've been talking for the past two years. It was the day after Thanksgiving in 2001 that I called Kolleen out of the blue to ask her if she remembered why we split up as freshmen roommates and why I had decided to stop speaking to her in the spring of 1968. She remembered. And just like when we did when we first met face-to-face as college roommates in the fall of 1967, in the fall of 2001, we talked and talked and kept talking.

Kolleen's cousin's Texas wedding is what has brought my ex-roommate to the state and Maxine Hong Kingston is what brought her to Dallas. Turns out Maxine is one of Kolleen's favorite writers and, like the rest of us around the table, Kolleen is giving Maxine her undivided attention.

The restaurant's low light matches our conversation's soft murmurs. We take turns speaking of loss, connections, resistance, sorrow, and redemption. At the end of a long exposition, Maxine suddenly sags against the cushions, then pops forward to push a saucer towards me. "Here, eat," she urges, patting my hand and motioning towards the three blanched snow peas sprinkled with soy sauce. Prodded by her handlers a short while later, Maxine retires for the evening and Kolleen and I move to Café Brazil, an all-night restaurant alongside Interstate 75. Beneath harsh overhead lights backed up by bland but bottomless cups of freshly brewed coffee, our talk

quickly turns confessional. In the wee hours of the morning, with Kolleen reporting, I'm getting news I can use if it is coming thirty years late.

“You know, I was in academic trouble just like you, but I was so intimidated by you because you were so darn smart. I'm ashamed to admit that I got pleasure from seeing you struggle.”

Kolleen had been a music Conservatory student, a “Connie” with courses slanted slightly more towards music than academics. Some of our classmates snubbed “Connies,” but it hadn't occurred to me to be one of them. I saw the intensity with which Kolleen threw herself into practice and studying and I assumed her grades matched her effort. Faced with her confession, I am surprised at my relief. I always felt like some folks around me found succor in my despair. So, guess I wasn't crazy after all.

Ten and a half hours later when it is well past daybreak, we are still pinned to the hard-backed chairs. With efficiency honed by great urgency, Kollen and I have excavated our way back to childhood, unearthing astonishing parallels en route. Both sickly as young children—we had “heart trouble”—we nevertheless grew up determined to see the world. With a keen sense of justice and fair play, we did not doubt that we could make things be the way we thought they should be. Compassion and empathy had set us on our collision course and they have brought us full circle.

As our gut-spilling juggernaut winds down, I am deep in calm, peaceful space. Though I am certain this is what forgiveness feels like, I no longer know who is forgiving whom for what.

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In response to an invitation, I submitted an essay for a commemorative issue of a widely-circulated national magazine, aptly-titled *1968: The Year that Rocked Our World*. I wrote about Kolleen and me, our fractured relationship and our reconciliation. As often happens in the world

of publishing, what I submitted is not what was published. The following are two versions of the same story.

~ ~ ~

One Story: Two Versions

“1968”

(Version 1 as submitted)

When I heard Dr. King had been murdered, I was 18, a Negro girl from Charlotte, NC, trying desperately to make sense of my place on the campus of an all-white tiny college in an all-white town in startlingly white Wisconsin. I cried so hard as I staggered back to my dorm room that I don't even remember how I got there. I walked in wailing. My white roommate was at her desk studying. Swollen with sorrow, I asked her to come with me to the candlelight vigil. She said no, she had to study for exams, then bent back over her books. I stood there, stunned and disbelieving. I went to the candlelight vigil and I never spoke to her again.

We kept living in the same room, but day after day, I looked right through her. I turned her into vapor. Finally, she came undone and moved out.

Thirty three years later, I was working on my memoir, but somehow couldn't remember anything about why my roommate and I had split up before school ended. So I tracked her down and, out of the blue, called her up. The part of the story about her refusal that dreadful night is what made things slide back into view because, as she spoke, I remembered.

Then she told me something else that explained my life and hers: “That night—what I said, the look on your face—all of it has informed every day of the rest of my life. I have three adult children. They all know this story by heart.”

On April 4, 1968, I learned there is an abyss of racial trauma that can swallow me without warning, and that even whites who claim to be my friends will watch me go under and calmly turn back to what they were doing. To stay alive, I learned to make those white folks disappear. But to keep living, I have spent my life trying to understand such callous disregard, such sublime oblivion, those things that are to me the essence of whiteness.

I have spent my life trying to drag white folks to their own racial consciousness and to their conscience. It happened once, thirty-three years ago. Maybe it can happen again.

~ ~ ~

“1968”
(Version 2 as published)²⁷

BERNESTINE SINGLEY, 59 *Lawyer, writer. When I heard Dr. King had been murdered, I was 18, a Negro girl from Charlotte, North Carolina, trying desperately to make sense of my place on the campus of a tiny, white Wisconsin college. I cried so hard as I staggered to my dorm room that I don't even remember how I got there. I walked in wailing. My white roommate was at her desk studying, and I asked her to come with me to the candlelight vigil. She said no, she had to study for exams. Then she bent back over her books. I stood there, stunned and disbelieving.*

I never spoke to her again.

We kept living in the same room, but day after day I looked right through her until finally she moved out. Ironically, though that day marked the beginning of what became a decades-long habit—making callous white people disappear—I have spent far more time trying to drag them into racial consciousness, to get them to step up and do their own work around race.

*—Bernestine Singley is the editor of *When Race Becomes Real: Black and White Writers Confront Their Personal Histories* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).*

~ ~ ~

What I offered as a story of racial healing was published as one stuck in racial trauma. As the person who lived the experience and who chose to share it, I cannot let the published version stand as the defining narrative. The amputated story—Version 2—ran in the March/April 2008 issue of the magazine, but the whole story and, therefore, *my* story is Version 1. That is story that must be told.

Ironically, the March/April 2008 issue that contains my edited essay won the 2009 National Magazine Award, the highest honor the industry bestows. It was the first time in the magazine's 50-year history that it had been so honored.

For that reason and for countless others, I am taking this opportunity to correct the record.

¹ We arrived on campus in 1967 just as “Negro” was becoming “Afro-American,” a term which was quickly replaced by “black” by the early 1970s, ushered in by James Brown’s anthem “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud.” Twenty years later, “African American” pulled to the front as the preferred term of racial identification. It was eventually joined by “Africans in the Diaspora,” “people of color,” and countless other terms that now form a range of acceptable racial and ethnic identifiers. Although I use all of these terms interchangeably in speaking and writing, for the remainder of this manuscript, “black” encompasses all of the foregoing.

² <http://www.lawrence.edu/library/archives/history.shtml>, accessed December 1, 2005.

³ Frazier, E. Franklin, *BLACK BOURGEOISIE* (1957).

⁴ Spanx or “body-shapers” in 21st century jargon.

⁵ Singley, Bernestine, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” *circa* December 1967, Letters to the Editor, *Charlotte Observer* or *Charlotte News*.

⁶ Charles W. Cherry II explains why. I set my numerical standard for my grade point average with my first year grades. By flunking classes my first year, my grade point average (GPA) took a nosedive. So, for the next three years, I was fighting nearly impossible odds to significantly raise it by senior year. Likewise, if had aced my first year classes because, as Cherry writes, “you have to really work hard to flunk out.” Why? “Because mathematically, your GPA is weighted toward your freshman year... The more classes you take, the harder it is for your GPA to be affected, either up or down, by your grades in the future.” *EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE: THE BLACK STUDENT’S GUIDE TO ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE* (Ft. Lauderdale: International Scholastic Press, 1993), p. 56-57.

⁷ Near the end of my first year in law school in 1972, Dave, in his first year of medical school, hanged himself.

⁸ Brown, Elaine, *TASTE OF POWER: A BLACK WOMAN’S STORY* (Anchor Books 1993).

⁹ See *EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE: THE BLACK STUDENT’S GUIDE TO ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE*, p. 56-57.

¹⁰ “Four Kent State Students Killed by Troops,” by John Kifner, *New York Times*, May 5, 1970, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0504.html>, accessed 27 December 2005. Meanwhile, the hospital reported that six other students had been treated for gunshot wounds. Three were reported in critical condition and three in fair condition. Two students with superficial wounds were treated and released. A comprehensive database devoted to the Kent State shootings is at <http://dept.kent.edu/may4/>.

¹¹ Website of Jackson State University, <http://www.jsums.edu/gibbs.htm> ;

http://www.may41970.com/Jackson%20State/jackson_state_may_1970.htm

¹² *La plus ça changent, la plus ça ne changent pas*. French for, “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

¹³ At the end of January 1968 during an agreed cease-fire, the North Vietnamese launched a major offensive during the traditional Vietnamese New Year—*Tet*—celebration. Many consider these events and media coverage of them to be the point at which American citizens turned against the Vietnam War *en masse*.

¹⁴ Small, Geoff (2008-07-09). “Remembering the Black Power protest”. *The Guardian*. Retrieved 2010-10-13.

¹⁵ Apparently, the FBI and COINTELPRO shared my belief, though with far more nefarious consequences. In what would turn out to be protracted litigation, the Alliance filed suit against the City of Chicago, the FBI, and various other government organizations for illegal wiretapping and other domestic surveillance tactics aimed at harassing and suppressing their civil rights activities. The Alliance won. See Lim, Esther, Rhodes, Jonathan and Schorr, Jacob Schorr, “Chicago Red Squad: A Case Study of *Alliance to End Repression v. City of Chicago*,” [http://www.kentlaw.edu/faculty/rstaudt/classes/2007PublicInterestLaw/studentdocs2007/Red_Squad_Case_Study-Lim, Rhodes, Schorr.doc](http://www.kentlaw.edu/faculty/rstaudt/classes/2007PublicInterestLaw/studentdocs2007/Red_Squad_Case_Study-Lim,_Rhodes,_Schorr.doc)

¹⁶ Schorsch, III, Albert “Uncommon Women and Others: Memoirs and Letters from Radical Catholics at Friendship House (Friendship House May 1990). “Betty Plank” is mentioned here. And while I’m not certain this is “my” Betty Plank, this description fits her perfectly. Accessed 15 Oct 2010.

<http://tigger.uic.edu/~schorsch/php/Fhhist3.htm>. And so does this book title—GOOD HEARTS: CATHOLIC SISTERS IN CHICAGO’S PAST—where “Betty Plank” is referenced as the source of a 1962 interview. Hoy, Suellen M. (University of Illinois Press 2006), p. 138. http://www.amazon.com/Good-Hearts-Catholic-Sisters-Chicagos/dp/0252073010/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1287195845&sr=1-1#reader_0252073010.

Accessed 15 Oct 2010. I never knew whether Betty was a nun or not. She didn’t wear a habit and I never asked.

¹⁷ [http://www.kentlaw.edu/faculty/rstaudt/classes/2007PublicInterestLaw/studentdocs2007/Red_Squad_Case_Study-Lim, Rhodes, Schorr.doc](http://www.kentlaw.edu/faculty/rstaudt/classes/2007PublicInterestLaw/studentdocs2007/Red_Squad_Case_Study-Lim,_Rhodes,_Schorr.doc)

¹⁸ Bud Schultz & Ruth Schultz, *The Price of Dissent: Testimonies to Political Repression in America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) p. 403.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 221.

²¹ Ibid., p. 220-221.

²² Ibid., p. 403.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/notorious_murders/mass/whitman/index_1.html accessed 22 Oct 2010.

²⁶ *Dr. Robert MacNeish, Associate Superintendent of the Baltimore Public Schools (Ret.)* ©. 1993. Reprinted with permission.

²⁷ http://www.aarp.org/politics-society/history/info-03-2008/1968_feature_article_trauma.html,

1968: The Year that Rocked Our World, 25 March 2008, *AARP Magazine*. The amputated Version 2 turns a story of racial healing into one stuck in racial trauma while Version 1 is the real story, the whole story, and the story I believe is most worth telling. I chose to accept the magazine's butchered Version 2 because I wanted my piece to be included in its issue commemorating the historic events of 1968. Ironically, that issue went on to win the *2009 National Magazine Award*, the highest honor the industry bestows, making it the first time in *AARP Magazine's* 50-year history that it had been so honored.