

The Deep End: A Journey of Faith

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Abstract

This paper is an expansion of papers written in my MFA program's creative non-fiction writing class and workshop. In English 600: Editing, Layout, and Publishing, the class wrote a paper to document our faith journey and our approach to understanding ourselves and our world view based on our religious indoctrination. This paper was 10-15 pages long and had a title page, a table of contents, an acknowledgement page, and a dedication page.

After writing this paper, I began to consider the possibility of writing a longer work that would dig deeper into the real essence of my faith walk. It would take a lot more than 10-15 pages for me to provide a more detailed story. Therefore, this thesis is a longer version of that paper. Though it may cover some of the same issues, there is more depth and clarity. It is both a literary work and a testimony of my faith.

Dedication

To the aspiring writer who has learned things along the way and has a strong desire to share and enlighten others. Don't be afraid to impart your wisdom to the world, and do not be afraid to share your love, faith, and kindness with them as well.

“And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened” (Daniel 10:19).

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all the memoirists whose work I read in preparation of writing this paper. Each memoir was unique, but all told a remarkable story. Some were like autobiographies, but all were revealing and entertaining. Though I did not write this paper as entertainment, there are sections that may be more fun to read than others.

I want to thank all those who have contributed memories to this memoir. Without the addition of others in our lives, what would we have to write about? While it is true that I have shared many stories, memories, and occurrences, there was simply not room for everything. Therefore, there are stories that will not appear in this paper.

Some were omitted in the interest of brevity, and some were omitted in the interest of good taste. Unfortunately, not all of life is pleasant. We have heard that we must take the bitter with the sweet, and that is what I attempted to do.

I also want to thank my instructors at Liberty University for teaching the craft elements that appear in this paper. While it is true that no one can teach a writer how to write, it is also true that we can show writers what well-written prose looks like and make suggestions for how they might improve. I was very fortunate in this regard. My instructors showed me what I needed to know.

The paper you will read is the result of my own experiences being prepared with methods I learned in my MFA program. Taking the classes was one of the best things I could have done for my writing career. I hope, by the time you are finished, you agree.

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The Deep End: A Journey of Faith

Introduction

“A memoir is a narrative, written from the perspective of the author, about an important part of their life” (Dukes). Some focus on the past. Some show how the past influences the present. But no two memoirs are alike. Many “memoirs can vary enormously in tone and content” (Blakeley). Some may resemble an autobiography, which spans an author’s entire life. I have chosen to write *The Deep End: A Journey of Faith* as a memoir focused on my strict Christian upbringing, my faith journey, and my day-to-day struggles for survival.

There are many ways to write a memoir, and each has its advantages and disadvantages. Writing a memoir requires reflection and honesty. “Often, memoirs detail particularly unusual, challenging, or fascinating aspects of a person's life. The term "memoir" comes from the French *mémoire*, which means "reminiscence" or "memory" (Blakeley). People who write memoirs are memoirists. Their carefully crafted stories are memories they share with the world.

We are all unique. We are not alike. What distinguishes us from others could be a lifestyle, a religion, a relationship, a fear, an illness, a dream, or a nightmare. However, we all dream the same dreams. We want to be happy, to be successful, and to be loved. Some want to be rich and famous. Some just want to be free. Shakespeare states, “We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.173-5). However, God is the one who holds to the key to our futures, and He always gets the final say.

So, why a memoir? Why not a different type of work? Kephart tells us that a memoir is not “a chronological, thematically tone-deaf recitation of everything remembered. That’s autobiography” (6). It is also not a “trumped-up, fantastical idea of what an interesting life might have been *if only*. A web of lies. A smudge. A mockery of reality. There is a separate (even

equal) category for such things. It goes by the name of fiction” (Kephart 6). Why would I produce a work of fiction about my own life and call it a memoir?

Instead, I’ll share authentic stories, true stories, that I hope will enlighten and inspire others. While it is impossible to remember every detail, I’ll do my best to recreate genuine memories for my readers. Kephart says if you want to write true memoir, “you need to set caterwauling narcissism to the side. You need to soften your stance. You need to work through the explosives—anger, aggrandizement, injustice, misfortune, despair, fumes—toward mercy” (8). In other words, you need to just write. Put the pen to paper and share what is in your heart.

There are many reasons why people want to share their experiences. Famous people want to explain or clear the air. The not-so-famous just want to share. I am not rich or famous, but I’ve experienced my fair share of life’s ups and downs. Every person who has ever lived has a story to tell. Some have more than one. I don’t want to bore you with my life’s stories, nor do I want you to assume that my life is more important or interesting than anyone else’s. Most days I feel my life has purpose and meaning. Some days I am not so sure.

I am always hoping for the best but bracing myself for the worst. Like most people, I have good days and bad days, days that I don’t know where I’m going, and days I see the road very clearly in front of me. Most days I am optimistic and pleasant. Other days I struggle with bitterness and despair. Though I have been severely disappointed in life, I have also been greatly blessed. We never know what hand we will be dealt next, so I am grateful for the things I have and constantly hope and pray that my plans and dreams for the future come true.

When I was a young girl, I couldn’t wait to grow up. I wanted to wear stylish clothes, dab on lipstick, don high heels, go on dates, and stay out late at night. In fact, I spent most of my childhood, planning my adulthood. Childhood was just a weigh station, a checkpoint, an

awkward, painful period of my life that I had to endure to get to my *real* life. So, I focused on my adult dreams, made a bucket-list of hopes and expectations, and bided my time. I also wanted to know how women lived and survived, how they handled ambition, careers, love, sex, marriage, and other issues that are important to young women.

Though I could have asked my mother, I didn't think she would have been best. Most mothers have definite, idealistic roles they want their daughters to fill. I knew most of my plans would not agree with hers. There were other things she wouldn't like either. Telling her that I sometimes hated my life, that I wanted to run away, or that I was afraid of the future would've made her feel guilty, as if she had not prepared me for life.

Also, there would have been disagreements about life choices and careers. I might want to be flight attendant, but my mother might want me to become a librarian or a schoolteacher. Though I might want to be single, my mother might want me to marry, have five children, and become a housewife, which was my worst nightmare. I should not blame my mother for not being ambitious for me because her choices would have been safe, practical, and wholesome. I know this as sure as I know the sun will rise the next morning.

So, instead of talking to our mothers, most women, like me, read racy novels, talk to their best friends, watch romantic movies, and read the biographies of women who have lived before them. We dream spectacular dreams and are glad we have others to share them with. Having friends to share hopes, aspirations, and fears with can be a great blessing. I know this because I don't have many friends now, and I miss that type of intimacy. Loneliness can be painful.

So, we scribble in diaries and journals. At times, they are our best friends, and in case you are wondering, this is how some of us become writers. We also become avid readers. My favorite books are works of fiction, but memorable non-fiction books grace my shelves, too. In

middle school, in addition to reading Nancy Drew novels and comic books, I gobbled up the biographies of women like Amelia Earhart, Bessie Coleman, Florence Nightingale, Clara Barton, Betsy Ross, and many more. These books filled my adolescent mind with notions about a life of excitement, romance, and adventure.

It was around this time I decided to become a writer. I did not know how a person went about becoming a writer. I only knew that I wanted to share my thoughts, feelings, and ideas via the written word. I figured that if those famous women became pilots, nurses, and American heroes, I could lead a fulfilling life, too. I could share my passions, my hopes, and dreams. I hoped that one day I might write something that could change lives or maybe I'd just have the courage to write about things that were already in my heart.

There were times I wished I was a pilot who flew all over the world and visited many countries, peoples, and cultures. Many of the places I wanted to visit were in Central and South America, places like Costa Rica, Panama, Argentina, and Brazil. I also wanted to visit Mexico, to see the pyramids, the ancient ruins of the Aztecs, Mayas, and other Native American groups, also to see the bullfights, the cliff divers, and the amazing beaches.

I wanted to travel to the Caribbean, to photograph waterfalls and beaches in Jamaica, to collect black coral in the Caymans, to visit the Bahamas, Aruba, Puerto Rico, and hopefully, one day Cuba. I also dreamt about Kenya and Tanzania, visiting African game preserves on safari, and photographing African wildlife. There was also the Sphinx in Egypt and the pyramids. I knew I could probably sail to many of these places, but airplane trips seemed more exciting.

I could see the entire earth from the air. I also realized that I could see a great deal from big, tall mountains, like Mt. Everest, Mt. Kilimanjaro, and Mt. Fuji. On my travels to Europe, I could experience the Swiss Alps, Mt. Blanc, and Mt. Etna. The world is as a vast and beautiful

place, and I realized that if I became a pilot, I could fly through the sky, soar above mountains, and see just about anything I desired.

Despite my severe case of wanderlust, I also wanted to become a nurse. I got my chance when I was in the Army. I nursed wounded men and worked in obstetrics. I once wanted to become a pediatrician, to ease the pain and suffering of little children and to make doctor visits more pleasant. I also thought of becoming a child psychologist, to discover why some children grew up to be confident and successful and others were shy, conflicted, and self-conscious. I wondered if a child's upbringing could be responsible or if it was genetic or even spiritual.

The only way to find out was to study psychology and to study children and the complexity of their lives. I gave up the idea when I met a former family therapist who told me that counseling children made him feel helpless. He could not solve their problems. He could not take away their pain. He could only sit and listen. Eventually, he gave up his practice, attended law school and became a truly sensational attorney. But he admitted that he missed talking to his patients and wondered how they were doing without him.

Long before I thought of writing a thesis or a memoir, I read the memoirs of present-day women, too. I read *Becoming* by Michelle Obama and *First Lady of Plains* by Rosalynn Carter. Both books told how these women went from being ordinary wives and mothers to First Lady of the United States. The situations they endured were sometimes painful to read, but I appreciated their honesty. I'd rather know the truth than to be fed a pack of lies.

Several years ago, I read *The Paris Wife* by Paula McLain, about Ernest Hemingway, his first wife Hadley Richardson, and their life in Paris. Hemingway, the bestselling author of *Death in the Afternoon*, is from my home state, Illinois. I also read *The Aviator's Wife* by Melanie Benjamin, about Anne Morrow Lindbergh, the wife of aviator Charles Lindbergh, who was a

writer, a pilot, a graduate of Smith College, who helped her husband with many of his pioneering efforts in aviation.

The Second Mrs. Astor: A Heartbreaking Historic Novel of the Titanic by Shana Abe, is a haunting story about the life of Madeline Astor before and after the death of John Jacob Astor onboard the *Titanic*. The book describes the scandal that arose when she married Astor, who was nearly thirty years her senior, and the pain and suffering she endured upon learning of his death. Reading the book about the tragedy of the sinking of the famed luxury liner, reminded me of how truly fragile and precious life can be.

My grandmother's mother told her the story of *Titanic*, saying the orchestra was playing "Nearer My God to Thee" as the ship sank into the ocean. This was illustrated very clearly in the movie by James Cameron. What a tragedy! *Titanic* soon became my favorite movie. I have seen it more times than I can count. Therefore, I eagerly devoured this book about the Astors. I had read *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* years before.

In addition, I read many other biographies and memoirs, some by actresses, singers, and famous models. Though I will always love fiction, I enjoy biography and history, too. Stories about how people live, how they cope with adversity, how they survive challenges, and learn to adjust, are stories I love to read. Memoirs and biographies of women, whether famous or not, have made a profound impact on my life.

Each story is like a testimony, a retelling of issues that have shaped lives. It has been said that every story, whether fiction or non-fiction, stems from something that has happened in the author's life, whether it was to him or to someone he knows. In that sense, every book is autobiographical or has biographical elements. "Every conversation is a story, and every story is an adventure, and every adventure takes me out of my small life into a larger one, and I love

that” (Gerard viii). No two stories are identical. This is why I love reading books. Each story introduces me to new characters and welcomes me into their world.

Another book that inspired me to write a memoir was a somewhat autobiographical book entitled *Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography* by Richard B. Patterson. In the book, he tells us how important it is to keep track of ourselves and our spiritual journey, not to take a moment or experience for granted because these experiences have all helped us along the way. He states, “Socrates said, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ What about the unexamined spiritual life? In *Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography*, we discover the answer” (25).

In addition to Patterson’s book, the book *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson was inspirational. Though the main character in this Pulitzer-prize winning novel was a fictitious preacher writing a memoir for his young son, I realized while reading it could be about anyone. We all have stories filled with insight and wisdom that we may wish to impart to our children when we realize we are dying. The fact that Robinson wrote several sequels is unique. When I heard that Ethan Hawke was all set to play the main character in the film by the same name, I joined Oprah’s Book Club, hoping to learn more.

Remembering Your Story: Creating Your Own Spiritual Autobiography by Richard Morgan is another book which influences Christian autobiography. If we think about it, most of the entire Bible is filled with stories about strong men and women of faith who usually overcame great obstacles while practicing their faith. We have read the stories of Abraham, Noah, Moses, Isaac, Joseph, Ruth, and Naomi, and certainly the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. None were solely written about themselves, but their stories have been told and retold for thousands of years. Several books I read deal with the fulfillment of dreams and coping with anxiety and disappointment.

In *The Secret of True Happiness* by Joyce Meyer, she states, “I am convinced one of the most important lessons we can ever learn is to choose to be happy every day of our lives as we look forward to the future” (viii). She says most people are so focused on the future that they forget to enjoy the present. That is sort of like seeking the end of a journey rather than smelling the roses along the way. Enjoying the journey is an important part of taking the trip.

Reading many different biographies gave me a desire to tell my own story. The fact that some authors write their own stories is impressive because how a person tells his own story reveals how he *sees* his story and how he sees himself within that story. Is he the villain? Is he the victim? Is he the hero, survivor, or victor? I am hoping that my thesis will present a realistic picture of my life, where I may be cast in all those roles at different times. Above all, I aim to tell the truth creatively “because academic writing is a very creative activity” (Oliver 4).

The book that finally convinced me to pen a memoir was Rosalind Goforth’s *How I Know God Answers Prayer*. The book is an autobiographical account of what Goforth and her husband endured on the missionary trail in Asia with their guides and children. From the title, we know the book deals with faith and receiving answers to prayers. We read this book in my English 600 class at Liberty University. All the students were impressed with her story.

The book was truly inspirational and hard to put down. I found myself reading far into the night, wondering how many people had read her book and why no one had ever told me about it before then. Though the book was written many years ago, Goforth’s faith rings as loud and clear as a bell. This is true for most of the other memoirs and biographies I read though each had a different tone, and not all wrote about their Christian lives.

This did not make their stories any less compelling. Some wrote about their lives in general. Some shared how their faith helped them endure life’s challenges. About praying and

receiving answers to prayer, Goforth states, “the most blessed element of this asking and receiving from God is the subsequent strengthening of faith that comes when a definite request has been granted. What can be more helpful and inspiring than a ringing testimony of what God has done?” (2). Her words can inspire people both with faith and without faith.

When I was younger, I had many phobias and fears. Along with the normal fears of snakes, wild animals, and fire, I was afraid of spiders, cats, dogs, loud noises, clowns, crowds of people, and sleeping in the dark. Painfully shy, I also hated to answer in class and never raised my hand. I would sit way in the back, hoping the teacher would never call on me, but of course, he/she always did, and though I didn’t always have the right answer, somehow, I survived.

Another issue was public speaking. Holding class offices, I always had to make speeches, and I died a million deaths each time I faced an audience, fearing I’d either forget my speech or fall flat on my face. None of those things happened, and I learned that making a speech really isn’t that bad. It all depends on your audience and the topic of your speech. I went on to write speeches for many of my classmates who ran for office. I also won debates, oral essay competitions, and spelling contests.

I am still shy at times, which is why I enjoy reading stories about other women, wondering how they overcame their difficulties, coped with adversity, and conquered their fears. Were they shy, too? Were they afraid to answer in class? Were they one of the cool kids in high school? Or were they the wallflowers at a dance? Had they ever been the class clown, the nerd, or misfit? We have all been outsiders at times, and we all learned how to cope. I coped by putting my thoughts on paper, sharing my feelings in stories, poems, and essays.

I guess, you are probably wondering what a shy, self-conscious woman like me would say in a memoir. Believe it or not—quite a bit. After years of attending college, working

different jobs, serving in the military, marrying, having children, getting divorced, traveling the world, and dating men who were rich, famous, and perfectly ordinary, I have a lot to say. Life sometimes challenges us, and my life has been challenged in a lot of ways.

Though a book about the life of a famous person would make an interesting read, after reading so many memoirs, I realize that *anyone's* story could be entertaining if it is well-written. Stein states, "The lifelong habit of writing traditional non-fiction, passing on information, is curable through attention to the fiction writer's primary job, which is creating *an emotional experience for the reader*" (8). Though my memoir is a true story, I am hoping it will provide a compelling, emotional experience for my reader.

My story is more of a memoir than an autobiography. I share experiences from my childhood and adulthood. The purpose is to show how my faith in God helped when facing adversity. As I said before, I will try not to bore you with my life's details. I will only discuss those that have special meaning and that have helped me to grow. As I present this autobiographical piece, I hope to enlighten and inspire the reader. I hope students and others appreciate my story and feel encouraged to share their own.

The Craft Element of Plot

We've all heard the expression "The plot thickens" (Villiers) when the situation in a play, novel, or short story becomes more puzzling and complicated. The plot of a creative or literary work is considered one of the most important craft elements in the story. The plot is essentially what the story is about. It may be simple, or it may be complex. What matters most is engaging the reader, keeping him turning pages, and reading far into the night. The plot is just as important in a work of fiction as it is in a work of non-fiction, like a memoir or autobiography, and a writer may use a variety of methods to create plots for their stories. Every story has a plot,

plan, or scheme. To write a great memoir, writers should read memoirs written by others. They should also read articles that give instruction on the best methods of preparation.

Each memoir is different. No two are like. There is no definite structure for a memoir, like there is for a novel. However, every memoir should have *some* type of structure. So, “if there is a dividing line between writing good memoir and writing bad memoir – and there is – it’s the structure brought to the tale. Build a solid structure from the start and no one will stumble into – or around – the parts of your story” (Smith).

Writers of memoirs must decide where to begin their story. Should they begin in childhood, with an event, like a birthday party, an illness, an accident, or other occurrence? Should they start in adulthood, with an event like a wedding, a vacation, or a first love? Where a memoirist begins sets the tone for the entire story. If they begin in the wrong place, and do not open well, the story may be difficult to follow and boring to read.

Like most fiction writers, memoirists should plan, outline, and think things through. They should begin with a time that has a certain significance for them, for instance, a special event. I began my first novel, *Lunch with Cassie*, on my protagonist’s wedding day, because it is a very exciting time for most women, and there were a lot of unusual happenings for my protagonist on that day. It is not written as a memoir, so I could have begun in another place. With fiction, it doesn’t really matter.

A writer may begin at the beginning, the middle, or the end. It all depends on how they tell their story. Some authors start at the beginning and take the reader all the way through to the end. Some writers start at or near the end and take the reader back to the beginning. Along the way, the main character may have intermittent flashbacks, or the omniscient narrator (the author) may provide backstory about the characters and plot. Some writers begin with a prologue, which

sets the scene for the story to come. Some just jump right in. Either way, the fiction writer is flexible.

After reading the first chapter of *Lunch with Cassie*, the reader knows that Cassie's wedding to Jeff Gordon will not be a stroll in the park. In just a few pages, you meet the heroine, the hero, the love interest, and the villain and have made decisions about who they are and what role they will play in this drama. By the end of the story, you meet the same characters in a different way because they have all changed. Most readers want to see the protagonists achieve their objectives, to conquer their fears, and to ride off into the sunset, happier than they were.

The same pattern may be used in a memoir. The authors are the heroes or heroines of their own stories, and they introduce us to the major players in their lives in just a few pages. They describe their triumphs, fears, strengths, weaknesses, motivations, and dreams. Kephart says, "Real memoirists open themselves to self-discovery and, in the process, make themselves vulnerable—not just to the world but also to themselves. They yearn, and they are yearned with. They declare a want to know. They seek out loud" (8).

When I structured my memoir, I realized the more details I added to my story, the more I was willing to reveal. I wrote several of the stories in my creative non-fiction-writing class. Each story brought me closer to a realization. Each realization helped me understand my journey and provided kernels of wisdom. Therefore, in order to give readers an authentic experience, memoirists should choose passages that have a real purpose.

I did a lot of soul-searching when I wrote *Lunch with Cassie*. If it is true that all novels are autobiographical, then without realizing it, I included bits and pieces of my own life in my fiction writing, too. I attributed my political beliefs, Biblical perspectives, and personal likes and dislikes to my main character: Cassandra Reynolds. I also attributed some of my phobias,

illnesses, and fears to her. She and I loved the same foods and even had friends with the same first name. I've heard this is true for many first-time novelists.

We can learn a great deal about writing a memoir by reading a novel. In "How to Write Your Memoir Like a Novel," Joe Bunting tells us that there are four things most readers want in a memoir. Readers want a memoir that: 1. Tells an entertaining, engaging story; 2. Provides life lessons you can apply to your own life, 3. Gives a different perspective on life, and the world, and is 4, Funny and/or emotionally moving (Bunting). Bunting goes on to say that both novelists and memoirists are trying to accomplish the same goal, which is to tell an interesting story.

While novelists may change plots anytime they may want to, memoirists must tell the truth. It is how they tell the truth that makes for an interesting read. Bunting says the best way to write a memoir is not to begin with a day-to-day recitation of your life but to start with a special day or event. Then include a lesson that was learned from that event. It can be painful, funny, or sad, but it needs to be *real*. The reader should *feel* something when reading.

Writing is cathartic because the writer puts himself and his emotions in his craft. He/she is often reliving an authentic experience. Most authors draw on these emotions when they plot their novels. Though their characters may have different names and lifestyles, they all have elements of the writer within their characterizations.

The Plotter, the Pantser, and the Tweener

To make sure all the pieces of their story fit together well, some writers become excellent plotters and deliver their stories in three acts. "The three-act structure comes from drama and is used extensively in film" (Bell 31). A plotter creates an outline for the major events in the story, and they may write and revise this outline several times until they get it right. The plots may be in numerical order, each representing a major happening or occurrence in the

timeline. The plot outline for a novel or play can be very detailed and include characters, actions, and motivations. The same is true for a screenplay. Laying out each scene so the filmmaker or publisher can follow the story is a key job for writers.

If the outline is unsatisfactory, the writer does not achieve his goal for the screenplay, and/or if the parts don't fit together, there is something wrong with the plot. Some plotting is looser than others, and some work better onscreen than off. To simplify things, the "plot is about a Lead character who has an objective, something crucial to his well-being. The major portion of plot is the confrontation with the opposition, a series of battles over the objective. This is resolved in a knockout ending" (Bell 32). The better the writing, the better plotted the story.

Another way of writing a novel is to be a Pantser. A Pantser, as the name seems to imply, is a writer who flies by the seat of his pants when he writes. He does not plan, does not outline, and does not know where he is going. He may do a bit of thinking, brainstorming, and daydreaming, and then he starts to write. Sometimes he creates characters, scenes, and dialogues, and tries to shape them into a story. Or he starts with a main character, called a protagonist, who is the Lead in the story. Then he decides what he wants to do with that character.

He may consider several scenarios before making a choice. If he is an experienced writer, this can happen in the first few pages. If he is inexperienced, it may take longer. There is often a contest between the importance of the plot and the characters within that plot. Weiland says, "Readers want thrilling, mind-tingling plots. They want to be wowed by the intricacies and the suspense. As a result, we can sometimes lose sight of the fact that plot is nothing without character. No character, no plot" (*Crafting Unforgettable Characters* 1). The plot may be completely riveting, but it is still imperative to choose the right characters to act out that plot. It's sort of what casting directors do when choosing actors for a play or film.

Ideally, in a work of fiction, the opening or beginning should introduce us to the protagonist, the story's main character, and provide tension. Something should be happening. We should also be given the setting or location. There should be action, not just scenery and character depictions. If a story stalls right after the opening, meaning the story does not flow well, the writer needs to work on his set-up. The set-up is how the opening scene is presented. There are several methods of doing this, and some work better than others. Les Edgerton states, "The simple truth is that if your beginning doesn't do the job it needs to, the rest of the story most likely won't be read by the agent or editor or publisher you submit it to" (1).

Sometimes the Pantser adds supporting characters: friends, family, neighbors, co-workers, and he creates a setting, but none of this is really planned. It just sort of comes to the writer while he is writing. The details fall into place as the writer commits more to the story. Everything significant starts with the protagonist and who and what matters in his/her life. In addition to the protagonist, there is often an antagonist, depending on the plot.

The antagonist is the enemy of the protagonist or simply the opposition. The antagonist in a story could be a friend, relative, neighbor, coworker, or even a love interest. It could also be a disease or a political situation. The antagonist is what or who keeps the protagonist on track. The antagonist's job is to try to stop, harm, thwart or obstruct the plans of the protagonist. Though most readers applaud and cheer for the protagonist throughout the story, without the antagonist, the story wouldn't have much momentum.

Another type of writer is a Tweener. This writer is between a Plotter and a Pantser. You could say they do a little bit of both. They plot a little and they fly by the seat of their pants a little. They may have a certain plan in mind, but it is loose at best. As they write, they may discover that the dialogue or the plot will not work out as they planned, and they may need to

start over again. This can be done on paper or in their heads. In some cases, they may realize they need to enlarge or expand the plot or that the character does not work well with the plot. He/she needs to be more or less than they imagined or created mentally. If that is the case, then they make corrections or alterations as they write, and that may or may not improve how they tell the story. The Tweener is more flexible than the Plotter and the Pantser. Tweeners spend time researching various details to support the protagonist or to explain the antagonist. Research, however, is important to all three.

By taking a writing class or enrolling in a program, such as my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program at Liberty University, most aspiring writers learn what they need to learn in order to write a story that may captivate an audience. I learned how to create a plot point outline in my first fiction-writing class. Then I used the same technique in my creative non-fiction writing class, and I continued to use it in my creative screenwriting class.

In each class, I jotted down the names of characters and actions and decided how they would play out. Though I had never plotted before, I found it helpful, and it saved me a lot of time. In addition to plotting on paper, I learned to plot in my mind. Both have helped me a great deal. Having used all three methods above, I can honestly say I prefer the Tweener. I like to plot a little on paper, plot a little in my mind, do both at the same time, and see what develops.

All the Above

When I wrote *Lunch with Cassie* in 2005, I had only taken one fiction-writing class in college and had not learned any real writing technique. In that class, we simply created our own stories and took turns reading a page or two to the entire class. After we read aloud, our classmates commented on our passages and asked a few questions. Then the instructor asked about our characters and made suggestions for our stories, including better descriptions, using

more active voice than passive voice, using more action verbs than passive verbs, adding more authentic dialogue, and showing more than telling. More on this later.

I started writing *Lunch with Cassie* in my head a few years before I entered college. Then I eventually wrote a first draft in a notebook, typed it, saved it to a disk, and lost the disk. Therefore, I had to start over. Because the characters were so firmly entrenched in my mind, I was able to do this just by memory. Once I finished writing, not having much confidence in my story-telling ability, I did not seek a publisher, nor did I pursue an agent. I told myself that I was just writing for fun. So, I self-published with a company that was used by a woman I worked with. And when I showed it to friends and family, I was surprised that it caught on so well.

The story about a young married woman who has a racy affair with a billionaire acquaintance of her husband's was surprisingly an even bigger hit with men than with women. The fact that the wife was married to the son of a preacher was probably what made it catch on. The forbidden is always irresistible. During a book-signing, I was asked about the plot. Why did I choose adultery? Why a May-December romance? I wasn't sure at the time.

However, now I would say that I wanted to write something out of the ordinary. I had not seen any books like mine on the shelves of any bookstore. As with most ideas that authors get, I had borrowed (only the adultery) from the misadventures of a former friend. The character was not based on her, just the loneliness and heartache that led to her affair, familiar themes in stories about unfaithful wives. There are many subplots in the novel, and I received emails and letters from some of my readers about those plots.

When my publisher suggested I go to Hollywood to pitch my book as a film project, I couldn't pack quickly enough. It was a very exciting time for me. During that weekend, I learned how to craft loglines and how to deliver one-minute pitches. I met studio executives, actors, and

other writers who were hoping to get their work produced, too. Soon, *Lunch with Cassie* was ordered by one of the studios and placed in a database. I waited patiently for it to be optioned and produced. In the meantime, I worked with an interested screenwriter.

After he got about a third of the way through the 456- page book, he said there was too much material and too many characters to adapt to a 125-page screenplay. He needed a project for a two-hour movie and felt my story would suffer if he omitted characters or subplots that were important. He suggested I find a producer for television shows and miniseries and gave me several names. I was disappointed that my book was not optioned, but I knew he was right. I wanted the book to be reproduced in the best form.

My mother had a stroke shortly after I returned from Hollywood and died a few days later. So, I put my Hollywood dreams on hold for a while. Eventually, I went back to teaching and writing. I've written five other books since then, but *Lunch with Cassie* is my favorite. I feel it is my best work thus far because it was first, and I spent more time setting it up. I believe most readers were intrigued by the plot, but some were drawn to my quirky protagonist.

Cassandra Reynolds is a daring photographer and U.S. Congressman's daughter who often winds up in hot water for taking the right photo at the wrong time. One of the first decisions I made was where to begin Cassie's story. I decided it should be on the day of her wedding to Jeff Gordon, the doctor and preacher's son, who saved her from being abducted by poachers. Though very simple, the opening paragraph reads as follows:

Cassandra Reynolds came slowly awake on the most important day of her life: her wedding day. Bright sunlight nearly blinded her view of the digital clock, so she kicked back the covers and reached for it on the nightstand. It was 9:05. She shivered with excitement and euphoria. Though she had a million things to do that day, she wanted a

cup of coffee first. Then she would luxuriate in a bubble bath and sit still for hair and make-up. (Henderson 3).

Not exactly scintillating, right? I wasn't sure how to begin, but I didn't want to overwhelm the reader with lots of dialogue and scenery. So, instead I put myself into the mind of a woman on her wedding day. I tried to remember myself on my *own* wedding day, but that was many years ago, and I couldn't remember all the details. Therefore, I created feelings of excitement, fear, and euphoria for Cassie, realizing that was probably how many brides feel. The second paragraph is more detailed and brings more tension to the opening:

Hopping out of bed, however, she felt absolutely and positively sick to the stomach, so she rushed to the bathroom to retch in the toilet bowl. Then she smoothed back her hair and promised herself that she wouldn't panic. A bad case of nerves just before getting married was not an unnatural occurrence. Her parents had invited important people from all over the world, and Jeff's large, extended family would be in full attendance. She would just have to pull herself together and try to get something in her stomach (3).

Most of the first chapter centers on Cassie's preparation and anticipation of a day that was a prelude to a life of joy and happiness with the man she loves. Though that was the original plan, we all know the best laid plans go awry. Marriages are not all made in Heaven. Cassie's story takes us on an exciting roller-coaster ride of adventure. *Kirkus* called my book "A big, crowded, frothy soap opera" (*Kirkus Reviews*). But what romance novel isn't?

Like actors on a stage, writers must deliver the proper lines, project proper emotions, and ensure the story flows smoothly and ends well. Beginnings are just as important as endings. They usually have things in common. By the end of the story, the protagonist should have changed in some way, or the writer has not done a good job. About beginnings it has been said, "The ideal

goals of an opening paragraph are: 1. To excite the reader's curiosity, preferably about a character or relationship; 2. To introduce a setting; 3. To lend resonance to the story" (Stein 16).

The beginning of *Lunch with Cassie* satisfies all three objectives. I divided the first chapter into two sections. The first part sees Cassie dress, arrive at the church in Maywood, Illinois, and head to a private room with her bridal party. Then receiving a cryptic message, she heads to the lower level of the church where she has a confrontation with Angela, Jeff's jealous and angry ex-girlfriend. After the argument, Angela slams out of the room, and the door gets stuck, trapping Cassie in the recreation room. By this time the wedding is about to begin. All the bridesmaids are in place. But where is Cassie? That is the end of Chapter One.

Chapters Two through Five give a little background about both characters and tell how Cassie and Jeff met and fell in love. We meet their families and friends, and we meet Angela, the jilted fiancée. In Chapter Six, we get up close and personal with the other man, Jonathan Hunter, the billionaire who is Jeff's brother-in-law's friend and the vintner for the wedding. At the end of this chapter, Jonathan plays the hero. He finds Cassie on the floor of the recreation room where she has fainted from the heat when she couldn't find a way out. He revives her in time for the wedding, but many things happen between the two of them before and after the ceremony. These are things Cassie tries to forget but that Jonathan refuses to allow.

When beginning a chapter, the writer should also consider the ending of the chapter. What will happen to the protagonist? What will the antagonist do? Where are they? Who else is there? The writer must never lose control of the story. It is easy to veer off course if distracted by other creative endeavors. However, the writer must consider the reader. What would the reader expect? You don't want to confuse or disorient them. Once you promise something, you should deliver. Each chapter should end with a bang, a cliffhanger, something to make the reader read

on. It is hard to regain a reader's interest once it is lost. So, here is where I set the stage for Cassie's inevitable romance and the tempestuous nature of the relationship moving forward.

Many people have asked why I created my first novel this way. Why not just a simple love story? Some have asked if the novel was autobiographical. A few asked how I created the plot. The truth is that I was a pantser and a tweener with most of the story. I had never heard of plotting on paper or the three-part structure until I attended Liberty University. However, once I learned how to plot and to use the three-part structure, I realized it was useful, especially for someone like me who had not received any formal instruction in writing fiction, or any type of writing for that matter. The book was my own invention.

It was like taking a dive off a steep cliff into the water, wondering if or when I would surface. I created the characters first and gave them all backstories. Then I created the setting and set up each scene. The main plot was always adultery. The only decisions I had to make were who Cassie's lover would be, how to begin the story, and how it should end. Once I made those decisions, I started writing and didn't stop until I was finished.

About Writing

It has been said that writing cannot be taught. You may teach students how to spell, how to punctuate, and how to outline an essay or article, but you cannot teach them how to write. Writing comes from within, the same way that music or art comes from within. It is natural or instinctive. Though many people take art and music lessons, those who are truly gifted don't need lessons. The art and music are within them. The truly gifted writer simply writes.

His stories are within him. You also cannot teach imagination or creativity. There are many writing classes online and in university classrooms but taking a class will not make you a writer. You can, however, learn specific crafts. An aspiring writer can learn how to piece

together the essential *parts* of a story. What cannot be taught is how to create a *really* great story. You may suggest the plots and the narrative that goes with them, but only a gifted writer could create something from those plots. There is no guarantee that a certain plot will impress anyone anyway. “People place way too much emphasis on the idea behind a story, often neglecting to understand that it is the execution of that idea that is far more important” (Wood 11).

Sometimes writers run out of steam, or they have trouble coming up with topics to write about. This can happen to a beginning writer or a veteran with many books under his belt. When this happens, writers say they have something called “writer’s block.” This can go on for months or years if the writer is not determined to overcome. If untreated, it can ruin an entire career. There are many methods of dealing with writer’s block. Some writers brainstorm for ideas. Others read books with helpful tips.

If a writer is *really* stuck for a plot, two books may help. The first is *5,000 Writing Prompts*, and the second is *Master Lists for Writers*. Both books were written by Bryn Donovan. The books offer hundreds and thousands of plots to choose from and several ways to develop them, including how to choose characters, setting, and pacing. Another book for writers with writer’s block is *The Writer’s Idea Book* by Jeff Heffron. It is loaded with possibility.

Some writers choose a genre first. Then they may choose a subgenre and write to fit that genre, especially if they expect to be published commercially. Most book publishers have definite guidelines for the books they publish. They will only publish books written one way or another. They may have several different imprints, and each imprint publishes books written in a certain style or fashion. Nowadays many writers, like me, are self-published. They write books to please themselves and do not have to cater to a publisher’s specifications. Some popular fan fiction genres include, romance, murder/mystery, sci-fi, horror. There are also spy thrillers,

political thrillers, legal thrillers, psychological thrillers, young adult novels, dystopian novels, and many others. There are also subgenres and combined genres, such as young adult romance or psychological political thrillers. Once you choose a genre or subgenre, you begin outlining and writing. Remember, most stories begin with the protagonist. The reader must know whom to focus upon. Otherwise, they will get lost in the story.

Many writing instructors suggest creating a protagonist with an unusual name or occupation. He/she should be worthy of our interest or attention. Ideally, the reader meets him/her before anyone else. Weiland states characters go through three different stages: 1. The protagonist starts one way. 2. The protagonist learns some lessons throughout the story. 3. The protagonist ends in a (probably) better place” (*Creating Character Arcs* 6).

Some readers and stories are more character-driven than plot-driven. That means the story’s character, usually the protagonist, or even the antagonist, is what keeps them turning pages. For others, it is the other way around. They are plot-driven, more enticed by the stimulating plot than by the characters. Avid readers, like myself, are enticed by both. For me, the protagonist must be appealing along with the plot. If I find neither very interesting, I will not buy the book. If I buy the book, I may lose interest after just a few pages if the plot is executed in a lack luster fashion. I need to be delighted, held captive, and enthralled to continue reading. In certain cases, I may pick the book up again and read it later, but in other cases I may not.

After reading hundreds of books, I decided my favorite is *Scruples* by Judith Krantz. The plot of an overweight, unhappy, unattractive girl who goes to Paris for a year and returns a beautiful, cultured, and sophisticated woman, sounds like something straight out of Hollywood. Strangely enough, the author was married to Steve Krantz, a Hollywood film producer. After I finished the book and saw the film, I realized it reminded me of *Sabrina*, a movie about a

chauffer's mousey daughter who goes away to Paris for a year and returns glamorous enough to attract both her father's wealthy employer's sons, played by Greg Kinnear and Harrison Ford.

Another story that captivated me was *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. Most people have seen the Civil War epic in the movies. Well, when I was in college, I read the book and became fascinated with Scarlett O'Hara. She was spoiled, selfish, strong-willed, and unconscionably devious, not like any character I'd ever read before. By book's end, she had married three men and made enemies of most women. Scarlett was beautiful and seductive, could have had any man she wanted, but she wanted Ashley Wilkes, her best friend's husband.

Though I have read more books than I can remember, these are the first two books that I was drawn to right away. I loved *Scruples* because of the plot, which eventually became a trilogy. By the story's end, the main character, Wilhelmina, called Billie, has married a billionaire, a film producer, and a photographer, and has given birth to twins.

I loved *Gone with the Wind* because of the characters. By book's end, Scarlett's best friend Melanie has died, and Scarlett's husband Rhett Butler assumes with Melanie gone, Scarlett and Ashley will get together, but he's wrong. Scarlett loves Rhett. When she chases him down to tell him and asks what she will do without him, he delivers the most famous line in the story: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a"

Structure and Set-Up

As mentioned above, the set-up is how the author introduces the protagonist into the story. The set-up also introduces most of the supporting characters and the antagonist. This happens in Part I of our three-part structure. There should also be a story-worthy problem, an inciting incident, which upsets the status quo and sets our tale in motion. This is something that takes the protagonist out of his/her comfort zone. How the protagonist reacts to what happens is

the meat and potatoes of our story. There is usually a dilemma or conflict of some sort, which must be resolved for the protagonist's life to regain order.

This takes us to Part II, where most of the story takes place. The protagonist might go through several changes and move forward and backward throughout this part of the story. When we reach Part III, the end, the protagonist has solved the problem and has been changed in some way though the structure of most novels and stories has changed over the years.

Once upon a time, a writer impressed an audience with a long opening page or two filled with brilliant descriptions of scenery and tons of backstory about the characters. Sometimes the writer introduced the entire cast of characters before the reader was given an inkling about the plot. However, nowadays things are different. With so many books to choose from, readers grow impatient when looking for something to read. They want to be captivated on page one.

Therefore, the writer should "hook" his reading audience at the very beginning. So, instead of backstory and description, the writer must get to the action. "To keep the reader reading, you want his involvement to be a continuous experience. The best reading experiences defy interruption" (Stein 46). If the writer has done a good job of "hooking" the reader, then the book, novel, or short story, will be read.

There are nine basic plots for fiction: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, the voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, rebirth, mystery, and rebellion (Strathy). Of course, plots can be combined, and some may be more complex than others of the same type. For instance, you could write a rags to riches story, which could also be a tragedy or mystery. You could also write overcoming the monster story, which might involve a quest.

There are also ten basic ideas for writing a non-fiction book. Biography and memoir figure very high on the list. Once we have chosen either fiction or non-fiction, we choose our

plot. Then we move on to outlining our literary work. We do not need a formal outline, like an outline with a capital I and a capital II or with a capital A and a capital B. We use an informal outline where each number on the line equals a development in the story.

Some writers create a plot line for each page of the novel or screenplay. There can also be more than one plot per page. It should be fine to spread the plot developments over a series of pages. The plots can be numbered from one to infinity, depending on how much action is in the story. Whether large or small, each story *must* have a plot. Plots sell novels and screenplays. In addition to creating a plot, we also need to create the structure of that plot and tell how the story will be set-up. What comes first? What goes last?

Even a memoir can be plotted. For best results, the writer should outline first. In a memoir, the set-up is as follows: Step One: Introduces the protagonist, the story-worthy situation he/she is suddenly confronted with, and how she/she reacts or responds to that trouble. In Step Two: The protagonist has a confrontation. This is the longest part of the story where he/she wrestles with the issues and tries to find a solution. And Step Three: The resolution where the protagonist solves the problem and saves him or herself (Stafford).

In my memoir, the author (me) is the protagonist. So, my job is to introduce you to my world and to the people who make up that world and who have had a major influence on my life. This is where I introduce the reader to my plans, hopes, dreams, fears, and nightmares. If there are major difficulties, they will be revealed here also. Then I will take the reader through my struggles to resolve those issues.

There will be lots of backstory from the omniscient narrator, who is of course, me. Then I will try to explain myself, tell why I did it this way or that way and not some other way. I will also mention future goals, one of which is to graduate from Liberty University with my MFA in

Creative Writing, and what I plan to do after that. Teaching other students what I have learned in the program ranks high up on the list of objectives.

Conclusion

There are many ways to tell a story, even a story of one's life. Many fiction writers use proven methods and are often called plotters, pantsers, or tweeners. I have used all three methods, and they have worked well for me. I plotted when I was in graduate school. I flew by the seat of my pants before I took my first writing class, and I was a tweener when I wrote my first novel. I used all three methods when writing *The Deep End: A Journey of Faith*.

Whether fiction or non-fiction, each story has a middle, beginning, and an end. There are protagonists, antagonists, and supporting characters. There are also major events and some that are less significant. As with plotting a novel, I'll do the same with my memoir. I will present a beginning, middle, and end to my story, add supporting characters, and include special events. I hope by revealing so much of myself I can get a better understanding of who I really am. I also hope to make new discoveries as I go along.

After trial and error, I have learned there is really no such thing as writer's block. Most authors are not blocked at all. Their creative juices are still functioning. They just need to make a choice. Anything can become material or a plot in a novel. The sky is the limit. The same is not true for a memoir. A memoir consists of the truth. The task for the writer, in this case—me---is to choose the best way to *tell* the truth. That is something I consider as I move on to the next stage of my paper.

Chapter One

“Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof” (Eccl 7:8).

I’ll never forget my college graduation, which took place on a warm, muggy day in Chicago in July, sunny, and somewhat humid. In my fourth month of pregnancy, I was slightly nauseous when I awakened that morning, a bit woozy and excited, but determined to face the day ahead. My mother was concerned and wanted me to stay home and rest. “You can always receive your degree by mail, you know?” she assured me, to which I looked at her in horror.

I had spent four years earning my degree, and I wanted to walk across the stage to receive it. When I explained this to her, she said she knew how I felt but urged me to be careful. My blood pressure was slightly elevated when I was pregnant. She reminded me of when I was expecting my oldest daughter who was four at the time. During that pregnancy, I developed something called preeclampsia. My ankles and feet were badly swollen, and the summer heat, even in Chicago, made me so light-headed and dizzy I almost passed out.

However, I couldn’t and wouldn’t miss my college graduation. I knew I’d share the experience with my children and grandchildren someday, hoping it would encourage and strengthen their own educational pursuits. My grandmothers approved of me completing my degree while my husband completed his duties in the US Navy. They had both dropped out of college when they got married. I had dropped out to join the Army shortly after high school, but after three years in the Army, I married, and had a child. Then I returned.

All of that took five years, so, they were glad to see me get back on track. Attending college was important in my family, especially on my father’s side where, at that time, just about all were teachers. Some taught high school. Some taught grammar school, and an uncle taught at a community college. One aunt taught modern dance and creative art.

I have often been called the oddball, the trendsetter, or the person who marched to a different drummer because of my choices in life. I was the first woman in the family to enlist in the military. I was the first in my family to enter the medical field, and I was about to become the first to graduate while pregnant. Also, I didn't know it at the time, but one day I'd be the first to lecture at a university. Since then, one cousin joined the Marines, several became nurses, doctors, and business executives, and we never know what the future holds.

So, I pulled myself together and rode to the venue with two fellow graduates. We grabbed our caps and gowns and joined hundreds of others. When I felt nauseous again, and my feet, in their high-heeled sandals, began to ache, I sat in a cool, air-conditioned room and sipped cold water. Later, when I lined up with the College of Arts and Sciences, several students and myself were pulled out of line. We all wore white medallions. They were given by the dean's office, signifying that we were graduating cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude.

As honor students, we were seated on stage with college administrators and guest speakers. It was cooler up there and much closer to the action. The ceremony went well. The songs and speeches were encouraging and uplifting. Those of us with the white medallions were last to receive our degrees. After an announcement was made about our various academic achievements and types of degrees, there was a round of applause as we accepted our diplomas.

When I shook hands with President Benjamin Alexander, a distinguished-looking man with a salt and pepper-colored Afro, whom I interviewed many times for the campus newspaper, I was flooded with memories. I never pledged a sorority or partook of the drinking and partying that happens at many colleges, but I attended book readings, parades, science, art, and job fairs. I interviewed alumnus Danny Davis when he first ran for Congress. He was elected a few months later and has served his district in Congress faithfully for over twenty years.

I remembered working with the Victim/Witness Advocacy Program, which assisted victims of violent crimes and their families. During my time there, two young women were sexually assaulted, and we helped put their attackers behind bars. I remember writing articles about higher tuition costs, new academic programs, sexual harassment on campus, college plays and concerts, art exhibits, and writing a book review of *The Thorn Birds* that my dad thought should appear in *The Chicago Sun-Times*. So, he sent it to them!

I remembered the protests against apartheid, protests against the reverse discrimination lawsuit from Andrew Bakke to the Supreme Court, protests against immigration policies; I remember demonstrating for women's rights and writing a petition to retain a certain professor. I remembered the lectures from visiting educators, a lecture from a Cuban dictator, the push for accreditations for the College of Nursing and the College of Business and Administration.

I remembered the tennis match between the president and the governor to raise money for student scholarship programs. I remembered my first interview with the president about state-sponsored programs to aid the handicapped. I also remember my last interview with him about the university's board of director's proposal to go from a quarter system, with four semesters (fall, winter, spring, and summer) to a semester system, with only three semesters (fall, spring, summer). We discussed the impact it might have on the university and the student body.

I also remembered the snowball fights, the basketball games, the performances by the gospel choir, cramming for exams, the food in the cafeteria, the bookstore with its array of books and memorabilia, interviews with faculty, student leaders, university administrators, the many classroom projects and discussions, the dozens of classes I took, the professors who taught those classes, and what I learned. I remembered it all and realized I would miss the university.

I would miss it a lot.

I didn't see my family right after the ceremony, but I was happy to finally have my degree. I was also sad. I had graduated and was no longer a student. My time at Chicago State University was over. Why were graduations called commencement ceremonies? It seemed like something was ending rather than beginning. Is it because the graduate is beginning a new phase of life and possibly a career, or is it because college graduates enter a better place economically?

According to an article from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW), "adults with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$2.8 million during their careers, \$1.2 million more than the median for workers with a high school diploma" (Nietzel). This isn't true for all graduates though. Teachers, for instance, earn less than most other professionals, and men out earn women by approximately \$170,000 over a lifetime.

As I searched for my family, I met my fellow graduates. "Congratulations," said my friend Paul, who founded the college's first gospel choir. "Thank you," I said. Then I shook hands with the president of the Student Government Association, who had given me many scoops for the college newspaper. Later, I hugged my friend Tom, the former news editor, who had handed the reins to me as he headed off to *The New York Times* the year before and eventually, *Time Magazine*. I also shook hands with the English professor who suggested that I give up dreams of becoming a journalist and try writing a novel. Eventually, I took her advice.

I also spotted my old friend Delois whom I met the summer after my high school graduation. We both worked at Spiegel's that summer and went shopping after work every payday. We were eighteen and looked forward to attending our first semester of college. Though we saved money for tuition, we spent most of it on our college girl clothing, which consisted of blue jeans, cardigan sweaters, and short skirts. We had a great time trying on clothes at various stores, getting each other's opinions on our selections. During these shopping sprees as we

laughed and talked about clothing, accessories, and our boyfriends, we were undecided about our careers. We just knew college was important. Though we parted ways after the summer, I often thought of her and wondered where life had taken her.

Running into her eight years later, I saw she was an older, more mature version of the girl I met years before. Her face was rounder, her smile brighter, and she seemed to glow. She received her M.S. in education that day, and I received my B.A. in psychology. As we embraced, she whispered, “You should become a teacher. Teaching is the best job I’ve had.” Eventually, I would take Delois’s advice. At the time, I was joining my husband in Washington D.C. when he returned from his final voyage and being a dutiful housewife until the baby came.

Finally, I found my parents, sister, and grandparents. They had left the building. “When you didn’t march with the College of Arts and Sciences, like it says on the program, we thought you had fainted or were taken to the hospital,” my mother said. When I told her I was fine and explained about the last-minute switch by the dean, they said they were sorry they had missed it. I was sorry, too. I wanted them to see me accept my degree. I didn’t know that years later they would see me accept my M.A. in curriculum and instruction from a different university.

In the meantime, I was exhilarated. My cousin from California arrived with her husband and two children. There was a huge family dinner the next day. Grandmother Inez had invited people from her church. I was happy and felt blessed. I received hundreds of dollars in graduation gifts and thanked everyone for their generosity. As I packed for D.C., I was content for the moment, not knowing what the future held.

Before I left, my father and I finally had the talk we had put off for years. Though he spent twenty-six years in the Marine Corps, he had never wanted me in the Army. He explained as he hugged and congratulated me, that men hated to send their sons off to war, and sending

their daughters was a thousand times worse. “I was worried about you the entire time you were gone. Now I can relax. You’re married and expecting your second child. You’re also a college graduate who can do anything you want, hopefully as a civilian,” he said. I laughed, giddy with joy and happiness. Then I thanked him, glad he was so proud of me.

When I returned to Chicago State University twenty-three years later, I was surprised at how much it had changed. I was hired to teach English, but I also assisted with grant-writing, and advising students who were failing classes. The university had gained dormitories, new colleges, and new degree programs. It had grown by leaps and bounds. None of my former professors were still there, which was disappointing, including the president who had passed away.

The only instructor I knew was Professor Bryant. I interviewed him years ago when students charged the history department with racism because he was the only black teaching African American history, and he was repeatedly denied tenure. He was a striking man, with a neat afro and elegant speech. Even I was starstruck. Students said the denial was due to the professor’s lectures, which featured the Middle Passage, Jim Crow, and Critical Race Theory.

After reading my article, which outlined the students’ claims, the governor consulted with the university president. When tenure was granted, the multi-racial student body held a celebration for the professor who had turned down interviews with CBS, NBC, ABC, *Sixty Minutes*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, and other media outlets. He said he only agreed to be interviewed by me because the students’ protests and outrage had drawn national attention.

The fact that he was still there after many years and was department chair spoke volumes about his dedication. When I visited him upon my return, he was older, grayer, not quite so striking, but, seemed much wiser. He said back in the day he felt victimized. Now, he said he

knew the battle was not just for him, “but for those who came after.” At the time, he was mentoring a young Japanese professor who had received opposition to teaching Asian American history at the university. Though it took time, the professor eventually won. Her Asian American history course features stories from the Japanese Internment Camps during World War II.

I also met Donda West, mother of rapper Kanye West, who was still active at the university even as she was leaving to manage Kanye. We held English department meetings with Donda, the former department chair, as she outlined plans to help students master Standard American English. She visited other universities and public schools to help with their curricula. When she passed away, they had a special ceremony to honor her work and contributions.

In addition, was the Gwendolyn Brooks Center in the university library, which promotes the literature of black authors in the entire nation. Brooks, a Pulitzer-Prize winning poet laureate of the U.S., was a frequent guest lecturer at the university, and I attended one of her poetry readings. She dedicated several of her books to the college and joined the faculty. The university built and established the writing center in her honor to help writers hone their craft.

Another addition was the Meditation Room, which was once controversial. The project began when the Christian Fellowship Club, founded by my friend Michael, requested a room for prayer and devotion. Moslem, Jewish, and Catholic students demanded rooms for their clubs, too. Eventually, the university created this room for all faiths, and all worshiped there. There were stained-glass windows, pews to sit on, an altar to pray, prayer cloths, bottles of holy water, Bibles, hymnals, New Testaments, an Apocrypha, a Koran, a Menorah, a cross, and a rosary.

One major change was the university switch to the semester system. The college no longer offered four terms. They had switched to three terms per year. When I had asked President Alexander about the possibility many years ago, he said, “Nothing has been decided

yet, but it might take students longer to graduate. Instead of finishing in three years, it might take them four, but they'd have a longer break between semesters." I was a senior by then, so it didn't affect me. Too bad for present-day students though. They'll have to go the distance.

There were also many improvements and services in the office of accommodations. I had a hearing-impaired student in one class who was given a note-taker, a proctor for exams, and four different signers, who used American Sign Language, to aid in the comprehension of each lecture. Each signed for thirty minutes of the two-hour class, and they were there every single day. This was not even an option twenty-three years ago.

One thing that hadn't changed, however, were the students. They were still young, old, enthusiastic, bored, hardworking, and hard partying, just like they were many years ago. Most were aspiring teachers, but some were business majors, nursing, and pre-med majors. Watching them stroll across campus reminded me of myself years ago, carefree, and ready to take on the world. But wherever they went and whatever they did, they'd never forget their college years. The memories would stay with them forever. My memories have certainly stayed with me.

Though commencement is a time of beginning, it is also a time of reflection. When I woke the morning of my graduation, I didn't know my parents wouldn't see me receive my degree. I kind of envisioned them taking tons of photos and us going out to dinner later, but it didn't happen that way. As they oohed and aahed at the "with honors" notation on my degree, I didn't know why things had happened the way they had.

I was glad to see Delois again and surprised to hear her gush about her teaching career. Teaching became my favorite job, too. However, I suffered badly with morning sickness that day and was dizzy and weak throughout my entire pregnancy. I was very ill for the next fifteen years. I didn't know if I would live or die. Here's the rest of my story.

Chapter Two

I was born on a chilly day in Chicago on November 7. My birthday sometimes falls on Election Day, so sometimes I am happy, and sometimes I am disappointed. It depends on who is elected. When my chosen candidates get voted in, it is like a birthday gift. When they don't, it's like waking up on Christmas morning with no presents under the tree. I am the second oldest of five children. I am also the middle daughter. With three girls and two boys, our family was a little larger than the families of today.

Though I am in reasonably good health now, according to my mother I was a premature baby and only weighed 5 pounds and 6 and 1/4 ounces at birth. I'd break out in red welts and cough and wheeze when she gave me a Cod Liver Oil-type substance to help me gain weight. Once she learned I was allergic to seafood and stopped giving it to me, my skin cleared up. But I almost died when I was two because my grandfather sat me in front of a window so I could breathe fresh air after my mother fried some fish. The cold air was too much.

I developed a bad cough and cold that got no better. Grandma Ethel said I slipped in and out of consciousness when she tried to feed me corn on the cob and hot buttered rolls, which she knew I loved. She and Grandfather Henry sent for the neighborhood pediatrician. After a lengthy examination, Dr. Walker said it would be my last night on earth if I did not get to the hospital. So, my aunt and uncle rushed me to a hospital emergency room. Diagnosed with double pneumonia, I was placed under an oxygen tent in intensive care.

My dad was in Korea then, so it was mostly my mother and her family who visited me in ICU. When I returned home, my grandparents' home was maintained at a warmer temperature, and for the rest of my life I have guarded against extreme cold. Every time I visited my grandparents, they'd recant the events of "The night I almost died" to everyone present. This was

especially true as I grew older. Though we spent years in other cities and states due to my dad's military service, whenever we were in Chicago during Christmas, the story would be told over and over again until everyone in the family knew it by heart. My grandparents always asked how I was doing in school, what I was doing with my life, and if I was happy and taking care of myself. It was as if saving my life had given them the responsibility of ensuring that I lived well.

They attended my graduations, met my husband and friends, and doted on my children. As a result, I always adored my grandparents and felt loved and appreciated when I was in their home. I was often called Grandfather Henry's favorite. Because he was an exceptionally affectionate and doting grandfather, no one seemed to mind. They knew he loved them, too. However, shortly before he died, he called, and we spoke. "You know you were always my favorite," he said. "I have to leave you now, but I want you to be a good girl and live a happy life." I couldn't stop crying when he said he would be watching from Heaven.

Other than the double pneumonia that almost claimed my life, I have come close to death at least three more times: the second was a near-drowning; the third was an attack by a mad man; and the fourth was a fit of jealous rage from my ex-husband. In childhood, I endured the mumps, the measles, and the chickenpox. I also had a heart murmur that I learned was a result of the stress on my heart when coughing while exposed to seafood. After many years of trial and error, I learned I can eat tuna fish and shrimp without too much of a reaction. I have also tried other seafood like mackerel, sushi, clam chowder, and scallops with mixed results.

The seafood allergy seems to run on my father's side. Some relatives on that side have had bad reactions to shrimp and shellfish. There is a nut allergy on my mother's side. My brother Mark, my cousin Timmy, and I are all allergic to Brazil nuts. My niece and granddaughter are allergic to peanuts, pistachios, cashews, pecans, and almonds. I have only had one extreme

reaction to Brazil nuts, and that took place on Halloween when I ate a delicious chocolate candy bar filled with mixed nuts. Yet, it did not stop me from eating candy, and I always read the ingredients before I indulge. I am always reading anyway. Books are my favorite things, along with films, and art of all varieties: contemporary, impressionist, abstract, etc.

Most of my childhood was spent on Marine Corps Air Bases in the United States. My father, Thomas Wimberly, enlisted in the Marines when he was a teenager. He served during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. He and my mother married July 4, 1948. They had been high school sweethearts. Among other things, he was a drill sergeant, a military police officer, and a mess sergeant. During the first fourteen years of my life, we lived in fourteen different houses in Chicago, Virginia, North Carolina, California, and Hawaii.

At times, we were the only black family on the block, in the neighborhood, and in the school, but we made friends wherever we went and were always blessed with good neighbors. They usually came over to meet us the day we moved in, bringing casseroles, pizza, and other things. Most of the children in the neighborhood hung out at our house. I have very fond memories of them all. We children grew up very patriotic. It was common on the bases where we lived to see soldiers marching, jets flying overhead, and to hear the national anthem played.

We frequently sang the “Marine Corps Anthem” as well. We sang it on the school bus to impress the military police when we passed through the main gate. We were very proud of our fathers and their jobs and positions in the military. We often discussed their duties and achievements. They were our heroes, and we respected everything about them.

Military life could be rough, but I guess adjusting to different climates, languages, and people has helped me become the seasoned traveler I am today. I can adjust to different altitudes, temperatures, climates, and weather forecasts easier than most of my friends. My main concern

is whether Americans would be welcome in the places I choose to travel. For instance, I have serious reservations about visiting any country in the Middle East, like Syria, Iran, and Iraq. I also would not visit Afghanistan and anywhere in North Africa, including Morocco, which I yearn to see. I would not visit Saudi Arabia or Pakistan either. I want to visit Egypt but may not pack right away. I especially have a strong desire to visit Israel, to walk the streets of Galilee, to visit the Wailing Wall, the Garden of Gethsemane, the temple in Jerusalem, the city of Nazareth, and the Red Sea. But I have not gone yet. The issue is personal safety.

I know many church groups have toured the Holyland and were perfectly safe, but I have heard of American tour groups being shot to death in Cairo and other parts of Egypt, so I will stay away. I have also heard about the suicide bombers on the Left Bank in Israel. As American allies, Israel would welcome American tourists, but what about the Palestinians? How do they feel about American tourists? I will continue to wait and pray until I get an all clear.

Several years ago, a friend's mother asked me to accompany her to Russia. She had always wanted to visit Moscow, was fascinated with the Kremlin and all things Russian. Even though this was after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I didn't feel comfortable visiting a nation that, for as long as I can remember, had always been our enemy. Despite them being an ally in World War II, something has gone wrong in our relationship. They hate us, and we hate them. Or is it simply distrust? They don't trust us, so we don't trust them. Is that it?

Anyway, I declined the invitation.

Sometimes I feel I was right. Sometimes I feel I was wrong. Because of the tension between the U.S. and Russia right now, I may never get another chance, and that is too bad. Russia is a vast and mysterious place. There is nowhere like it in the world. I had planned to visit Alaska to see Mt. Denali and the Northern Lights. Now, I hear some Russians want to reclaim

Alaska, the same way they keep trying and failing to reclaim Ukraine. If I'm in Alaska and tensions erupt between Russia and the West, could I be caught in the middle of World War III? The entire world is watching as Putin loses a little more each day. When will he give up?

Getting back to my family, I feel that because my siblings and I were born in different states, we have different personalities. My older sister Dena and I seem to be city people. We were both born in Chicago. Though she is almost four years older, we attended the same church, some of the same colleges, and had some of the same friends. We both became educators. She taught second grade for the Chicago Board of Education for over thirty years. I taught third and fourth grade before teaching at the college level.

Though I was second in birth order, there was a brother born between Dena and me. His name was Thomas Jr., and he only lived a few hours. Despite my mother's determination to be strong and trust God, I know his death devastated her. However, five years after I was born, my brother Mark was born. My brother Michael followed a year later. Then Karen, the baby arrived three years after that. Both brothers were born in Quantico, Virginia, and enjoy the outdoors. Karen was born in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, and is entirely different from the rest of us.

My brothers Mark and Mike were sporting and athletic. There were few sports they did not enjoy, and they loved making music. Though my mother made us all take piano lessons, my brothers enjoyed it more than anyone else. Dena and I sang in choirs and at church, and Karen took up the clarinet. My brothers played the trumpet and piano and eventually graduated to other instruments. They played with their high school band and with their friends.

Mike was also a composer. He sat at the piano for hours and wrote songs for his band and for my mother, niece, and me. When he passed away in 1993 from complications of diabetes, our cousins, who are all musicians, played one of my brother's songs for a music producer they

knew. He, in turn, gave the song to Beyonce`. According to my cousins, Beyonce` recorded “Mike’s Song” during a recording session and added it to one of her albums. At my brother’s funeral, which was a heartbreaking event, my cousins offered up musical tributes to him from their trumpets and saxophones. He was considered the best musician in the family and in his high school band. We were truly a music-loving family.

We also loved games. Chess was my brothers’ favorite. My sisters, my mother and I played checkers. We all played *Monopoly*, *Sorry* and *Trouble*. When we were teenagers we played Gin Rummy, Blackjack, and a game called Spades, also Whist and Bid Whist, which were popular with friends. I never really learned to play Poker. It didn’t interest me. Like, my mother, I love all types of crossword puzzles, Sudokus, jigsaw puzzles, and when I am particularly bored, Solitaire. I play those games for hours, even while watching TV.

Our outdoor games included badminton, tennis, ping pong, basketball, swimming, and golf. Though we played many games, we didn’t always play with family. Between the ages of 8 and 11, I played centerfield on an all-male baseball team in my neighborhood in Hawaii. It gave me great pride to be the only girl on the team. I learned a lot about the game, which was rough and tumble and more exciting than I had imagined, certainly more challenging than the softball games I played with girls.

My brother Mark raced me every now and then, to see who was the fastest and to see if he could beat me. When we were the same height, I always won. He was usually a gracious loser until he grew to be 6’3” and about 200 pounds. After that, I stopped racing him! Board games became our favorite activity. We also played games like *You Don’t Say* and *Password*, which we played without cards or other props. While we traveled from place to place during our childhood, the things we missed the most were our friends and our extended family. We also missed having

a regular church to attend and a group to worship with because that changed wherever we moved. We also met people from other religious faiths who had a great deal of influence on our beliefs. Most seemed to add to beliefs my parents already held, but others challenged their beliefs and forced us to study, learn, and delve deeper into the scriptures.

My mother and her sister Vera grew up on a farm in Holly Springs, Mississippi, and were brought up Methodist. We also have family in Tennessee. During a family reunion many years ago, I spent the night in the house where my mother and aunt were born. I later learned the house, on part of an 80-acre plot of land once owned by a slave master, was built by my great-great-grandfather, Henry, and given to my great-grandmother Martha as a wedding gift.

Unable to have children with his wife, the slave master deeded the land to Willis, his son by his slave mistress, and Willis shared the land with his half-brother, Henry, my great-great-grandfather. Each brother took 40 acres and raised his family on that land. Great-grandmother Martha gave birth to all her children in the house built by Henry, and she and her husband Will gave the house to my grandmother, Ethel, who later gave it to her younger sister Amanda. Today, Amanda's grandchildren own the house, where water was once drawn from a well.

My father was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, and grew up in Robeline. His mother Inez, who was Pentecostal, was from Baton Rouge, and his father George was from New Orleans. When I was in high school, my grandmother told me that my father's grandfather was an English earl. I also learned that my father had a half-brother who was his father's son from a previous marriage. We never met my uncle, and I have always been curious about the family in New Orleans, especially during Hurricane Katrina, when we were anxious to find them to no avail.

Years ago, my wealthy, well-connected roommate, daughter of a U.S. Congressman, who was great at performing background checks, including on several of my friends, bragged that she

could tell me who my great-grandmother attended the prom with over a century ago. When I said my great-grandmother probably went with my great-grandfather, she stated, “Then wait till I tell you about the pirates in your family.” Though I was shocked, she said it was true: there were pirates in my family! I had no reason to doubt her. She had already provided the address of every place I had ever lived. I was amazed at her accuracy. She not only knew every address. She knew the names of our neighbors, the schools I attended, and the names of playmates and friends.

She also knew grades I had gotten in school, classes I had taken, clubs I had belonged to and was aware of certain achievements and more. Was it possible that I was a descendant of pirate Jean Lafite, as my roommate claimed? I never got the full story. She just said the pirates entered my family via a female ancestor named Catherine. The only Catherine I ever heard of was my paternal grandmother’s aunt. Her name was Catherine, and she helped raise my grandmother and her siblings when their parents died, but that was not two centuries ago.

History says Jean Lafite had a mistress named Catherine who gave birth to his son Pierre. There is no indication that she is the ancestor my roommate was speaking about; however, and that was many, many years ago, back during the War of 1812! I thought about how I might be related to this woman named Catherine and realized that it could have been many ways.

Rather than dwelling on something I did not understand, I focused on what I knew about my parents and grandparents, and I became curious as I grew older. Sometimes they’d tell us stories about our great-great-grandparents or our great aunts and great uncles, some of whom were slaves. The fact that my mother and aunt grew up on a farm was very exciting for us. We were mostly city kids. We knew nothing about milking cows, gathering eggs from the hen house, slopping hogs, feeding chickens, fishing in a creek, or riding ponies bareback. We enjoyed the stories about how during the Great Depression my grandfather would load his shotgun, and he

and my mother would go out and shoot pheasant or quail for dinner. Sometimes, my mom said they shot rabbits, opossums, and raccoons or they went fishing.

On Thanksgiving, my mother and aunt helped my grandfather kill turkeys for their dinner. They also picked berries and learned to make jams and jellies. One summer when we were teenagers, my grandmother taught us how to make marmalade from a large barrel of apples. My mother never taught us to make jams or jellies, but she taught us how to cook, bake, crochet, and sew. I am sometimes sorry that I was not a better student. I learned just enough to get by.

Wherever we lived, my mother started a club for women. It began with church members. Then it expanded to the women in the neighborhood and their friends. They were different ages, races, and religions. My mother was an excellent housekeeper. She was also great at sewing, decorating, and hospitality. I envied her ease with people. She was friendly and outgoing, putting the women at ease as they sipped coffee and tea with her in the dining room and eventually joined her in the living room where they sat and chatted as they knitted, crocheted, or mended their children's clothing or made clothing for themselves. Sometimes they embroidered potholders and kitchen towels or made patchwork quilts.

My mother organized the group to work on projects. Both parents were great with people, but where my father was stern and strict, my mother was a softie. My dad caused grown men to shake in their shoes, but my mother always brought smiles to their faces. Everyone was afraid of my dad, but everyone loved my mother. Neither parent drank, used drugs, or cheated on the other as far as I knew. But my mother was a real people person. The women she entertained were kind and hospitable, too. They'd usually gather on Monday mornings and stay until school was out. Some of the topics were feminist, and some spiritual. The women shared their arts and crafts, the patterns for the sweaters or Afghans they were knitting or crocheting, their recipes, house-

cleaning tips, and childcare suggestions, not to mention the food they prepared for potluck. They also formed carpools, found babysitters for each other, rides to the commissary, or clinic, and found solutions for each other's problems. Most were lonely and hoped to meet new people. Some were glad to get out of the house. Others wanted the company of someone other than their children. With their husbands in the military and away on some duty, it was nice to have friends.

I didn't know it at the time, but when my husband and I were living in Norfolk, he'd be sent on voyages to the Mediterranean, Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, or other parts of the world, and I'd have been completely alone, if I hadn't met the other Naval wives. We were good company for each other and helped each other in numerous ways. We shopped together, shared our food, our cars, money, and other resources. We were like a sorority or a clique. I am thankful for each friend and the marvelous things they added to my life. I feel blessed to have met Ronnie, Dorothy, Rhonda, and Melanie. I was a new wife and a new Christian then, and I sometimes struggled with my faith though I received some remarkable answers to prayer.

Feeling lonely and isolated, I prayed more often and drew closer to God. I didn't always share my faith, but it was always there. In Norfolk, I began writing again. I created a protagonist, supporting characters, and backstories. Yet, there was no plot. Years later, I realized Cassie, my protagonist, resembled me and people I had met over the years. It sounded spooky until I realized this is how most novels are written. I became a bookworm in middle school. I read mostly out of loneliness and to fill a void.

Writing also filled a void. I almost feel haunted by some of the memories in my subconscious. Speaking of haunted, you will not believe what happened in our old house in Chicago when I was a teenager. If you are practical, you may draw a practical conclusion. If you are not practical, then you will not know what to believe when you read **Chapter Seven**.

Chapter Three

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...” (Ps. 23:5).

My father was transferred to Cherry Point, North Carolina, when I was two years old. I don't remember much about it, other than that the jets constantly flew overhead and scared me half to death. It was like *Top Gun* all day long, with one plane after another zipping through the air. I would run into the house, covering my ears, when the sound was too loud. It wasn't so bad the second time we lived there, when I was thirteen, but that comes much later. I will tell you about Virginia first. It was where I really began to grow and understand a lot about the world.

In Virginia, I learned to read, write, ride a bike, roller skate, play kick baseball, and to say my prayers. It was where I first learned Bible scriptures and about a place called Heaven and one called Hell, during our church services. Even as a youngster of about five, I knew there were vast differences between the two places. People who were basically good went to Heaven, and spent an eternity with God and His angels, but people who were bad, died and went to Hell where they spent an eternity with the devil and his demons.

After a few years, my parents met the Clarks, another military family. The husband was half black and half Cherokee. His wife was black, and at that time they had one daughter named Deandrea, whom we all called Cookie. She was two when we met, and I was five. We would often spend the night with each other. Years later, she had a younger sister named Debbie. Along with other families in our neighborhood, we began worshiping in a small redbrick church near the Marine base. My parents were from the Church of God, as were the Clarks, so they were not Pentecostals or charismatics, but they still held a lot of the same beliefs.

Their strict Christian churches didn't allow dancing, drinking, smoking, or cursing. Women didn't wear make-up or jewelry or slacks or shorts. They never painted their nails or got

manicures. Short skirts and short-sleeved shirts were forbidden. As children, we were not affected by these restrictions, but when we grew older, we challenged them. The church grew larger as more people joined. We read scriptures and said our prayers at night, always said grace before each meal, held Bible studies in the home, and attended church every Sunday.

Because I wanted to go to Heaven, near the end of every church service when the pastor asked if anyone wanted to come forward to repent for their sins, I was always the first to leap out of my seat and head to the altar. My parents never allowed it, however, feeling I was way too young to really understand. That would change a few years later.

In Virginia, my parents observed Christmas in the traditional sense. We put up Christmas trees, sang carols, and opened gifts. Though my parents never mentioned Santa Claus, I sat on his lap in kindergarten and told him what I wanted for Christmas. My sister broke my heart when she forced me to stay up late on Christmas Eve, so I could see the *real* Santa Claus. I cried like a baby when we peeked downstairs, and I saw our parents wrapping our gifts and eating the cookies we left, realizing Santa would not be sliding down our non-existent chimney.

In Virginia, on Halloween, we dressed up in costumes and went Trick or Treating, like other children. I was Cinderella one year and a princess another year, but after we left Quantico, things changed. It seemed we had entered a new world. We no longer put-up Christmas trees even though we participated in the Christmas play at church, and we had a huge family dinner. We no longer observed Halloween either. We never dressed up in costumes or went out to Trick or Treat our neighbors. We would put out the lights and hide in the house on Halloween night.

As I grew older, I felt guilty about the children's expectations. Children don't realize that you are not giving them candy because of religious reasons. They just assume you don't like them, and this makes them sad. Children shouldn't be hurt or disappointed so early in life. I was

in my teens when we stopped this practice. We gave the children candy, not because it was Halloween or the “Devil’s Night” as our parents called it, but to show love and kindness.

Quantico, Virginia, is in Triangle, not too far from Arlington, and the nation’s capital. We were so close that we visited often. When I was five, I entered John H. Russell Elementary School, the only black student in my kindergarten class. Though segregation existed throughout the South and even in Virginia, it did not exist in our neck of the woods. We had white neighbors on one side and black neighbors on the other side, and we were very close with both families.

Our white neighbor, Jean, was my mother’s best friend. She was an attractive brunette with two daughters named Jeanette and Colleen and a son named Robin, who was my partner in mischief. He and I would dig in the mud all day long. We’d make mud cakes and dig up worms, caterpillars, and other disgusting things that would cause our mothers to run screaming for the hills when we brought them home for Show and Tell. We didn’t know it then, but Jean’s family was very wealthy, and she inherited a tidy sum from her parents when they died.

I was eight years old when we last saw them, but Jean and my mother corresponded for years as we moved to various military bases. When I was nineteen, and in the Army, I heard on the radio that Jean and her husband were shot to death by their grandson. Certain that they were wrong, I called my mother who found out what she could. The news was not good. It was true that her friends were both killed by their 12-year-old grandson in a dispute over money.

Eventually, all three children contacted my mother to ask her to sort out their mother’s will. Evidently, Jean had died without making specific provisions. My mother had been their babysitter many years ago, had known them since they were children, and they felt she knew them better than anyone else. By then, Jeanette was an actress and had changed her name. She’d had three ex-husbands, and Robin and Colleen didn’t want her wasting money on another bad

marriage. Also, Colleen had been in rehab several times. So, Jeannette and Robin didn't want the money to go up her nose or in her veins. Robin—my mud cake-making buddy—had married a German beer heiress, so he didn't need the money. So, to whom should it go?

After they talked it over with my mother and father and a financial advisor, it was decided that most of the money (several million dollars) would be kept in trust for the grandchildren. The three adult children kept in touch with my mother for years as they worked out the smaller amounts each of them would receive. Jeannette got enough to pay her divorce attorney. Colleen paid for rehab, and Robin sent his children to college. None of us saw this happening when we were children, however. We were just doing what children do.

Our black neighbors on the other side, were a couple with three teenage girls who sometimes watched over us when our parents were away. Barbara was 18, Teresa was 17, and Shirley, the most popular and best-known member of the family, was 15. Our row houses were near the woods. We could take any of several wooded paths to school or we could ride the school bus. Though we lived in a housing development, we were very close to the federal prison and to the FBI training center. This proximity could be disturbing at times.

After the television show named *Quantico*, most people know Quantico as the place the FBI trains its federal agents. It is believed that FBI recruitment was way up during the time the TV show was still on air, and that recruitment may have gone down once the show was canceled. Also, the FBI reputation took a huge hit after Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidian Complex fire that took the lives of many of the David Koresh group. Some may also remember Quantico as the name of the federal prison (the Brig) from the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, which starred Jodie Foster as FBI agent, Clarice Starling, who faces off with a cannibalistic serial killer named Hannibal Lecter. Lecter was especially frightening since he was once a highly respected forensic

psychiatrist who was confined to the Brig after committing several horrendous murders in which he literally ate his victims. Anthony Hopkins won an Oscar for his horrifyingly realistic portrayal of the killer and was also cast in the movie *Hannibal* where he played the same character.

When I saw the film, I knew Hannibal Lector would get out because during our time at Quantico, prisoners frequently escaped. How they escaped from a maximum-security federal prison, I don't know, but they did. We'd hear reports on the radio that they were armed and dangerous and would be wearing nothing more than a helmet. A naked killer? We couldn't believe it. We stayed inside until the MPs recaptured them, usually within a few hours or days. One day my sister was late coming home from school, took a short cut through the woods, and said she saw one of the escapees in the woods near the creek, but during the five years we lived there, I never felt I was in any danger despite all the potential for it.

Once, Dena, her friend Suzanne, and I had taken a shortcut through the woods to get to a convenience store. On the way back, a scary-looking teenage boy with shaggy brown hair, chased us, flashing a knife. We screamed and ran, dropping all the groceries. Even Lady, Suzanne's beautiful collie, ran with us. We kept telling Lady to go sic him, but Lady thought we were playing a game. She often ran with us when we played Hide and Go Seek, Red Rover, and other games. So, she ran with us then, eager to be part of whatever game we were playing.

The guy was close behind, but we raced across the road and reached the housing area before he could catch us. When we emerged running and screaming, the neighbors called the MPs. After questioning us, the military police drove us home and spoke with our parents. Though we were all shaken up, nobody was hurt. Our fathers took us back to gather the groceries we had dropped. When the knife-wielder was arrested, we learned he was part of a teenage gang that lived in a shack and attacked and robbed people whenever they took that shortcut through

the woods. Other neighbors had been robbed, too. Our childhood friend Patrice Gaines, formerly of the *Washington Post*, wrote a book called *Laughing in the Dark* and mentioned Quantico.

She was on the *Oprah Show* twice to share details from her book, including an incident about a woman shooting her husband and many others. We knew these stories because we had lived them, too. Hearing her speak about them on network television brought them back to life. When I visited Patrice at the *Post* years later, we talked about a family named the Johnsons who were like the Johnsons in *The Color Purple*. We wondered if Alice Walker ever knew them.

One event I'm not sure Patrice knew about took place during my 6th birthday party. Patrice and her younger sister Sheila were invited, along with every child in the neighborhood. One thing about Quantico was that race, age, and religion didn't matter. A ten-year-old would attend the birthday party of a four-year-old and vice versa. Whites attended the parties of blacks, and blacks attended the parties of whites. We attended the parties of Asians and Latinos, too. We were all children who just wanted to have fun. That's what makes this story so hard to tell.

I was dressed to the nines for my party in a light pink dress with a frilly petticoat. I wore black patent leather shoes and had pink ribbons in my hair. Most of my classmates came early and were dressed well, too. The women helped my mother set up chairs and tables and helped with the food and beverages. The men assisted my father on the patio where he grilled hotdogs and hamburgers for the children and chicken and steak for the adults. While the adults set up the tables and food, my classmates and I greeted guests at the door. Several teenagers arrived with their younger brothers and sisters and deposited them on our doorstep.

Then they headed next door to Shirley's. It seemed the teenagers would have a party, too. When my party was about to begin, Shirley invited me next door to choose my birthday present. I always loved visiting their home. They had the largest collection of snacks I had ever seen. There

were potato chips, pretzels, peanuts, Fritos, Cheetos, gummy bears, M&Ms, lollipops, bubble gum, and other types of goodies. Their house was a junk food lover's paradise. As I feasted my eyes on all the options, I saw the teenagers sprawled on chairs, on couches and on the floor. Loud dance music was playing, and they were drinking Shirley's stepfather's Cokes and beer, smoking cigarettes, and dancing in the living room and out on the patio. It was the first time I had seen dirty dancing, and I watched for a few moments.

When I realized a few of my classmates had followed me inside, I quickly grabbed a candy bar, thanked Shirley, and hurried back out. I knew their older brothers and sisters wouldn't want to be spied on. Besides, we had a party of our own to attend, and I couldn't wait to get back to it. It was getting dark. More children had arrived. Some handed me gifts and showed off their shiny new shoes and party clothes. One classmate named Shayla and her little sister Cami came later.

She handed me a birthday card. "My mom said to give you this," she said. Then she turned to leave. When we asked why she wasn't staying, she said, "My father said I can't play with colored kids." My friends and I looked at her and laughed. Because none of us had ever experienced racism before, we thought her father was just being silly, and we told her so. We children were all different colors: black, white, brown, tan, yellow, red-headed, dark-haired, blonde, Asian, Latino. As far as we were concerned, we were *all* colored. What was the big deal?

When I opened the card, there were birthday greetings and about twenty dollars. I hurried inside to give it to my mother. Though we missed Shayla, the rest of the party was great. We had relay races, pinned the tail on the donkey, played charades, and musical chairs. All the winners received prizes. The double-tiered birthday cake was delicious, and we had Neapolitan ice cream.

By the time the party was over, I had received several hundred dollars in cash, and numerous gifts. One of my favorite gifts was a gold locket given to me by Robin, Jeanette, and

Colleen. Because my parents were deeply religious, I had never owned a single piece of jewelry. They thought wearing jewelry was sinful, but my mother let me wear it for the party. So, I cherished that necklace. It is sad that I never wore it again. I never knew what happened to it. Did I lose it? Did I break it? Did my mother put it up for safe keeping? I don't know. I just never saw it again. I've thought about it for years and wish I could remember.

When the party ended, we were all on the lawn dancing to music on Shirley's record player. I was on Cloud Nine. It was one of the finest days of my childhood. Shirley had left her front door halfway open, so the music blasted out loud and clear. When the music stopped, the parents, the teenagers, and their younger siblings waved goodbye, and headed home. The cleanup took hours, but by that time I was fast asleep in bed. I dreamt I was a queen, a princess, someone special and fabulous, who had received extraordinary gifts from neighbors and friends.

The next morning, Shirley knocked on the door. The son of the chief of police was on her front porch holding court, surrounded by neighbors and friends. He would stop by every now and then to give us the latest news of who-shot-who and when, where, and why. So, this morning was no exception. Shirley and her sisters were feeding him a breakfast of sausage, eggs, grits, and beer as he regaled the neighbors with the crimes that had taken place over night. He spoke about shootings and robberies and about more arrests of the teenage gang members.

Then Shirley asked me about the little girl who hadn't attended the party, the one who had left early. It was a small community, so I wasn't surprised that everyone knew Shayla and Cami had not stayed very long. After I gave her name to Shirley, she told the son of the chief of police to give me the latest news on them. What he said shocked everyone. He said that after they left the party, they returned home where their mother was packing. She apparently was leaving their father. When the father got there, he and the mother had a huge fight in the bedroom while the children

watched the party from the living room window. Their house was on a hill directly above ours. So, they could see everything that went on in my backyard and Shirley's yard, too.

So, while the children were preoccupied, the parents argued. Then the father pulled out a gun. Though the policeman's son kept speaking, I closed my eyes and almost wept imagining my friends and their mother shot to death. But according to the tall, red-headed guy, whose name I don't remember, what happened was that the father put the gun in his mouth and shot *himself*. "He blew his brains out all over the wall," the policeman's son stated, as he took a big gulp of beer.

After he'd swallowed, he said our neighbor Jean was taking care of Shayla and Cami. While their mother was giving her statement to the police, the MPs were doing their forensic work. Jean had fed the girls and was planning to take them to a carnival and to shop for new clothes. She had reached the grandparents who were on their way to pick them all up. There was no mention of the father, only that he was a deeply troubled man. His hatred for others had caused problems in the marriage. Having his wife threaten to leave him apparently was the last straw.

I never saw Shayla or Cami again. But I often think of them and wonder how they are doing. I wonder if the girls wanting to attend my party caused the argument between their parents. Every other child in the neighborhood had attended. Shayla and Cami must've felt left out and told their mother. Their father was obviously a racist. The mother apparently was not. The parents might have argued about their differences. Regardless, I am sorry my friends lost their father.

I know it was not my fault, but every year on my birthday, I remember that my friend's father shot himself to death during my party. And believe me, it is not a good memory to have. I always ask God to be with her and to be merciful. I am sure Patrice Gaines did not know this story. It happened a long time ago, but I must live with it every day. We stayed in Virginia for two more years. Then we moved to Hawaii.

Chapter Four

Hawaii is truly a tropical paradise with palm trees, warm scented breezes, and marvelous beaches. When our plane landed in Honolulu, we didn't know which bathroom to use. One was marked Kane. The other was marked Wahine. We hopped around in distress until we saw a man emerge from the bathroom marked Kane and a woman exit the bathroom marked Wahine. Then we rushed inside. There were many other things we'd learn in the next few days. One of the first was that the word "Aloha" means hello *and* goodbye.

On our second night in Hawaii, I experienced my second brush with death. It took place in the early evening hours between six and eight p.m. at the Pali Palms Hotel on the windward side of the island. We had left Honolulu and were near Kaneohe Bay, the Marine base where my father was assigned. After leaving Quantico, my father was offered a choice of either Alaska or Hawaii. The 49th and 50th states were places of curiosity. The legends of Mt. Denali, the Alaskan Gold Rush, and the Northern Lights were very popular, but in Hawaii there were hula dancers, palm trees, miles of beaches, and tall, majestic mountains. If you have ever seen *Hawaii Five-O*, then you know what I mean. We were naturally intrigued about a place that was warm all year 'round. Therefore, we chose Hawaii. So, there we were.

Earlier that evening, our parents had gone out to meet Bishop Reed, the pastor of our new church. He met my parents through the Clarks who had once lived in Hawaii. The pastor's family was part of a large group of islanders from the Garden of Prayer Church who would become our nearest and dearest friends during the three years we lived there and for many years after. So, meeting them was important. While our parents were out, my twelve-year-old sister Dena and I unpacked our suitcases, hung our clothes in the closet and placed them in the drawers. We also made all the beds, including the extra cots the hotel had sent. When our parents

returned, my mother began to prepare dinner in the small kitchenette. She sent my sister and me to get ice for the lemonade. The ice machine was in the main building.

It was a pleasant evening, not too hot or too cool, after all, we were in Hawaii. If we had been in Chicago in the middle of February, it would have been freezing, maybe even below zero. We would have needed coats, hats, gloves, and boots, and we still would have been freezing. However, in Hawaii we needed none of those things. It was truly a tropical paradise. Besides a canal in the back of the hotel property, a beach and golf course were nearby. There were coconut trees, hibiscus flowers, and soft, gentle breezes, which carried the scent of plumeria.

As we walked through the bungalows and headed to the main building, the sun was going down. Tiki torches lighted the pathway to the main building. We tried the back entrance of the building, but the door was locked, probably because it was near the swimming pool, which was closed. Though there was no cover over the pool, the area was dark and deserted. So, we went around the building and entered through the front door. The ice machine was in the rear. On the way there, we passed people in the dining room and those sitting in a nice, cozy bar, laughing, chatting, having a good time. Once we found the machine and filled our bucket, we headed back.

It had grown darker outside, also the wind had picked up. There were a few clouds. It looked like it might rain. It had rained the night before. Uneasy in the darkness and not wanting to be caught in the rain, we took the shortcut by the swimming pool. The area was wet and slippery in places. We could barely see the sidewalk. Impetuous as usual and running ahead, I slipped on some water near the pool and fell into the deep end! Dena screamed! She knew I couldn't swim, and she immediately started to jump in after me until she remembered that she couldn't swim either. As I thrashed and flailed my arms, I yelled for her to go get our parents. She said she didn't want to leave me. I suggested she get someone from the hotel, but the back

entrance was locked, and it would take too long to go around. She wouldn't leave, and I didn't want her to go. There was no one around to help. No lifeguard. No hotel employee. No guests. How was this story going to end?

When facing death, people see their life flash before their eyes. Or the life they won't have. So, I realized I'd never go to college, see Paris, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, and the Mona Lisa. I wouldn't see Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, and the Houses of Parliament in London. I wouldn't see Rome, the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel, and the Trevi Fountain. I would not see the Times Square and the Empire State Building in New York.

I would never marry and have at least two children.

I knew that if I could not get out of the pool, I would not live.

In 2007, a woman named Beth Moore published a groundbreaking book called *Get Out of That Pit*. Beth's book references life issues and situations people may need deliverance from. A well-known Bible teacher, she says there are various ways people can find themselves in a pit. One way is to be thrown in. She uses Joseph and his brethren in the Bible as an example. She also says you can jump in, like a person who chooses a certain lifestyle. She says you can be lured into a pit, and that you can slip into a pit. Though I hadn't heard of Beth Moore when I was just eight years old, slipping into a pit is the situation I found myself in.

About that she states, "You can slip in. We just weren't watching where we were going" (49). That's right. So, how do I get out? Will I live or die? In the seconds I thrashed in that swimming pool, (it seemed much longer) I realized that I needed an immediate solution. I needed help, but from where? I did not know God at the time, not the way I know Him now. If I had known Him, I would have asked for His help, but I didn't. However, I knew it was not my time to die. I still had some fight left in me. Beth also says in another part of the book, "Beloved,

God's will is for you to get out of that pit" (132). I believed it was. He wanted me to get out of that pool! So, I wracked my brain for a solution. I had never taken a swim class before. I had never seen anyone swim at all. My father was a Marine, so I knew he probably was an excellent swimmer, but my father was not around. My sister was yelling at me, but I could not hear her very well. I was distracted by my fears of drowning, and the process of taxing my brain for everything I had ever heard about swimming. Sadly, I couldn't remember anything. I felt helpless. I wanted to cry, but I was too afraid.

Then after a few seconds, I *did* recall something. It wasn't much, but it might help. So, I homed in on the memory, which took place when we were still living in Virginia. I had just awakened from a nap when I heard Dena telling my mother about her friend's trip to summer camp. The friend had hated summer camp. She had no friends and no one to really pal around with. Dena described how mean and strict the camp counselors were. The worst experience she related was about her friend's swim instructor. She said the woman scolded her. When my mother asked why, Dena said her friend was afraid of drowning.

After one particularly difficult lesson, the teacher had become frustrated. As the lesson was ending, she told my sister's friend, "If you would just stop wiggling and relax your body, I could teach you something." So, remembering those words, I relaxed my body. I allowed myself to go completely limp. Before, my body was sinking below the water level, and I was swallowing quite a bit of water, not enough to drown, but I had taken in a lot. However, once I relaxed my body, I suddenly felt light and buoyant, and to my surprise, I was no longer drowning. I was bobbing to the surface of the water like a cork! Then it only took a few seconds and some improvised gestures for me to propel myself over to the side of the pool where I dragged myself out of the water. While my nearly hysterical sister yanked me to my feet and

screamed at me all the way back to our bungalow, I was surprised none of the diners or people in the bar had seen or heard anything, but I guess the music was loud and the rum punch was good.

After our new Hawaiian friends heard the story of my near drowning, they said that was the way many of them had learned to swim. None had ever been to the YMCA or taken a formal swimming lesson. They were simply tossed into the water once they were able to walk, and they did all the rest on their own. They said what caused most people to drown was fear of the water, like Dena's friend. They said I needed to relax, to conquer my fear. They shared a lot of things about the islands with us, including legends of Pele, the Goddess of Fire, who supposedly appeared to many islanders in some form or fashion. The stories were scary and otherworldly.

I learned a lot during the three years I was in Hawaii. I learned to play baseball, to dance the hula in colorful muumuus and grass skirts, to play the piano, and to make beautiful flower leis. I also learned how to get along with the boys in most of my classes who were usually a chauvinistic group. But that's another story. It was a relief that not all of what I learned involved near-death experiences. Most of it was pleasant. How could it not be in the tropics?

It was many years later--after I had accomplished things, I feared I wouldn't--that I realized that what is keeping most of us from living life to the fullest is that we might be in some sort of pit and don't know how to get out. In my situation, I was stuck in a swimming pool and could not swim (or so I thought). While reading *Get Out of That Pit*, I realize that anyone can find him or herself in a pit, and we can get in those pits in various ways. We might have jumped in, fallen in, got thrown in or tricked in, but we need to find a way out because real life begins when we are finally free, and it does not matter what we are free from.

I also realize that the conversation I overheard between my sister and my mother was no accident. It was almost as if God had awakened me at the right moment to hear those words.

Being omniscient, He knew I would fall into a swimming pool and that remembering those words would save my life. So, Beth Moore is right. God wants us out of our pits as much as we do. When I reflect on that experience now, I am glad that was the case.

In Hawaii, our multi-racial church, The Garden of Prayer, figured prominently in all our activities. We attended Friday night prayer services and Sunday morning worship. It was at one of those services that I decided to get saved. When Bishop Reed gave the altar call, I came forward and was born again. My parents tried to stop me, but when the pastor said, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for such is the kingdom of Heaven" (Matt 19:14), all was well. This was the first step in my faith walk, but there were many more to come.

Our church had many luaus on the beach where we consumed raw fish, poi, haupia, fresh pineapple, roasted pig, coconut, guavas, mangoes, and papayas. We always went swimming before eating. Some went cliff diving or out in canoes, but we always had prayer first. One time our Puerto Rican friend's son came close to drowning, but the church prayed as a group, and he recovered. Our church was not a megachurch with a huge choir and massive organs and pianos. We were in a small frame building in Waimanalo. We had one piano and one organ.

Dr. Peters, the church organist, played at most services. The Hawaiians brought their ukuleles though, and just about all of them played very well. A few played the piano. The first Sunday of every month we attended our sister church, a much larger building in Honolulu. There was a large choir there and more people attended. Many of them were service members based at Hickam Air Force Base or Pearl Harbor. Every year, delegates from our church in California came to stay with us on the Marine Corps base where we eventually moved.

While growing up, I was always the new girl in nearly every school I attended. I did not mind living in a lot of different places and attending different schools, but I *did mind* having to

make new friends because I was shy. I was also very thin and was all arms, legs, and pigtaails until I entered high school, so I was teased a lot. Several friends compared me to Olive Oyl from the Popeye comics. This made me self-conscious and anxious to fit in. I prayed about this situation regularly, but it took many years before my prayers were answered.

After we left the Pali Palms Hotel, we rented a bungalow in Kailua on Manono Street. It was a small frame house surrounded by lots of greenery. In the back, there were coconut trees, a fig tree, and a papaya tree. There was a large mulberry tree in the front with the juiciest berries you could imagine. I'd climb on top of the carport just about every morning and pick a bucketful of them and share them with my friends. Our next-door neighbors had a guava tree. Sometimes we would fill a bucket with papayas for them, and they would fill the bucket with guavas for us.

When we first moved in, we realized we were the only black and English-speaking family on the block and throughout most of the area. The Chinese family across the street spoke Mandarin Chinese. There were three generations in the house, but the children, who attended Aikahi Elementary School with me, were the only ones who spoke English. Our Japanese neighbors on the left spoke no English, but they visited us often when they learned we knew a few Japanese words. My classroom teacher was Japanese and spoke it freely, so I picked up words here and there.

On the right, were a U.S. Naval officer and his European wife. There were three lovely, dark-haired children: Debbie, 7 Estefania (called Stevie), 6, and Peter, 4. The wife named Jana was from a Portuguese bullfighting family. She said Spanish was her first language though she spoke Portuguese, too. Like most Europeans, she also spoke English. We met her the day we moved in. Our Puerto Rican friend's sons helped move us. When Jana heard the brothers speaking Spanish as they unloaded the van, she immediately came over and introduced herself.

Though we were not the Latino family she assumed we were, we became friends. Jana's wealthy family was involved in banking, ranching, publishing, shipping, and other industries. Jana was a Jehovah's Witness. She and my mother read scriptures and prayed together. Some of my parents' Biblical beliefs changed due to Jana's influence. We no longer had huge birthday parties, and Halloween was verboten. Jana was a meticulous housekeeper who always kept her daughters neat and clean. With their glossy dark hair and beautiful clothes, they looked like dolls in a Sears catalog. They were not as rough and tumble as me.

I was a raging tomboy who played baseball with the boys in the street, attended cock fights, climbed trees, and swung from branches like Tarzan. My father constantly reminded me that I was a girl and not a boy. Many times, he ordered me out of the trees and into the house to help my mother, but when he left for work, I'd scale the top of the carport to pick mulberries. I was determined to enjoy a yard with so much greenery.

Over the years, my dad and I would lock horns quite a bit, especially when I reached my teens. I challenged him at every end. When he said to turn right, I turned left. When he said to turn left, I turned right. I couldn't resist. He was too strict! I frequently violated curfew when I was older and would usually be punished. My friends advised me to calm down. One friend said, "Remember, the prom is coming up." I assured them we still had a few years for that, and by that time I would be eighteen, and things would be fine, and they were. While I was eight years old in Hawaii, however, I was still hardheaded, and it had its consequences.

My sister scolded me for playing with Reenie and Johnny who were considered the neighborhood bad kids. Like most Hawaiians, they were a racial mixture. Their father was a blond Irish fisherman. Their mother was a biracial Hawaiian woman with beautiful blue/green eyes and long, dark wavy hair. Whenever their father went out to sea, Reenie and Johnny got into

all types of mischief. They climbed neighbors' trees and stole mangoes. They used neighbors' water hoses or swimming pools without permission. Once Johnny, who was two years older than me, begged me to race him in a rusty race car. I was a bit of a daredevil and often raced boys one way or another, so I took on the challenge. Though I won, I cut my arm badly on the sharp metal. Johnny took me home. Then he ran away. My father rushed me to the hospital where I got eight stitches and wore a bandage for several weeks. I still have the scar on my right forearm. When I entered the Army, they listed that scar as one of my distinguishing features.

In Hawaii, I completed second grade. I had four different teachers that year. From September to October in Quantico, Virginia, I had had Mrs. Hintz, a middle-aged white woman with sandy-colored hair who loved green sweaters. From October to February in Chicago, I had Mrs. Stafford, a chubby African American woman who wore glasses and loved for us to read. In Hawaii, I had two different teachers. The first was a Chinese teacher whose name I do not remember because we were only there for a few days before moving to Manono Street.

However, the second of my second-grade teachers in Hawaii, from March to the end of the semester, was Mrs. Inioshi, a slender, petite Japanese woman with a bright smile, who spoke to us in English and Japanese. Mrs. Inioshi, with her formal customs and desire for perfection, was the most memorable teacher I had that school year or ever, and I've had a lot of teachers. Besides being energetic, she was extremely formal, strict, and a stickler for details.

She made us line up at the classroom door every morning and wait for her. We would greet her by saying, "Ohayo, Sensei," to which she would respond, "Ohayo, seito," and only then could we remove our shoes, enter the room, and take our seats. She also counted out students for special projects. "Ichi, ni, san, shi, go," she would say, pointing at certain students to line up or take their places in a reading group. I was always in the top reading group, which made me very

proud, and since she rewarded diligence, I often received a gold star and a warm smile from her before the day was over. I did not make any friends in her class though. Nor did I make friends in any other class in second grade. You'd think that attending four different schools in one school year and having four teachers of different ethnicities would have been enough of a challenge for me, but the real challenge was simply trying to fit in and make new friends.

Debbie and Stevie, the next-door neighbors, became my best friends. They called me their "mejor amiga." Because their mother was a teacher, we played school nearly every day during the summer. We ate breakfast together every morning when their uncle Joachim, a matador, came up from Mexico to visit. He looked like a young Johnny Depp. Jana was ecstatic. She had lit candles and prayed for him before all of his bullfights. Now, he was there. He was my first Spanish teacher and taught me the names of breakfast foods and other things while we ate. In the evening, he played his guitar while the neighbors gathered around and sang well known Mexican songs like "La Cucaracha," "Cielito Lindo," and "Besame Mucho."

When he finished singing, the entire neighborhood would quiet down. Lights would go out, and we'd all go to sleep. He was very popular in bullfighting circles and was often written about in Latin American tabloids. Jana said he was a cat with nine lives. Besides being a bull fighter, he'd raced cars professionally, went wild game-hunting in Africa, and lived with the Maasai in Kenya. She said he dove off cliffs in Acapulco, went sky diving, and hunted sharks and barracudas in Great Barrier Reef in Australia. She also said he was a high stakes gambler who won large pots in Macao. I didn't know it then, but he'd become my idol and role model.

The children in the neighborhood were fascinated with him and followed him around. He was also followed by curious women and the media. We introduced him to our Spanish-speaking friends at church. They showed him around and introduced him to Hawaii. We got housing on

base when Jana's husband was transferred to San Francisco. I hated to leave my friends. I hoped we'd meet again someday. Debbie said I was still her "mejor amiga." She said, "If we ever lose contact, come to the Wellington Hotel in Madrid during the month of May." She said there was a bullfighting festival there every year, and her family always attended. She said to just ask for her.

Many years later, I did go to the Wellington Hotel in May for the Festival of San Isidro. What Debbie and I didn't know was that we would be adults someday, and we'd marry, and our names would change. Therefore, I didn't know who to ask for. There were plenty of women named Debbie. I wracked my brain for a solution. The hotel was full of bullfighters, breeders, their families, and their fans. There were lavish parties and dinners every evening. The media were always around. The atmosphere was charged with energy and excitement.

In the elevator one morning, I realized that this was the hotel where Ava Gardner had sat in the bar for hours, knocking back drink after drink waiting for the bullfighter she was dating. It was also the hotel where Ernest Hemingway interviewed bullfighters for his book *Death in the Afternoon*. Though I never saw Debbie again, I enjoyed the festival, which included dancing in the street, art fairs, parties, and an entire month of bullfights. I attended the festival twice, thinking of my friend each time. Years ago, we received a call from her brother Peter when he entered the Naval Academy in Great Lakes, Illinois, which was not far from Chicago.

He said the family was fine. When he said Debbie had become a bullfighter, I was totally shocked. When we were children, our mothers decided we'd all become schoolteachers. They said it was the most honorable profession for young women, but Debbie and I had always wanted more. We vowed to run away and live on her uncle's ranch in Mexico. That, of course, never happened, but I joined the Army and nursed wounded men to find more. Debbie had become a bullfighter to find her version of more. I wondered what the future would bring.

Chapter Five

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; lean not unto thine own understanding” (Prov 3:5)

In Hawaii, I wanted a best friend more than anything, someone to eat lunch with, to walk home with, and to hang out with after school. Yet it never happened. I was alone. On the Marine Corp Air Base at Kaneohe Bay, one of the bases bombed by the Japanese during Pearl Harbor, I attended Mokapu Elementary School for third, fourth, and part of fifth grade. As usual, I was the only black girl in all my classes. There was a black boy named Bobby and a Japanese boy named Michael, but that was it for the minority contingent.

The summer before I entered third grade, I began taking piano lessons. My music teacher was Dr. Peters. At thirty-six, he was the church organist, and my parents’ best friend. One of his grandfathers owned a sugarcane plantation in Brazil, and the other lectured at Oxford University. Dr. Peters had dark hair and unfocused gray eyes. He had been blinded in a bad fall when he was eight, but he was an excellent musician. He played piano and organ and was the producer of our church’s evening radio broadcast. He also owned a record label and recording studio.

Several of his students had recorded on his label. The record he played for us was “Uncle Sam Gave Me a State for Christmas,” which was about Hawaii becoming the 50th state. The flip side was “Mele Kalikimaka,” which is Hawaiian for Merry Christmas. The songs were sung by his student named Bernadette, a 12-year-old Filipino girl. He had also named his record label for her. He played us recordings from some of his other students, too. The fact that they were all female didn’t make sense until much later. Dr. J.D. Peters was my confidante, best friend, and mentor, the person I turned to with my questions about life. He promised to make me a star.

As I sang and played scales on the piano, he taped every lesson. Then he played the tape back while I played baseball with the boys in the neighborhood. Being invited to join the team

meant they considered me a worthy ally. I didn't worry about by Dr. Peters though. He and I were always together, either playing the piano, listening to music, or just talking about life, but one day, things went too far. While my mother answered the telephone extension in the kitchen, he closed the bedroom door and took advantage of the trust I had placed in him. I cried for several days afterward and avoided him when he came to visit. Dena was the first to notice and eventually dragged the story out of me. My parents were devastated.

My father had just been ordained at the church. He and mother discussed what to do. This challenged their faith. If they reported the assault to the police, he would be arrested. That meant he would no longer produce our radio broadcast, which had saved many people's lives. Our broadcast reached people in Hawaii and on the mainland. Some of their testimonies took our breath away. One woman testified that she was completely broke, had no way to feed her six children, and had decided to drown them. She was placing them in burlap sacks and planning to take them to the beach when she turned on the radio to drown out their cries and screams.

Somehow, she heard our broadcast. The pastor's wife was singing "It Took a Miracle." When the song ended, the woman called in and accepted Christ as her savior. On Sunday, she brought her children to church and testified about her "miracle." Soon, they found her a job and a new home. We were happy we could help her and her children. Another call was from a famous Hollywood actor who was planning to jump from the top of the Honolulu Hilton. Something had gone wrong in his life and career, and he wanted to end it all. As he headed to the roof, he heard us on the radio. He stopped and phoned our call center. Someone led him to Christ.

His testimony was that he had never even attended church before and never knew God actually cared. He became a Christian and spread the word to others. While in Hawaii, I experienced many things, but there was nothing as profound as seeing people's lives transformed

by Christ. There were many other calls, but those are the ones I remember most vividly. So, we decided not to tell anyone about Dr. Peters. I was an emotional wreck, however. I had not only been sexually abused, but I had also been betrayed. He was my friend. I had trusted him. How could he do that to me? I could hardly sleep at night. Soon, I broke out in boils and blisters, sort of like monkeypox but only on the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet.

Crying pitifully, I asked my mother, “Why did this happen to me? I’m a new Christian. What did I do wrong? Doesn’t God love me?” My mother hugged me and said I was like Job. “Job didn’t do anything wrong. It happened because you were good, not because you were bad. Job recovered, you will, too.” In the meantime, my parents and my doctors tried to find a cure.

Although US soldiers are posted all over the world, my military doctors were baffled by my condition. They had seen nothing like it. They even called hospitals in other countries, as far away as the UK. Unable to determine the cause, they decided to treat me with penicillin. I received an injection at least once a week and took oral penicillin, too. I also had to soak my hands and feet in a special soap. I lost fingernails and could barely walk or feed myself.

I always thought my father was the strongest man I knew, but he broke down and wept when he saw the blisters on my hands and feet. Eventually, I got better, but it didn’t happen overnight. For many years I had to avoid using strong detergent to clean or wash dishes. Just touching it would cause a breakout. The only blessing, if you want to call it a blessing, was that my sisters sometimes washed dishes for me. They didn’t like it, but they had to do it.

When I was in high school, we heard Dr. Peters had married a woman from a Catholic church. When they divorced, he married a Hawaiian woman from our former church whose children I once played with, and they had a son together. It wasn’t until I was near fifty that my mother asked exactly what had happened. What had he done? By that time, he was dead and

buried and unable to be prosecuted. Yet, even after many years, I couldn't share the details. They were too painful. So, I simply said that my heart had been broken and my innocent life shattered, but I had remained a virgin. She left it at that. Yet the memory has stayed with me forever. I never cut a record, like he promised. It was like I had been on a casting couch, used and discarded. I've heard that 1 in 5 girls are sexually abused and 1 in 20 boys. The ages children are most vulnerable is 7 to 13, also many children are abused by family members and close friends.

This trauma separated me from my sisters and made me feel dirty and ruined in some way. I was the weirdo, the one who was sexually assaulted. They were not. Therefore, something must be wrong with me. For years I resented this, especially when they made fun of me. Also, they lied and exaggerated their own experiences to gain the sympathy and compassion that I received. It also caused me to withdraw from people more than before. Books became my best friends, and I retreated into them wholeheartedly.

Though I don't remember third grade, probably due to the sexual trauma, I went on with my life. I was elected class secretary in fourth grade and vice president in fifth. I also remember the girls and boys were always having battles. The boys in my class felt all females were inferior. I understood them taking pride in their manhood. We were on a military base. Their fathers were fighter pilots, company commanders, drill sergeants, military police officers, captains of Naval vessels, and they performed many other jobs that are considered masculine and manly.

By contrast, their mothers were mostly housewives who raised children and prepared meals. While their fathers were off fighting wars and saving the world, their mothers were trying to decide what to prepare for dinner, which drapes would look best in the living room, and what types of roses to plant in the front or backyard. Things are different for girls today. Their mothers are doctors, nurses, teachers, dentists, U.S. senators, and school principals. That wasn't the case

back in the day, and the boys certainly let us know it. The worst thing they said was that no female would ever be president of the United States because girls were not tough enough or smart enough. It made me angry and determined to prove them wrong. Things got better when I joined the boys' baseball team. I was the class name-taker, and it started with them chasing me home to get their names erased from the "bad list" and ended with us becoming friends. I did not have a best friend then, so I was happy to make friends with them and to play centerfield.

During practice, they taught me how to bat a ball, how to catch, and steal home. My self-confidence soared each time. When we made our first double-play in the outfield, we jumped, shouted, and high-fived each other. When we made our first triple-play, we went totally berserk. Our opponents couldn't believe it, especially when I tossed my hat in the air and they saw my pigtails. I will never forget the look on their faces or the thrill I felt when I heard the words, "No way a girl caught that ball! I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it!"

I soon became a feminist and advocate for women's rights. Though it started in the classroom in fourth grade, it continues to this day. I am still crusading for women and learning how to negotiate with the boys. I am looking forward to our first woman in the White House, pleased that we have a Supreme Court with four women, the largest number of females ever!

In Hawaii, the years flew by rapidly. When I entered sixth grade, we moved to California. I will happily admit that California was one of the best places we ever lived. The weather was always spectacular, and it seemed the people lived an entirely different lifestyle than those in other parts of the country. I even feel that way now. Every time I visit Los Angeles, I feel like I am stepping into a different world. It has nothing to do with Hollywood and the glitz and glamour of the movies; it is just the way Californians live. We rented a house in Santa Ana for several weeks before moving to El Toro Marine Base. I attended Irving Junior High School,

which has a different name now. This was one of my better years in school. The students were required to take Spanish classes in southern California the same way they are required to take English, math, or science everywhere in the U.S. Having already gotten a head start from our neighbor and becoming close friends with a Mexican girl in my class named Berta Gomez who taught me a lot of Spanish, I didn't do too poorly.

Our teacher, Mrs. Stone, planned many activities. There were essay contests, poetry fairs, and spelling bees. She encouraged creative writing, and some of my classmates were gifted in that area. I was the only black girl in the class, too, but I made several friends, and we studied together. We also sang in the choir and performed at Christmas. Berta Gomez was the class delegate to the National Spanish Competition, and I was her alternate. "Don't get sick or be absent," I told her because I knew I couldn't do as well as she. I was a runner-up in the *What America Means to Me* essay contest, too. But I was class delegate to the National Spelling Bee.

I was the only black student in the contest. My blonde friend Hazel and I both represented the sixth grade. She was in the class next door. I don't remember the other sixth grade delegate, but we were all nervous. The contest came with a set of rules. You had to pronounce the word, spell it, and pronounce it again. Even if you spelled correctly, you could be disqualified for not following instructions. To our horror, about seven or eight students failed on one of the first words, which was "America." As far as I can recall, all of them spelled the word correctly. A few even spelled "American" thinking they heard incorrectly. Many, however, were disqualified because they became nervous and forgot to follow instructions.

It wasn't until the final student spelled America with a capital "A" and was invited to stay that we realized capital letters counted, too. I made it to a final round and misspelled a word I had never used before: shrubbery. When I realized how simple the word was, I recalled what

Hazel had suggested when we began studying together: “Let’s do the easy words first. Then work on the hard ones.” Her strategy might have worked if we had used it. Instead, we worked on some hard words, just to make sure we could spell them, and wound up losing to a fifth grader. We were all heralded by our classrooms though and treated like conquering heroes.

While in California, we also visited our family in Los Angeles and in Oakland. We didn’t have a church at that time, but we held to the same religious beliefs. The holidays passed without us changing much in our way of life. Just like in Hawaii, there were no Christmas trees, no gifts, no decorations, or big dinners. In Hawaii, we had eaten Christmas dinner with our church, which still celebrated Christmas. My father invited servicemen who were away from their families during the holidays. They distributed toys and food to children in the church and neighborhood.

Thanksgiving was the only holiday my family really celebrated. We knew Jesus was not born on December 25, and that celebrating his birthday would coincide with a celebration by the Pagans to usher in the Winter Solstice. We knew there was no Easter Bunny. The celebration of Easter was the festival of Ishtar, a Pagan ritual to usher in spring and harvesttime. My parents also hated Halloween and “The Devil’s Night” for all that Satan represents. So, Thanksgiving it was. We always had a huge Thanksgiving dinner, thankful and grateful for all God had given us.

My family also commemorated U.S. history and the friendly Native American people who befriended the new settlers. We celebrated with a huge turkey, dressing, cranberry sauce, and all the rest, and it didn’t matter where we lived. My father still invited the servicemen from his base to join us, and they frequently did, thankful to be alive.

We left California after a year and returned to Chicago. That year my father was sent to Vietnam. We wrote letters and sent tapes while he was in Da Nang. Then his unit was attacked. The names of dead soldiers appeared on television daily. My father’s name was never listed, but

we were anxious and afraid when we had not heard from him for weeks. Was he wounded? Missing? A prisoner of war? On the main gate at every military base, there was a sign that read: “Have a nice day, with a huge yellow sun with a smiley face. Then next to it was a black sign with white lettering that read, “POWS and MIAs never have a nice day.”

When more weeks went by, we feared the worst. We didn’t say it out loud, but there could only be one reason we hadn’t heard from him. None of the other wives in his unit had heard from their husbands either. So, my mother, aunts, uncles, and grandmother wrote letters and called our congressmen, to no avail. Not getting anywhere, my thrice-widowed, feisty grandmother Inez grew frustrated and declared to us, “I’m going to call the mayor, the governor, and even the president himself if I have to, to find out what happened to your daddy.”

In the meantime, our classroom teacher, Mrs. Balanoff, planned a field trip to see *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, with Rex Harrison and Charlton Heston who played Moses in *The Ten Commandments*. The movie was about Michelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel in Rome. We needed to pay for the movie, bring our own lunch, and pay for the bus. My mother said she didn’t have enough money. With my father missing in action, we had not received mail from him, with money he sent her monthly to pay bills. We were running low on necessities. She had borrowed from my grandparents twice already and didn’t want to do it again.

I really wanted to see the movie. The Sistine Chapel was on my list of favorite places to visit when I finally got to Rome, and I wanted a preview. When my best friend Mabel, a beautiful girl with dark chocolate-brown skin and a round face, walked me home a few days before the class trip, she urged me to ask my mother again. She said she wouldn’t go if I couldn’t go. So, I begged my mother for the money. While Mabel watched television, my mother pulled me into the back room of my grandparents’ home to explain our financial situation, also to say

she still had not heard from my dad. When I suggested we pray about it, we knelt in the bedroom and prayed for my father's safety. Then my mother asked God for enough money for a bag of groceries and for me to take the trip with my class. We prayed about a few other things, too, and then we said "Amen." As I walked Mabel home, I felt optimistic. I didn't know what would happen, but after praying I felt a burden had somehow lifted. I knew God heard my prayer.

On the way back home, I took a different route. Instead of crossing the street, I stayed on the same side and passed a grocery store. When I passed a laundromat, I saw a wallet lying in the middle of the sidewalk. Without thinking, I picked it up and searched for a name and address. There was none. I looked around. There was nobody nearby, nor was there anyone in a car at the curb. I took the wallet home and showed it to my mother. Inside, we counted just enough money for her to buy a bag of groceries and for me to take the trip with my class!

She thanked God so fervently that tears ran down her cheeks. I was surprised to see my mother so happy. Her *real* happiness was a few days off though. On the day of my class trip, my friends and I saw the film, ate lunch together, and all vowed to visit Rome one day. I was still daydreaming about a trip to Italy the next day when I was called down to the principal's office. I didn't know what was going on, but I was told to go straight home. So, I did.

When I entered the house, I saw my grandmother and my father's siblings. My sister Dena was there and so were our other grandparents. My mother was on the phone. Because she was smiling and crying, I had no idea what was happening. Was my father in a hospital? Was he seriously wounded but going to live? Was he a POW? I had no idea. Then my mother handed me the phone. It was my dad. He sounded far away, but I could tell it was him. He said he was at work, doing his duties, when he was told to report to his Commanding Officer (CO). He said a person is sent to his CO when something very good, like a promotion, commendation or transfer

is happening or something very bad, like a court martial, demotion, or office hours was happening. My dad said he knew he wasn't up for promotion, commendation, or transfer. He also knew he was not facing disciplinary action. That only left one thing: something must have happened to one of *us*. He said he prayed all the way to his CO's chambers.

When he got there, he was given the phone and was shocked to find himself speaking to President Lyndon Baines Johnson! He said the president asked his name, rank, and serial number. When he was sure he was speaking with my father, President Johnson allegedly exclaimed, "Your mama's about to drive me crazy!" He said my grandmother had called the White House switchboard for fifteen days straight before he took her call. He said she apologized for disturbing him. Then she told him my dad's unit was missing. She said as commander-in-chief of all the U.S. armed forces that if anyone could find my father it was him.

The president and my grandmother spoke for a while. Later, he met with his Joint Chiefs of Staff and located my father's unit and learned what had happened. Then he phoned my dad. He asked about my father's health and welfare. Before he hung up, he told my father he was blessed to be so loved. He also told him to call home and speak to us. So, there we were. I was in Chicago, but I was talking to my father in Vietnam. It was incredible, but it was true.

As my mother gave her testimony at different churches, I realized God had answered our prayers while we were yet praying. When my father passed away in 2017, I shared this story at his funeral and got many shocked reactions. Yes, President Lyndon B. Johnson phoned my father in Vietnam, and it was awesome! Later, we moved back to Cherry Point, North Carolina, for a year, and attended schools that had only been integrated for three years. My sister's high school graduating class held its first integrated prom there, which was a huge success. Then my father retired, and we came home.

Chapter Six

We moved back to Chicago just as I was starting high school. With a little help, we found a red-brick bungalow in an old Irish Catholic neighborhood, which was constantly in a state of change. When we first moved in, there were five taverns and nightclubs within one block of the nearest Catholic church. Things changed, however, as more African Americans moved in, and more small businesses sprung up. Calumet High School, a stately antique, which had been around since 1909, was just three blocks from our new house. I was new to the area, only knew one person, and was eager to make friends. Instead, I made an enemy on the first day of school.

At fourteen, I was still extremely thin and shy, and weighed 98 pounds. I was happy when I got new clothes to start high school because I didn't have much of a wardrobe. The outfit I wore the first day was a dark brown skirt and jacket set with a gold tank top. I wore it with brown shoes with gold buckles and gold tights. I wore my hair in a ponytail with several gold bangles and gold earrings. Yes, I wore jewelry then. I was happy to be wearing a skirt and not my brother's blue jeans. I felt like a real high school student, like the other girls at school.

Things went well in my English class, my math class, and my history class. However, in my science class I hit a bump in the road. A neatly dressed male classmate with a GI haircut named James Wright took the seat next to me and struck up a conversation. I chatted with him for a while about us both being freshman and how we hated physics, but he got the wrong idea. When he asked for my phone number, I told him I had a boyfriend, which was true, but he didn't believe me. He harassed me after class that day and every day for the next few weeks.

He followed me to my locker and often asked to walk me home. When I reminded him that I had a boyfriend, he declared, "You're lying! You're just trying to play me." I assured him there was no game. I was already in a relationship. My boyfriend David, a possessive eighteen-

year-old, had already finished school and lived in another area, but we saw each other on weekends. James was so disagreeable that I wondered why I tried to explain. I was glad when my locker mates showed up. One day I gave him the wrong phone number just to get rid of him.

My friend Lynn and I giggled and hurried off when I told her. We had a gym class together every day after my science class, so she always tried to be there in case he tried to threaten me. I told her that I had told James I was in love with David, but James refused to back off. However, I was determined not to let him ruin my first semester of high school. I ate lunch with Lynn and Anna every day. We discussed our classes, our teachers, and new friends.

English was my favorite class. We wrote essays and compositions, read stories, and worked on English grammar. I told them my math class was tolerable. I would never be a mathematician, but I could do the work, and I thought my teacher was strict but fair. He never smiled, but he knew mathematics. I would earn an A in algebra, but I didn't know it then. My Modern World History class was okay, too, even though I hated reading about the French and American Revolutions, wondering why they had to be so bloody.

But I detested science. I did not want to study physics or geology, but the biology class I had wanted to take was full, so I had no choice. When you register late, that's what happens. I also didn't like science class because there were quite a few male students. There were five guys for just about every female. It was worse when the teacher assigned seats. In addition to the other classes, I was taking gym and Freshman Chorus. After singing in a choir in California, I wanted to sing in high school. Freshman Chorus was for beginners. It was where we got our feet wet and learned what we could do. The choir I really aspired to join was the Acapella Chorus, the top choir in the school. Only singers with outstanding voices and a recommendation from the director of Freshman Chorus were admitted into that choir. The director of the Acapella Chorus,

Alice Maguire, also directed the Girls Glee Club, one of the most popular choirs in the school. The girls wore white blazers, cranberry-colored skirts, and sky-blue bowties, our school colors.

Alice Maguire was an energetic blonde Irish woman who knew true talent when she heard it. Many of her students became rich and famous, and a few, I was to learn, were in my graduating class at Calumet High School. At the beginning of class, she gave you the Debbie Allen speech from *Fame*. If you had big dreams and wanted fame, she had the connections you'd need, but you also had to pay your dues. I am proud to say that several of my classmates paid their dues well and received those recommendations. I love watching them on television.

Back to high school, David asked me to go steady, and when I agreed, he gave me his class ring, which had a bright red stone in the center. It was too large, so I wore it around my neck. Then I switched to wearing it on my hand by wrapping masking tape around it to make it fit. It was still too loose. One day in science class, James saw me twirling the ring around on my finger and asked to see it. When I refused to show him, he grabbed my hand. I jerked away from him, but he pulled harder. When I checked my hand, the ring had fallen off. I couldn't find it on the floor. He must have taken it, but he claimed he didn't have it. I couldn't see it anywhere.

The students behind us said James was the culprit. I reported it to the teacher who said he'd look into it, but he never did. I also reported it to the principal, but I still didn't get the ring back. James claimed he didn't have it, and they couldn't prove that he did. One morning on my way to school, he tried to force me to come home with him. I pulled away and ran. He chased me down the street, dragged me into a large vestibule, and tried to kiss me. I pushed him away, and when a woman came out of one of the apartments and left the building, I ran out right after her.

James grabbed me and forced me into another building. Fortunately, an off-duty police officer saw what happened, and James was arrested. According to the police, James said I was

his girlfriend and that we were just playing a game. He also said we cut class together all the time. I was shocked speechless by his lies. The police checked his story with the attendance office at school and learned he was lying. He was forced to remain in jail until his parents arrived. Eventually, he was released and came back to school. It was very embarrassing. The boys called him Jack the Ripper, but it didn't seem to bother him.

When I told David what happened and explained about the ring, he didn't believe me. He didn't believe a guy I claimed I had no interest in would be so persistent. Why pursue a girl who is not interested when there were other girls in the school? How could I explain James? I had never met anyone like him. His audacity was rare. David was right. Most guys would give up, but James just pressed on. It was almost as if he refused to be rejected. What type of guy refuses to be rejected? I would find out years later when I was a graduate student and was stalked by two men I had once dated. One was a police officer. The other worked for an internet security firm. It took three government agencies to get them both off me. One was arrested and deported.

At that time in high school, I was just confused. When another girl named DeDe in our science class said he followed her home, beat her, and sexually assaulted her, I couldn't decide if he was really insane or just plain evil. I agreed to go to court with her to testify what he had done to me. She was badly bruised and emotionally shaken. However, James abducted me twice more after that, one time, dragging me into the auditorium, and threatening me with a knife. Though I managed to escape with the help of security and the police, my patience was wearing thin.

David eventually broke up with me. Though I was sad, I didn't have time to grieve. I was failing just about every class in school. James had learned my schedule and followed me from class to class. Whenever I exited a classroom, he'd chase me down the hall, even into the girls' bathroom where I thought I'd be safe. He didn't care. He wanted to make me miserable. When I

got home, I was too stressed to study or do homework. My parents didn't know what to do; this ordeal was testing their faith as much as mine. My father didn't believe me at first. He had heard James's lies in the police station. Dena was like David. She thought something was strange. Why continue to pursue a girl who wasn't interested? The police were the only ones who believed me and were trying to help. They urged me to go to court, and I was willing until James's lawyer called and threatened me with lies to keep me from doing so. I didn't know what to do.

I wanted a normal high school experience. I wanted to pass my classes. I wanted to graduate. As I sat in my counselor's office and discussed my dismal grades and why I couldn't concentrate in class, I felt overwhelmed and wept for about thirty minutes during which Mrs. Benjamin, a kind, motherly woman with silver-gray hair, waited patiently and listened quietly. In addition to being a counselor, she was also our gym teacher and swim instructor who always reminded me to relax in the water, not to fight it. I had to pass swim class to pass freshman gym.

She was a great instructor, but it wasn't her teaching I remember most. It was her words of wisdom. She asked about my dreams. What was I planning to do with my life? Where did I see myself after high school? I told her that I wanted to go to college, to study nursing, that I wanted to travel and join the Army. I told her that one day I hoped to marry and have children. After telling her that, she encouraged me to focus on my dreams and not to let this trauma set me back. I remember her saying: "This will not always be your life. Tell yourself that this too, shall pass. Then plan your future and walk toward it." I dried my eyes and went back to class.

Later, I walked home and thought about what she said. Was it true? Would I be free of James one day and be happy? The police were waiting when I got there. I had told my parents about the threatening phone calls. The police said they could not accuse the lawyer if I had no proof. It could have been one of James's friends or it could have been James disguising his

voice. Though they said they believed me, there was nothing they could do. After they left, feeling pathetic, I finally fell on my face before God and begged for His help. I wept for nearly an hour, trying to get all the pain, rage, and frustration out of my system.

I had survived another trauma just the year before. When we were in North Carolina, I babysat for The Hudsons. Their son George was in the same Cub Scout troop with my brothers. There were three tow-headed children: George was 8, Marylynn was 7, and Joey was 5. George and Marylynn were great kids, no trouble at all. Joey was a little spoiled. He hated bedtime and could be cranky. It turned out that Joey wasn't the real problem though.

On New Year's Eve, the Hudsons attended a big bash with some friends. They said they wouldn't be back until the wee hours of the morning. Mr. Hudson always picked me up and drove me home, so that was no problem. The children were fine that night. My friend Debbie sent her brother Jimmy, who worked for a pizza parlor, over with pizza, and they went to bed right after eating. Around midnight, Mr. Hudson returned alone. He said he needed more champagne. As he grabbed a few bottles, I could tell he had already consumed too much.

When he made an indecent proposal to me involving money, new clothes, credit cards, and a bunch of other items, I felt ill. I was only fourteen years old! This man led a Cub Scout troop. How could he do this? He grabbed me and tried to kiss me just as his neighbor came in. He and the neighbor talked about me as if I wasn't even there. After the horror of Dr. Peters, I became frightened and ran from the house. It was after midnight. Fireworks lit up the sky. I could hear shouts of "Happy New Year" as I ran down the sidewalk. When I heard what sounded like gunshots, I ran away from the sidewalk and skirted the woods, which was scary.

After their first camping trip, my brothers told us what their Boy Scout leader said about the animals in the woods near Cherry Point. There were foxes, alligators, black bears, deer,

turtles, wolves, rabbits, and a variety of dangerous snakes. I felt like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* trapped in the forest with her friends. Only there was no Yellow Brick Road, no Scarecrow, Tinman, Cowardly Lion, or little dog named Toto. There just me, and I was terrified.

I wept as I ran, mumbling to myself, “Gators, snakes, and bears, oh my. Gators, snakes, and bears, oh my.” I was afraid of the animals, afraid of being shot by New Year’s celebrants, and afraid of the men who were following me. I could hear them calling, apologizing, saying they realized I was just in eighth grade, not a high schooler as they thought. So, it was okay to proposition a high school girl? They said they wouldn’t harm me, but I didn’t trust them. Young black girls and boys were killed in the South all the time. What could I do?

In December, the temperatures were in the 60’s during the day but cooler at night. I didn’t have a jacket or sweater. Though we were on a military base, I knew there were unsavory characters around. What saved me from the animals were the gunshots and fireworks. With the exception of a squirrel or two that I saw, they probably stayed deep in the woods to avoid danger. Humans, unfortunately, couldn’t hide in the woods forever, so I knew I had to come out. The men promised not to hurt me, and I decided to trust them. Shaking with cold and fright, I dried my eyes and blew my nose on Kleenex they gave me as they drove me home.

My parents were furious, but I was not harmed in any way, just shaken up. My father had nasty words with the two men, but it didn’t go any further. I often think about that night, knowing that I probably wouldn’t be alive if the men had been more nefarious and intoxicated than they seemed. With this latest trauma in my life, I wondered if I would ever be free from danger. Why did bad things keep happening to me. When would I be safe?

The next day as James chased me down another hallway, I ran into the principal’s new office by accident. I didn’t know he had relocated. Black student leaders were demonstrating

against the almost all-white administration, and Mr. LaForce's job was on the line. Many flyers had been sent to his office, demanding his resignation. While the predominately black student body desired a multi-racial faculty, they demanded a black principal. That day, I really didn't care. I just needed his help. So, I told him the situation. He already knew most of it from my first visit to his office. Security and others filled him in on what had happened since then.

We chatted for a few moments. Then a few days after my untimely visit, he called us both into the office with our parents and announced that James was being expelled. The principal said if he was even 200 feet near the school he would be arrested. That was fine with me. I knew then I would be alright. I would survive. I would get through the horrible ordeal. I would study hard, pull up all my grades, and complete my freshman year.

I would enjoy high school. To prove it, I ate lunch with my friends every day, went to parties, sang with my choir during our Christmas program, which was truly spectacular, went to our school's championship basketball game, and met Eddie who was a senior and a star basketball player. We started going steady. My friendship with him would last for many years.

The last day of school I cleaned out my locker, happy that I had passed all my classes and excited about the long, hot summer. Then suddenly, there was James Wright. Too bad Lynn and Anna had already taken their things from the locker and were meeting me at Creamsville, our neighborhood hangout. It was a fast-food place that sold different flavors of ice cream along with hamburgers, cheeseburgers, fries, and other goodies. We didn't eat there often because it was always crowded, and their prices were high.

But after school that day, a choirmate, who years later became a rich and famous Grammy Award-winning singer, was performing there with her group after the last class of the day. Back then, her name was Yvette. She sang with a girls' group. Later, she'd call herself

Chaka Khan and sing with a group called Rufus. Today she sings alone. We were all fans even in high school and loved to hear her sing regardless of who it was with. If you have ever heard Chaka Khan, you know what I mean.

Well, anyway James threatened me with a knife when I tried to scream. He grabbed me by the arm and forced me down the stairs. No one was around except a janitor who was at the other end of the hall. He was buffing floors and wouldn't have heard me scream anyway. I had no choice but to go with James. I didn't know where he was taking me, but I wracked my brain for ways to get away. We were bound to run into someone who could help me.

When we finally reached the ground floor, he pushed opened the door and saw the area was packed with people. It seemed many others wanted to hear Yvette sing, too. As they waited, recent graduates signed each other's yearbooks, took pictures, and showed off their diplomas. Their parents and friends took photos, too. There were moms, dads, babies in strollers, bicycle riders, and students showing off their new cars. It was like *The Fast and the Furious*. Within the large crowd, I saw a girl I knew walking by. "Amy," I yelled, "are you going to see Yvette?" When she said, yes, I jerked away from James and ran toward her.

When he tried to chase me, some of the graduates eyed him suspiciously and blocked his path. I caught up to my classmate, and we hurried to Creamsville, a half block away and joined Lynn, Anna, as others to hear Yvette sing. Her voice, as always, was spectacular. The next time we would hear her sing she would be on television.

When I got home, I thanked God for delivering me from a boy I knew was seriously deranged. God alone had accomplished more than the police, my parents, and the principal all put together. When I learned James was arrested for hurting another girl, DeDe and I celebrated, so glad to be free. I never saw him again. Thank God!

Chapter Seven

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth...liberally” (Jas 1:5)

Many other events took place in high school, and most of them happened in my freshman year. One issue was in the attic in our new house. The previous owners, an Irish-Catholic family, had moved out in a hurry. They had left plenty of furniture and appliances behind, which was a huge help because we were moving back to Chicago from North Carolina. They also left clothing and stacks of paintings. The wife was an enormously gifted artist. There was a draftsman’s table and easel in the basement though most of the paintings were in the attic.

As we leafed through the paintings, we saw pictures of Nativity scenes, crucifixion scenes, scenes with angels, and pictures of priests and nuns. Some of the pictures were so beautiful we wondered why they had been left behind, why they weren’t in a museum. One picture of a group of angels singing praises to God, was my favorite. Their faces were radiant as they were raised toward Heaven, their arms also raised skyward.

The artist was brilliant, her work magnificent. It rivaled anything in an art museum though back then, I had not visited many art museums. My idea of art as a teenager was the colorful posters of rock stars, sports heroes, and movie stars that graced my bedroom walls. They were my heroes, and I was proud of my collection. But years later, having viewed work in the Smithsonian, The Met, the Art Institute, The Prado, The Louvre, the Sistine Chapel, and other museums, I knew her work was truly magnificent. Most of the pictures were reverent and holy.

There were a few, however, that seemed to take a turn for the worst. These were mostly pictures of nuns who were smiling at each other in one picture, and in the next, the same characters had hideously distorted faces that showed anger, rage, and pure hatred. In one picture, a nun with a horribly enraged face stabbed another in the back with a knife, and the blade was

still dripping with blood! In another, a blonde woman in a skintight red dress was walking along and was confronted by a man who could barely restrain a German Shepherd on a leash.

By the time we had gone through the boxes, unpacked our clothing and belongs, and gradually moved into the house, we were aware of a strange occurrence. We had just finished unpacking one day and sat down to eat dinner in our new dining room when it happened. My father always called us to the dinner table before he said grace. He would even take headcount to make sure we were all present. That day one friend and one relative were there. So instead, of seven of us, there were nine. After my father said grace, we dug into my mother's scrumptious dinner of crispy fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and mixed vegetables.

Suddenly, we heard walking in the attic right above us, which was impossible because we were all sitting at the dining room table. We looked at each other. Then my father got up, and we followed him up to the attic and swung open the door. To our surprise, the room was completely empty. We searched in the crawl spaces and found them empty, too. The window was locked from the inside. We shook our heads in confusion and went back to finish dinner. This went on for several months. We'd hear walking in the attic. We'd rush upstairs and find the room empty.

There were no footprints, no open window, no explanation, no reason why we'd hear the walking. Sometimes we'd hear one pair of footsteps. Other times, we'd hear one step and another foot being dragged. One night it was particularly loud, and my father climbed the stairs to the attic with a club in hand, ready to confront the intruder, but there was no intruder.

The room, as usual, was completely empty. Eventually, we accepted the fact that the attic was probably haunted. By what or whom, we didn't know. We didn't know how it could be happening. When we asked our neighbors about the family that had lived there before us, one neighbor said, "There was a mother, father, and two teenage girls. The wife was an artist. She

painted portraits for the neighbors. She was friendly at first but then she withdrew.” No one knew why. Some said it was marital problems. Others say she went stark raving mad and that her husband committed her to a mental institution. Many thought she witnessed a murder and was forced to keep quiet. They knew her paintings had taken on a sinister quality as if she was disturbed or troubled. Who was killed? Was her husband the guilty party? Did he commit the murder in the attic? We needed an explanation. Were the footsteps those of the restless spirit of the person killed? We never checked with the police to see if there had been a homicide on our property, not that they would have told us anyway. The walking continued for months. It didn’t occur every day. Sometimes we’d hear lots of footsteps. Sometimes it was quiet.

Our Catholic cousins spent the night with us and obviously went home and told what they had witnessed. One day, Aunt Betty, my uncle’s wife, an attractive bronze-colored woman, with a great sense of humor and a hearty laugh, came to visit with a bottle of Holy Water and her rosary. My father’s side of the family was religiously diverse. Most of his six siblings were devout Baptists. Some were Pentecostal, and some were Catholic. Aunt Betty was the daughter of a Baptist preacher, but she became Catholic when she married my uncle. We always knew her as wisecracking and fun-loving, but she was serious that day.

She scolded my mother for moving into a house, not knowing about the previous occupants and without having it blessed. She said as a member of the family and a devout Catholic that she was going to bless our house. We watched as Aunt Betty anointed the front door and began to pray her rosary. We Protestants didn’t believe in rosaries and rituals like those she was performing, but we respected prayer, so we didn’t interfere. Aunt Betty prayed a simple prayer: “Dear God let no evil enter this house through this door. If there is any evil in this house, let it leave now.” She anointed the front windows with Holy Water and prayed the same prayer.

She did the same with every window and door in the house, including in the basement. When she headed to the attic, we followed her. In the room, she sprinkled Holy Water on the window, the crawl spaces and prayed the same prayer. Then we formed a circle and prayed God would take the noises and spirit away. We thanked Aunt Betty for coming over but didn't expect much. She wasn't a priest, and we wouldn't admit the footsteps could have been an evil spirit. We were good Christians. How could that happen in *our* house? So, we went on with our lives.

We had Thanksgiving dinner in our home and Christmas with our grandparents, with gifts and all the trimmings. Before New Year's, our cousins, who were popular and well known, threw a party and introduced me, Lynn, and Anna, to the movers and shakers at our school. It was nice to feel popular for a change.

So, it was several months before we realized we no longer heard noises in the attic. The footsteps just suddenly stopped. It was as if they hadn't happened at all. We never heard footsteps again and never spoke about it until decades later when my parents retired, moved to Indiana, and planned to sell the house. They called the children and grandchildren to come get their stuff out of the attic. While we threw out old toys and memorabilia, I asked my mother what she thought had caused the walking and what made it go away. She admitted she didn't know.

"Someone may have actually broken in," she said though we could never find any evidence of it. She never mentioned Aunt Betty, the Holy Water, or her prayers, but I am willing to bet that was the cure. We were so blessed to have had it. I thought about that after Aunt Betty's funeral years ago. She was truly a remarkable woman who chased an evil spirit away.

In my sophomore year, we still didn't have a church, so we visited those of family members. My mother also started having Friday night Bible studies in the home for my brothers and little sister. Drinking, cursing, and smoking were not allowed in our home, and my mother

wanted to make sure they knew it. When they were asked why they didn't join another church, my parents mentioned the paganism of Christmas and Easter and didn't like how they were celebrated in Christian churches. They had also stopped observing Sunday as the sabbath day.

They had begun studying with Herbert W. Armstrong and adhered to his teachings about the sabbath and observations of holy days. In the Bible, the true sabbath was Saturday, not Sunday. Christians began worshiping on Sunday after Christ died, but many believe it is wrong to change God's sabbath day. "And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made" (Gen 2:3) My parents often quoted: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex 20:8).

My parents observed the Jewish sabbath from sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening. We had to get our cooking and housework done ahead of time. Saturday was a day of prayer, rest, and worship. They also observed the days of unleavened bread in the Bible. My mother didn't allow any bread with leavening in the house during this period. We stopped eating pork, shellfish, and anything forbidden in the Bible. We learned which animals were clean and unclean by Bible definition. So, all predators were forbidden.

In addition to adjusting to my parents' religious practices, I also joined the Girls' Glee Club, one of the most prestigious choirs in the school. We performed at churches, at school assemblies, and at graduation ceremonies. One of our most memorable engagements was the first time we sang live on television. When Mrs. Maguire told us about the event, we all rushed home and told our families that we would appear on the *Sunday Evening Club*, a program that aired every Sunday evening in Chicago. My parents were ecstatic and called their friends, urging them to tune in. We rehearsed vigorously in the days ahead. The night we went on air, our white blazers, cranberry-colored skirts, white blouses, and blue bowties were all neatly pressed. We

used tons of hairspray, mascara, and lipstick to make sure we looked as good as we hoped we'd sound. We were told not to look at the camera, not to close our eyes, or to chew gum. Mrs. Maguire hated gum anyway and threatened to kick us out of the choir if she caught us eating, chewing, or smoking in her class. We loved the choir, so we never did. That evening, we sang two carefully selected songs and exited the stage to a round of applause. The internet didn't exist at that time, so unfortunately, I don't have a recording of the show. It was fun though.

In U.S. history my junior year, we had the option of taking a test, writing a paper, or doing a dramatization. So, I wrote a play for my group based on six amendments to the US Constitution. I felt a little like Tyler Perry and Clint Eastwood, able to write, direct, produce, and act in my own production. It also gave me a greater appreciation for what they do. My classmates were divided into groups for each amendment, but some appeared in more than one.

Our parents thought we were goofing off when my group met at a classmate's house to rehearse and practice our lines. So, imagine their shock when they snuck in and expected to catch us smoking, drinking, doing drugs, or fornicating and heard us reciting the First, Second, Fifth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution and dramatizing each one. I am proud to say we did a great job, and we all received an A on the assignment.

I continued to cross swords with my father during high school though. He hated my clothes, my friends, and especially my music, which was secular. I often violated my curfew. If I was due home at 11:00 o'clock, I'd usually get back around 11:30, which was the curfew for Chicago young people under eighteen. For this infraction, I'd be grounded for two weeks: no phone calls, no visitors, no outings, no TV. These punishments would usually last for two weeks, but if I was really belligerent, they'd last longer and would even overlap if I snuck in a phone call or visitor when I didn't think he was around. Somehow, he always knew though. He knew

everything. My friends warned me about the possible consequences. “You know the prom is coming up,” one said. I assured her I’d be fine by then, and I was. My father never caught me with drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes though. My Christian upbringing was stronger than I realized.

In my senior year, I was accepted at the University of Illinois for nurses training but needed money for tuition. I wanted to join the Army but was madly in love by this time, with the neighborhood bad boy. After breaking up with David and ending things with Eddie, I didn’t have high hopes for romance. I didn’t fall for anyone until I met Jerome near the end of my freshman year. I would later call him the love of my life though I attended prom with an old boyfriend and dated many others. I met Jerome at a party that Lynn and I gave in the spring of freshman year.

He was very handsome and well known. He had slick black hair and stylish clothes. Lynn and I had invited all the teenagers on our block, but he lived a few blocks away. So, I don’t know who brought him. He met Lynn first, and the two of them became a couple. Then something went wrong. They quarreled frequently. When she’d call him, he’d leave her hanging on the phone while he searched for cigarettes, matches, ashtrays, and other things. She’d ask me to hold the phone while she went to make tea and toast. It was like they were avoiding each other.

When he’d come back to the phone, he and I would chat. Soon, we became friends and he helped with problems I had with other guys. Eventually, he started to visit me, and I didn’t intend to fall for him, but I did. I didn’t feel like a bad person though. Lynn had dated my ex, so I figured why couldn’t I date hers? I apologized when I realized I had hurt her, but Jerome and I were in love. He was several years older and a lot more sophisticated, so I never expected anything to come of it. However, by senior year, he expected me to decide. He never asked me to marry him. He *told* me we were getting married. The problem was I wasn’t sure I wanted to get married at all. I wanted a life of excitement and adventure, not the dreary life of a housewife. I

remembered what Mrs. Benjamin said when I was attacked by James Wright. She told me to hold onto my dreams. So, that's what I was doing. I just didn't know what to do.

When an ex-girlfriend of his spread the rumor that she'd had his child, my father ordered me to break it off immediately. Jerome said she was lying, that she had told the same lie to another girl he had been engaged to. Her best friend told me she was lying too, but in the end it didn't matter. I wanted to join the Army. I was not ready to get married. It would have been a mistake. So, I was totally unprepared when Jerome asked me to elope with him, to live with his folks until we got our own place. I loved him. I truly did, but I wanted more out of life.

My English teacher became interested in my plight when she read the scribblings in my journal after class. She was a wealthy woman who offered me use of her enormous library and connections in literary circles when I told her I wanted to be a writer. She even offered to pay my college tuition so I could study English, which she said was what I truly wanted to study. When she learned of the complications with Jerome and my parents, she urged me to seek counseling, not with the school counselor, but with a real professional. She even offered me a session with her own therapist. So, one day after class I took her up on it. His name was Dr. T. He was a tall, handsome Asian man with glossy black hair, intelligent brown eyes, and a gentle voice.

According to Ms. Smith, he was one of the best in the business. When I outlined my dilemma, he listened quietly. Then he said, "Make a list of the top five things you want in life." When I finished writing, he asked me to read the list back to him. On my list I wrote the following: attend college, travel the world, become a nurse, join the Army, and write a book. Then he said, "Which item on the list *must* you do, or you will not be happy?" I thought for several seconds. Then I chose joining the Army. When I said that, he smiled. "Then that is what you must do. Your father and boyfriend are both strong and controlling, but you know what you

want. Live your dreams.” When I wept as I thanked him, he said I had cured myself. He said I knew what I wanted and that I should not let anyone change my mind. After I left his office, I was dazed for a few moments. I hadn’t expected him to be so completely thorough. He was as good as my teacher, Ms. Smith, said he was. From that moment on, I knew what I had to do.

I enjoyed the rest of senior year and graduated from high school, knowing I would soon have the greatest adventure of my life. That summer I worked at Spiegel’s where I met Delois, and while taking fall classes at a community college, I stepped into an Army recruiting station and filled out an application. When I raised my right hand and was sworn in, I wondered if I was making the right decision. I could always do something else, but I became more certain when one of my high school classmates and her friend were enlisting in the same recruiting office. One of our recruiters was the uncle of our class valedictorian. How was that for a coincidence?

I visited my grandparents shortly after I enlisted. They hugged and kissed me and said they knew I’d do well in the military. They told my father to relax and wish me well. Months earlier when I was still in high school, their friend Sarah Jones, mother of jazz musician Quincey Jones, had asked me: “What are you doing when you graduate?” As a friend of the family, she had given Dena and my cousin piano lessons when they were little children. My family met her at one of the many churches they attended, and she had become a good friend.

At the time, she and Dena were banging on the piano in our living room. Sarah lived in Seattle, but she had come to Chicago to meet with Mayor Daley. I had no idea what the meeting was about. However, she visited my grandparents, and then she came to visit my parents. Dena had just graduated from college, and Sarah was full of questions and congratulations. When she asked what my sister was going to do, Dena said she was teaching primary grade children. At that time, I believe she was teaching kindergarten. So, Sarah was helping her play a few songs on

the piano to keep the children engaged. One song they played was “Happiness in the Lord.”

When Sarah questioned me, I responded, “I want to become a nurse, so I want to join the Army to get experience. When I get out, I’ll have money for college.”

When my father protested loudly that he would never allow me to enter the military, Sarah replied, “You’ve had your life. Let her have hers. The military didn’t hurt you much. You have a nice family, a nice home. Let your daughter have what she wants. We must let our children live their lives. Where would Quincey or Lloyd be if I’d tried to stop them?” My father didn’t respond. He was a little in awe of Sarah and a little afraid. He said she reminded him of one of his stern schoolteachers from elementary school who always caught him goofing off. Therefore, when the time came to give his permission, he signed on the dotted line.

My conversation with Jerome was more painful. We met in a four-bedroom home he was renting, near a south suburb. He said, “You’re signing away three years of your life. You don’t know how it will be.” I nodded and said I would deal with it regardless. When he said I was leaving because of his ex-girlfriend’s lies, I shook my head and explained that I had been planning to join the Army long before I had met him. Then I outlined my career plans and how I hoped to fulfill them. I told him I loved him and would miss him, but he already knew that.

When he said I would probably love him forever, that I was ruining both our lives, I began to weep, knowing he was right about one thing, but I hoped he was wrong about the other. I wanted us both to be happy. We hugged each other, kissed, cried, and pledged to remember each other forever. Then we said goodbye. I was crying the next day when my recruiter arrived to take me to the airport. Dena said I was on the first leg of a journey that would take me all over the world. I told her that I hoped she was right. She and my parents prayed God blessings upon me. With a tearful farewell, I said goodbye and left.

Chapter Eight

To my surprise and delight, my army days were some of the happiest of my life! I'd dreamt of joining the Army when I was eleven years old and met two WACS onboard a ship while traveling from Honolulu to San Francisco. Over the years, I asked every girl who became my best friend to enlist with me. They all agreed, but when I was ready to enlist, no one was ready to go. I was angry until I realized that it had always been *my* dream. It had never been theirs. So, I decided to live my own dream.

A final push to enlist came when Ms. Smith my English teacher died and my friend Brenda, a girl I had planned to attend nursing school with, was killed in a motorcycle accident before we could register for classes at the University of Illinois. While I grieved with others, I realized that life was too short, that to live our dreams we had to act. So, on my birthday, I went inside that recruiting station. In the Army, I would gain real-world experience, and Uncle Sam would pay my college tuition when I got out. I was appointed squad leader right before we left Chicago. My job was to get my group of seven girls to our headquarters.

Basic training in Aniston, Alabama, was rough. There is no other word for it, especially in the wintertime. Back then, our units were composed of nothing but women. There were four platoons in our company, and there were thirty-three women in my platoon. We were inoculated against several diseases at the same time. It was like walking down an assembly line. We were stuck in both arms three times by medics on each side. Then we were told to swing our arms, or they would stiffen up. We marched miles in the rain, snow, sleet, and heat, with our fingers and toes so cold sometimes they were almost numb. We sometimes got up at 2:00 a.m. for KP (kitchen police). After several weeks, we almost got used to it. We stood reveille first thing in the morning, also retreat in the evening. We ran laps around the field, practiced flanking and column

movements on the parade field, and learned about military courtesies and customs. We received mandatory field training exercises where we pitched tents and performed first aid on each other, including CPR. We did all of that and more that I cannot share. When it was over, only twenty-eight of us remained. Some had suffered injuries and illnesses. Some went AWOL. One suffered a nervous breakdown. Some did so well they were promoted, and some like me, were promoted at their next duty station.

After a two-week leave, I headed to Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Fort Gordon, Georgia. I had hoped to go to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas, to train as an Army Medic, but the Army sent me to The US Army Southeastern Signal School where I trained on communications equipment and small computers. At that time, women were in barracks strictly for females, but we were surrounded by men's barracks. The WAC Shack, the nickname the men gave the women's barracks, was a popular place. The men dropped in all day long, but they were restricted to the lower floors in a room called the Date Room. Any man caught upstairs could be court martialed. The provost marshal and military police were just around the corner.

From 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. most of us were attending classes with the men who outnumbered us 200 to 1. Like most soldiers, we kept our shoes shined, our brass polished, and our areas immaculate. Military discipline was always required. When not in class, or on CQ duty, we were usually at the NCO Club, especially on Wednesday night, dubbed "Soul Night," the most popular night of the week. Hours of dancing, meeting the men who whistled at us when we marched, and sipping watered-down drinks helped us survive. Sometimes we went to clubs off base and could barely make formation the next day. Though in training, we still had fun.

Georgia quickly became one of my favorite places in the universe. When I first arrived, I was shocked that nearly everything in Augusta, the nearest town, closed at 10 p.m. on a Saturday

night, but later it didn't matter. Georgia was a wonderful place to be. When I finished AIT, I was one of the outstanding graduates of the course, was promoted again, assigned to the same base, and allowed to choose where I would work. Still chasing my dream, I chose nursing and was assigned to work in obstetrics and orthopedics in what is now Eisenhower General Hospital.

During the six months I worked there in my white nurse uniform during the latter part of the Vietnam Era, I learned a lot about health care, pharmaceuticals, life, death, and coping with adversity. I also made several good friends. As Permanent Party, I moved to a barracks that more closely resembled a college dorm. A few of us had private bedrooms. The rest had two or three roommates. We decorated our rooms any way we desired with certain restrictions.

Our female commanding officer, a major, with short, silver-blond hair reminded us that the base commander, a male general, often inspected our barracks with her while we were at work. Therefore, she expected our rooms to be clean, neat, and presentable. That meant our *Playgirl* centerfold pin-up boys, posters with political statements, and obscene objects, like vibrators needed to disappear. Even so, we had colorful paintings on our walls, shag carpets and throw rugs on our floors, bright bedspreads, TV sets, stereo systems, and small plants.

On the second floor, we had a kitchenette, with a refrigerator, microwave, dishwasher, oven, a washer and dryer, a bathroom with adjustable showerheads, and a landline phone. On the first floor, there was a Day Room with a large screen TV, a pool table, and a dining room. In addition, we had our own mess hall, which was open from 6 to 9 p.m. So, we were always surrounded by the pleasing aromas of roasted meat, grilled vegetables, and microwave popcorn.

At that time in my life, I was very happy. I had everything I had expected to have at nineteen. I had a job I loved, good friends to hang out with, and I met a lot of gorgeous men. My best friends Becky, Barbara, Lisa, and Carol are people I will never forget. Nor will I forget the

other women or men. Within a few weeks, I became engaged to Tom, a Catholic CPA from Chicago, whom I had met when I was in high school. We shared a love for Chicago and did a lot of crazy things with our friends. Things grew serious very quickly, but when he asked me to leave the Army, I just couldn't go. I had waited eight years to enlist, so I couldn't quit. I didn't want to lose him, so we remained friends when he was transferred to Japan.

I met Rob from Milwaukee. He was from a strong Christian background like mine though neither of us were devout at that time. We became engaged but were not in a real hurry to get married. We broke up when he was transferred to Germany. Then I met Floyd, a Baptist preacher's son, and spent a fabulous Fourth of July weekend with him and his family in Philadelphia. We became engaged a few weeks later but broke up when he was sent to Korea. I remained on good terms with those men, but there were other romances.

As I continued to fall in and out of love, my girlfriends played a larger, more important role in my life. We were like a family. The major benefit of working in the hospital, which was right next door, was that two of my friends worked there, too. We befriended other women on our floor in the barracks. When one of us was hurting, we all hurt, and we staged interventions when some girl's life seemed to be going off the rails. We were also inventive and creative. We threw card parties, pajama parties, and birthday parties on and off base. We doubled-dated, split cab fare, and lent each other clothing and accessories for important dates.

Barb was a former model who liked doing make-up. Chris was a hairdresser who loved doing our hair. All we had to do was ask. We also helped each other with family and relationship issues. When Tina's younger sister was kicked out of the house when her devoutly Christian parents caught her dancing in a strip club, we put her sister Vicky up in our barracks for several weeks until she got on her feet. Because most of us worked shifts in the hospital and other

places, she always had a bed to sleep in and someone to keep her company. We brought her food from the cafeteria or commissary. She cooked in the kitchen, showered in our bathroom, and used our washer and dryer. She also wore our clothes when she went on job interviews. Our barracks sergeant pretended she didn't know what was going on, but I think she knew and just didn't want her living on the street. It's more dangerous for women than for men. The day Vicky finally got a full-time job, she treated us all to pizza. Then we helped her find a nice apartment.

My first day in obstetrics, I assisted in a live delivery! With some help, I gave the doctor the right instruments, took the patient's vitals, watched the doctor extract a baby from the mother's womb, and grinned when the baby howled at the top of its lungs. As I walked on air the next day, I was told to take a mother to see her baby. She had had a C-section the day before, but I didn't know all the details. So, I was shocked when the new mother and I peeked in the nursery window and saw tubes running through the baby's tiny body, two doctors working on the infant's chest, the baby's intestines on the wrong side, and blood being pumped into the infant's stomach! When the mother fell to the floor, crying, and screaming, I almost cried myself. It was such a heartrending scene. I helped her back to bed and whispered a prayer for her and her child.

Weeks later, I worked with wounded men. One patient was a recovering drug addict, so his medication was closely monitored. He hurt all day long. Sometimes the nurses got busy and forgot to medicate him at all. It got so bad that he wept and begged me to kill him several times. He said he couldn't take it anymore. He even told me how to get in the narc cabinet to get the drugs. I refused him a lethal dose of narcotics and prayed he'd be able to hang on.

Another patient was a pilot who was often depressed. His Vietnamese fiancée feared he would harm himself if she did not visit regularly. Her name was Faith, so I encouraged her to give him faith. I also prayed for them. One day I was sent to another ward to work with a

depressed young woman named Mary. She'd been driving the car that had killed her sister and left her in a body cast. Also, her fiancé had been killed in Vietnam. She felt she had nothing to live for and wanted to die. I shared the struggles of the wounded men on my other ward. Many were suffering from gunshot wounds. Some were in body casts and had lost fingers and toes. A few were paraplegics. I had one patient whose gunshot wound to the arm didn't heal properly.

I flew home for my parents' silver wedding anniversary, and when I returned, I learned the doctors had amputated part of his arm. When I reached for his arm and realized part of it was missing, it was such a shock that I had to leave the room. The patient followed me to the nurses' station. I didn't realize I was crying until he said, "I was in a lot of pain. The doctors did what they needed to do." When I mentioned his arm he said, "They'll get me a prosthetic. Don't worry." He smiled, as if touched that I was concerned about him.

A fellow medic, a medical student, suggested we leave the ward for a while. He was tall and blonde with a rakish smile. As we sipped coffee in a hospital coffee shop, he explained in detail why the doctors had operated. Then he asked, "Are you sure nursing is right for you? You seem very upset." He was right. I *was* upset. I felt like I lost a patient. My roommate, a debutante/heiress, saw us talking and later exclaimed, "He looks like old money." Then she explained that his family was one of the richest in America. He played polo with Prince (now King) Charles of England when at Cambridge. I already knew that, but it didn't matter. I was more impressed with him saving the lives and limbs of U.S. soldiers, sorry he hadn't been able to save my patient's forearm. Later, I mused about what he said. Was nursing a good fit for me?

One day I invited some friends to visit men on the ward. The women wrote letters for them, helped serve meals, and brought a few smiles to their faces. The men enjoyed the visit so much that I invited a few more to visit. One day, I took Mary to the ward. Though she was out of

the body cast then and, in a wheelchair, she seemed to enjoy herself, especially when she met a man from her fiancé's platoon who said he had seen her fiancé alive. She was skeptical at first but perked up at hearing the news. I only saw her a few more times before going to work at a dental clinic on the other side of the base, near where two other friends worked.

Around this time, I suffered my third brush with death. It happened when a friend wanted to borrow a car to attend a concert given by her ex-boyfriend, a popular Motown entertainer. At the time, she was the houseguest of an A-list actor, who has starred in movies with Tom Cruise, Julia Roberts, Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman, Clint Eastwood, and many others. I wasn't surprised when Mr. Hollywood said yes. He and his wife were generous hosts. I had been invited to dine with them many times. But he pulled me aside right before we left. "The guy puts on a great show, but don't let Mia go backstage. His entourage is bad news." He said to come right back. So, I agreed, and we left.

The show was great, just as he predicted. I was still clapping when I saw another friend. As Lela and I greeted each other, I saw Mia heading backstage. When I tried to follow her, I was stopped by security. They said the singer's fans were attending an after party at his hotel. When we got there, the suite was a madhouse. Mia and Mr. Motown were in one of the bedrooms. I pounded on the door, but Mia asked for more time. Meanwhile, a member of the singer's entourage asked me to dance. I said no, but he kept following me, harassing me. He was drunk and wouldn't take no for an answer. Finally, he shoved me into an empty room and locked the door. Then he backed me into a corner, put his hands around my neck, and threatened to kill me.

I looked into his glazed eyes and realized he meant what he said. There was no way out. Though I stood my ground, I was terrified. As he squeezed my neck and bragged about assaulting and killing other women, I prayed a silent prayer. All I wanted was to get my friends

and go home. I knew I had fallen away from God, was living a sinful lifestyle, but I promised God that if He saved me from this maniac, I would return to the church and lead a clean, decent life. It took a few seconds. But when I heard angels singing above, I knew God had answered my prayer. My attacker must have heard something too because he looked startled for a moment. Then he seemed to sober up quickly. He released me and unlocked the door.

On the way home, Lela and Mia could hardly believe my story. I knew Mr. Hollywood was right about Mr. Motown's entourage. His people were not just bad news but downright criminal. I should have listened better. After that incident, Mr. Hollywood helped me out of another sticky situation, and might've saved my life. I often think of him as my rescuer. Whenever he is nominated for an Oscar, I always keep my fingers crossed, hoping for the win. He has not won yet, but after four nominations, he's long overdue, so it may happen soon.

A few weeks later, I was transferring to another base to work in communications and needed to pick up my medical records at the hospital. While I was there, I thought about my time as a nurse. Though I'd had some great moments, it was apparent that nursing was not the field for me. The Army was right. I was too emotional, couldn't bear to see others suffer. I felt helpless. All I could do was pray. As I prepared to go, I asked God if I had accomplished anything as a nurse. Had it just been a waste of time? He answered in the most amazing way.

While waiting for the clerk to find my records, a little girl dropped something as she rushed past me and headed for the door. I picked it up and handed it to her mother who was right behind. As the child waited by the door, her mother turned to me and asked, "You don't remember me, do you?" When I said "no," she said she was the mother whose child had been born with the reversed intestines. She said the Army flew them to a medical center in Ft. Sam Houston, Texas. "As you can see, she is just fine." I looked at the little girl, who looked just like

any other child, and was so happy, I smiled at the mother and wished her and her daughter well. As I continued to wait, a young soldier walked up to me. I saw right away that he was the soldier who had begged me to kill him over a year ago. He said he was no longer an addict, no longer suicidal, and that he had just reenlisted. He thanked me for being a good nurse and for ignoring his crazy request. He seemed happy and confident. I hugged him and wished him well. Then I looked up and saw the depressed pilot and his Vietnamese sweetheart. They told me they'd just been married by the hospital chaplain! He was in full dress uniform. She was wearing a lovely floral dress and carrying a red rose. I congratulated them with tears in my eyes.

The next person I saw was Mary, the young woman from the car accident who I had cared for over a year ago. She walked toward me with a bright smile. "Do you remember me?" she asked. Though she was a slimmed down version of her former self, with her hair waving down her back, I said I knew who she was the moment I saw her. She thanked me for being her nurse and said God brought me to her. It turned out the soldier was right. Her fiancé was alive! He was sent on a top-secret mission. His unit reported him dead so the mission would succeed.

When it was over, he wrote to tell her that he was still alive, still loved her, and couldn't wait to get married. When she announced, "We're getting married this Saturday," I could not stop crying. It seemed that God knew this all along! It was not a coincidence that she was my patient. God wanted her to know her fiancé was still alive, so she would not give up on life. How is that for a miracle! After that, I saw God in just about everything.

I kept my promise and recommitted myself to Christ when I was twenty-one. My parents and grandparents told me I made the right decision. I was attending an Assemblies of God church in Chicago. My parents didn't like my Pentecostal church, but they came to my baptism. My father gave me a beautiful Bible with a concordance, letting me know he was pleased.

Chapter Nine

“Marriage is honorable in all...” (Heb 13:4).

I met the man I would marry during a holiday weekend one summer when I came to Chicago to visit my folks. At that time, I was based at Fort Sheridan, in Highwood, Illinois, which was 28 miles north of Chicago. I was no longer an Army medic. I was working in my MOS, which was in communications. I worked in a message processing center and had a security clearance. I was always on call because we sometimes received a heavy load of messages from the Department of Defense. When the work lightened up, I worked on a military switchboard.

I was working the switchboard on the nightshift when we met. Just about every weekend when I was off, I'd spend the weekend with my folks in Chicago. Before I recommitted myself to God, my friends and I would attend card parties near the base and play bid whist all night long. My friend Lynn was a singer. Sometimes I'd bring my Army buddies to her shows in Chicago. We'd sit on the front row and clap and cheer and drag her out to party with us later. We'd go club-hopping and dance till dawn. Then my fellow WACS would either crash at my parents' house or go out to breakfast afterward. Denny's and IHOP were favorite places.

I hate to admit it, but I enjoyed my sinful life almost too much. I had friends. I had fun. I lived life to the fullest and never went too far with my activities. I had never used hard drugs and never really enjoyed the taste of alcohol, so there were no bad habits to overcome. I was not a self-destructive person. I simply didn't want to give up my way of life to take on another. However, I had made a promise to God, and after a year, I finally answered the call on my life. When I was saved and baptized in an Assemblies of God church in my neighborhood, immediately my lifestyle changed. I stopped partying and hanging with my friends. I mostly went to church in Chicago. After Sunday dinner with my folks, I'd head back to my base.

During dinner, my folks would lecture me about my Assemblies of God church where people spoke in tongues. Though they were still Christians, they didn't believe speaking in tongues was a Godly gift. In reference to the Day of Pentecost, they said the apostles spoke in tongues because they were sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with people who did not speak their language. So, God made it all possible through the Holy Spirit. My parents said Pentecostals believe that *every* Christian should speak in tongues, and that is not right.

If everyone in the church speaks English, why would they need to speak another language? The only exception was if the church was in a foreign country or if someone in the congregation didn't understand English. This is a hugely controversial issue for most Christians. My parents simply believed that God would only impart that gift if it were really needed. They still worshiped with Herbert W. Armstrong, so they didn't attend a brick-and-mortar church themselves. "You could attend the Church of God," my mother said as she tried to persuade me to attend her old church. "Pastor Gordon is great with new Christians."

I shuddered when she mentioned her super conservative former church where women wore long dresses and closed-up shoes and didn't believe in wearing lipstick or nail polish. They wore face powder though. So, what was the difference? Make-up is make-up. I don't think a woman should be made-up like a streetwalker, but women should be able to protect their skin against cold, harsh winds, and the brutal rays of the sun. The teachings of my mother's old church seemed so outdated and extreme. Isn't that why she left?

When I got frustrated and stated, "If I stop attending the church, I'll probably go back to my old life," she'd stop pressing, as if not wanting me to backslide. So, I stayed with my church for the time being. After Sunday dinner, I'd catch a commuter train to my Army base, and other times, my father or my sister and her husband would drive me back to the base. I enjoyed making

the trek by myself though. After living in Georgia for a year and a half, it was nice to be back in a familiar neck of the woods.

One Sunday, I left directly after church. When I arrived at the train station, I learned the train I had planned to take was delayed. There had been an accident on the tracks, and the train would not arrive for two hours. Many prospective riders stood near the gate chatting about the accident. This is when I first shared a conversation with the man I would marry. He walked up to me and began speaking. He seemed very confident and self-assured. He said he had seen me on the train several times and had never gotten a chance to speak. He said he knew I got off at either Highwood or Fort Sheridan. He was headed to Great Lakes Naval Base. Was he stalking me?

I turned and took a good look at him. He was a striking man of average height, slender, with bronze-colored skin and cold black, wavy hair. He said he was an assistant company commander who had just completed training. He was due to ship out in a few weeks and wanted to see more of Chicago. His parents had relatives there. He continued to talk, and I half-listened until he said his family lived in Washington, D.C. Always thinking of the D.C. area as my second home, I gradually began to warm up to him. When he said his American family had adopted him when he was abandoned on the streets of Japan, I was deeply touched.

His adoptive father was in the Army, and he and his wife had been unable to have children at the time, so they adopted him and brought him to America. He did not know his complete racial heritage until very recently. Though he is mostly Asian, he also has European and African blood. He never knew his parents, and he did not remember Japan. He became a U.S. citizen years after being adopted, so America is the only country he's known.

That evening as we waited for our train, he offered to buy me dinner. We ate in a café in the train station and discussed our time in the military. As we chatted, I realized we had many

things in common. We both had military fathers and mothers who were housewives. His uncle was a Baptist preacher in Newport News, Virginia, and my father was once an ordained minister in the Church of God in Christ. We continued to talk as we rode the train up north.

The next day he called and asked me to have dinner with him in Chicago the following weekend. After dinner, we walked along the lakefront. Several dates followed that one. Then one night I took him home to meet my folks and we wound up spending the entire weekend when there was a bad storm. I assured him that my parents didn't mind. Two of my fellow WACs had spent the night in my parents' home, and my parents were always kind, hospitable, and gracious. They were the same with him. Several times he came for Sunday dinner. Within a short while, he and I grew very close. I was still surprised the first time he proposed.

I automatically said no, believing I was not destined to be anyone's wife. By that time, I had been engaged at least five times, and none of those relationships had lasted. The timing was never right. Therefore, I felt marriage would never happen. He proposed to me two more times before I finally said yes. Neither of us wanted a fancy wedding. Besides, we didn't have time. He had become attached to a ship and would be leaving within a few months. I'd be completing my tour of duty in the Army in December, just months away, so we wanted to time things just right.

We finally set a wedding date for the middle of October. By that time, the summer heat would be over, and the holidays were far enough away that everyone would be able to attend if we decided to have a formal ceremony. In the end, we decided to elope. We'd go to city hall in Chicago. We'd stop by to see my parents. If they wanted to come with us, they were welcome. We didn't plan on a honeymoon. We figured we'd take one month down the road.

Though we shopped for rings all over Chicago, we finally found a set of rings in the suburbs, and then I looked at dresses. I didn't want to splurge on something I'd wear just once,

like my prom dress, so I planned to marry in a light-green and white dress I often wore to church. Instead of wearing his dress blue uniform, Andre wore his Naval whites. We didn't plan a reception or fancy party because I was always on call at work. Though I had never been called in on my day off, I was told to expect to be called in at any time. It never happened though.

At four p.m., on October 17, I became Mrs. Andre Henderson. On our wedding night we dined on Asian cuisine in one of our favorite restaurants. We also celebrated with champagne. My new husband had brought me a bouquet of red roses. This was something that would continue throughout our marriage: red roses, presents, romantic dinners and champagne. As we settled into married life, we gradually adjusted to each other.

Earlier the day of our marriage, I had been stuck on my Army base. Our original plan was to leave our respective bases at 7:00 a.m., hop the train, and to meet at my parents' home in Chicago between 9:00 and 10 o'clock. Things didn't exactly go that way. The Army detained me for five hours while they searched for the WAC who was scheduled to relieve me. They finally let me go when they found her in a hospital emergency room. When I got to my mother's house, I learned Andre had been waiting for hours. He was extremely angry. We had a nasty quarrel and almost didn't get to city hall. For the rest of the day, we were on tenterhooks with each other.

However, the next few weeks were fiercely romantic. We rode the train to work together and returned in the evening. We had dinner together, attended church, visited family, and settled in. I received cooking lessons from my mother and was soon able to prepare most of the dishes he loved. In December, I was finished in the Army. In three months, I learned I was having our first child. Around the same time, he was sent to Norfolk and would sail to the Mediterranean for six months. During that time, I stayed with my family in Chicago. When our daughter Tertia (Tersha) Roxanne was born on the Fourth of July, my family had a huge celebration. It was her

birthday, Independence Day, and my parents' wedding anniversary all rolled into one. When my husband returned, we moved to a cute apartment across the street from a beach in Norfolk, Virginia. Every morning we awakened to the pungent smell of the sea, and we spent a lot of time splashing in the water. In the late fall, his ship was sent to Guantanamo Bay for three weeks.

During that time, the wife of his shipmate and I decided to stay together. Dorothy helped me with six-month-old Tertia. She babysat while I did laundry or went grocery shopping. Our husbands sent money for food and necessities. However, that soon changed. There was a disturbance of some sort in Cuba. Three weeks became three months. The men couldn't send or receive mail, and that was not good. We were running out of food. One morning when we only had one egg left, I prayed that God would somehow provide. A few days later, the mailman was putting mail in the slot. When I checked, there was money in an envelope!

I had lost several dollars in the building's laundry room. They had taken a long time to repay us, but the timing couldn't have been better. Dorothy and I put the baby in the stroller and headed for the supermarket. A few weeks later when we still had not heard from our men, I realized my daughter was running out of food. As I opened her last jar of Gerber baby food, I prayed, "Dear God, I know you love my baby. You are not going to let her starve. Amen."

As soon as I raised my head, I heard Dorothy clapping and shouting. She had been watching a rerun of *Let's Make a Deal*. I figured Monte Hall had made someone a great deal. When I asked her, Dorothy said she saw a book on the bookshelf that looked like her husband's. So, she got up and opened the book and out fell dollar bills! I thought she was kidding. Then I saw the money and knew it was real. God had answered my prayer just that quickly!

Weeks later when our husbands returned, they explained how Dorothy's husband had borrowed from mine and how he had repaid my husband by placing the money inside the book to

mark a chapter he wanted my husband to read. The title of the book was *Basic Christianity*. At the time, I thought it was a testimony. All it took was basic Christian faith for my prayers to be answered. It also added a new dimension to my faith.

Several years later we were living in Washington, D.C. Though my husband's tour of duty in the U.S. Navy was over, he still worked for the government. By this time, I had finished college in Chicago and was expecting our second daughter: Tracey. One day, I realized how blessed we were to be expecting another child. I thought of my pastor's wife in Chicago who'd wanted children for years but had been unable to have any. Her doctors said there was nothing physically wrong with her or her husband. They just had not conceived.

The church had prayed for them many times. Every visiting pastor or evangelist prayed for them, yet after several years it had not happened, and they were becoming discouraged. They congratulated members who were expecting, but it was hard to ignore the looks of sadness on their faces when they baptized, christened, and dedicated new babies to God realizing they did not have children of their own. The pastor's wife was very dear to me. She was godmother to my sister's oldest son. She had been aware that my husband was frequently overseas and that I was very lonely. So, she would call me, pray, and read scriptures to give me encouragement.

Therefore, I wanted God to do something special for *her*. So, one night I prayed that God would give her a child. I prayed fervently and determinedly, assuring God that answering her prayer would increase the faith of the church. It would be something no one would ever forget. I stayed on my knees for a long time. Then when it seemed like I was completely spent, I finally heard from God! "I have heard your prayer, and I have answered. News of her pregnancy will reach you in six months," He said, "There will be much shouting and rejoicing." Later, He said He had not planned to deny her. He had just wanted her husband's ministry to grow, and that she

was an important part of that ministry. She was an outgoing and friendly person; however, her husband was more serious and laid back. She sang and played the piano and would address women's groups. The pastor was simply a good preacher. His wife was a great asset to him. So, I believed God that summer night, and I took Him at his word. My daughter Tracey was born two weeks before Christmas, and I was with my parents in Chicago in January.

My sister's husband was out of town, so she and her children stopped by, too. I loved being a new mother back in Chicago. One Sunday morning, we were visited by a couple from our former church. After greeting them, the wife stated, "You'll never guess who is expecting." My sister and I suggested the names of several mothers in the church. When she and her husband shook their heads, we were baffled. Finally, we just asked. When she said, the pastor's wife, we couldn't believe it! She said when the pastor's wife made the announcement shortly before church let out, people nearly went crazy!

She said they clapped and cheered, shouted, and praised God for over an hour. She said they danced in the aisles. The band played and played until everyone was exhausted! She said some church members wept. Some laughed and hugged each other. She said when everyone calmed down, they agreed it was like a miracle, better than they could have believed, and it confirmed their faith. They knew then that when God made a promise, He intended to keep it!

I smiled when I heard the news. By that time, I had almost forgotten that God had told me this would happen. When I shared it with my mother later, she asked if God had really spoken in an audible voice. Was I sure it was Him? Could it have been an angel? I wracked my brain, but I could not remember. I know it sounds spooky and otherworldly, but I believe he spoke with an audible voice. I was not afraid though. The important thing was that God had kept His word! He had promised that I would hear word of her pregnancy in six months, and I had! Years later, I

learned the pastor and his wife had two daughters. One became a teacher. I do not know much about the other, but I know they were both an answer to prayer. I have prayed about many things. Sometimes I get clear answers and other times, they were not so clear. I realized what I got then was clear as a bell. Though it had taken a long time, God had finally answered.

He didn't answer my prayers about my marriage, however. We struggled for many years. Though my husband cried often and asked me not to leave him, our quarrels about money, infidelities, his threats against my family, and my general unhappiness, forced me to depart. The last straw came when he arrived to beg me to take him back. As I was about to say no, an ex-boyfriend phoned. My husband flew into a jealous fit of rage, and if my daughter hadn't awakened from her nap and hopped onto his back to wrestle with him, I might not be alive today. He came to his senses then, but I sustained injuries that required a doctor's care.

Clearly, I had married the wrong man. Instead of a mature, loving adult, I married a vindictive adolescent and was glad to be free. I tried not to be angry or hostile. I had wanted a divorce for years, but he had begged me to stay with him. There were times I thought we would make it, and at times I was angry that I had given him so much of my life. When I was married, I had envied my single friends who could date whoever they wanted, go where they wanted, and do what they wanted. Well, guess what? I am that person now. I live life to the fullest.

However. I was ill for many years after giving birth to Tracey. I was so dizzy and weak that I could barely get out of bed some mornings. I went to doctor after doctor. They said I was overworked and over stressed. One checked me for diabetes since it ran in the family. Another checked me for hypertension. They were wrong on both counts. Finally, a doctor at a VA hospital tested my blood and discovered I was severely anemic and had been for a long time. He said the numbers were so bad that he didn't know how I was even alive.

I told him that I had been feeling ill since my last pregnancy, that I had regurgitated every time I took my prenatal vitamins. Therefore, he concluded that I had become anemic due to a lack of iron and severe morning sickness, which meant I'd been ill for over fifteen years. The iron-rich foods I had eaten had helped me survive, but he prescribed large doses of therapeutic iron for me to take every day. He called often to make sure I was taking it regularly. When my lab tests failed to show improvement, he told me to avoid taking it with dairy products and to eat foods rich in iron. It took almost a year, but I recovered my health. The doctor saved my life.

Though I struggled financially, I was able to provide a good life for us. Repeatedly turned down by landlords because I was a single woman with two children, we lived with family for many years. It was convenient at times because there was always someone to babysit, but it was also inconvenient because we needed a place of our own. It finally happened when I answered an ad from a private lender. We moved into a three bedroom in a quiet neighborhood near the lakefront, near both a public school and a Catholic school. There was also a park, library, grocery store, and drugstore nearby. I found a lovely babysitter who lived a block away.

There was also a bus line to take the girls to Grandma's house if I had to work on the weekend. In addition, there were plenty of children for them to play with. We were happy there. Family and friends lived nearby and visited often. I cooked, entertained, and enjoyed life with my daughters. Along with their cousins, we went to the movies, to the beach, to museums, to the mall, and other places of interest. I was the designated driver for the children during the holiday season. We shopped at the mall, went to the movies, and frequented McDonald's. I loved being a mother and having daughters. Who knew the terrible tomboy would grow up to be a girly girl?

I loved shopping for my girls and dressing them in beautiful clothes. They couldn't have enough warm sweaters, skirts, and soft pajamas. I put ribbons and barrettes in their hair and

bought them tons of Barbie dolls, games, puzzles, and doll clothes. Christmas was an important time for us. I never knew what their father would send or if he would send anything at all, which was usually the case. Therefore, I made the holidays memorable for them. I put up a Christmas tree and sang Christmas carols. On Christmas morning, we always ate a huge breakfast, with all of their favorites, like pancakes, waffles and hot chocolate.

I may have overindulged them to make up for the lack of interest from their dad. My parents didn't celebrate Christmas, and I knew I was bringing in paganism. However, I reasoned that I was just making the holidays fun for the children. I explained that Christ was not born on Christmas Day, but people celebrated his birth that day. When my grandparents were alive, we had Christmas dinner with them. The grandchildren helped my grandfather put up the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. Then we ate snacks and sang Christmas carols. My grandparents' block club always caroled around the neighborhood on Christmas Eve. Every now and then, we'd give them treats or go out and join them. I always stressed Jesus and not Santa Claus.

I told them that Easter was about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and not the Easter Bunny. We never colored eggs, but I bought them Easter baskets, so they wouldn't be left out. For Halloween, I rented videos, ordered pizza, popped popcorn, and had them invite their friends over. The only holiday we didn't spend together often was Thanksgiving. The family usually had dinner at my mother's. I stopped attending there years ago. My siblings had become unbearably cruel over the years. There was ridicule, name-calling, gossip, and other painful things.

When we were children, they would hide my homework, schoolbooks, and clothing. When I told my father, everyone was punished, except Dena, who was the instigator. Our children believe it is sibling rivalry, that my parents have favored me in some way. They say I am like Joseph in the Bible who was sold into slavery by his brothers, but I have never felt I was

my parents' favorite. They didn't give me a coat of many colors, a dress of many colors, or anything they didn't give the others. They just said I was kinder, wiser, and had more integrity. So, maybe that was enough. Anyway, I sent my daughters to my parents' house for Thanksgiving and rarely went myself. I either dined with others or stayed at home. I have spent many family events alone to avoid trouble. When I went back to college to earn my master's degree, I was usually studying or writing a paper, so I was able to pretend that it didn't matter. Graduating was a priority. Sometimes I went out of town. I began traveling when my ex-husband wanted the children every summer. One year, he had them for an entire year. Then he had them for four years. Though I missed them something awful, I tried to enjoy the freedom it gave me.

My first trip alone was to Niagara Falls where I enjoyed the majestic waterfalls on the Canadian side and the swirling rapids on the American side. On my first trip to New York many years before, my husband and I visited the Statue of Liberty, and then we went to the World Trade Center. When he asked if I wanted to go to the observation deck of either tower, I said no. I wanted to visit the Empire State Building first. So, we did. Though I have visited New York many times since then, I never returned to the World Trade Center. When I saw both towers crash to the ground on September 11, 2001, I realized I never would.

Fascinated by all things British, I next went to London and enjoyed Buckingham Palace, the Crown Jewels, and Harrods's food salon. Then it was on to Paris, the Eiffel Tower, the sidewalk cafes, and the artwork in the Louvre. I almost had to pinch myself to make sure I was there. The following year, I was off to Madrid to see the amazing bullfights and the artwork in the Prado. Spain is one of my favorite countries. The weather and people are divine. I also love Rome, Venice, Florence, Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and many other places, including parts of the U.S., like Mt. Rushmore and the Alamo. Each trip is a great adventure.

Chapter Ten

Except for loneliness, I enjoy my single life. I go where I want to go and do what I want to do. I work, travel, study, read, and enjoy life. My married friends often ask about my love life, whether I will get married again. They know my dating life has been up, down, and all around. By this time, I have been engaged to at least ten men who were not the right one. Who is the right one? Does he even exist? I doubt it. I have dated the rich man, the poor man, the beggarman, the thief, the doctor, the lawyer, and two royal princes.

Me? Dating royalty?

Yes, I met one prince through an incident at the DMV. When my friend's car broke down and, I couldn't borrow it to take my road test, I asked a total stranger to let me use his car. He seemed amused at first, but he said yes. After I passed my test and got my license, he told me he was a member of a royal entourage. We celebrated my license by having dinner a few nights later. During this time, I met the king's son and his royal cousins. I wound up dating one of the king's nephews. We had dinner a few times and attended the theater.

I met the other prince in graduate school when I had trouble doing my homework. It turns out that I didn't know a debit from a credit. He helped me sort things out over dinner, cocktails, and polite conversation. Though I never earned my MBA, it was nice to make a good friend. I enjoyed learning about his country, and his assistance helped me understand my job better at a retail firm where I worked before working for the Chicago Board of Education. Teaching, you know, was not my first choice of occupation, but I have stuck with it the longest.

After my nursing fiasco, I decided to leave the medical field for good. After taking my first English composition class in college, I knew I wanted to teach English. Ms. Smith was right. There is something about words and putting them together to express ideas that strongly appeals

to me. When I taught fourth grade with the Board of Education, one of my students won the young author's contest for the entire school! I was ecstatic when I heard this amazing news. I knew then that I had obviously stimulated or cultivated a love for reading and writing within her, and that made me happy. I take that memory with me whenever I teach others.

When I left the Board, I taught at two universities and the City Colleges of Chicago while working part-time jobs in other retail establishments. This allowed me to dress in the latest fashions while doing what I loved: teaching English. I especially love to read. Every week, I check to see what is new by my favorite authors. I also share books with my students. I used to keep a book journal. Whenever I was asked for suggestions, I'd refer to my journal and find titles for people. Friends and family would grab books on my bookshelves, which were always bulging with bestsellers. Often, the books I chose become movies.

Years ago, a coworker and I shared our books with each other. She'd read mine, and I'd read hers. We were both serious bookworms, always searching for the next great author or the next great read. This is how we discovered John Grisham who is often called America's favorite author. During our lunch hour one day, we met a woman who was reading *The Firm*, and we asked her about it, and she was happy to share. Then we discovered Grisham's other books and saw all the films that made them famous.

Over the years, I have discovered authors, like Kimberla Lawson Roby, Sandra Brown, Stephen L. Carter, Judith Krantz, Harlen Cobin, Nora Roberts, and others that I enjoy. From time to time, I revisit classics by Jane Austin, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and of course, the Bible. As I read, I admire the structure of the stories, the writers' craft, and the style of writing, hoping to absorb some technique. I knew I had a lot to learn. I also needed to acquire knowledge. Most novelists, including John Grisham, admit that they blend facts with the truth.

I kept a personal blog for many years where I critiqued books and their authors. I also wrote articles about books for an online blogsite. I had been teaching for the City Colleges of Chicago for two years when I completed *Lunch with Cassie* though it didn't have a name at the time. I wrote several drafts before I finished it. Then I had to decide what to do with it. I didn't have a plan when I wrote the book. It was just important to me to finish it and to learn if anyone liked it. When I received positive reactions, I decided to self-publish it.

I did some book signings and interviews when there were still brick-and-mortar bookstores around. In 2005, there were Borders Bookstores, Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, and several independent bookstores that welcomed independent authors. I learned that this is how many great authors were discovered, such as Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Margaret Atwood, John Grisham, and many others. Now, however, online bookstores are the thing. People order from amazon.com or other online retailers.

Anyway, my publisher offered a pitch fest for new authors. We would go to Hollywood and pitch our books to film producers. At first, I was doubtful. Could my book become a movie? Did it have everything a good film might have? Could I pitch it well? When I filled out the questionnaire and wrote the loglines, it seemed that I knew my story well enough (pages 18-26). The only question was how well I could pitch it to others. Authors from other publishing firms attended the fest, too, which took place Saturday and Sunday in Century City.

We all met for lunch and cocktails and shared our books with each other. Some writers set up kiosks and sold books to interested buyers. It was exciting to meet other writers and share my book and how it came to be conceived and written. Everyone's story sounded fascinating. Some works were fiction. Some were autobiographical. I wondered whose book they would choose. We were told they were seeking a vehicle for Tom Cruise who at that time was working

with Paula Wagner. I doubted if a romance novel would be a good project for Tom Cruise, but I knew they were seeking material for other studios, too.

After cocktails, we had several coaching sessions with an actor and a film producer who prepared us to pitch to the 40 executives we'd be meeting the next day. Eventually, it was narrowed down to about 30, but we rehearsed vigorously. The next day we rehearsed again. Then we ate lunch. Afterward, we entered a room with the Hollywood reps. It was like speed dating. Each pair or trio of reps sat behind desks, like *American Idol* judges. Each writer pitched his work to one group at a time. We had several minutes to explain the plot, answer questions, and to provide contact information or any other particulars before moving on to the next.

I was ridiculously nervous and rehearsed my pitch about a hundred times in my mind before entering the room, but when I approached the table with the first two executives, I completely forgot my pitch, and just started talking. "A young woman is drawn into an adulterous affair when she accidentally kisses a family friend on her wedding day," I said. The executives raised their eyebrows. "Is this a comedy or drama?" one asked. I said it was intended as a drama, answered their other questions, and moved on to the next group. I tried to be consistent with my pitch, getting better each time or so I hoped. It wasn't as hard as I thought.

Later, we were told which books they were interested in. Mine was one of those selected. They ordered the books from our publishers. When I arrived home, I worked with a screenwriter. The entire story is in the plot section, pages 18-30. Though I wanted my book optioned right then and there, I appreciated the suggestion of a mini-series or TV show. I just needed a producer.

In the meantime, I wrote another book. It didn't take long to find a publisher, but I couldn't figure out how to do the revisions the editor requested even though she highlighted them for me. So, while I worked on them, I submitted a second book to them and had the same

problem. It is very hard to rearrange a story when you have already conceived of the beginning and ending. Perhaps I will get better at it. Anyway, I have continued to write and teach English, and I continue to travel. Each new adventure inspires a new story, character, or plot.

I recently read an article about first time cruisers and what they should know. The article gave advice on what type of cabin was best, what to pack, what to expect onboard, and how to enjoy yourself at sea. Inside cabins were considered boring. Cabins with windows were more interesting. Cabins with terraces or verandahs were best. Also, having a cabin in the middle of the ship, as opposed to fore or aft, was good because you'd be closer to dining and entertainment. The article gave good advice, but I read it *after* I had been at sea three times.

My first time on a ship I sailed with my parents from Honolulu to San Francisco. The five-day voyage was fun because a classmate was onboard, and we met the other tween-aged girls and explored the ship together. We also met the captain. Though he had a million things to do, he played ping pong with us and got us treats from the galley. So, though my family got seasick and spent a lot of time below deck, I was not alone.

The second time I cruised, I requested a single share. My roommate and I had the same first name. She was traveling with a church group from Philadelphia, and her friends and our cabin steward had fun sending little notes and invites to "Janet," leaving us to sort out which one. I also had a shipboard romance with an officer, an engineer. He was good-looking and popular with the crew. We were the talk of the ship, but we were in love, so the talk was not bad. He had dark, curly hair, was heir to a ship-building fortune in Italy and escaped by sailing the high seas.

One night, I accompanied him to the engine room and found it completely flooded. The water was up to my thighs! Though I was nearly hysterical, he assured me this was normal: ships take on water. As his men worked pumps to remove the water from the ship, I tried to relax,

thinking of all the water taken on by the *Titanic*. I prayed the ship wouldn't sink. During our week in the Caribbean, we sailed from San Juan, Puerto Rico; to St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands; to Aruba; to Guadeloupe; to Grenada; and to La Guaira in Caracas, Venezuela. Then we turned around and sailed back to San Juan. My roommate's church group had prayer every morning, and we toured some of the most beautiful spots in the Caribbean, like the fort in Old San Juan and Magens Bay in St. Thomas. I hadn't needed cruise tips to enjoy the cruise. Though I had an inside cabin, the cruise was a success. I made new friends and fell in love with the turquoise blue waters of the Caribbean and with a great guy.

I took my third cruise a few months ago. This time, I didn't travel with family, classmates, or roommates, nor did I have a shipboard romance. I went solo in an outside cabin, and discovered several men and women were traveling alone, too. Our first five days in the Caribbean were warm and humid, and the evenings were balmy and light. There were bachelorette parties, couples celebrating anniversaries, and lots of fun. Things went well until we were docking in Grand Turk in the Turks and Caicos. While having breakfast around 7:45, I wondered what the day would bring. We would disembark on shore excursions at 8:15.

A day earlier, we were in Amber Cove in the Dominican Republic, a very verdant place with plenty of diversions and possible excursions. Some cruisers just splashed around the pool near the dock, but others went ziplining, scuba diving, snorkeling, horseback riding, hiking, and sliding down waterfalls. We also went shopping, exploring, and dining. We took dozens of photos and met the natives who were all friendly. What would we do on Grand Turk?

As I stared out of the window, I saw black smoke billowing from the upper deck. As the smoke grew thicker, people rushed to the windows to see what was happening. Suddenly, an alarm sounded, and we were ushered out of the dining room. We hurried out on deck and looked

up to see the funnel of our ship on fire! What followed was a scene from *Titanic* though none of us were as calm and serene as John Jacob Astor and his high society friends.

On *this* ship, passengers and crew ran to their cabins and grabbed their life vests. Others rushed to their Muster Stations and the lifeboats. The elevators were out of order, so some ran down to Deck One, ready to abandon ship. Nobody really knew what to do, but we all wanted to get off. Finally, we were ordered to wait for the captain's signal. While we sat in a room near the lifeboats, I texted photos of the fire to my daughters, explaining what had happened.

They didn't even know I was on a cruise! I don't always reveal my travel plans. As I tried not to panic, I laughed at myself. After surviving a steamy summer in Italy filled with tourists the year before the pandemic, and then enduring the icy cold of Flagstaff and the Grand Canyon just after New Year's, I figured I'd be fine on a cruise ship in the Caribbean, right? Well, not right away. We learned we would not be heading right back to Florida as planned. The ship would be going to the Bahamas for repairs, but the passengers would remain in Grand Turk for an additional two days to board another ship, which was being sent from Florida.

Our cruise director said it was the first time in history that a ship with thousands of people was completely transferred to another. So, we enjoyed our extra days onboard and all the discounts they gave us. Because I was traveling alone, I got to explore the ship. When traveling with others, I am less lonely, but I must compromise on activities. I do half of what they want and half of what I want. When traveling alone, however, I do everything I desire.

I visited comedy clubs, Karaoke bars, piano bars, played bingo, and enjoyed the bands, the shows, and other shipboard events, including a show for Memorial Day, which honored all U.S. veterans. I stood up for myself in this program and applauded the other veterans who stood during the ceremony, too. I remembered to honor my dad during this program. Even though he

passed away five years ago, it was his military service that allowed me to have so many great adventures. Will I take another cruise? Yes, I will. It would take more than flooding in the engine room and a fire in the funnel to keep me away. My children, grandchildren, and I will take a trip to Paris soon. We are checking flights and hotels. I will also check out Mt. Denali, Fairbanks, and Anchorage. Regardless of Russia's war with Ukraine, I must see the Northern Lights

God has helped me survive earthquakes in Mexico, snowstorms in Arizona, and fires on a cruise ship, so I know He can help me survive anything else. I have also learned that anything can be material for a novel. The experiences I listed above have given me great ideas. Can you imagine the type of story that could be created from scary events while traveling?

Conclusion

In 2022, I am still allergic to most seafood. I remember my hospital stay when I was two and wonder why my mother cooked fish when she knew I was allergic to it. The allergy was worse when I was younger. When I even smelled fish, I would swell up, break out, and start wheezing. The double pneumonia was almost fatal. Now that I am older, my skin tingles and my lungs feel pressured when I am exposed to seafood, but that is all. I still eat tuna and shrimp, and I'm still allergic to Brazil nuts, but I enjoy cashews, pistachios, pecans, and peanuts.

I will never forget the pain caused by Dr. Peters. The chat with my mother forty years later didn't take it away. Did we do the right thing? Should we have turned him in to protect other little girls? Back then, we thought the good things he did for our church overruled the bad things. People need salvation. We didn't want to hurt the ministry. However, he may have hurt others in the church. If they had told *us*, the entire situation could have been prevented. Oh, well.

As the only black girl in most of my classes in grammar school, I sometimes felt alone, especially during the Civil Rights Movement. My classmates were not racist. We were military

brats whose fathers were posted all over the world, often in countries where Americans aren't always accepted or respected, so we learned to accept others. My white friends told me what it was like to be the only *white* family in the neighborhood when their fathers were sent overseas. They said children in Okinawa, the Philippines, Morocco, and even Hawaii would taunt them, harass them, chase them home, and beat them up. How can people be so cruel?

The only racial incident I ever experienced was the incident at my birthday party years ago, and I didn't understand it at the time. I was just happy everyone showed up. I still remember the pain of always wanting a best friend, a confidante, someone to share things with, when I was the only black girl in class, and not having one. I had pictured this friend as a young black girl like me, who lived on my block, and who shared the same interests. However, it seemed it would never happen. No matter how hard I prayed, I rarely got the friend I thought I wanted.

God in His wisdom did something better. He gave me the friend I *needed*. Sometimes my best friend was a blue-eyed blonde, often wealthy, often studious, who'd give me her last dollar if I needed it, her shoulder to cry on, and was my partner in every type of mischief. We shared our clothes, our food, our money, and our hopes and dreams. We might have bonded well because of our statuses. She was the richest girl around, and I was the only black girl around. Despite being lonely, I enjoyed my childhood in different parts of the country. I met people from all over the world and shared their cultures. Living in so many places was a great blessing. If I had to pick a place, I'd say Hawaii afforded us the greatest adventures and the most fun.

I enjoyed my high school years in Chicago, too, especially after James Wright was out of the picture. He should have done time in jail for what he did to me, DeDe, and others. I know God wants me to forgive him, and I have for the most part. I am still angry though. Overall, I still enjoyed high school and love running into my classmates. Several became nurses, doctors, and

teachers, just like they planned. A few became rich and famous, and it is great to know I knew them when. After years of sit-coms on TV, one classmate now has a Las Vegas residency and is even funnier in person than she was on TV. When I published a short bio after writing my first book, I was contacted by the fan of another former classmate and choir mate, Merrell Jackson, who is deceased. After the interview, she produced an online tribute site for him and the entire cast of *The Godspell*, his first film. I loved his amazing voice and versatility. He was truly talented, able to dance, sing, and act. His song "All Good Gifts Come from God" inspires many.

During our Senior Class Luncheon, our class prophetess accurately predicted most of our futures. She was spot on with Merrell's success and that of several others. When she said that in ten years, she saw me either in the Army or married with ten kids, I found myself laughing with everyone else. She didn't know how accurate she was. My parents were surprised and delighted when I shared these things with them. After attending all my concerts in high school and my graduation, they were happy to see all of us following our dreams.

My parents eventually found a regular church to attend that held the same beliefs as the Armstrong group. My mom died in 2011 and my dad in 2017. I miss them every day, especially my dad. I had a volatile relationship with him when I was a teenager, but I always had a deep and abiding love for him. His words of wisdom still ring in my ears, and I realize they will stay with me forever. I often reflect on what he taught me about life and Christianity.

When I visited The Vatican in Rome, I learned the truth about speaking in tongues. The day I was there, St. Peter's Square was filled with people of different races and nationalities from all over the world. The Pope gave mass in Latin. Then he delivered a message to the people there in various different languages. It was then that I understood the Day of Pentecost. The apostles spoke in tongues to tell the people about the gospel of Jesus Christ. They didn't speak gibberish

or nonsensical words. They spoke *real* languages. Though I still attend Pentecostal churches from time to time, I do so with new knowledge and wonder why others are so confused.

I was once told by a friend of my mother's that one day I would learn everything my parents told me was true. I am finding that out now. I will carry my parents' words of wisdom with me forever, but I must forge my own path, be my own person, and apply what they taught me to my own life. They had a great life together, traveling, teaching, and entertaining, but I must live my own. Every day I ask God for wisdom and guidance about things I don't understand, hoping to make the right decisions for me, my children, and grandchildren.

When I am confused and need to hear from God, I grab the book my friend Clarence Frederick gave me many years ago. *He Spoke and I was Strengthened* by Dick Mills is still in a drawer beside my bed, as it has been for many years. After reading the passage for my state of mind, I can hear God speak to me through the scriptures. His words of comfort always give me hope. He has saved me from double pneumonia, from drowning, from being murdered, and from severe anemia. I think I can trust Him with anything else.

Whenever I complain about being alone and not having enough friends, God gently reminds me of all the friends I have had over the years, and I feel blessed for having had each one. They were different ages, races, religions, and socio-economic groups, but we shared something very special. I will especially cherish the memory of my Army buddies and my friends from high school and college. I will remember them for the rest of my life and pray for them whenever I think of them, hoping they are fine and doing well.

My birthday is drawing near again, so I will pray for Shayla and Cami, too. I know they probably remember my birthday as the day their father committed suicide, and I am sorry for that. I recall that event every year, too, and know that it is wrong to hate anyone because of their

race, religion, sex, orientation, or any other reason. God is love, and He wants us to love others. It should not come as a big surprise that I have never had another birthday party. Just small celebrations with cake, ice cream and a few gifts. When I have significant others, there are candlelit dinners, trips out of town, lots of presents, and red roses but no parties.

I often reflect on T.D. Jakes's sermon: *Nothing Just Happens*. He says the things we think of as coincidences may have been planned by God or can be used by Him to bring about some unknown purpose of His. If so, I hope he uses my pain and loneliness to produce something wonderful for me and/or for others. I must get on with whatever life has in store for me. There could be bigger and better chapters ahead.

So, where does that leave me? I will continue to work on my writing. I have learned a great deal in the MFA program at Liberty University. My classes have helped me understand the process of writing so well that I can successfully guide the writing of others. I look forward to teaching my first creative writing class. When my fourth-grade student won the young author's contest for the entire school, I knew I had the ability within me. I just needed some additional instruction. Who knows what my students might achieve in the years to come?

During an award ceremony in college, the announcer referred to me as "a writer extraordinaire who has rendered a great service to the university" as he presented me with a Student Achievement Award. Then I watched as my mother and sister applauded, sampled the hors d' oeuvres with lox and cream cheese (which I couldn't eat), the sparkling champagne (which was white grape juice) and met all the college administrators who attended.

Ever since that event, I have wanted to be *that* extraordinary writer, who goes above and beyond, who inspires others, and who does justice to the written word. I hope to do my best for my students, and once I finish this program, I can move forward with those plans.

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