

PLAYING MOMMY: A COLLECTION OF STORIES

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PLAYING MOMMY: A Collection of Stories

An Abstract
Presented to
the Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Deborah Cain Hancock

April, 1993

ABSTRACT

Henry James states in his essay, "The Art of Fiction," that "the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of beauty and truth." Can James' observation apply also to human beings themselves? The answer is "yes" if it is conceded that each human being is both an artist and a work of art, continuously in process; both a malleable substance, shaped and molded by outside influences and a corporeal entity capable of creating her own identity and shaping the physical and psychological matrix of another individual.

The stories in "Playing Mommy" were written to explore and dramatize the influence of family interrelationships, especially those between parent and child, upon an individual character's psychological development. Although the stories are interrelated, each one independently reveals an incident of family life (charged with meaning, tension, and action) that contributes in some way--directly or indirectly--to the character's emotional and psychological matrix, and portrays the character's response to that situation.

The stories present a central character named Dixie. The familial influences that will mold her character are at work even before she exists; her character traits are a legacy passed from great-grandmother, to grandmother, to mother, to child, and finally, to her own child, in a rippling effect as old as Adam and Eve. The legacy begins with the courage born of necessity as Delia faces the birth of her first child

while separated from husband and friends by rising flood waters, with only her faith and an aged, half-blind woman for help. The bequest also includes guilt as Reba Mae struggles to accept the birth of yet another child into her crowded family. From her father, Dixie learns fear of abandonment; from her mother, the lethal power of verbal abuse, a knowledge of the pain of motherhood, and unqualified forgiveness. From Frances, Dixie has the opportunity for compassion, the consciousness of another's suffering. From Lucille, Dixie receives an awareness of jealousy and the boundaries of authority. Finally, from her mother and her own son, Dixie learns how to let go. And from each, Dixie learns the most important lesson: a bruised heart can still love.

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A Creative Thesis

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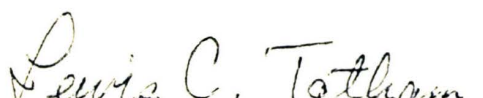
April, 1993

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Creative Thesis written by Deborah Cain Hancock entitled "Playing Mommy: A Collection of Stories." I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.


Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:


Second Committee Member
Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to Dr. Lewis Tatham, professor of English, Austin Peay State University, who gave me the opportunity to write a creative thesis and also for reading and critiquing the final project. I wish to thank Dr. David Till for his guidance and constructive criticism and Dr. Steve Ryan for reading and critiquing the final project.

To my husband, Tim, and my children, Matt and Lindsey, for their patience and understanding during the completion of this project, I would like to say, "Thank you."

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Cordelia

My grandmother's birth was never registered. There is no officially sanctioned record that Cordelia was ever born unless you take into consideration her nine surviving children, her twenty-two grandchildren, and her eleven great-grandchildren as proof of her existence. As her first grandchild and the mother of her first great-grandchild, I am more than satisfied.

Granny was born during the jazz age, in the midst of the roaring 20's, in the aftermath of World War I, and during the great literary movement of the "lost generation" writers. While Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner were fathering Gatsby, Nick, and Caddy, my great-grandmother Evie Cordelia and her blind, eighty-three-year-old, German grandmother struggled to bring her firstborn child into the world.

October 1925, Indian Mound, Tennessee: Outside the rain continued to fall in wet, gray blankets, swelling the river until it overflowed its steep banks and swamped the rickety, wooden bridge. On one side of the river, Great Grandpa Oedie watched the muddy waters swirl past. A gambler by nature, he had bet he would make it back home in plenty of time for the birth of his first child, but the days passed as if they, too, were caught

up in the fast-moving current. Now Oedie realized the odds were against him. He took little comfort in the knowledge that the house was not likely to be threatened by the flood or by the fact that his grandmother was sitting with his wife, Delia, or as everyone called her, Delee.

Grandma Deborah likely needed more help than she could give. Would Delia be able to make Grandma understand when the time came? He cursed his luck. The doctor wouldn't be able to come if the water didn't recede. The reason he wasn't home with his wife now was that he'd left to find work so they'd have the money to pay the doctor when her lying-in came. Oedie tossed a wet-blackened branch into the river and watched it struggle briefly until the churning waters pulled it below and it was lost.

The corners of the room were shadowed where the light from the kerosene lamp didn't penetrate. The wrought iron bed had been moved from the bedroom into the living room opposite the pot-bellied stove when the weather began to cool. Delia concentrated on the comforting orange glow of the coals burning in the old stove. She took another deep breath, then slowly released it, aware of the body lying next to her. She dropped the writing tablet with its half-written poem onto the floor and pressed the palms of her hands against the worn mattress, then she pushed herself higher up onto the goose-down pillows and prepared for the next contraction.

"It'll be worse if you wait for it," she said to herself. She turned her head and looked at her contorted reflection in the bowl of the lamp next to the bed. Still, she couldn't forget what was coming. The pain felt as if an invisible hook were impaled in her spine, drawing her

upward. Her knees bent of their own accord. She braced against the pain by lifting her backbone off the bed and absorbing the shock of the pain in her bent knees and the soles of her feet.

Despite her efforts, a low moan escaped her. The body next to her stirred under the quilted mound, then was still. It was over now. Delia relaxed back against the feather bolster. Her rich dark hair lay in a thick braid over her shoulder against the white muslin gown. Tiny beads of perspiration dotted her upper lip. The patchwork quilt was bunched at the foot of the bed beyond her reach. The constant downpour outside sent a chill throughout the room.

"My feet are freezing." She felt a gathering tension form at the base of her spine and took a deep, slow breath to calm her rising anxiety. "Oedie, where are you?" A smile touched Delia's lips briefly as she thought of warming her bare feet under his nightshirt. She wasn't above a little revenge. He'd be sorry for leaving her alone like this. This time the pain caught her unaware, jolting savagely along her spine. She grasped the cold metal of the headboard and tried to lift herself away from the piercing agony as the pain hooked through her pelvis.

She pressed her mouth against the pillow to stifle her moans. "Dear God . . . please," she began, but stopped her silent plea when her eyes fell on the worn Bible on the table next to her. It was God's curse on women to bear the pain of childbirth, she reminded herself. For a moment, she was almost glad Oedie hadn't brought the doctor . . . until the next pain came, bringing a torrent of warm water to flood the sheets. Immediately, the chill replaced the sudden wet warmth. She stretched out her hand and shook awake the woman at her side. She might have to endure the pain, but she didn't have to die of pneumonia. She had a

responsibility to Oedie, as well as to God. She couldn't just give in to the numbing chill. What would become of the child? Of the old woman?

"Grandma Deborah, it's time."

The old woman fumbled for her wire-rimmed glasses. She was still drowsy. She had been dreaming about the baby. Although she was nearly blind and could speak little English, she was mentally alert. She pulled her shawl about her shoulders and calmly took in the sodden sheets and the pain-glazed eyes of the young woman at her side. She shuffled into her slippers and crossed to the stove to add more coal to the dying embers. Delia climbed out of bed and crossed to the bureau and took out a dry gown and a pair of Oedie's socks while Deborah moved about the room, lighting the other lamp and pumping water into pans to heat on the stove. Delia dropped her soiled gown to the floor and slipped the clean one over her head.

Delia watched the older woman's slow but deliberate movements as she prepared for the birth and began to feel less afraid. At least she was not alone. Her belly tightened with the next contraction and she twisted away from the advancing wave of pain.

"Nein." The gruff, commanding voice came to her from the shadows, and Delia's gray eyes sought the stooped figure as it moved into the circle of light. Deborah spread a folded worn blanket over the damp sheets and gestured for Delia to get back in bed. Fresh bedding would have to wait. She took the dark, woolen socks from Delia's clenched fists and pulled them on over the young woman's frigid feet. The old woman moved about the room again, setting aside the discarded quilt and removing thread and scissors from the sewing basket and placing them on the table.

The next contraction found Delia's hands melded to the headboard.

Deborah pried her granddaughter's hands from the iron scrolling and motioned for her to take long, deep breaths. Then she placed Delia's hands on her swollen abdomen and made them make soothing, circular motions. The light stroking and deep breaths were relaxing, and Delia continued when Deborah moved away. She heard pans rattle against the iron stove and the splash of water. A basin appeared on the crowded table, then a tin cup. Next, the old woman reappeared with a cloth. Delia was in the grip of another pain. When it was over, she gratefully accepted a drink of water and submitted to having her face and neck washed, then her lower limbs, and finally her inner thighs.

By now the child's head was crowning, and both women knew it would not be much longer. Deborah smiled encouragingly at Oedie's wife and patted her hand.

"Soon, liebbling, soon."

Her pace quickened. The basin was emptied outside the door and refilled with hot, clean water from the stove. The contractions were coming closer together, and Delia began to pant.

"Das good." Deborah pushed Delia's gown over her thighs and positioned her frail hip against the younger woman's foot, using her shoulder to support her knee. Delia pushed and the baby's head emerged, then a shoulder. Deborah eased her fingers into the opening and guided the child into the world with the next contraction. A triumphant shout mingled with the agonized cry of the mother and the mewling of the newborn child.

"Wunderbar, mein fraulein!" She placed the baby girl on her mother's breast and drew the folds of the gown over the baby to keep her warm while she tied off the umbilical cord. Her arthritic hands could do no more,

and she handed the shears to Delia, who managed to cut the cord. While Deborah worked on cleaning up the mother, Delia wiped away the blood and mucus from her beautiful, dark-haired daughter.

The water had receded enough to reveal that the bridge had been torn away. The broken pilings smiled evilly like a toothless grin from rotted gums, mocking him as day by day, signs of the flood's destruction swept past in a rushing stream of rusted-cream water. On the fifth day, driven by horrors, Oedie dove into the river and fought his way to the other side. He was a man hardened in war, but the current was fast and the water numbed his limbs. He could feel submerged debris scrape and grab at his body, but there was no pain. A skeletal hand from an uprooted tree plucked at his trouser leg and pulled him beneath the opaque surface. His arms and legs felt like lead weights; he struggled to free himself from the river's grasp. He broke free and floundered toward the surface, spewing muddy water.

"Keep moving, keep moving," he chanted to himself. He no longer remembered why or how he came to be in the water. "Move!" His limbs rose and fell heavily until his mind registered the cold suction of the red clay of the bank where the flood water and debris had gouged away huge chunks of raw earth. The straw-strewn muck pulled his drenched socks off his feet. Oedie couldn't have cared less if he was as naked as the day he was born. He had made it.

He lay for awhile on the bank while the morning sun warmed the chill from his tired body. Finally, he remembered that he had to get home. He lay for a moment longer in the red clay's embrace in fear that he had crossed to the wrong side. He staggered to his feet, climbed to the top

of the embankment, and tried to get his bearings. For the first time in two weeks, he smiled. Ahead was the road home. He untied his shoe laces from his belt and wedged his feet into the cold, stiff leather. He was surprised he hadn't lost his shoes. Maybe his luck was turning and he would catch a ride. For now, he was ready to hoof it.

Delia lay on her side away from the door. Her daughter lay within the circle of her embrace, nursing steadily at her breast. She was still so tired. The rhythmic pull and tug was pleasantly relaxing. She dozed fitfully and didn't hear the kick of gravel when the truck halted outside, nor the muted exchange of male voices, but the sound of the back door's slamming intruded on her awareness. People had been stopping by with food, baby clothes, and advice ever since the preacher had been in to check on her when she hadn't shown up for prayer service. Sister Delee rarely missed a Bible meeting.

The door opened, and she registered the rattle of a dish on the table and footsteps across the wooden floor. She heard hushed voices come from the other room; then someone crossed to the bedside and stopped. She didn't want any more company. She didn't even want to open her eyes. She didn't think she could if she wanted, which she didn't. All she wanted was to rest, her baby's tiny form snuggled against her breast.

No, she thought, there was something else she wanted, but right now she was too exhausted to put a name to it.

Oedie bent his angular frame to the floor and stretched an arm over his wife's waist, pillowed his head on his other, and glugged himself with the image of wife and child before his own fatigue overtook him and his eyes closed in sleep. Deborah eased the door closed. There would be

plenty of time for little Cordelia to properly make her papa's acquaintance.

Delia's hand stretched across the quilt and tangled in her husband's hair. Content, she smiled and drifted off to sleep.

Reba Mae

Reba Mae is my mother. She is the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter, as am I. Child of a woman who bore twelve children, nine of whom survived into adulthood, Reba Mae was forced into the role of surrogate mother at a very young age. However, it was not until her sister Lucille was born, when Reba Mae was ten, that she began to balk at being both big sister and stand-in mother. Until Lucille came into the picture, Reba Mae was the only girl. After Reba Mae was born, came four boys: Will, Harold, John, and Mitch. Now there was a new baby girl in the house to contest Reba Mae's claim to her daddy's heart. To top it all off, during Lucille's birth, the woman assisting Granny during the birthing dislodged the baby's eye. This naturally caused a lot of concern and drew additional attention to a child who might otherwise have been overlooked in such a large family.

The years passed in a never-ending cavalcade of dirty bottles and soiled diapers. Soon after Lucille was born, came Pete; then, just as he began to toddle around, came another baby girl, Frances. Now, to Reba Mae's disgust, it seemed as if there would be yet another addition to the family.

Reba Mae dumped another pail of hot water into the galvanized tub on

the back porch and watched as the steam rose in a dense cloud in the winter air. She thought guiltily of the harsh words that she had just spoken to her mother. "Well, I just can't help it! I don't want another baby," she mumbled into the gray, dismal afternoon. At sixteen, what she wanted was to have some fun.

She lifted a dirty diaper and plunged it into the soapy water and gagged at the stench that rose with the steam. Looking at the pile of similarly soiled diapers awaiting her attention, she decided that she definitely didn't want another baby in the house. "As a matter of fact," she declared to herself, "I'm not ever going to have any babies. Never!"

She added the rest of the diapers into the washtub and picked up the brown bar of lye soap and began to wash the clothes. She tried to disregard the smell and avoided the thought of her bare hands emerged in the dirtying water and concentrated on getting the chore completed as soon as possible. However, as she rubbed the lye soap over a soiled diaper, it slipped out of her cramped hand and splashed the foul water in her face. She turned her face into her shoulder and rubbed it dry on the rough material of her coat until it felt as if she had rubbed the top layer of her skin off. Her stomach rolled in protest as she struggled to control her gorge. Inside the house, she could hear Frances crying. The baby had colic and seemed to Reba Mae to have been crying ever since she was first born.

She attacked the laundry with a vengeance born of desperation. With each diaper that she lifted to scrub savagely against the ribbed washboard, she grew more and more furious. Suddenly she realized that she was chanting in rhythm to the washboard, "I hope it dies; I hope it dies." For a second she was petrified with horror, then the possibility

became a tentative hope. "After all, Mamma did lose one baby, a little boy, between Harold and John, and it will be her eleventh birthing. With all the kids now, there's always so much to do that she doesn't get any rest."

She hugged that meager hope to her as she hurriedly finished the laundry and began hanging the diapers out on the clothesline. About halfway down the second line, she looked up to see her mother handing her a damp diaper and a clothespin. She averted her eyes quickly, afraid that her secret desire might be read, and pinned up the next diaper.

"Sister . . ." her mother started, but noting the stiffened back and her daughter's clenched jaw, she began again. "Reba Mae, I know how you feel about this baby, but what's done is done and there's nothing either of us can do about it."

Still Reba Mae refused to look at her mother. Her mother knew she hated to be called "Sister" just as much as her brother Dave hated to be called "Junior." Couldn't anyone see she was practically grown? That she was a real person with a real name? She jabbed the clothespins onto the diapers. Her fingers grew numb as she moved down the line under her mother's watchful gaze.

The silence grew until her mother offered her the one thing she was certain she did not want. "How would you like to name this baby when it comes?" She was shocked. She was expecting a lecture, not this. Suddenly the anger she had been feeling was gone, replaced by an unwanted curiosity about this child growing in her mother's womb.

She never noticed that her mother had returned to the house until she began to pin up the last row. Will it be a boy or a girl? She hoped it was a girl. She had enough brothers as it was. "I wonder what I should

name it," she thought, as she carried the wicker basket up the concrete block steps and crossed the warped planking of the porch and went inside to help her mother start supper.

The months passed quickly as Reba Mae helped her mother prepare for the baby's birth. When the time came for the baby to be born, Reba Mae and her brothers and sisters went to their aunt's house while their daddy took their mama to a clinic to deliver the baby. Since they were dirt poor, as soon as the baby was born, mother and child were sent packing in the middle of the night. On the way home, they stopped and picked up Reba Mae. By the time they arrived home, it was almost daylight.

"Well, Reba Mae, you have a new baby sister. What name did you pick out?"

She took the baby from her mother, who sat weakly in the rocker near the foot of the bed, and looked at her small red face. She looked just like a delicate porcelain doll. She was beautiful, and she was hers.

"Her name is Mary Catherine."

"Mary Catherine it is then. After you clean her up, put her to bed, then come and help me clean up. The bed needs to be changed."

Reba Mae sponged the baby clean with warm water, diapered her, then placed the child in the bassinet and tucked a shawl carefully around her before turning her attention to Cordelia. After Reba Mae had settled her mother in bed, she made breakfast and got her daddy off to work.

She checked the baby, but the baby was still sleeping and she knew she shouldn't wake her without a better reason than the desire to hold her, so she went into the kitchen and warmed a bottle of milk. Then she went back into the bedroom and picked up the baby and sat down with her in the rocker.

"Wake up, Mary Catherine, it's time for your bottle." She looked at the sleeping baby cradled in her arms. "That's such a big name for such a little girl. I'm going to call you Cathy." Reba Mae reached inside the folds of the shawl and touched the baby's hand. It was cold. She grew afraid. The room wasn't at all cold, and the baby was wrapped warmly. She held the baby close to her own body and tried to warm her. The only sound in the room was the sound of Cordelia's quiet breathing and the squeak of the wooden rails of her chair as they rocked against the bare floor. The rhythmic sound reminded her of wash day. She shoved the thought away before it could materialize. Faster and faster she rocked, until the sound seemed to explode in her ears.

"Reba Mae! What's wrong? Is it the baby?"

She could hear her mother's voice, but she couldn't seem to understand its meaning. The words were muted, as though she were underwater. Cathy was sleeping and she was cold. Reba Mae had to take care of her baby sister. She felt that if she stopped rocking, something horrible would happen. She must not listen. She would not listen.

"Bring the baby to me, Reba Mae!" Finally, the authoritative tone of her mother's voice penetrated, and she stood up and handed the baby's lifeless body to her mother.

"Oh dear God, no."

"She won't wake up, Mama. And she's so cold. Why can't I wake her up?" She could still feel the coldness where the baby had lain in her arms. Despite her efforts not to remember, she recalled another day when she had been cold, a day when she had wished ...

"Go next door and call your Daddy."

spreading through her veins to curl like heavy fog around her heart with the memory of that day.

"Sister! I said for you to go next door and call your Daddy."

"Yes, Mama."

Reba Mae did as she was told and went to call her Daddy. The first call she made was to his job. He wasn't there. She called everywhere she thought he might have been except for the place where she already knew he was. Finally, she called there, too. The bartender called him to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Daddy, Cathy's dead," then she hung up the phone.

Dixie

I was born in a military hospital in Fort Ord, California, three days before my dad's birthday. Mom was one of several new mothers in the maternity ward. Throughout the preceding months, she had played mommy by arranging and rearranging the nursery, which consisted of a baby bed in a corner of the living room and a bureau drawer in the bedroom, taking out the baby clothes sent by family and friends in Kentucky and showing them to visitors or just folding and refolding them until they were nearly frayed by the time I arrived.

Mom had prayed for a little girl with curly black hair and blue eyes, and that was exactly what she got. In fact, I was so dark-complected that when the nurses brought in the babies, they confused me with a little Mexican baby. Mom didn't even notice. She bared her breast and cuddled the other baby next to her heart and gave my dinner to another. Meanwhile, I was carried to the Mexican baby's mother. My reception was less charitable. The woman took one look at me, pushed me away, and began screaming a hysterical mixture of Mexican and English, "That's not my baby!" causing several mothers on the ward to take a second look at the bundle of joy nestled in their arms. The mistake was soon remedied. The babies were exchanged. The Mexican mother was reunited with her own

daughter. And I finished off what was left of my dinner in peace.

Mom probably felt I was indeed a changeling when my hair lightened to an ash brown, and my skin paled to reveal a spattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose, and my eyes became an indeterminate blue-gray-green, one color or another dominant, depending on the color I wore closest to my face. She would say that I looked just like my dad in such a way that I knew she didn't appreciate the resemblance, particularly when she pointed out what a pretty baby I had been and related, with such wistfulness, the incident when she and my dad had been offered a boat marina in exchange for me by a wealthy childless couple. I sometimes wondered whether it was my mom or dad who refused. Thankfully, there were no other offers after Dad was called to his tour of duty in Germany.

Mom was an indifferent mother at times. Perhaps it was because, as second born and the eldest daughter, she had helped shoulder the burden of a large family and had been forced to live in poverty for most of her life; she felt she had already done her bit for motherhood. If she had waited until she was older before she married or before she started a family or even if she had married for love, things might have been different. Marriage was an escape from the responsibilities of being "Sister" to eight other siblings. She met a handsome young G.I. stationed at the nearby military base who offered her travel, adventure, escape. He said, "Will you?" She said, "I will." And she was at last free, or so she thought.

Once she left, she couldn't wait to get back. My dad was an abusive alcoholic. When he was called to his overseas tour, my mom returned with me to Kentucky with the intention of staying. When I was about four, my dad convinced my mom to give him another chance, and we went to live for a

short time in Phoenix. Still, I didn't see much of him. One of my earliest memories was crying in the dark and hearing my dad tell my mom, "If you don't shut her up, I will," and mom's tear-choked voice, whispering to me in the dark, trying to quiet me.

I guess field maneuvers kept Dad away from home because I remember homecomings rather than his being at home. I didn't understand then about his drinking, or the other woman, or the physical and mental abuse he inflicted upon my mother. He would bring me a box of candy that had a red whistle inside, and I would meet him at the door and search his pockets for it.

I remember very little about that time in my life except the blazing heat, the insidious dust, and the uninvited ants that ruined my Easter basket. A few memories remain, like the time I was chewing on the plastic cap from the mustard squeeze bottle and swallowed it. Just the day before, Mom had been summoned by the Mexican women next door to help her little girl who was strangling on a marble. She had saved the girl's life and returned to lecture me about putting things in my mouth. I didn't understand that her concern lay in her fear of my choking on the object; for days, I worried that that gnawed bit of plastic would kill me. There was also the time Mom made me come inside to take a nap, and when I woke up, I discovered my crayons had melted into a psychedelic blob that shimmered in the afternoon heat. Then there were the times that my dad's brother stopped by. He would snatch me by my arms and toss me, squealing in delight, up in the air, then catch me in a bear hug; except one time, he pulled my arms out of their sockets. The pain was horrible and my agonized cries and my blueing arms reduced my uncle to a quivering hulk. It was Mom who popped them back into place.

Sometimes Mom, Dad, and I would visit his sister and go swimming in her apartment complex's pool. Mom had a fierce aversion to being submerged in water and rarely ventured in deeper than her waist. During one of those visits, I nearly drowned. I remember playing on the steps leading into the pool when I slipped and found myself in a strange world of muffled sound and reflected turquoise light. I could see the steps, but I couldn't catch hold of the edge. My hands were too slippery. Suddenly my dad was there to pluck me to safety. Dad insisted that Mom allow me to go back into the water, and he carried me piggyback across the pool and back so that I wouldn't be afraid of the water.

Just before Mom and I returned to our bluegrass roots, the three of us went on an outing to see a natural rock bridge in the desert near where we lived at that time. Now, looking back, I cannot remember any word or action which suggested that a separation was imminent; however, it seems now that the desert outing was a foreshadowing of Mom and Dad's divorce, only I was too young at the time to understand.

That time was like waking from a dream and not being able to separate night fantasies from memories. My parents and I walked together across the burning desert sands, hurrying quickly towards the welcoming coolness in the shade of the rock bridge. For a while I climbed on the sun-warmed boulders at its base, hunting for lizards lurking in the darkness, while my mom looked on and my dad climbed higher to explore the bridge's smooth surface. As he approached the mid-point, he called down to us. To see him, we had to walk away from him into the desert with its prickly cactus and its secret, furtive creatures that hid away from the dangers of the sun's glare and of man's capriciousness. When Mom and I turned back, we had to shade our eyes against the sun's blinding rays, the same rays that

cast my dad in silhouette and obliterated his features as he stood like an eclipse suspended on the horizon.

We waved to him and he continued across the bridge and disappeared into the distance. The air began to chill, and we moved away from the steadily advancing shadow of the rocky overhang as it reached toward us. We moved to where the setting sun still warmed the sand. Gone was the white glare that bleached the color from the sand and sky. Now the sun's light bore a tint of amber.

Being closer to the ground, a child naturally focuses her attention on what can be easily obtained. I know the sky was painted with an intense turquoise blue contrasted with a sun-filtered rose typical of the early stages of a Western sunset; yet I looked instead at the dry, cracked surface of the streambed beneath my feet. I discovered that the color darkened where the moisture had softened the tortured clay, smoothing its cracks and crevices, blending its edges.

I walked farther along the streambed, and the air began to smell like rotten eggs. Gradually the dampness gathered to a sluggish trickle, colored with the red-rust and yellow-ochre sediment of the surrounding landscape like an oozing, infected wound. Past the up-raised arms of a solitary cactus, the water widened to a thin, clear stream that passed quietly over smooth, round pebbles to gleam in the distance like a silver chain twisting in the dying light.

My mother called me to her side. It was time to go home.

Playing Mommy

After Mom and I returned to Kentucky for the last time, we lived with my grandmother, Cordelia. I was three or four years old, but even then, I understood what a remarkable woman my grandmother was. As an only child at the time, I couldn't help but be impressed by Granny's fertility. After all, she had given birth to twelve children and raised nine, six boys and three girls. Even though the three oldest boys, Dave Jr., Will, and Harold were either married or in the service at that time, still at home were John, the family's budding scholar; Mitch, the basketball enthusiast; Lucille, a carbon copy of her older sister; Pete, a chubby clown; and Frances, who was only five years my senior and an epileptic; plus my mom, Reba Mae, and me in a small, two bedroom house.

My grandfather had died of cancer several years earlier, leaving the heavy burden of raising his children upon his wife's already stooped shoulders, and Granny, like the old woman who lived in the shoe, sometimes didn't know what to do. Compromises were made. Granny worked the 11-to-7 shift as a nurse's aide at the local hospital and slept in the day while everyone was at school or work. I had few rules to follow as a child beyond the requisite Beware-of-Strangers classification of Do's and Do Not's. They included Stay Close to Home, Always Let Us Know Where You Are

and Who You Are With, Don't Talk to Strangers, Don't Pet Strange Dogs.
And . . . DON'T WAKE UP YOUR GRANDMOTHER.

Granny had two mama cats, each recently delivered of a litter of kittens hidden beneath the house out of reach of dogs and children, their natural enemies. One afternoon, my mom went to run some errands and I was left behind. Usually I played outside most of the time or next door with the neighbor's little boy. His name was Potna, or so he was called, in childish imitation of John Wayne's "Pardner." Potna never wanted to play Cowboys and Indians with me. I think it was because I had a real cowboy hat and a red cowgirl skirt and blouse with white fringe on it. All Potna had was a cap pistol, which wasn't so great once you figured out that a rock and a roll of caps would bang just as loud.

Instead, Potna always wanted to play Army or Matchbox Cars or to dig for grubworms in the dirt. On this day we played cars together until a little red-headed boy with Opie-Taylor freckles crowded me out. I quickly grew bored as a spectator and left to find something else to do. For a while I swung on the branches of a weeping willow tree that grew in Granny's front yard. I gathered a handful of willow branches, beat my fist against my chest, and sailed across the ditch at the tree's roots, screeching my version of Tarzan's fiercest jungle cry.

The heat soon exhausted my energy and I rested against the tree's rough trunk. Shielded behind the curtain of the weeping willow's swaying limbs, I mourned my baby doll, who had been sacrificed by the neighborhood boys in the name of sport. I remembered finding her naked body hidden in the dirty clothes closet. She had been de-CAP-i-tated (someone had explained), her shorn head used as a makeshift softball.

I pushed the memory away into that closet of things best

forgotten--things like lost treasures, absent daddies, and broken hearts--to be left there until I grew old enough to open the door and look at them in the harsh light of day. It was then that I remembered the baby kittens, soft and furry, just the thing to keep me entertained.

I crossed to the side of the house and removed the piece of wood used to block the opening, placed it aside, and crawled out of the afternoon glare into the darkness. I paused and inhaled the damp, musky smell inside. After the heat of the midday sun, the cool, packed earthen floor felt good on my bare legs. I crawled into the deepening shadows toward one of the cardboard boxes containing the kittens, pulled the box to me, and scanned the interior for the second box. A pair of green eyes glowed from the darkness, watching me warily as I crept forward, heedless of spiders and snakes. A mama cat passed into the shadows and reappeared briefly in the half-light before disappearing through the white square of light marking the entrance.

The second box lay on its side and the kittens scattered as I neared, dragging the cardboard box along the ground behind me. "Here Kitty, Kitty. Heerrre Kitteee, Kitteee," I called, to no avail. But I was small and quick and they, though smaller, were still clumsy. I soon had all but two in the box. The other two had scurried into the shadows. I could sense their eyes upon me as they waited warily for me to approach. I stared hard, trying to distinguish their shapes in the inky blackness. Occasionally, I caught a silvery glimmer as one of the kittens turned its head, reflecting a stray particle of light on the oily moisture of its eye.

Things moved unseen in the shadows, recalling night terrors where monsters lurked behind closet doors and beneath children's beds and

grinning, hollow-eyed skeletons waited in dark hallways.

The square of sunlight at the entrance beckoned me to safety. I grasped the corrugated edges of the box and scooted backward on my behind.

Inside, the kittens bounced and tumbled haphazardly as the box bumped over the uneven dirt floor. They mewled plaintively as I kidnapped them from their home.

I emerged into the light, reached back and brought the box into the sudden shock of the afternoon sun. The kittens blinked, then stared out into the world, for the first time. Some tried to climb out of the box using their companions as stepping stones. I gently folded down the flaps and peered inside like a giant as they stirred uneasily upon their spindly legs.

Carefully, I carried the bulky box inside the house where I could play undisturbed by a bossy aunt or uncle who would free my captives. I went into the bathroom and closed the door.

Inside, I turned the box on its side and heard the kitties scramble for solid ground as their world shifted on its axis. As the flap dropped down, the fuzzy creatures pranced and tumbled playfully on the bathroom floor to investigate its four corners. Their leathery footpads pattered softly like rain on linoleum. I stood watching their antics indulgently. Then I discovered someone had left bath water in the tub. Wonderful! I would give my babies a bath!

I took each baby, one by one, and placed it gently into the tub. There were about six or seven, some gray-striped, some yellow, or splotched like a quilt made from scraps and no pattern. My favorite reminded me of the *Pépé LePew* cartoon. She looked like a white kitten that had had black dye dumped on her while she sat dozing with her paws

and the tip of her tail tucked beneath her for warmth. I held her under her front legs and raised her to eye level. The white fur began beneath her chin and ruffled extravagantly over her breastbone. I stared into her eyes, noting their peculiarity, the color so like my own, yet the shape so foreign. She stared back at me unafraid, yawning her indifference into my face. I could hear the gentle rumble of her purr in my fingertips. She broke the connection between us with a immense yawn that squeezed her eyes shut.

I leaned my bare arms against the cold white porcelain tub and eased her into the water to join the others where they paddled the surface, making soft splashing sounds which tingled against the tiles, their cries breaking like fine crystal against the chrome fixtures. Their small wet paws reached up, trying to gain a foothold and escape. I laughed at their efforts and blocked their retreat, pushing them firmly back into the water.

"Now, babies, it's time for your bath," I said, reaching for the bar of soap. With my finger I traced the letters embedded in the soap and knew they spelled IVORY.

My babies were getting tired, so I got to the business at hand. I rubbed the soap against one kitty's head while the others' heads bobbed like apples on Halloween. I briskly lathered the kitten's fur, carefully scrubbing its bedraggled frame. The fur lathered thickly. I cupped my hands, catching the water and releasing it over her head, but the soap would not rinse off. I put my hand on her back and pushed the kitten under the water, slowly moving it to and fro as the suds loosened their hold and rose to the surface.

When I let go, the kitten struggled slowly to the top, crying weakly.

Her fur was plastered to her skull like painted glass, in sharp contrast with the twin peaks of her ears, pink satin flags of surrender. Her eyes fluttered sleepily as I plucked her scraggly body from the water and pulled the towels from the rack next to the tub. I spread one on the floor to make a pallet. Its whiteness gleamed against the floor's dark green tile. I placed the drowsy kitty on the towel and drew the other over her to keep her warm while she napped.

I turned my attention back to the others, who paddled feebly to stay afloat, bumping stupidly against the bar of Ivory as it floated on the surface like an iceberg among tired swimmers. I repeated the bath ritual until each kitty was thoroughly washed, rinsed, toweled dry, then laid to rest on the pallet beside me. I leaned over their quiet bodies, soothing them with a lullaby, tucking the folds of the towel between each small body, lovingly forming delicate mounds beneath the bath towel.

At last someone discovered my nursery game. It was my aunt, Frances. Her shocked gasp startled me. "Reba Mae! Come here and see what Dixie's done. She's drowned the kittens! You little monster. I'm going to drown you. Just you wait." Her screams of outrage soon brought everyone, gaping in horror, to crowd into the doorway. I didn't understand what all the commotion was about, and I worried they would wake my babies from their slumber. What was worse, they were going to wake up Granny. Then I knew I was going to be in trouble because I had somehow started the uproar.

The voices jumbled, sounding foreign. I pressed into a corner away from Frances's grasping hands. Words hung accusingly in the thick air--DEAD, DROWNED--then my named dropped heavily, obscenely, among them--DIXIE.

Then someone pushed ahead into the bathroom past Granny, Frances, and the others who stood frozen in the doorway. It was my mommy. Her eyes looked at the bar of soap floating on the soap-and-hair scummed surface, its Ivory imprint dissolved. She reached down and pulled back the damp towel to expose the tiny corpses; their small mouths were open, revealing sharp baby teeth.

The words MONSTER, MURDERER reverberated on the ceramic tiles. Her dark, knowing eyes fastened on my lighter ones, waiting. "I was playing MOMMY. I only washed them 'til they went to sleep."

Her hand reached down and enclosed mine, accepting, understanding, forgiving, drawing me away, forestalling the dawn of realization.

Afterwards, Mom settled me down for a nap on my uncle's bunkbed. I lay for a long time listening to the muffled voices outside the door and tried to understand what I had done that was so wrong.

Maybe it was just naptime. Out of habit, I glanced up at the top bunk where my uncle kept his magazines. For a long time, he didn't know I took my naps in his bed during the day. I lay quietly in the heat of the small room and watched the dust motes swim in rivers of yellow sun. I blew a puff of air into the beam of light to make them dance and thought of Munchkins dancing to Oz. Flies droned lazily about the room as I contemplated my pink raisin fingertips.

I must have dozed for awhile. When I woke up, the light was different and there was a slight breeze blowing through the window. A fat metallic-green horsefly buzzed incessantly against the screen. I leaned an elbow on the windowsill and watched him crawl sideways on the screen. He had big, funny eyes, hairy legs, and sparkling wings veined like the back of a leaf. I cupped my hand over him and closed him up in my fist

where I could feel him crawl against my sweaty palm. It tickled. The screen was fastened to the frame with two screws. I loosened one side and thrust the fly out. I could hear him buzz away as I tried to refasten the screen. Then I saw it, a dead fly, and remembered: DEAD.

I pushed the screen back again and nudged the small corpse, its legs raised to the sun and its wings forever-folded, out of the corner with my forefinger. Its dry carcass rasped across the paint-peeled wooden sill, then it was gone.

Dead was something with rigid, raised legs or something smooshed on the side of the road, something unidentifiable that crawled with maggots, buzzed with flies, and smelled sickly-sweet. Dead was like the wild turkey that flew into Uncle Mitch's car windshield and splintered the glass like when you step on a frozen puddle--CRACK! Hundreds of hair-like fractures radiated outward, colored with watered-ketchup. Dead was something you don't see, hidden in a long, glistening box that stings the nose with the smell of carnations.

I squirmed upright and clasped my arms around my knees. Or dead was horrible like when Granny took out the hatchet and took a hen from the chicken coop. Dead was something that screamed and squawked in a snowstorm of blood-stained feathers and open-staring eyes . . . or bloated fish sunning their white underbellies on sharp-stoned shores . . . or kitties with rheumy eyes and open mouths, oozing soap-scummed water.

The closet door in my mind opened, and I thrust DEAD inside and locked it away.

Frances

Frances was the baby of the family, that is, until I came along. Maybe that is why she always felt it necessary to remind me that she was the boss. She always wanted me to call her "Aunt" Frances. But I refused. I already had an Aunt Frances; actually, she was my great aunt and Frances was her namesake. Besides, Frances was just a kid like me, so I didn't feel she had the right to order me around. Although Frances was six years older, she wasn't allowed to leave the neighborhood either. She had epilepsy and needed to be watched.

Frances's "fits" were different from mine. Hers were called seizures. Mine were called temper tantrums. The doctors gave her white capsules that smelled like coconut. Mama gave me a spanking. At first I was jealous; then Frances told me her pills didn't have any taste and she'd let me smell them whenever she had to take one. I thought it was neat when she had a seizure. My Uncle Pete didn't. He used to hit her in the head when they'd argue, and when she started to have fits, he blamed himself.

One day Frances was passing out school supplies to the other kids when she just froze in her tracks. It was as if she were playing Frozen Tag, and we were all IT but didn't know it. At first, Pete, Mitch, John, and

Lucille were irritated because she wasn't giving them any pencils.

"Hurry up, Christmas, I don't have all day," someone said. Still, Frances stared into space. Mitch tried to take the pencils from her, but her fingers were like a vise, and he couldn't pry them away.

"Maaaaaa! Frances won't give us any pencils," Lucille called in the sing-song voice of the tattletale. Then Frances's grip loosened and she began slinging pencils everywhere. Freshly sharpened No. 2's rained down on me like Indian arrows in a cheap Western. The ambush was met with a volley of "Ouches" and another "Maaaaaa" wailed in response.

Suddenly, it was over. Pencils crunched beneath tennis shoes and penny loafers, and Frances staggered as her foot shifted on the rolling columns. Pete grabbed her elbow to steady her, then angrily dropped down to help Mitch and Lucille clean up the mess. John, the man of the house now that the older boys had moved out, stood talking with Granny in the hallway; both were watching Frances. Granny had just gotten home from her shift at the hospital and still wore her nurse's aide uniform.

When the seizures first began, everyone thought Frances was just being a brat, which she was sometimes; then they realized something was wrong. You could tell by her face, as her mind struggled to catch up to the events, that she didn't know what had happened.

Another time, Frances had gone to the kitchen to make a sandwich and a glass of coffee. I watched her assemble a skyscraper of baloney, lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise-slathered bread in Dagwood-fashion onto a plate, grab her glass of hot coffee, and head back into the living room where my uncles, John and Pete, were watching Batman. Just as Frances crossed between the boys and the batcave, Frances simply stopped.

"Move, Dummy," someone yelled. Nothing happened.

"Your Daddy wasn't a glass-maker, you know. I can't see through you." Still, she didn't budge.

"Get out of the way, Lard Butt, before I move you out of the way."

Meanwhile, Batman and Joker were exchanging WHAM's, BASH's, and CRASH's on the black and gray flashing screen. About the time the guys got up to forcibly remove her, the fit started. I watched in fascination as her sandwich shuffled and danced on the plate and coffee sloshed back and forth over the glass's rim. The seizure grew stronger, convulsing her chunky, adolescent body, as baloney and bread toppled to the floor.

She was surrounded now. I picked the food up off the floor as Pete and John pried the dishes from her wadded fists. John took the food from me and for a minute I thought he was going to stick it back onto the plate as if it had never fallen on the floor, but he didn't. After all, she would never have known.

The seizure was almost over, so everyone returned to their seats. It had only lasted a few moments. When it was over, Frances looked down at her empty hands. She had a puzzled frown on her face like when you walk into a room to get something and realize you've forgotten what you've come in for.

She stared at the back of her hand which was flushed red and stained with coffee. Her doe-brown eyes skittered over her brothers' faces as she began to realize what had happened. Neither of the guys would look at her. Instead they stared fixedly at the flickering screen while the announcer crooned, "Stay Tuned, Same Bat Time, Same Bat Channel." Frances picked up her dishes from the coffee table and went back into the kitchen. She did not come back.

The seizures varied in intensity. Twice, Frances fell off the back

porch, once cracking open her head. After she fell from the school stage and busted open her head a second time, she started having a home-bound teacher. Not all of Frances's seizures were so dramatic. Most of the time, she would just click off, like the TV screen when the power was turned off or a fuse had been blown; her consciousness would go to sudden black with only a faintly-glowing dot to indicate its initial presence. Then, a short time later, a little electrician would pop in and change the fuse, and she'd be back on-line again.

My Great Aunt Irene lived way out in the country, and Mama, Granny, Frances, and I often went to visit. However, this particular trip didn't last very long because there was a hard freeze, and Granny and Mama wanted to head back before the roads started to glaze over. As usual, Frances and I rode in the back and sang songs. She stretched out in the back seat and I wedged between the back of the seat and the rear windshield. I was not very discriminating as a child, and I thought Frances's voice was very pleasant, until I grew up and discovered that she carried a tune as if it were shards of broken glass in a tin pail. However, I accepted her renditions of my favorite songs as unconditionally as I accepted having a runny nose in the winter. Since then, I have learned the value of Kleenex and ear plugs.

One of the best things about playing with Frances was when she had a seizure, not like the ones where she fell and bumped her head or when she would get embarrassed about making a mess, but the small, quiet ones where she stopped in mid-sentence for a few moments then continued right where she had left off.

There was a farmer had a dog
And BINGO was his name-o
B-I.....

The silence was always abrupt, a surprise, like playing 1-2-3 Redlight. You never knew when the conversation would resume. Still, you waited; that was part of the game.

I watched the scenery drift by the windows and marveled at a small stand of barren trees that sparkled with an icy veneer in the dubious warmth of the afternoon sun. It seemed as if a gust of wind would shatter their delicate crystal boughs.

-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O, B-I-N-G-O
And Bingo was his name-o.

She was back. I don't think she ever realized she had had another seizure, so I didn't tell her. I think they scared her. They only scared me when her little "vacations" happened less frequently, and her "fits" became more severe.

One time I witnessed one of Frances's fits. We were playing in the living room when Frances dropped to the floor like a fighter KO'd in the tenth round. BAM! Her neck arched back and her eyes rolled back into her head until only the whites showed. Her hands and heels started flapping erratically against the wooden floor like birds caught in a snare.

I screamed for help. "Mama! GRANNY! Something's wrong with Frances."

Mama ran into the room. Her feet stopped inside the threshold, but her body leaned forward, dragging her feet into the room. Gagging sounds came from Frances's throat and spittle dribbled out the corner of her mouth.

"Oh my God. MAMA, she's choking!" Mama screamed in a hoarse, agonized voice as Granny staggered from her bedroom and gazed at the scene as if her nightmare had come to life.

"She's swallowed her tongue. We've got to clear her air passage."

Granny ran into the kitchen. I could hear the ping of silverware clattering onto the linoleum floor as she clawed through the utility drawer for a spoon.

Meanwhile, I knelt beside Frances on the floor and captured her flailing hand while Mama pulled Frances's head into her lap and reached between Frances's gnashing teeth to try to dislodge her tongue from her throat. I looked away as Frances bit Mama's fingers. Frances's face was red and the cords in her neck were distended. I turned away and looked, instead, at the hand I held. The knuckles were bruised and bleeding. My gaze fell on the faint scar on the side of her hand in the shape of baby teeth where I had once bitten her when she had tried to make me stay in the yard and I hadn't wanted to. I had felt justified at the time.

By now, Granny had managed to work in the spoon and had cleared Frances's air passage so that she could breathe. Her teeth clacked painfully against the metal. Mama had captured Frances's other arm at the elbow, but the hand still flopped against the floor like a beached fish.

I heard the back door open. A knife cartwheeled across the kitchen floor, kicked by an unsuspecting foot, and my uncle Pete came to stand inside the living room doorway. He stared in open-mouthed dismay.

"Get out of here," Granny said when she saw him standing there. Her voice sounded harsh, angry. I don't know if she blamed him for Frances's seizures or if she just wanted to spare him from seeing his little sister thrashing like a rabid animal on the floor. He bounded like a startled deer into the hall in one leap. His tennis shoes thranged against the floor furnace. His second leap was punctuated with a loud bang as the bedroom door slammed shut behind him. I listened through the thin wall, but I could hear nothing.

Gradually, Frances's convulsions diminished, and Granny left the room and came back with a damp cloth which she handed to Mama. Mama washed Frances's face and neck and dabbed at the drying blood on Frances's knuckles. It was as she was folding the cloth into a compress to apply against the knot that was forming on the back of her sister's head that she noticed me.

"You'd best go outside and play now."

"But . . ."

"No but's about it," she said as she fixed me with her hazel-nut stare. Abruptly she reached over and hugged me tight.

"You did real good, but now it's time for you to go outside and play like Mommy's Big Girl, O.K? Scoot."

It was after that that Frances had to go to Western State Hospital. Western State was a scary place where they sent crazy people. They also sent people there for drug and alcohol rehabilitation. I had heard it whispered that my great-grandfather, who had been admitted for alcoholism, had been beaten to death by an orderly. Frances was sent there to have her brain tested. They ran EKG's and Cat Scans to see if they could control her seizures, which seemed to be growing worse. The medical experts told Granny that Frances would never be able to drive a car and that she should have a hysterectomy so that she would never get pregnant, but Granny refused. Tests and medications were one thing; a hysterectomy was something else. When the family doctor had Frances prepped for the surgery anyway, Granny checked her out of the hospital.

Running Scared

It supposedly happened one muggy summer night before I was even born at the old Harper place where the McNeils now live. The Harpers and their visiting friends, the Mitchells, were sitting around the table talking about crops, children, tractors, neighbors, the weather--you know, things that people who work the land discuss over a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea or lemonade after a hard day's work in the fields.

Or at least that is how I imagined their evening began each time I heard the story about the little spacemen who were said to have landed at the nearby farming community called Kelly. That night I heard the story yet again, in the very house that it was said to have happened in. And as children often do, I believed every single word was true. My mind was filled with dancing, green space creatures who tangled their taloned fingers in children's hair and tried to kidnap them.

At best, I (who fervently believed in the troll under the Three Billy Goats' bridge and who screamed in terror at the words Fe Fi Fo Fum) knew that where there was so much smoke, there had to be at least a little fire. And if I wasn't quite prepared to believe in spacemen, I had little problem believing in lunatics because I had seen a hospital just for crazy people. Whenever we took Frances there for her tests, I would stay in the

car and lock my door. I knew that some of the patients had done bad things and because they were sick, they went to the hospital instead of going to jail. I could see some of the patients taking walks, and although they seemed all right, I was afraid they might have sudden fits like Frances's spells.

I listened to the adults as they discussed their own opinions of what really happened. I, too, wondered what happened that night to send the entire Harper clan squawking into the sheriff's office for assistance against an alien invasion. A day or two afterwards, the Harpers moved, taking their friends, the Mitchells, with them. They didn't even leave a forwarding address. Although no concrete evidence was ever found, I had earlier been on a tour to the very spot where the spacemen had landed. My tour guides, the McNeil boys, had shown me the perfectly round pond in the field behind the house that used to be a corn field and still was, except for a small, shallow pond and the furrow leading up to it. It was supposed to be the spot where the spaceship had landed and scorched the earth so bad that nothing would grow there anymore.

Meanwhile, the hungry fire crackled and popped in the background, casting the back of the room in shifting shadows where piled winter coats writhed and sighed in the flickering light. A bare branch shivered in the frosty air outside the curtainless window; it seemed to beckon me forward. I scooted nearer the blaze and the safety of those seated around the fire.

"Yes, it happened here in this very house during the summer of '55. Some folks say the Harpers and the Mitchells were likkered up, but nobody ever found a trace of moonshine on the place. Others say they made up that story just to stir things up," one of the McNeils said as he watched

the smoke-trail of his cigarette waft toward the window where an occasional burst of wind ripped at a corner of the plastic cover stapled to the outside of the window frame.

"Ya wanna know what I think? I think it was some kinda military maneuver from out the Fort. Remember, they had a couple of MP's out here that night. Or maybe some of them there loonies from the lunatic hospital," said a faceless voice from a shadowy corner.

"Well, what about the shot through the window screen?" challenged the younger McNeil boy. All eyes, including mine, turned toward the legendary window. The boys motioned me forward. The oldest pointed to a ragged hole in the screen, "Lookie here. This is where them little green men shot at them folks that night with their laser guns! See the hole in the screen?"

"Yeah," the other said, elbowing me and pointing to the ceiling where a hole in the corrugated metal roof had been roughly patched. "And there's where ole man Harper shot through the roof to try and drive 'em off."

The goose bumps that crawled along my skin had little to do with the cold air seeping through the window. My eyes glowed hugely in the window pane's reflection. Nervously I stepped away from the curtainless window and pressed my way through outstretched legs and jutting elbows until I reached my mom's chair. She looked at me and said that it was time to go. "Go get your coat, and I'll help you put it on."

I looked toward the pile of coats where they lay just outside of the light's circle then back at her. "Mommy, I'm scared," I whispered. "You come with me."

"Now, Dixie, there's nothing to be afraid of. That was just a story.

Get your coat. It's time to get you home and to bed," she said while turning me firmly toward the back of the room and giving me a gentle nudge forward. I walked to the shadowy edge and looked to see if she was still watching me, but she had turned back to the others. I stretched out my hand towards my coat and grasped the edge of a sleeve. Suddenly, I remembered the hole in the roof above and imagined that a crazy Harper or a grinning Martian squatted above, waiting to snatch me by the hair and pull me up through the hole in the roof. I yanked the coat to me and sprang back into the lighted circle of voices and laughter as the coats slid to the floor in an avalanche of winter wool.

My mother and my aunt retrieved their coats and guided me into the hall where my mom stooped to fasten the braided frogs on my second-hand coat. As she bent over me, I could see the knobless back door across the hall and thought how glad I was not to live in a house where water was still drawn from a well and the bathroom was a smelly hole in a splinter-studded plank in an outdoor closet where flies buzzed in the summer and slop pots were emptied in the winter. There wasn't even a latch on the door. Anyone could walk right in if they wanted.

The dampness had swollen the door in its frame, and my mom had to use both hands to yank it open. That's when it happened.

Just as the front door was grappled open, the back door slammed flat against the wall directly behind me, crashing like thunder. I instinctively bolted out the door and into the night before anyone could react. I screamed in terror and twisted away from the hands that grasped at my shoulders. The hands clutched again and again at me in the darkness as I streaked across the frozen ground. For once, I was glad of the dark. If I couldn't see IT, then maybe IT couldn't see me.

Hysterically, I raced around the yard, spurred on by the talons that repeatedly clawed at my flying coattail. My screams rent the night like forks of summer heat lightning as I eluded my captor's grasp. I could hear my own voice calling desperately, "Help! Help! Oh, Mommy! Help me. Don't let them get me!"

The sounds of running feet punctuated my cries as I raced blindly towards the steep incline that bordered the front yard. Dimly I remembered the dropoff, but I was disoriented. At last, a hand clamped like a steel band around my arm, then an arm swung around my middle and I was lifted upward. I struggled furiously, but the grip tightened. Finally, a voice penetrated my fear-hazed mind, overriding my cries, stilling my feet which pounded the air instead of the ground.

"Dixie, it's Mommy. It's Mommy. It's only Mommy."

I stopped struggling and turned into her arms where I found safety. She stroked my hair and patted my back until I quieted; then we went back into the hall where my pregnant aunt stood clutching my mom's purse. No one there laughed at my panicked flight. Guiltily, the boys slunk from the room. I shook uncontrollably in my mom's embrace as she wiped my tears away with her handkerchief. "Dixie, what scared you like that? You could have broken your neck out there."

The race in the winter air made my chest ache, and it was a few minutes before I could answer. "It was the door. I thought the spacemen were coming to get me," I wailed in embarrassment.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I told you that it was just a story."

Lucille

My aunt Lucille has always worn glasses. I used to think that it was because she had her eye gouged out when she was a baby. Lucille was born at home with the help of a Black midwife. As the woman was assisting the birth process, her finger slipped into the baby's eye socket and dislocated her eye. The ghoulish image of her dark eye as it lay gleaming upon her cheek always fascinated me as a child. I believed that Granny just popped it back in, but actually, Lucille was carried to Nashville where her eye was reinserted by an eye doctor. Anyway, I always assumed that was why she had to wear glasses.

By the time she was born into the family, Granny already had Junior, Mama, Will, Harold, John, and Mitch. Besides the child-known fact that smart people wore glasses, I grew up believing that Lucille was the smartest child in the bunch because she learned to swim before she knew how to walk. At first I thought it was because the family name was "Fish," but my own mother's fear of the water shot that theory full of holes even in a child's limited logic. Later I found out that Lucille fell into the creek when she was still in diapers. The current carried her downstream, and she would have drowned if it hadn't been for the air trapped in her rubber pants. When they got to her, she was paddling in

the water.

I always felt that Lucille was a little jealous of Mama. Not only had Mama married and traveled from one coast to another, but she had returned home, leaving all that behind and bringing with her a baby girl. Never mind that Mama's marriage ended bitterly in divorce, or that she'd been all alone in a strange place, or that she had to raise her child single-handedly during a time when a divorced woman was seen as spoiled goods, easy pickings. Lucille was infatuated with the idea of home and hearth. She wanted the very things that her big sister had thrown away.

I had a friend named Tanja, who lived two streets away on the opposite end of the street where Granny lived, but I wasn't allowed to go to her house by myself. My boundaries were clearly defined. I could play as far up the street as Granny's right-hand neighbor's front walk (any farther was considered playing on the interstate), and all the way down to the opposite end of the street, which ended in an open field where the neighborhood boys played baseball. If I went anywhere else, I was to have permission beforehand and a personal escort (in other words, a baby-sitter).

But, as the teeth marks on Frances's hand attested, I was prone to challenge authority. I couldn't understand why I could play to the end of Granny's street, but I couldn't go from there two houses back to play at Tanja's house. She was the only other little girl in the neighborhood; her house drew me, and I could not resist the pull. Sometimes I would slip alongside the last house and call to her if she was outside, and she would come over to Granny's house to play. If she wasn't outside, I would race across the backyards, bound up the porch steps, and pound on the door, calling in sing-song fashion, "Can Tanja come out to play?" Tanja

had her own boundaries.

"Dixie!" Instinct propelled me into motion before the call was complete. Mama's voice alone was enough to spur me into action; but when I registered the fact that the sounds carried to me on the wind corresponded to those that make up my name, I shifted into high gear. Bare feet thudded across crew-cut lawns, and arms moved like the bars on the wheels of a fast-moving train.

As I tore down the path towards Granny's house, I could hear Lucille's voice calling me as well. This was not a good sign. The tone of their voices held a note of anxiety, and I knew they had been looking for me for some time. I dodged behind the far corner of Potna's house next door to catch my breath and to think up an alibi. When I looked around the corner, I saw Mama standing in the backyard near the clothes drying on the line. She put her hands to her lips to call again; and when she turned to the side, she saw me peeking around the corner of the neighbor's house.

"Dixie Marie! Where in the Devil have you been?" I stood frozen as each word brought her closer to me. She grabbed my wrist and gave me a brief, hard shake. "Young lady, I asked you a question, and I expect an answer. NOW!" Mama's eyes were smooth onyx spheres. They were eyes that saw everything.

"I wanted to see if Tanja could come and play with me." I knew the tears were starting because my nose had started to run.

"You know you're not supposed to go that far from the house, especially when no one knew where you'd gone." She paused and looked toward the house, where Lucille stood. Lucille's smug smile seemed to ignite the fuse of Mama's barely suppressed anger.

"Go and get me a switch," she commanded.

"But Mommy, I . . ." Her voice, incisive, slashed through my objections.

"Do it now, Dixie." I knew then there was no turning back.

The walk in itself was an interminable punishment as she followed a few feet behind me, her eyes pushing me reluctantly forward. I approached the willow tree with its carpet of discarded limbs as if it were a pit of writhing reptiles. I bent stiffly like an arthritis-riddled, old woman and selected a switch. Experience had made me a true connoisseur. I started to cry.

Lucille appeared around the opposite corner of the house and beckoned to me. "Run!" she shouted. My legs obeyed even though my mind screamed, "Don't!" I tried to stop, but it was too late; from that first instinctive leap, I was doomed.

Mama sprang after me, but I had a head start. I ran around the car and hid behind the tire. I could see Mama's pedal pushers on the other side as she continued around the corner of the house. Lucille, my accomplice, appeared around the opposite corner. She stood sentry and motioned when it was safe for me to move.

When Mama reappeared, this time from the opposite direction, she was carrying the switch I had discarded. The screen door swung open, and Granny came out onto the side porch. I began to have hope. Granny, after all, was Mama's mama. I watched the two women exchange a silent communication which I was too young to interpret and, obviously, so was Lucille. Hope faded as all eyes turned to watch Mama as she smoothed her hand down the switch's length, stripping off the leaves, leaving only a few at the tip, and no one said a word. She flexed the slender bough at her side, testing the quality of her weapon. "Whoosh!" I could already

feel the welts rising on my bare skin.

Mama started toward me, but Lucille was closer. "Run, Dixie, Run!" she screamed. I did, but not before I saw Lucille step into Mama's path. However, Mama never paused in her advance. "Crack!" Her open hand slashed out across Lucille's jaw. Tears exploded from her eyes as the imprint of Mama's hand blossomed across her face. "Maaammmaa!" Lucille wailed and ran toward Granny. "Reba Mae hit me."

"You should've minded your own business."

"Aren't you going to do anything about it?" Lucille asked incredulously, cradling her stinging jaw tenderly.

"No, unless you want me to give you more of the same." She turned and went back inside the house.

Meanwhile I ran like a greyhound at the racetrack, or more like the mindless mechanical rabbit the hounds chase. All Mama had to do was lengthen her stride, reach out her arm, and I was caught. Then began the bizarre dance as I leaped and jumped around Mama as the switch rose and fell with maddening regularity. Slender red welts appeared on my bare legs. My cries were frozen in my chest; I had no breath to scream; then suddenly, Mama stopped. She released my arm, dropped the switch, and went inside without another word. Then the real crying came.

I sat in the dry, prickly grass with my arms wrapped around my knees and with penitentially-bowed head, purged my pain, grief, and humiliation through tears. Later, when the edge of the pain had dulled, I could hear Lucille still bawling her indignation where she sat on the side porch. But I felt no sympathy for her. I knew that most of the stripes that I had received had been earned because of her interference. I sniffled, drew a long shuddering breath, wiped my nose on the bottom of my Peter-Pan

collared blouse, then examined with morbid satisfaction the criss-crossed pink and blood-red marks marring my thin legs. I vowed I would wear shorts until the marks faded so that everyone would feel sorry for me.

After a while I noticed I had been folding the discarded switch into sections like a folding carpenter's ruler, and I flung it away. I watched a brown grasshopper balance on a blade of grass and wondered if Tanja could come out and play.

Hell on Wheels

Dixie came in through the patio door and crossed into the living room where her mom and step-father were reading the paper. She was really excited. Things seemed to be finally looking up for her.

"Hey, guess what! That guy gave me \$500 for the MixMaster. Cash!" The Blue Bomb, or the MixMaster, as her boyfriend's dad called it, was her first car. It was a German import, robin's-egg-blue, '69 Sunbeam. And she was glad to be rid of it.

"Hank and I just came from the bank. I wanted to deposit the money before the guy changed his mind. I was afraid the muffler would drop off before he got out of the drive," she said, as she draped herself across the armchair and waited expectantly for their reaction.

"Did he test drive it first?" her stepfather asked.

"Yeah, I thought I'd be stuck with the Blue Bomb forever, but he said he wanted it to drive back and forth to Ft. Campbell. It does get good gas mileage."

"When it runs," Dick shot back.

His remark irritated Dixie. She had expected they would be pleased, if not at her success, then at least because they hadn't been bothered. Neither her mom nor her step-dad had been much help in teaching her to

drive or in selecting a car. They had, admittedly, loaned her the original \$550 to buy the car on the condition that she pay all expenses, including insurance and maintenance, and repay the loan within three months out of her part-time salary as a co-op student at the bank, which she did.

She took as little from them as she could, paying her school expenses and clothing out of her own earnings. She didn't even eat at home anymore. Her boyfriend's parents always had a place set for her at their table, or she would stop at Mickey D's after work.

Her musing was interrupted by her mother's voice.

"Well, don't expect to use my car to do your running around in."

"Have I ever?" she tossed back.

Her anger flared, coloring her tone and hardening her gaze as she remembered begging to borrow her mom's second-hand car for small errands and being refused repeatedly. The denial might not have stung her so deeply if it hadn't been for the double standard that allowed Dick's juvenile delinquent son to cruise around in the brand new truck. The guy was a bum. He didn't even have a driver's permit, much less a license. Besides that, he was on probation, and his grades were low because he smoked pot and stayed out half the night. And he was probably behind the theft of her car stereo, the one thing on the Sunbeam that had worked well, and it was stolen the first night she had the car.

She still held her mother's gaze with her own. "Besides, I've already been looking for a new car, but I had to get rid of the Sunbeam first." She sat up in the chair. As she did, a thick lock of her hair spilled across her shoulder and curled into her lap. "There's a real cute little car at the Oldsmobile place that I like. It's a green Starfire with tan

interior. Hank and Uncle Harold have already checked it over. I think I'm going to buy it."

Her mother shook out the paper with a flick of her wrists. "Don't expect us to loan you the money."

"I don't. The bank said they'd give me a loan."

"Well, we won't co-sign for you!"

She played her trump card. "I didn't ask you to."

The silence grew until her mom asked, "How are you going to get a loan at your age without a co-signer?"

"They said that Hank could sign for me."

Again silence filled the room. "What about insurance and a down-payment? That \$500 won't go very far."

"With my savings, I have enough for the down payment and six month's insurance. I can handle the payments."

"You'd better," came from behind the newspaper.

She looked from her mother to her stepfather, contemplated the typeset wall raised against her, and stood up. Damn them. She had felt so good. Now she felt sick. Her throat felt raw and her chest ached. She thought she had done a good job, covered all the bases, and they had acted like they had just been told that she was 9-1/2 months pregnant with triplets. No matter what she did, it was never enough.

Already she missed her car. It was the only place she had any freedom or privacy. Even on cold days when it balked at running, she could at least sit in it with the doors locked. When it did run, it sipped daintily the expensive brew her part-time job afforded her. Now, she had no refuge.

She sat on the front porch step and put her face in her hands. Maybe

if she didn't see the passing cars, she could imagine she was alone. She sat in the sunshine and thought about the promises they had made her if she'd just come back home.

What an idiot I am, she said to herself. She thought back to when she first started to work at the grocery. Her mom and step-dad gave her permission to work after school and on weekends. In return she had to continue to keep up her grades and her chores and pay her own expenses. She also had to foot the expense of a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk or a carton of Winstons--those necessities of life that she alone could provide at 9:00 p.m. on a weeknight. She thought of the many injustices in her life, like coming home late from work to find a supper plate kept warming on the stove only to be told it was for her stepbrother, not her, then having to clean the kitchen anyway. With eight people in the family, kitchen duty was like working a restaurant job.

She thought about the embarrassment of last Christmas--that one special day legendary in her family when wishes came true no matter how bad finances were. Dixie's mom had prepared her beforehand, justifying the disparity in Christmas gifts by saying that her new stepchildren (whose own mother was serving time for forging bad checks) needed the extra TLC, and by reminding her that her own brother was young and she didn't want him to feel left out. That meant that Reba Mae's extravagance had to come from her daughter's share.

"You're the oldest. You should try to understand." And she did try to understand, to be generous, but when she had to unwrap her small presents in front of her stepbrother's friend and had to endure his question, "Is that all you got for Christmas?" as if he wondered what she had done bad, she wondered as well. She felt betrayed. The music boxes

might have been lumps of coal signifying her unworthiness to share in the family spirit of Christmas cheer. Any enjoyment she might have gotten from them was overshadowed by what she felt they represented.

Dixie remembered the vicious fight a few weeks later when mother and daughter hurled ugly taunts until Reba Mae began to hurl those same music boxes at her. They crashed against the wall over her head in a tinkling hailstorm of gilded gold. Dixie remembered the shock of the attack and how she cowered in a corner of the bedroom until the storm passed. She remembered stepping over the debris and returning with the dust pan to sweep up the broken shards of metal and how her heart twisted to see the blue ceramic butterfly-shaped box (a handcrafted gift from her best friend) had not survived the sudden squall. The shattered pieces fell in a glittering cascade into the bottom of the plastic wastebasket.

She knew even then that her mother regretted her actions, but she wanted to say something to make her feel as wretched as she did. All she could say was, "They were my only Christmas presents." Later, she heard her mom trying to piece the broken fragments back into shape, but it was too late.

Dixie sat on the front porch and thought about leaving home again. Then she remembered the argument last summer that had resulted in her doing just that. She didn't remember the particular fight, but she did remember stating emphatically, "I'll just leave then!"

"Fine." Her mom answered with a smug look. "You'd better take all your things with you when you go, because if you do leave, you won't be coming back."

She had called her boyfriend, loaded her stuff into his car, took her savings (\$200 in freshly ironed \$20's--money is easier to hide when it is

ironed flat), and took up a girl friend's offer to stay at her house for a few days.

She stayed one night. It cost her \$60, \$60 that would have been better spent at the Holiday Inn, except that she learned people aren't as likely to steal your money if you keep it in the bank. She realized she could not afford Clepto Casa. It was then that her Uncle Harold and his wife, Karen, rescued her, the bank sheltered her reduced savings, and her boyfriend's car ceased to double as taxi/moving van.

Despite the open arms at her uncle's home, there was a price to be paid there too, not in dollars, but in family relationships. Harold and Karen not only took her in, but they pampered her, treated her as if she was an honored guest, an adult who could be trusted, and yet still enough of a child to be taken care of. While this situation was very beneficial to her, it was hell on Reba Mae's and Harold's relationship.

Finally, in the interest of family harmony, Dixie agreed to move back home. When she went to unpack, she discovered that the bedroom she had shared with her two stepsisters had been rearranged. It looked very nice, except that her bed was gone and her dresser was now in the hallway. She was informed that she would now be sleeping on the living room couch.

Dixie knew that if she did leave again, there wouldn't be anything to come back to. She looked at the empty place in the driveway and pictured the shiny green sports car in its place and began to feel less anxious.

On Monday, Dixie exchanged the bank's cashier's check for the keys to the Oldsmobile hatchback. She could hardly wait to show everyone her new car. At home, the interest was less intense. Dick and Reba Mae barely acknowledged the new vehicle. However, things began to heat up a few days

later when Dixie came home from her co-op job to again find her mom and step-dad reading the newspaper in the living room.

The kids must have been out. Her parents seldom ventured out of their bedroom otherwise, except for meals. She tried to leave without their notice, but Reba Mae's voice halted her in the doorway.

"Dixie, give me the keys to your car. I want to drive it tomorrow to Bowling Green."

Dixie stalled. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could she let her mom know, without causing a full-scale fight, that she didn't want to let her drive the car? Briefly, she considered handing the keys to her mom, but the sight of the two of them as they sat hiding behind the newspaper reminded her of the day she sold her old car. Their attitude then added to the fear she had now of never being able to drive her own car; and the sight of her step-brother behind the wheel of her car, plus the memory of being denied access to either of their two vehicles in the past, made her stand firm in her refusal. Still, she tried to be diplomatic.

"I need the car to get to school in the morning, and then I'll need it to get to work."

"You can drive my car. Besides, your car needs to be checked out."

The thought of driving her mother's car made her sick to her stomach, especially when she knew her mom would be driving around in her newer, sporty car. Reba Mae's car was a gas-guzzling tank.

"Hank and I have already checked out the car. We drove it to Nashville on our date Saturday. If you take the car, I'll never get it back. It's mine. I paid for it. You didn't want to have anything to do with it. Remember? Now I want to be the one to drive it."

Dixie took a steadying breath. There, she had kept her cool. No one was slapping her, screaming at her, or pulling her hair. Maybe it was over. She stood hesitantly in the doorway and wished someone would come to the door or that the phone would ring so she could escape.

Dick's voice boomed into the silent room, startling the other two with its unexpectedness. "Damn it! Give Reba Mae the keys to your car like she told you."

"No." The newspaper lowered and revealed the fury on his face. Dixie quaked inside. She felt as if she would throw up, but her own sense of justice fired her anger, supplanting her fear.

"What did you say to me?"

"I said, No, sir."

"I'll take those keys from you permanently if you don't give them to her now."

"And then what will you do? I have another set of keys. And if you do take them, you still can't drive it. My insurance won't cover you if you have an accident."

"Your mother will drive the car to Bowling Green or you will get the hell out of my house! Give her the keys."

Dixie felt her face burn with anger and embarrassment. She had never been so defiant, but she had gone too far to turn back now. "I won't give you my keys, and you won't be driving my car, not tomorrow, not ever. And if you take the car, I'll report it stolen and have you put in jail. It is my name on the title and my name on the loan."

She took a deep breath and tackled the last issue. "As for my leaving this house, you can forget it. I left once and you begged me to come back. And for what? For this? This may be your house, but I sleep here

at night, and I will continue to until school is out."

She pulled out her car keys. "Now I'm leaving, but I will be back. You can count on it." She looked for a moment at her mother, then at Dick's face, which was contorted with barely suppressed rage, and left.

When she returned just before curfew, she expected to find herself locked out because she no longer had a house key. Although the house was deadily quiet and every light was extinguished, the front door opened easily to her. She swallowed convulsively a few times. She hadn't been sure she wouldn't have to sleep in the car. In the morning, no one said anything to her as she left for school.

The Haunted House

Often when Dixie was alone in the house, she would listen to the thumps, bumps, and moans and explain the noises away. Thump! She could tell by the way the walls vibrated that Ft. Campbell was on maneuvers. Rattle-Ting! Relax, that was only the wind rattling the stove vent. Thump-Bump-Groan was the preliminary noise the central air unit made just before it kicked on. Then there was the plaintive moan that sought her out through the dark, empty rooms and down the hall to her bedroom. The sound always reminded Dixie of Bronte's Heathcliff, crying into the wind for his lost love, although she knew it was just the wind burrowing down the chimney in the den. And then there had been the sudden, fierce rattle from the kitchen when they had first moved in, but it disappeared when the ice-maker stopped working.

However, late one night while Dixie sat writing a paper at her computer, there had been a new sound that floated to her from the floor vent beneath the bay window next to her desk. Hissss! Hissss! The sound seemed amplified in the still house, as if someone had whispered directly into her ear. She jumped away from her desk. After a minute, she forced herself to check the window. Windows were hard for her. She had a fear of being watched that originated from a televised scene from Henry James's

Turn of the Screw and the fact that she had once surprised a peeping Tom, but there was nothing to be seen from that window or any of the other eleven in the house.

Dixie reined in her imagination and returned to her seat. plinkity-plink went her fingers over the familiar keyboard as she became once again lost in the words. The computer groaned when the page was full and a blank one was presented begrudgingly to her.

Hissshhh! Her whole body contracted. This time she jumped to the window. Again there was nothing. Somewhere in the back of her mind was the disturbing image of someone lying beneath the house with his lips next to the air vent for the express purpose of scaring the hell out of her. When it happened yet again, she began to move boxes of old papers and receipts that she kept stored beneath the computer desk. Although she did not find a reptilian house guest, she was probably more disappointed than relieved. At least she could deal with the known. She had a husband for such things, didn't she? It was the man's job to deal with spiders, snakes, and peepers, wasn't it? It was the unknown that kept her up at nights creating solutions to "What-If's."

It wasn't until a few weeks later that Dixie finally exorcised this newest ghost. Her son and daughter were playing beneath the kitchen window in the pebble garden around the base of the central air unit. Their soft voices and the ping of pebbles against metal carried through the unit and up the vent. And suddenly she knew. The family cat often defended his territory from atop the unit. She realized that the hissing sounds from the vent were meant not for her but for his life-long foe from across the street.

Dixie admitted that she liked having the answers. Today, she hadn't had the answer. Her house was haunted. She knew because she had created a new ghost only that morning; rather, she had created a monster out of the storm and lightning of the early morning, her swollen throat and aching head, and her cramping stomach. Add to that a well-rested husband who refused to heed her warnings and repeatedly burst into loud, annoying, Hiawathian celebratory chants, and the increasing pressure of an approaching deadline for a paper she didn't want to do, and horror was unleashed on the innocent.

Perhaps, she thought, she was being too melodramatic, but Dixie remembered too well the many times she had borne the brunt of her own mother's sudden abuse. Even though she now understood the reasons behind her mother's behavior, she could not forget. No matter how much she achieved in this life, she knew she would always judge herself by how different she was from her mother. However, fate conspired against her as each year she grew more like Reba Mae in appearance, and judging by this morning, in temperament. She had made a solemn vow to be a better mother to her children, to treat them with dignity and respect, and to never undermine their self-worth. This morning she murdered this ideal. In its place, she resurrected a demon and stood by helplessly as it attacked her first born child.

"Honey, it's about time for the bus." She opened the front door and thrust her arm out to check the temperature. Considering that it had been raining all morning and the skies were overcast, she was surprised at how warm it was for this time of the year. Still, she would let him decide.

"Do you want to wear your jacket or your raincoat?"

"My jacket."

"Okay." She smiled and helped him on with his bulky blue-jean jacket. "I'll put your raincoat in your backpack in case it starts to rain again."

"Okay." He grinned impishly at her and pranced like a high-spirited young colt in the doorway. She knew he was excited. Today was the long-awaited day his class was scheduled to go for a hayride and to pick their very own pumpkins from a giant pumpkin patch. His kindergarten had gone last year, and she had accompanied his class. There would also be a little petting zoo and a maze created with bales of hay. She was sorry she could not go with him this time. She had offered, but she wasn't needed, his teacher had said.

She stood with his blue plastic raincoat in her hand and looked at the dark sky. She worried that his field trip might be cancelled because she knew he would be disappointed. She tried to prepare him for the worst.

"You know your trip might be rescheduled because of the rain . . ."

Her son interrupted her. "My teacher says we'll go even if it rains."

As if on cue, the rain started pattering on the wet leaves of the trees in the front yard. "But, Honey, if it gets too wet, you won't be able to go. You can't traipse around in the rain and the mud, especially with lightning flashing in the sky," she warned. "You'll still get to have your picnic lunch if you don't get to go to the pumpkin patch today."

"It's just a sandwich."

"I'm sure it's more than just a sandwich," she reassured him. "Come here and let me help you put on your raincoat. Do you think it'll fit over your jacket?"

"Yeah, over the jacket!" He danced around; finally she succeeded in wedging him into the plastic raincoat. He looked like a blue sausage with

arms.

"That's not going to work. Hurry, let's get that off before the bus gets here." She peeled the top layer off and tried it cape-style, but he could not keep still. She tried to adjust it, but he kept pushing her hands away. Suddenly, without warning, Dixie reached over and slapped him on the side of his face.

The attack shocked rather than pained him. She, too, was surprised as a part of her watched the monster with her mother's voice snatch off the raincoat and jerk off the jacket. His tears angered the monster, and she thrust the blue thing at her little boy and commanded, "All right then, Crybaby, you put it on." The monster crossed over to the light switch and turned on the overhead lights so that the mother could see the red mark on her son's jaw.

She and the monster watched as her son struggled tearfully into his raincoat and backpack. The bulky vinyl was crumpled beneath the weight of his bookbag and the hood was folded in on one side. A blast of wind would rip the whole thing off his back. She wanted to help him, to apologize for not protecting him from the ghoulish creation, to kiss him and wipe away his tears, and to wish him a good day at school; but the monster was not finished.

"Here let me do that! You see, you still need my help, don't you?" The little boy shook his head no. Her rough hands pulled and tugged at the coat and back pack, angrily adjusted the fit, and snapped the coat closed. Dixie could hear her mother's words, hateful, hurting words, words that she had pledged never to inflict on her own child, being spoken in her voice; then she heard the grind and screech of No. 66 as it rounded the curve and approached his stop.

"There's the bus," the creature said and flung open the storm door as if the child were not welcome in his own home. At last Dixie broke the creature's hold and called out to the solemn, red-eyed little boy, "Have a nice day at school."

The child trudged up the steps of the bus without looking back. Dixie saw him take his usual seat behind the driver and waved as she did every morning since he began riding the bus, but it was dark and she couldn't see if he waved back. She didn't think he did.