

MISS BIG GIRL'S HOUSE

ROBIN L. MOSS

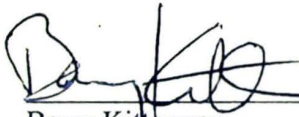
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Robin L. Moss entitled "Miss Big Girl's House." I have examined the final paper copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

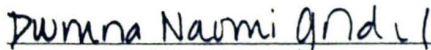


Blas Falconer, Ph.D.
Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend
its acceptance:

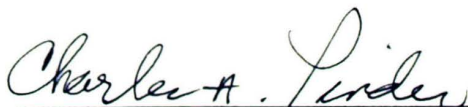


Barry Kitterman
Professor



Dwonna Goldstone, Ph.D.
Professor

Accepted for the Council:

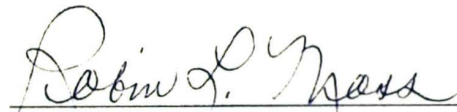


Charles Pinder, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Graduate Studies

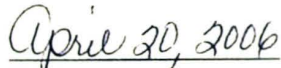
STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's degree at Austin Peay State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under the rules of the Library. Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgement of the source is made.

Permission for extensive quotation from or reproduction of this thesis may be granted by Dr. Blas Falconer, or in his absence, by the Head of the Interlibrary Services, when in the opinion of either, the proposed use of the material is for scholarly purposes. Any copying or use of the material in this thesis for financial gain, shall not be allowed without my written permission.



Robin L. Moss



Date

Miss Big Girl's House

Robin L. Moss

To Gertrude

for

my father. *William B. McGhee*

my grandmother. *Miss Big Girl*

my aunt. *Tina*

my uncle. *Richard*

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is made to my thesis committee: Dr. Blas Falconer, Professor Barry Kitterman, and Dr. Dwonna Goldstone, for their tireless and exhaustive review, combined with sincere dedication to making my writing better.

Thank you, especially, to Dr. Falconer for your admonishment to not let my words “die,” encouraging the vitality and music in my voice, for introducing me to the joy of memoir and its catharsis, and to poetry. To Barry Kitterman, I especially thank you for helping to give my voice audience and confidence, for your invitation to read, and for planting the idea that I might grow up to be a creative writer. Dr. Goldstone, we share what is culturally referred to as oral tradition; with your encouragement and advisement, I hope to make the tradition just as rich in memoir writing.

I would also like to acknowledge the faculty of the Languages and Literature Department at Austin Peay State University, especially Dr. Susan Calovini, for your gracious reception and accessibility whenever I showed up at your door.

I would like to thank my husband, Bishop William H. Moss, Jr., for your sacrifice, for your understanding, and for your devotion to my commitment. To my daughter, Tish, one of the reasons (ultimately, for me) this story is significant, for your ten-year-old understanding, thank you.

More than anyone or anything, I thank the Creator, for “without Him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3)—even creativity.

Foreword

“Miss Big Girl’s House,” predominantly creative non-fiction, is the beginning of a larger work in progress. This memoir incorporates one fictionalized account, which, while it dramatizes, provides exposition of the theme, affecting the narrator’s character. Secondly, Tina’s “fixing up” is about a fictitious coworker and boss, though my grandmother’s notions about meddling are not.

The section entitled “Hannah’s Joy” was first published in the March 2006 issue of *Clear Living* magazine, a Randall House publication, Nashville, Tennessee.

Contents

Entity -----	1
Miss Big Girl -----	11
Uncle Richard -----	18
Tina -----	23
Dad's Arrival -----	28
Entitlement-----	36
My Arrival -----	40
Hannah's Joy -----	43
Reconciliation -----	53

Entity

Miss Big Girl had a reputation for taking care of people, but my father was the only one of those she took in that she called her son. “That was the way she was,” people said, but to my way of thinking, that accolade was only part of the truth. She did take care of people. But, in time, it became apparent to me that the people she took care of were often dumped on her—including my father. I didn’t know the full story because it was never talked about freely, only in snippets of disjointed conversations. The first time I heard the name Gertrude mentioned in one of these clipped discussions, it hung in the air. And like air that cannot be seen, I could only imagine the make-up of the woman, and I could feel her existence somehow. All I knew was that Gertrude was my father’s birth mother, who eventually became, for me, a mysterious but distant entity—a thing to be put away. She was long gone by the time I heard mention of her, and that was the way I thought of her, as a long-gone entity associated with my father’s arrival at Miss Big Girl’s house—my grandmother’s house, the place where I, too, lived.

While I grew up there, when *their* Mamas fell on hard times, take-ins floated in and out of Miss Big Girl’s house, “just until things got better.” Cousins, nieces, and nephews flowed into our house as if by osmosis. For one, there was my seemingly indigent cousin, Jason, for he always appeared from out of nowhere, walking right up to the front porch with hat in hand.

Jason was crazy. And, he was called just that—crazy—because none of us knew the medical term, or the polite, sensitive word to use. Neither did it occur to us to find it out. Everybody knew Jason’s delicacy and respected it. He laughed along with us when

we laughed at him. He even instigated the laughter most times. Everybody in the house had been told not to pick on Jason when he came around because he couldn't help how he was. So, when he came bounding down the hill in staccato steps, everybody was tight-lipped until he got us started. He walked fast and wore long sleeves, even in the hottest weather. He appeared, dusty and parched, at the front door holding his hat. On his visits, he constantly played with whatever kids were around. His favorite game, cutting away at people with a fake knife or sword, invariably became a part of every visit. So common, it was like a greeting of his. Mostly, it was his family who played it with him, but on occasion, he stabbed at visitors who did not know him. We all played along, even the visitors (once they understood), letting him claim victory in the fight. The game usually ended with his laughing exclamation, "Gotcha," one of the things he could say clearly.

Tonal sounds became important when Jason talked because he could avail few words. He pronounced nobody's name properly, either. So, Jason learned to sign himself through life. When his words and gestures wouldn't convey his meaning, I looked at his face—a smooth, brown Hershey bar unblemished—to get an understanding. Meaning was usually there, in the furrows or in the quirky turn of his lips. His face told me the rest of what he could not say or mime. Jason's nature was playful, but his conversation was direct. There were no bushes to beat around as far as Jason was concerned. He handled the bushes of communication with a cut-away sword too. For Jason, life was plain and unaffected by time. There was no gray in sight within his tightly curled short hair. His body was tall, thin, and agile, its age hardly apparent. One sign was his rough, callused hands. They were worn to a dark cracked-leather finish, dry and sunken. His hands raked instead of touched. In fact, that's what he did—raked

people's yards mostly, although sometimes, he cut grass, too. He raked the yard and cut the grass like he walked, in jerky, short movements, and there was no need or time for talk then.

Jason liked to walk wherever he went, and he kept himself neat, though his clothes were tattered. His shirttail never hung loosely, and if his hat was not on his head, it was folded and tucked into his right jacket pocket. Tucking—no, stuffing—things in his pockets was Jason's compulsion. Particularly, he stuffed brown paper bags and newspaper, wadded into a neat mound, into his back pants pockets. Beneath his jacket, two evenly stuffed humps protruded. Even in winter, they could be discerned through his overcoat. In summer, when he wore no jacket, the two humps stood out from his backside. It was too hard for me to resist the temptation; I knocked away at them whenever Jason's back was turned. Then, I had to play the tickle game of fake knife and sword. With me, maybe because I was a girl, he didn't strike as hard. But even my youthful speed was nothing against his catlike agility.

The second sign of Jason's age was his feet. One winter, he stayed at Miss Big Girl's house, and Aunt Tina was his boss. He never seemed to mind it because he had to be told everything—to wash his hands, to take a bath, and to go to bed. Always cooperative, Jason washed his hands 15 times once before eating when Aunt Tina told him to. He never got angry; he didn't understand the concept of anger, even when she tied his feet to the bed one morning and yelled, "Jason, get up, there's a fire!" That's when Jason's feet gave his age away. Like the feet of an old toothless fairy tale wizard, his toenails were thick, long and curled. They curled to the right and left respective of each foot, one atop the other until the last one, which curled to the shape of his shoes.

When she saw them, it was Aunt Tina who soaked and groomed his feet without any laughter. For a time, he walked slower and the heels of his shoes didn't turn so badly.

Most often, Jason was happy. He never showed anger, but he could be fidgety when he was nervous about something. His arms drew up to the edge of his face and his shoulders pulled his back into a roundness that reached out over his protruding pockets. Since he wore long sleeves, I imagined that his elbows felt like the hardened bumpy skin of a chicken's legs. And, like Jason's hands, they would rake across whatever surface they touched too. But Jason only touched people when he was playing one of his games. Another game he played was bid whist, the grandfather of the game of spades. We were astounded that Jason could play the game when he had to be told to do everything else. But he was so good at it that everyone wanted to be his partner, including Fred, another family cousin.

Fred never lived at our house; he always came to visit in the evenings. "Fred, won't you have a bite with us," Big Girl asked.

"Aw, Miss Big Girl, I don't want to be no trouble." After he ate everything on his plate, sometimes he played checkers on the porch, or a game of bid whist. Fred was quiet. If he wasn't eating, or playing a game, he sat gazing.

Whenever he started looking glazed about the eyes, Miss Big Girl usually asked him nicely to go home: "Well, Fred, it's getting dark." He understood. After he left, she fussed, "always settin' and trying to look up folks' dresses."

People talked about Fred's voyeurism in the community, starting with speculation as to why he never married. "No woman could stand the way he looks at her. That's why," they said.

Big Girl agreed. "He looks at women and gals in ways he ought not."

Though she never turned hungry Fred away, she had no tolerance for his sneaky ways. He knew it, too. So, he generally caught her hint and left. When he returned, it was all the same again, Fred a-gaze.

It never mattered if the ladies were shrouded from neck to ankle; around Fred they might as well have been naked. He gazed at them, intent on burning holes through their clothes. Most people knew how he was and never stayed around him long. But Cousin Eddie Pearl was blind. She could not feel his burning stares, and Fred had a delicious time, looking under Eddie Pearl's dress, for she sat gap-legged most of the time. It was left up to me, or Big Girl, or Aunt Tina to make her aware of herself, but she often forgot and fell back into her comfortable gap. Fred was quiet all the more, helping Eddie Pearl also to forget his presence.

She was another drop-off relative who ended up staying weeks at a time. She was in her fifties then, and still beautiful, except for her one eye that was closed shut in childhood. The open eye was a beautiful dark hazel color. It was bright when she smiled, although she had lost most of her vision in it, too. Her skin was the color of apple jelly, not yellow, but golden, and the hair on her head framed her face in thick black waves when she wore it loose. Most often it was plaited. Just over five feet, Eddie Pearl was round, neither big nor small. She had gained some weight with age, but she framed it well in a medium size. When she thought she had said something funny, she got loud laughing, and then, she talked over everyone else in the room. My cousin, Robert, could make her animated like this whenever he "janked" with her. To get her going, he asked

something like, “What you doin’, Old Woman, settin’ there lookin’ like a train ran over you?”

Then she started, “You shut up, you old liver-lipped, biscuit-eating, . . .” They took turns laughing at their own remarks, then at each other’s. This game was a game of “besting” like the dozens game, but talk of mothers was out of bounds. There was a respectable, unspoken boundary between them about what they could say about each other. They each knew the game and never crossed the line. Eddie Pearl waited for these moments because there wasn’t much to her life. She had been married and widowed, producing two honey-colored daughters; one lived away and the other, who dropped her off at our house, lived nearby. The few hours she was supposed to be left always turned into overnight stays, and sometimes into days and weeks.

When she stayed, she was glad for the company, and her animated sessions with Robert were a kind of liberation. She had used her vision up in her young life, and now she had almost none, becoming lazy and slothful, allowing her impaired vision to excuse her from working and keeping up. Everyone else allowed it, too, except her husband, they say. He made Eddie Pearl clean the house, cook the meals, and care for the children. But, to look at her then, no one could imagine she had ever been industrious. Whenever she came, she wanted to be waited on hand and foot. Big Girl knew she had been a capable person, and let her live off the good graces of others to a certain point. When Eddie Pearl came, it meant we had to wait on her and cater to her whims.

Whenever she called out that she needed to go to the bathroom, I had to stop playing and lead her down the hall, then wait, and take her back to her seat. Her hair usually needed combing when she got there because she, and her daughter, left it

unkempt at their house. The most hated thing of all was when the television channel had to be changed because she didn't want to watch the program that was on. "What do you want to see, Pearl?" Big Girl asked politely. *See!* We rolled our eyes in open resentment—in front of Eddie Pearl and away from Big Girl. She didn't really like the show she had us turn the channel to; she was just mean enough to keep us from watching what we wanted. Everything changed when she came, even the sleeping arrangements.

Though things were uncomfortable when she was around, we also felt sorry for her. She did not have much of a life. When her daughter was at home with her, she was disheveled and ignored. When she dropped her off at our house, Eddie Pearl was frustrated and embarrassed. Her daughter brought no clothes, no toothbrush, and no apologies. Whenever Eddie Pearl asked her daughter what time she would be back, she got a good cussing out. Then they argued, after Miss Big Girl stopped the daughter from cussing: "You ain't gonna talk that way here—not while I'm standing here."

After that, Eddie Pearl made excuses for her daughter. "Don't pay no attention to her, Aunt Big Girl," she said. "She just got her mind on so many things."

Whatever sorry feelings people had then, they turned them off when Eddie Pearl excused her daughter's behavior. The arguing went on that way between them. Off and on, everyone felt sorry for Eddie Pearl—off when she made excuses for her daughter, and on when her daughter treated her like that.

One Saturday Eddie Pearl had been there overnight, so Big Girl took her along for the grocery shopping. Fred, in thanks for his dinner, offered to take Big Girl to the store the night before. Smartly, she placed Eddie Pearl in the back seat with her so Fred couldn't practice gazing openly. She had Fred wait while she pulled Eddie Pearl slowly

along the familiar grocery store aisles. I thought that I had squirmed out of helping with Eddie Pearl, claiming that I would clean up while they were gone. The real reason I got out of going was that Jason had come just before they left, and Big Girl didn't want to leave him at the house alone. To keep us both busy, she gave Jason something to do too: "Jason, won't you cut the grass while I'm gone? I'll be back directly." It was all she could do. She had her hands full with Eddie Pearl, Fred, and the grocery shopping.

I thought there would be more time than usual to finish my work, since the shopping trip included Eddie Pearl. When I heard the car in the drive, I grabbed the dust rag and polish quickly, moving toward the coffee table. But the next sounds I heard didn't make sense. I heard only one door close, and there were no footsteps on the ramp. Whoever it was had taken the steps to the front door instead of using the ramp, as everybody in our neighborhood knew to do. Looking out now, I could see a car I did not recognize. When I moved toward the front door, the knock came at the same moment I looked through the peephole. A blaring nose and big upper lip faced me from the opposite side. "Who is it?" I asked.

"Is this Miss Big Girl's house?" asked the big brown lip.

"She's not here," I said.

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"No, ma'am." There was silence.

"I really would like to talk to her. Do you mind if I wait? Maybe she'll be back soon," the woman said. I opened the door and stepped onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind me.

"I don't know how long she will be gone, ma'am," I told the woman. Now, I could see the woman's lips and nose without distortion. They were set on a face the color of a manila envelope. Her eyes were too big for the face they were set in, so they strained against the skin around them. Her hair was pulled back loosely into a twisted knot at the back. But the gray edges around the temples did not go with the flow, so it stood out around her face in wispy short curls. "If you tell me your name, I'll let her know you came by." *I wonder who she wants to drop off.*

"Are you kin to Miss Big Girl?" the woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I'm her granddaughter." *Well, I'm your cousin so-and-so,* I wanted to mouth because I knew that's what would come next. Instead, the woman stared. She had begun to work her mouth without sound, just as I saw Jason move around the corner.

Finished with the grass, he picked up the shiny machete he had seen earlier and began laughingly chopping away at the hedges. Jason darted around the corner to the front porch, and swung the blade deftly as he did in every game, yelling out "Gotcha." He swung again at the abdomen of the woman who turned toward him. "Gotcha, gotcha, gotcha," he gurgled. The body fell toward him and onto the ground. He stepped back nervously. His victims had never fallen to the ground. They always laughed. His hands flung up toward his face and the bloody machete touched his nose. When he dropped it, the clang of its fall to the concrete porch was so loud he did not hear the sound of Fred's car approaching. We both stood staring down at the woman.

Gertrude took her last breath at age 72, but she had dissipated long before then. No one knew when she actually left—she had been gone so long. Talk of her had

sometimes encircled my young ears, and I knew that Gertrude lived among the people I love many years ago. She was my father's birth mother, and when she abandoned him, Miss Big Girl took the baby in. In the end, it was not Jason's machete that killed her. She died of cancer some years later. But, here, on the porch of Miss Big Girl's house lay the entity, whose physical presence was a dream, one that I created, and it had taken years for her to get there.

* * *

Gertrude hailed from LaGrange, Georgia, and if she favored her people there, her cheeks sat high, anchored in prominence between the big brown eyes above them and the narrow chin beneath. All of her immediate kinfolk were the same manila-walnut color, and all of her kinfolk avoided talking about her. They didn't hear from her, they said, not since she left town those many years ago. Not only had she left them behind, but they knew of two baby boys left behind as well. One of them was my father. He had come to live at Miss Big Girl's house in 1936, four years before the birth to my aunt (Tina) in 1940; six years before the birth to my uncle (Richard) in 1942; and about 23 years before I came to live there in 1959. Take-ins floated in and out, but Miss Big Girl's children, I, and two other grandchildren grew up there.

The House

*Remember this house frame by frame,
its doors, its windows, its name.
An entity lived here but never came.*

Miss Big Girl

My grandmother always wore her hair in braids, plaits, actually, and she never wore pants. The one time we got her into a pair she fussed about them so much, we never tried again. Our mistake, we thought, was that we started off with rough blue jean material instead of something soft. We tried to persuade her to wear them as an outfit for fishing, or for when she was working outside. It didn't matter what she was doing, pants were not an option. She wore dresses, and, over the front of each dress, she wore an apron, every day.

She was a working woman, and something needed doing all the time. Just sitting on the front porch had its work. While a body rocked, it could shell peas or snap beans from the garden. The only time she wasn't working was when company came. Her leisure time was reserved for fishing, one of her favorite pastimes. I didn't like fishing, but I liked to lie on the blanket and watch her flip the cane pole. Her legs stretched out in front of her as she sat at the edge of the bank. Whenever she got into position, she pushed her straw hat back so it sat astride the crown of her head, the brim pointing skyward.

When we went fishing, I felt like a free spirit. There was a peaceful quiet when we walked there and back, never rushing, like the road was ours. Not much conversation went on between us, just the walking, me knowing her and her knowing me. Sometimes,

she put her arm around my shoulder. Then, I felt her softness and smelled the smell the iron left on her apron. She walked with a sure gait that never outpaced mine, unless I wanted it to; I fell behind on purpose and stepped where her shoes landed in front of me.

To get to the fishing spot, we had to leave the road and cross a cow pasture. She was aggravated, I knew, because I hung on to her dress the entire way across, looking at all the cows, but keeping my eye on the big bull. On this particular day, he looked back at me, mean, like he was trying to see if I had on any red. (My cousin, Robert, said that bulls attack people when they wear red.) I ran to the barbed wire fence, and stood with my back against it until she held it up for me to go under. Still inside with the bull, she slowly pushed down the fence from the top to step over it. When her head came down level with mine, the ends from the red scarf tied around her straw hat fell into my face.

* * *

Whenever my grandmother talked, it was about something she knew, and somehow she participated in every conversation that went on around her, no matter what the topic. Once, when my Aunt Tina told her she didn't know anything about what she was talking about, I was surprised. "This," Tina said, "is between me and my friend, Mama. You don't know the people I work with."

"Don't need to know them," my grandmother said.

But Tina went on to tell her, "You don't know how it is. Every time she gets behind in her work, the supervisor writes her up, and the rest of the staff won't help her.

I'm sick of the way they treat her. She gives her the work the others leave undone, and they don't get a write-up. But, she always punishes Gloria."

"What you gone do?"

"I can fix it up for Gloria," Tina said.

"You need to stay out of it," Big Girl said. "Only thing you gone be doing is fattenin frogs for snakes. When you get through meddlin, she'll really be in a fix."

That's when I agreed with Aunt Tina. Big Girl really didn't know what she was talking about. Frogs and snakes didn't have anything to do with helping a friend. I never knew what Aunt Tina's plan was, and that conversation took place so long ago, I didn't think of it again until years later, when I was in college.

My roommate liked a guy who was a football player, a star player. Everybody knew he was a player off the field, too, except her. At the mention of his name, she became mush. "Girl, he's a player," I said one day. But, she listened to the advice of other dorm mates who said they could fix her up with him. One introduced her, and the other helped set up their first date together. While she got ready, I watched her don a spotty green outfit. I thought of my grandmother's words again as my roommate leaped around and then out of the room.

* * *

Big Girl didn't talk either, about the "birds and the bees." I learned something about them from the words of a song that Jewel Akens recorded and strung together like a run-on sentence: "Let me tell ya 'bout the birds and the bees and the flowers and the

trees and the moon up above and a thing called love when I look into her big brown eyes it's so very plain to see and the guy you love, ah ah ah ah ah ah, starting from A to Z."

Then, finally, when there was a break in the music, he took a breath and started over.

That's the way I remember it, with a skipped verse, where I filled in with the *ah ah ahs* for the lyrics which actually say, "That it's time you learned about the facts of life."

Maybe, that's what my grandmother did when she knew the time was coming for me to learn about them. Since she hadn't known the words to tell me, she too filled in with the *ah ah ahs*. When I started to become a young lady, as she called it, she had to search out the words to fill in the meaning.

I would rather have had the "birds and bees" talk. Talk of wearing funny miniature diapers like babies was worse than the thought of having one. She said it was about becoming grown up, but it seemed like a reversal to me. Whenever it happened, I always felt sick at the stomach, and, like a baby, I curled up into a ball for comfort upon my grandmother's bed.

It was my bed, too, but it was never the same without her. At night, I slept curled as close to her back as I could. She was warm and soft, and I went to sleep every night enjoying her smell. But, during those beginning months of becoming a young lady, in the evenings I curled up on the bed alone with the sickness that made me feel nauseous. The first time it happened, she gave me a hot cup of tea she made from stuff she got from outside. I never knew what "roots" she used. I just drank the hot liquid expectantly. After that, she started giving me something different.

The first time she gave me the different remedy, I could only stare at her. She had come into the room and told me to hold out my hand. I did, palm up. She sprinkled

black pepper into it, and told me to lick it. Blankly, and automatically, I followed her instructions. “Lick it all,” she said. The granules sat in my mouth, at first, the way residual grits do. But, then the fire started to make me salivate, and I swallowed, and swallowed, trying to push the grains far back enough to get them off my tongue and into my throat. She didn’t give me any water to wash it down, even when I started coughing. “Just keep swallowin,” she said. Finally, it was done. I curled under the covers this time and waited for something to happen. When I woke up, I realized that it had; I felt better.

As the years passed, I started getting my own black pepper, even when Midol came along. When I told other women about my grandmother’s remedy, they smiled a smile of knowing, and, like me, chalked it up to some psychological thing—a placebo effect. I decided, on reflection, to look up the properties of black pepper, and among its attributed medicinal properties, is the calming of nausea.

* * *

My grandmother’s inclination for few words must have made me quiet. I never talked much as a child; instead, I watched people and listened to them. In this way, I got to know my grandmother, her temperament, the way she handled people and life. I watched Uncle Richard and Aunt Tina with the same intensity. I lived in the house with them; I learned them, for they were both adults living in the house during the formative years of my life. Early on, I learned to tell when people were uncomfortable. It was that way, one day, when my grandmother sat lonely on the front porch. We were the only ones at home, and she had changed her routine. She never went to the porch that time of

day. She sat there, on the porch, with her hair plaited in two, not talking, but not working either, which, even at age five, made me know something was wrong. She wasn't *doing* anything. I went into the house, stayed for a while, and returned to tell her that Uncle Richard had called from the hospital to say he was all right.

I stood there waiting for her to get up and do something. Instead of moving, tears came, along with a squeeze that gripped me flat against her. "Have mercy," was all she said. But she kept hugging me and crying. I didn't know what else to do except hug her back, thinking about what Uncle Richard might say if he really did call. I kept thinking about him lying in the hospital bed, "paralyzed" they called it. Though I did not know what paralyzed meant, I knew it made my grandmother sad, and I kept thinking of him and picturing him, wanting him to come back.

Uncle Richard was tall. I never asked how tall he was before the wheelchair. It didn't matter; I pictured him tall anyway. I pictured him walking fast and tall, with me snuggled against his chest. Before I learned to walk, he took me for walks. A proud uncle, first becoming one at age twelve to my cousin, Robert, and then to me at age sixteen, he liked to take us both around with him. He promised my mother the same thing before each walk: he would be right back with me after taking me with him to the store. I did not live at Miss Big Girl's house yet, so often, what started out as a short walk to the store turned into a visit at her house. An hour later, he would call my mother from my grandmother's house to say that I was fine, and ask if I could stay over for a while. I wasn't crawling yet, so my grandmother must have had a good supply of milk and clothes, until my mother came to get me.

Either Uncle Richard did not want to make the trip back, or he felt he had some type of vested interest in me, maybe. My mother says he was at the hospital when I was born, and practiced spoiling me from day one. She never got angry at him because they were happy times, though she had to come to get me from grandmother's house. She didn't have a clue then that I would come to live there, away from her, with my uncle, my grandmother, and Aunt Tina. She didn't have a clue then that my uncle's brisk walks away from her house to the store with me would be just a few miles, and a few short walks away, from the car accident that paralyzed him.

Uncle Richard

Getting out of the bed had been hard enough. Standing was a triumph. When my uncle got to his feet, with his body hung over the walking sticks, all of us in the room sweated with him. It was hard for all of us—asking the question, and finding the answer.

He wanted to walk again. We all knew it; we all wanted it; we all were scared of it. So, he became the question. I was not in school, and I saw how his body reacted. It was a big, tall question mark that moved. Starting with his chin, which bent under close to his chest, I traced a line from his nose and eyebrows that pointed outward, moving higher toward the lean of his forehead slanting up to the top of the round mountain of his head. From his neck, I slid down to the hump of his shoulders before it straightened out into a back. Then, I followed the line down over his bottom to straight legs that connected to heavy black steel-toed shoes on the floor. Would those shoes let his legs and feet move across the room?

There he stood, hung over the gray and tan poles. The curly part of him—everything above his knees—was nervous, jittery, and clumsy. His hands shook, and his fingers kept flexing around the rubber and gripping it, as if they didn't know whether to sit there loosely or hang on tightly. His head bobbed, up and down, facing ahead and looking downward, at long intervals. Whenever his head faced outward, the hump flattened and his body looked like it could become an exclamation point. He let loose his grip on the poles, his upper body shimmied from left to right. This nervous, jittery part of his body was the curly part. His legs stayed straight, as if they were pressing down on his feet so they would be set in a heap of glue.

Allowing the black right heel to lift from the floor, the invisible adhesive band was so strong the shiny steel toe stayed down and tried to burrow its way. The burrowing pushed his body forward, but he steadied himself with his nervous grip on the poles. When the poles pushed down hard enough, the foot came forward, half lifted and half dragged into a new position. The heel hit the floor hard. Just beside it, a big drop of liquid fell and splashed next to the arched part of the shoe. More drops fell, so I looked up. It was the tip of his nose and the edges of his eyebrows that sent them to the floor. The nervous jittering had gone to his face. It quivered and shook hard before I heard the sound of his left foot thump down. Drops came from his hairline then, and he lunged forward and to the right. The poles shifted his torso left and right in fast swings until he stood still. He stopped shimmying, clutching, and bobbing. His head went down and his body went back into its curl; we waited.

We waited. We waited until he swung his head around, until he gave a pensive, slow nod for the chair. Without shimmying, he pushed his torso forward, and his back lost its curl. Someone—I don't know who—took the braces off of his legs, and leaned the crutches against the wall. When his hands tightened again around gray rubber, they pushed, propelling him across the room, to the window, and eventually through the door.

* * *

I watched for Uncle Richard to come home in the evenings. Every day, when he rolled himself up to the dinner table, I sat beside him. I was excited one evening especially because my grandmother let me make a cake. So proud of it, I wanted Uncle

Richard to have the first slice. That meant waiting until after dinner because desserts were saved for last.

Before he had the chance to do it himself, I was pulling his wheelchair out of its spot behind the driver's seat. I pushed down on the vinyl between the steel arms, and put the wooden seat board on top, and the cushion on top of that. Adept at locking the wheels in place, I fastened the handles down, and held on to the chair while he slid himself out of the car into the seat. I grabbed the right arm and quickly snapped it into place. He pushed against the car door, giving me the start I needed, while I pressed my right foot down on the back of the chair to spin it around. "What's your hurry?" he said.

"I made you a cake," I said, "and I did it by myself."

"What kind is it?"

"It's vanilla." I thought I heard him chuckle before he told me to slow down.

While he refreshed himself, I set his place at the table. When he got there, I was waiting. He talked to Big Girl about his day, and they both ate slowly. I was finished a full five minutes before he finally said he was ready for the cake.

I brought it out and set it down proudly in front of him. He turned it completely around, examining it, as if it sat on a pedestal. The icing was thin on the sides and settled in thick puddles around the plate's edge. When he turned the plate, the slightly lower side made the cake form a zigzag motion pattern. "That's a good looking cake," he said. I beamed, and cut a wide wedge that revealed two huge air bubbles.

A connoisseur and lover of sweets, he took in a hefty forkful. Between bites, he praised my newfound baking skill, a skill in which he himself was proficient. The texture was good, he commented. And, he could taste the butter. "Um hum," he said, "you did a

fine job on this one.” Proud, I cut a slice for me, and I cut one for Big Girl. Uncle Richard was finishing his, while we started. I chewed and swallowed, as I saw my grandmother doing. I kept it up, but each swallow built a well of tears in eyes that apprehensively searched my uncle’s face. “Don’t worry, Shug,” he said. “This cake is plenty sweet, plenty sweet.”

* * *

He was on the edge of his seat again. But, that was the way he always worked on cars—on the side edge. Which side didn’t matter because when he rolled to either side of the car, he hefted his weight onto the arm of the chair, sat on it, and leaned over the engine. It made my grandmother nervous whenever he did this, but not me. He wouldn’t fall with arms like his. If two of us could swing on one of them and never pull it down, he was strong enough to hang on to the body of the car.

Fixing cars was one of the things he loved, although cars put him into the wheelchair. I loved to watch him, and sometimes I helped, handing him tools. I knew instinctively which one to give him, and reached for a wrench.

“How long you been standing there?” Not answering him, I shrugged and he smiled.

“I’ll be ready to take you home in just a minute,” he said.

I wasn’t ready to go, but I took as much pride in watching him drive as I did in watching him work on cars. No one helped him. He slid himself onto the driver’s seat, pulled the wheelchair taut, and with a quick upward snap, guided it into the space behind his seat as he leaned forward. I sat next to him on the passenger side. “Give it a little

gas; then turn the key, like this,” he said. I patted the floorboard twice with my foot, mimicking the gesture he made with his hand.

He pushed his hand downward now: “Be sure to put your foot on the brake before you put the car in reverse.” As he reached toward the gearshift, I saw the steel rod push the brake pedal to the floor. He made the hand controls himself, my aunt Tina told me, because he did not have \$1500 to buy them. The staff at Goodwill Industries, where he worked then, helped him with the installation.

The car jerked. He looked into his rearview mirror. I used the side view mirror. The car lurched again gently, as we moved down the road. I tried to keep up with the movements of his hands, the left one pulling and pushing as the car sped up and slowed down. His right hand circled unpredictably to the left and right. I moved my foot left and right to match the pushing and pulling of his left hand, but I did my own thing with my steering hand, pretending that I was holding the car steady in the road as we drove home.

Tina

Her hands were gloved in white lace. I watched them, waiting to see what they would do next. I couldn't see the nail polish, usually a bright color that covered evenly from the pushed-back cuticles exposing the moons to the not square, not round tips. The lace pattern on the gloves was thick at the fingertips, but thinned out at the wrist bone in an ornate, elastic ruffle. I anticipated the movement of her hands, to watch how her fingers curled softly when they were ready to grip. Much like her personality, they grabbed hold to things; they pointed; they facilitated; they pushed and squeezed; they created; and they worked. Though they were not touching me then, I could feel the familiar movement of her hands on me.

The sensation settled first on my head. That was the place her hands moved most frequently and fervently about me. I was not tender-headed, but I had thick, coarse hair, and back then, when she used to comb my hair, there was no chemical straightening—only a pressing comb, applied directly from the heat of the cooking stove to the hair. “Make it shine, your daddy told me,” she said. Then her right hand curled around the hot comb, and I felt the tug on my head as she pulled the comb through my hair. The process took forever, but at the end, my shiny black hair made pretty ponytails, or longer plaits. Sometimes, Tina rolled the front into bangs, or for a little while, she let me wear it loose, but just for a little while.

The loose hairstyle never lasted long, but if she was occupied, it lasted longer, and usually she was occupied. She played music to accompany whatever she did, especially when she sewed. I got to hold the pincushion because I couldn't touch the sewing

machine. I wanted to push the pedal so much, but I couldn't do that either. She said I couldn't push fast enough to keep the machine going, and that I would be in the way. But I knew I could if she let me, and I could push from the other side. So I had to be content with holding the pins. Whenever something she made was for me, I helped (with the pincushion only) throughout the entire project. My favorite part was when I could get pinned into the garment and stand in the mirror to see myself. If I happened to have my hair loose at the time, I spun around to watch it and the dress move with the music. My favorite outfit was the one she made for me that was just like one she made for herself. The bodice was brown velvet, with short sleeves and a round neckline. From the waist down, big brown velvety roses pushed out of the gathered folds of the solid beige background. With my brown patten-leather shoes, I wore white ruffle socks. Tina wore stockings and brown keen-toed pumps. We wore them to church together, to New Mt. Olive, and the people made over us both, but especially me.

Now, here we are together again with the same congregation, and the people are making over us, but this time especially over her. She lies there with her white lace gloved hands, folded and still, and I have been asked to say something. All I can focus on are those hands. So I tell them, how those hands nurtured and cared for me, how they created, worked and fussed over me. I tell them how they pierced my ears with a needle and thread, following a numbing with an ice cube, and how I trusted them to do it, and how it turned out well. I tell them how those hands made a party for my sixteenth birthday. I tell them about those hands.

* * *

Tina's hands made mischief too, and her change in tenor of thought was hard to detect, until a sleight of hand caught her victims unaware. Jason was her best and favored. He was easy and hardly likely to get angry. Mostly for her own amusement, she liked to frustrate him with repetitious tasks that he couldn't defend himself against, like the time she made him wash his hands over and over. After each washing, she grabbed both of his hands in hers, inspected the tops, flipped them over and back again, then pointed out another spot he missed. Jason's dementia could not reason to argue, neither could his happy disposition make room for discontent. So he washed until Tina was satisfied. And when Tina's comic need was sated, Jason also received nurture and care at her hand. She soaked his troll feet and manicured the hardened nails, after a foot massage. Tina's chameleonic hands were no problem for Jason, but they both annoyed and delighted me.

Because I could never guess what was on Tina's mind, I always waited to see what she did next. I knew to anticipate something, but I never knew which side of her personality might manufacture the idea. She liked playing tricks on people, and for her, the best part was scheming up the unexpected. She was crafty, setting up the circumstances so that who ever she decided to get had to fall into her trap. "Don't drink up my ice water," she told us before she left one day. We didn't like filling the ice trays (neither her two boys, nor I), and, of course, none of us refilled the water container for the refrigerator. To teach us, Tina filled her own individual container of water for the refrigerator, and sometimes placed it in the freezer to get it cold quicker. We knew it was hers, and we knew not to touch it. She knew that we would.

Embarrassment never let me tell her that I was the one who took a swig from her container. I worked furiously to mop up the spill of gin that exploded from my mouth onto the floor and splattered the wall. I scrubbed for thirty minutes trying to eliminate the strong odor, and then thirty more brushing my teeth and gargling. To hide my disobedience, I filled the container with water to replace the swig I had taken. I acted normal in my fidgeting, and she acted normal in her questioning stare. Neither of us ever mentioned it. I was annoyed, but could never acknowledge it; she must have been delighted, but couldn't enjoy giving herself a handclap.

My annoyances with Tina were few and short-lived—my delights many and more sustained. The hands that taught me not to drink someone else's water had years earlier taught me how to plait hair, too. She used my doll's hair to show me. "Now you do it," she said. I learned to watch her hands then, and over time I figured that hands do what they are told to do, and the teller is the important one.

I told Tina about a popular dance, but she had her own mind about it. After many practices, she finally got the hang of it, but her hands stuck out in a crazy way. Actually, when she did finally learn the dance, she became the queen of the Four Corners. She mastered the swing of the hips and the foot and upper body movements, but her hands had their own choreography. All the other people I knew made their hands into fists while they swung themselves to each corner. Tina's hands pushed down, turned right angles from the wrists, and her fingers spread out evenly. She looked as if she were pressing down on a flat surface to balance and push herself forward so she could swing out to whatever corner she wanted to move toward next. Actually, I don't know why they called it Four Corners, when the dancer only stopped on the east and west sides. But

I suppose that if the full swing matters, the body sweeps around full circle, taking in the north and south before it changes direction back to the left or right.

Tina's unique way of doing the Four Corners made her popular, and she tried to do it to any kind of music. She finally gave up trying it on the slow songs, but on every piece that had a good tempo, Tina swung to the beat. Outdated or no, she Four-Cornered the rest of her physically active life. Now and again, I break out in an unexpected swing in the four directions to make my husband laugh, but secretly I think of Tina, the Four Corner queen; I think of her delight and mine.

Dad's Arrival

My father's time at Miss Big Girl's house was not one that we shared, although we both had the experience. His time there ended long before mine started. We could have talked about the joys we each found there; we never did. As I quietly watched all the other inhabitants of my grandmother's house, I watched my father, and what I discovered in him was isolation and pain. He displayed a deep and abiding respect for my grandmother; he was dutiful. Toward his siblings, he fostered a big-brotherly command, and a never-ending devotion to their welfare. Without doubt, he loved them.

Though my uncle had been paralyzed from young adulthood, and learned to care for himself in every way, my father continued checking on him. Sometimes I thought Uncle Richard resented it, but if so, he never made a retort out loud. Aunt Tina fussed that he still thought she was a child, but she acquiesced to his wishes in the end. They could count on him, and it was he they called upon when things in their lives needed resolution. From early childhood, what they called him was "Brat," a playful name Miss Big Girl gave him because of his mischief. The name stuck, and somehow became extended, like an ism, into Bratford. To that was added the title Junior, as if his name, the symbol of mischief, was a re-enactment—second generation. They each—Miss Big Girl, Uncle Richard, and Aunt Tina—called him Brat, and then Bratford, Jr. for emphasis.

It was hard to imagine my father as bratty, for the man I knew was tight, stiff, unrelenting. For him, things were either black or white. Mixtures, like feelings, were avoided. He laughed, but the laughter was never from brattiness; it was the socially

expected laughter that happened in groups. One-on-one, up-close-and-personal laughter and wit were things uncomfortable to him. When I learned how he got this term of endearment, I knew that at one time my father had been soft enough to be a delight to my grandmother. But delightful was not a word I used to describe him. Thinking of the term, I tried to imagine a bratty little boy, receiving and enjoying the embraces of his mother without reserve. It was hard to see my father as that boy, for somewhere, sometime in his life he had become the most reserved person I knew—that is, keeping himself aloof, unattached. That he possessed feelings was clear, but he didn't share them.

He could not, or would not, allow himself to talk about his feelings, and maybe his stiff reserve forbade others. Maybe his demeanor and long-time custom of silence are what gave rise to the clipped conversations about Gertrude, a hushed relevance people tried to cover. The covering over of Gertrude became my father's lifetime occupation. He made a success of it overtly. He became a talented bricklayer, helping to erect his own home, Aunt Tina's, and even my high school. He grew to become an admired citizen, a law enforcement officer, one of the first Blacks in the city of Columbus, going on to become a detective, and earning credentials from the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia. His obvious success was out of balance with his internal static. He could not grow out of the isolation and pain of feeling abandoned. He could never rejoice in being found. His solution: never talk about being lost or found, feeling unloved or unwanted. Never talk about Gertrude or how he got to Miss Big Girl's house. Never talk, and these things could be obscured. Never talk—a strong resolve, but not strong enough to keep total silence.

Miss Big Girl took him at babyhood. *How* she got him was shrouded in mystery. I never got a full story, only short disjointed ones. His mother abandoned him, one story said. This vignette was rehearsed in such a way that I envisioned my dad the baby-in-blanket-on-the-doorstep. Another tale described a careless woman who simply “gave him to Miss Big Girl to raise.” The woman, Gertrude, was reported to be somewhat inhumane in all of these stories.

According to Aunt Tina, my eventual storyteller, my father, who was named Edwin at birth, was the result of an affair between Gertrude and a married man. She said that it was the married man who brought the baby, Edwin, to my grandmother, asking her to take care of him for a few weeks until he could make arrangements for him. It has never been explained why the father agreed to become the adoption agent, only that Gertrude left the baby with him. No one ever told, either, how or why he approached my grandmother. Maybe it was the “good woman” reputation she must have already had.

As Aunt Tina’s story goes, when the father returned after the few weeks were over, he asked Miss Big Girl to raise the baby. She agreed. Childless at the time, my dad became her first son. A few years later, Aunt Tina was born, then, my Uncle Richard. Gertrude, Dad’s birth mother, lived in LaGrange, Georgia, a nearby town, but soon moved away from her family, supposedly to parts unknown, until some years later when she surfaced in New York. She never came to meet Miss Big Girl, but she entered the house nonetheless, as entity, a presence filling the space of our lives. Her presence pervaded the married man’s existence also, though he spent his lifetime denying it.

I was young when I met him. It must have been just after I started school. He, and his wife, Mama Sally, lived in Beallwood, the mid-west part of town in Columbus,

Georgia, where my father took me for visits. Their house was near the end of the street, two doors down from New Providence Baptist Church. When we met, my dad simply told me to call the man Pop and to call his wife, Mama Sally. I didn't mind calling him Pop, but I resented the Mama Sally name. The Mama part bothered me.

Mama Sally was nice to me, but I always felt that she looked at me strangely, like she was trying to discover something. She had big dimpled cheeks and warm eyes when she smiled, and she had a bussomy hug that threatened my breath intake. She made special effort to talk to me, and she gave me treats from their store. I liked her, but I didn't understand why I had to call her Mama, and my father never told me. He never told me who Pop was to him.

I found out later why I had resentfully called the woman Mama Sally and him Pop all those years—from someone else. We visited them regularly throughout my childhood and teenage years. They were an odd couple to look at. He was not very tall, shorter than she was, and a shade browner than my father's pecan tan. He was slim and wiry with a slender nose and thin lips, a body that was always busy. She was the affectionate and talkative one; he was distant, polite, and spoke very little to me.

I didn't mind that he didn't talk to me. It was my father who should have talked. There were plenty of opportunities, but one I remember in particular. "Their name is McGhee like ours," I said.

"Tha, That's right," he stuttered his response. His stuttering was a dual sign of agitation and nervousness. "They are McGhees, too."

That was it; the sudden shut off in his voice, along with the stuttering made me know the conversation went no further. The opportunity to tell me what he knew, why

their last name was McGhee and our last name was McGhee, was covered up in silence. He could have told me why we had to visit them, along with Pop and Mama Sally's children, who all seemed to rally around my dad. I even spent the night with Pop and Mama Sally's granddaughter, who was a little older. I visited them, but I resented their familial intrusion. My family was my dad, my grandmother, Uncle Richard, Aunt Tina, and her two sons, Robert and Derrell, who were like my brothers. All of us, the permanent residents who occupied Miss Big Girl's house, were the family that I knew.

These were my people. But, then, Tina (that's what we all called her, including her sons), said that Pop was my people, too. He had kept tabs on my father through the years, and my father kept a silent but public association with him through the years. When Tina told me that Pop was Dad's father, I didn't respond. I pondered it. I did not ask my grandmother. I did not ask my father. I did not ask my mother. I just pondered it. Then, I felt sorry, but not ashamed, that I resented them. I still maintained the proud feeling of ownership I had about my special family.

* * *

After my father died in 1999, my stepmother gave me his journal notes, three tablets of them, and I brought them back to Tennessee to read. He started right in on the first page: "I decided to write my life story at age 43. My mother is Mittie Kate Blackmon. Everyone who knows her calls her Big Girl. She got the nickname from childhood because she was much larger than the rest of the girls her age. My dad was Abe Peterson." His notes go on to describe his early childhood, his being poor. He

accepted Abe Peterson as his father until he met his grandfather, a sometime visitor, whose identity Big Girl finally explained. He had been the man who brought him to her, and in the next few years orchestrated a meeting with his brother, Forrest. Gertrude gave Forrest to another family the same way she had given my father to Miss Big Girl, using the grandfather as agent. And, the grandfather had kept up with their whereabouts.

Most of the story talks about his military career, some family events, jobs, and friends. Offering some details about his past, the notes disclose his discovery of his birth name, having been officially recorded in the military as Edwin. With affection and determination, he fought to change it to the name William, the one Miss Big Girl gave him, along with the endearing one, Bratford. When the official name change occurred, it read William Bratford McGhee.

How the name McGhee became a part of his birth record is not known. However, McGhee is the name of the man reported to be his father, and his discussion of meeting his grandfather was perfunctory and cryptic. While in his journal notes he attempted to share the emotional seesaw and its surprise, these feelings seem masked though he acknowledged them. The meeting of other family members—an uncle, a sister—received similar treatment. Then, there was the meeting of his birth mother, treated in less than three paragraphs. There was no mention of Pop, and Mama Sally was mentioned as a special mother. Tina was partly right. The mysterious man who brought him to my grandmother turned out to be his grandfather—not his father. The entity, Gertrude, abandoned him, leaving the grandfather to find a home for him. Big Girl, the good woman, took him in, along with two of her sister's children that she was already keeping.

* * *

Dad's cryptic journal notes reflected his life's struggle to conceal his feelings, while it found a place for them. In his journal, he could finally say things, but his lifelong habit of concealing Gertrude left him unable to expose her thoroughly in print. It was the story he wanted to record, to tell, but he struggled in the writing, just as he struggled in the speaking. The difference, and what impressed me most, was that he wrote down what he never told, me, at least. I started to believe, more and more, that he wanted this story told, but it was too painful, too exposing.

My father exposed more of himself than he realized. I watched him shed unexpected tears, though he was reserved and aloof most of the time. He never gave them full vent. Trained to choke them off, he pushed past whoever stood near, to put his detached self back in order. Dad was emotional, easily injured, but what frustrated him most was sudden emotion that pushed its way out in the form of tears. The tears took away his control. When Uncle Richard died, we stood around his body at the wake. For a time, I stood near Dad, and could hear the quiet sobs he made, not that this was an unexpected shedding. But the reaction to receiving consolation was unexpected, and when I reached to embrace him, I received a quick, frightened push while he turned himself away. He wasn't able to share any kind of pain, even the pain of the shared loss of a person special and dear to both of us.

For him, loss went deeper than death. He had spent a lifetime feeling loss, and feeling lost, and consolation, like recovery, was a brutal battle. Deep loss and inexplicable need drove Dad into a search to find Gertrude, despite the outcome. According to his journal, he found her in Brooklyn, told her the story of having met his

grandfather, Bob McGhee, his father's father, who told him about taking Dad to my grandmother to raise. He writes, "She denied me and knowing my grandfather, when I introduced myself to her. This is what she said: 'I don't know him, never been South, and I'm not who you are looking for. There's no one here named Gertrude.'"

Years later, he visited Gertrude again in New York, not long before her death. There was no verbal acknowledgement from her in that visit either, but neither was there the vehement denial she gave in the first encounter. The stilted conversation they had was filled with talk of other things, none of which my father recorded. Another of her children arranged this visit, the daughter who also had been given to another mother to keep, driven by the same inexplicable need that drove Dad in search of Gertrude years before.

Entitlement

The words, entity and entitle, sit right next to each other on the dictionary page, though entitle is listed first. Because I had grappled with the entity, Gertrude, I decided to make sure my fight was not vanity, that it was justified, so I checked each denotation of the word. I took issue with the entity as a young child, and it had lived side by side with me in my existence, though never came upon its face. Reading the meaning of the words, I knew that I was certifiably justified. I was right to call Gertrude, my birth grandmother, the entity, for she has been a reality existing in my mind, no matter how neatly I tucked her presence away. Though I never met her, I have been familiar with her existence all my life. Today, while I wrestle with her presence in memoir and fiction, I wonder how it was I came into this kind of contention. It is the story I have been trying to tell, my father's story, about how Gertrude impacted his life and subsequently mine—about how her existence, somehow, is an act of forfeiture, entitling someone else to be mother and grandmother.

It was an unintentional bestowal of honor on the part of Gertrude, but it was not accidental that Big Girl earned entitlement. Like things preeminent, the word entitle stands ahead of the word entity, undeniably having the right to do so. And so, that is how I came into the fight, knowing Big Girl first as the entitled preeminent one, my grandmother, and learning of Gertrude, the forfeiting entity, second. This reversal is a paradox I came to appreciate, one that helps me unravel our braided stories, and plait them back again. Gertrude could not be cut out of the weave, but must remain within the folds, twisting and turning with, around, and through all the other strands.

She was as much a part of my father's life as any physical turn or twist his body ever made. She was pervasive, thoroughly entangling to him, though she was long gone and far removed. Early in my life, when I heard the clipped stories of their estrangement, I started to fight her off of our lives. My need to stave her off began with the one story that diminishes all the other tales, even the one that said she left him abandoned. He had spent time searching to find her and when he did, she denied having a son. To me, she was already an entity, but hearing this final story made her presence unsettling, needing to be put away. So, I decided that she was not important. She was not my grandmother, anyway. I had staked my territorial loyalty to Big Girl, so I never wanted to meet Gertrude. What would be the point?

When Dad made a return trip to New York, I was a young adult. I was invited to go, but declined, sticking to my position. I had no desire to see her. I felt no hatred for her, but felt no sense of responsibility toward her either. Entitlement belonged to my grandmother, and I fought Gertrude's presence to prove it. I resented her unintended intrusions on my consciousness, and on my father's emotional well being. She was not entitled.

So, I attacked her on the porch with Jason's machete, integrating a piece of efficient fiction. Jason was a real and integral part of the livelihood at my grandmother's house. Gertrude was the invasive member that no one could see, nor reckon with. No one could blame Jason for assault with a deadly weapon, and I would be an innocent bystander accomplishing a confrontation with the entity and a dismissal of her both at once. It was tidy and neat, justifiable, believable, but still not satisfying. Gertrude could

not be killed; that is, there was no putting her away. Though not entitled to preeminence, she stands yet in her place, existing—a reckoning presence.

I continued to wage secret war with Gertrude through my young adulthood, although our battles were reduced to sporadic skirmishes. I suppressed and diminished her, engaging myself in the newness of being adult. Because she had become a lightweight skirmish whenever I felt like fighting, I was the victor. When she emerged, I beat her back and out of sight promptly. I bested her with words, submerging her into the depths of namelessness. Entities are nameless, and so I did not mention her unless I wanted to push her back farther. If a conversation started about kinfolk on my father's side, I answered my lineage through Big Girl, and I went as far back, left or right as I could, naming Big Girl relatives. I went forward through the lineage from my father to me and my sisters and brothers. It was good, solid ground to stand on, and I felt justified in my stance.

In my young mind, I called my position loyalty, solidarity. There was no other way to think of it. I did not consider myself angry with Gertrude. I did not feel hatred, like or dislike. If she were available, I would not rush to meet her, neither would I flee. I was standing on solid ground. Why should I be moved? I had no reason to question my own feelings, since my position was built on neutrality. I had nothing whatever to do with any of it. She was the one who started it all, and who better to lose her footing, to be shaken loose of her stance?

To think it better to lose my place never occurred to me. My feelings about Gertrude carried me on a tenuous thread at times, unaware. I had walked along thin lines, not cognizant that I held her accountable, that I even had expectations of her. She had

given up her rights, so what was there for me to do? I was happy where I was, although indirectly she was the one responsible for it. I had no understanding for Gertrude as far as the compassionate part of understanding goes. I did understand, however, from a matter-of-fact point of view that I came to be at my grandmother's house because a certain set of circumstances occurred. But I had completely detached feeling from circumstance. Gertrude, the woman, became Gertrude, the entity, not both.

I could not reconcile the two.

Three hours passed while we talked on the phone. “I’ve always wanted to tell you this, Mama,” I said. “I never felt that you didn’t love me, nor did I ever feel that you abandoned me.”

“I never said that you felt that way,” she said.

“No, but I always wondered if you thought I did.”

“Well, naturally I wondered, and I always hoped you didn’t. But, it was because of your grandmother that I never worried.”

“I had a good life,” I said. “I wanted to tell you that, too.”

“I always tried to do what I could for you.”

“I know. But, that’s not the way I mean it.” I hesitated; she was silent. In fact, we had both been silent on the issue for 46 years. We had both hesitated to talk about it openly before. Instead we talked about what a good woman my grandmother had been, how constant her personality was, and her outspokenness. This trilogy of attributes was renewed in every conversation about her, but we never got to the heart of it—the thing my mother needed to tell me, nor the thing I needed to ask her: Why I came to live with my father’s mother instead of staying with her?

The story I heard hinted at some kind of duplicity. My father had a childhood friend who became a lawyer, for whose family he had worked many years. That part was true. I had met this family. I believed, without asking if it were so, that my father’s connection must have won him the court battle those many years ago. It made sense. In the late 50’s, not too many fathers got custody of the children, let alone girl children. So, I grew up believing my father had won the right to keep me through the court system

because he had this lawyer for a friend. That was just the way things were. I didn't blame my mother for it, and I never asked him about it. He wouldn't have told me anyway. He was closed like that. Most things about him were closed to discussion—most of the things I wanted him to talk to me about, anyway, like how he came to live with my grandmother, too, the good woman who took care of people.

There it was again, the good part of the trilogy of attributes for my grandmother. We could never get away from calling her good. That's what I was trying to get at telling my mom about on the phone. My life had been filled with that goodness. But I could tell from the thickness of silence over the wire that she had tensed up. A lump had formed in my throat, making the moment harder. But, I knew this was the moment to say what I needed to say, and I thought I knew what she was thinking.

She was thinking I was going to say that I felt neglected, that I wondered if she thought about me, that I felt forsaken, that I didn't have a mother. I didn't want her to give the prepared explanation I figured she had struggled with over the years. That was just it. I wanted to tell her that there was no need. I didn't need it. I had been happy. I wanted to tell her, long before now, that there was never a need for her to feel regret or agony about not having been with me. But, I knew that it might sound like I was saying to my own mother, "I didn't miss you," or "I didn't need you," when that wasn't what I intended at all. I wanted to talk about my grandmother's goodness to me, how it filled what might have been the empty spaces, how it sang to me, how it kept me, how it shaped and formed me. I wanted to tell my mother that I understood that she loved me, and there was no doubt. I wanted to tell her that no mistake had been made. Neither one

of us had a need to wonder how life might have been. So, I swallowed back the lump, and said instead, "Big Girl always taught me to love you."

"She was a good woman," my mother said, starting the trilogy all over again. "That's what I loved about her. No matter what happened between your dad and me, she never put me down or treated me any differently. She always made me welcome, even if he didn't."

"How old was I when I went to stay with her?" I asked.

"You were young, about a year old." We held the phone for a moment.

"There's something I want to tell you," she said. I waited.

"When we divorced, your father tricked me. He said that he would share custody of you with me—that if I let him and your grandmother keep you, I could get you and see you at any time, and that he would be glad to work it out. I was sixteen when we married, and I trusted him, not only with the legalities, but to take care of you. So, I signed the papers he had already made out." I was silent.

"I never forgave him for that," she said. "When I came to see you, he wouldn't let me. When I asked him why, he said, 'you already signed the papers.' But, your grandmother told him how wrong he was. She never stopped me from seeing you. When he left to go into the Army, I spent the night with you often." There it was again, the threesome that was my grandmother's character: goodness, constancy, and outspokenness.

"I remember you giving me ginger ale when I had the measles," I said.

"You remember that?"

"Yes, I do."

At the beginning of Fall 1993, I was 34 years old, in a new and happy marriage of two years, and Gertrude was less than a thought. My time was filled. I commuted 100 miles five days a week to my job from Clarksville to Nashville, Tennessee. On weekends, most of our time was spent visiting, conducting business, or worshipping—all in association with the church where my husband had become pastor the previous year.

I listened to the start of his sermon. “Now faith is,” he spoke the first three words in loud staccato, then abruptly lowered his voice to a didactic but soothing resonance: “the immediate application of belief. . . .” I sent his voice to the background, and remembered that I did not want to go to church that morning. Aside from feeling low in spirit lately, I felt fatigued. But, the sounds of my husband preparing for the day inspired some strength to get out of bed. I could hardly be more tired than he, or low. He had been awake for his usual Sunday morning meditation since 3:30 a.m. Following this, he always reviewed the sermon he prepared for the day. I swung my feet toward the floor slowly but with determination. Lazing around would not help me, but going to worship service always did. I got up.

At altar call, I mouthed my prayer request silently as my husband prayed aloud for the congregation. Aside from being thankful, I repeated my prayer for a baby girl. This time, I amended my request: “According to Your will, please God.” Having a child was my desire during my entire adult life.

Some weeks later, I stood in my sister-in-law's yard sale, gazing at a beautiful pink ensemble of hat, coat, and shoes sized for a baby girl aged about nine to eighteen months. I asked her across the room, "How much do you want for these?"

"What?"

"The little pink hat, coat, and shoes." When I got home, I hung them all together on one hanger in the closet of the room painted pink. The hat fell over the back of the coat and faced skyward with its tie strings looped around the shoulders of the coat. The pink patten-leather shoes hung at the neck of the coat, one ankle strap linked within the other, like a big period at the base of a question mark. A little brighter than the ceramic pink walls, they hung there in paradox—a nursery, no baby. The room was finished in creamy white frames around the door and window, earthy neutral color carpet, and all white furnishings. Everything was bright and new except my grandmother Josie's brown rocking chair. It warmed the room, and it warmed my heart because its arms seemed to be waiting, too. I ran my hand across the crib mattress. The white vinyl sprang back when I pressed against it. Like it, the rest of the room was unsoiled. No spills on the carpet. No milk-stained bibs. No crumpled linen. No freshly Johnson's-Baby-Sampooed hair. No baby-lotioned skin. No thermometer. No runny nose. No creak of the rocking chair. No cries. No gurgles. No baby.

Why had I bought these things when there was no baby to wear them? Almost three years had gone by then. As I closed the door to the closet, something from that long-ago sermon on faith echoed in my mind. "Now-faith," he said. It was curious, the way he kept putting emphasis on the word *now*, hyphenating and conjoining it with faith. His emphasis on the word *now* was stretching the author's definition of faith. It seemed

that the author meant *now* as a preface, as in “This is the way it goes,” or “Well, you see, it’s like this.” It was a preface, wasn’t it? I had to check it. What book was it? I turned to the reference section: Hebrews 11:1. There was no hyphen, and neither a comma, but a verb directly following. I read the entire verse while somewhere inside my head I heard the flat television commercial voice saying, “What’s your verb?”

“Is,” I answered aloud. “And that’s a linking verb.”

Thinking about what I said, I knew my verb had been put to work. Faith is about waiting. If so, I was full of faith because I had already experienced a great deal of that. I waited to have children. When we married and no children came at first, it was okay. It would happen, I knew, because I had been keeping the faith.

After my 34th birthday, I learned of our infertility as a couple. The doctor’s emphatic pronouncement left me mute. In my silence, the doctor turned out of the room and closed the door. The click of the door was emphatic, as his confining words were. I stared at the gray floor. Everything that touched it was gray, too—the steel legs of the examining table with its rubber tips, the dull gray 6-inch molding at the base of the wall, and the silver kickplate at the back of the door. This news colored my faith gray, too, like a misty, thick fog where there is a sense of something beyond. I felt gray inside, foggy and mysterious, like I was touching through emptiness, touching grief. Touching and feeling the vacancy of an inconceivable child is to grieve a mysterious death. Someone dies, but there is no *body* to mourn. So, the mourning hovers like gray fog, thick and unreasonable.

There is no reasoning in death—none. My unborn baby was dead. I had kept it alive within me as long as I could. So, what sense could there be now in praying? I had

already prayed the “Hannah” prayer, anyway—many times. Hannah, Samuel’s mother, prayed for his conception, and God answered. I waited for God to answer, too, longer than Hannah waited. And, my husband, like Hannah’s Elkanah, tried to be “enough” to fill the void. He didn’t understand, and I told him so when he spoke lovingly to me, with a heart full of regret and frustration: “This is the one thing I cannot do for you.”

“You don’t understand how it feels,” I responded.

“I know how much it means to you.”

“You can’t know. You have children.” I heard his silence, his groping; I heard his pain. But there was nothing I could do for him either.

* * *

That September, we went to the Human Services office in our county, Montgomery, to start the required classes that screened for adoptive parents. The instructor introduced herself, and then announced an apology that she was “sorry that our county could not accommodate a class at this time.” There were no workers to provide the training because they were understaffed. Those who preferred could participate in a class located in the next county or wait until the next session could be scheduled. We drove to Ashland City every Tuesday night for the next ten weeks.

Before the classes started, and especially during these weeks, ad after television ad aired the need for adoptive parents. When we finished the classes November 23, 1993, it was time to wait. Months passed, then a year. I called the caseworker. “If the

advertisements are true,” I asked, “and there’s urgent need for adoptive parents, why is the wait so long?”

“Well, there are plenty of children waiting to be adopted, particularly ones over the age of three, ones who are biracial and ones who are African American. But, you’ve asked for an infant. Are you interested in an older child?” she asked.

“No.” I felt terrible saying it. “I’m sorry.”

“I have a list of several children who are ready for adoption right away,” she said.

“Yes, I understand.”

“And we have so many who need foster parents.”

“I don’t think I can handle that,” I said.

“Lots of people feel that way at first, but find that they really can. Also, we provide financial support for families who take care of foster children.”

“It’s not about the money, it’s knowing you’ll take the baby from me. No. No. Just keep us posted.” I wanted to end the discussion.

“Yes, I’ll call you as soon as possible.”

I sat there, trying to push back the funny feeling, the selfish one. But I didn’t want to give a child back. Now guilt tried to creep in. These were needy children, yes, but I wanted a baby girl. My husband waited for me to speak.

“What did she say?” he asked.

“She wanted to know if we’d take other children.”

“Oh.”

“I feel like I have no right to turn down any child, since I’m the one who’s really needy.”

"What changed your mind?"

"I didn't change my mind. I want the girl I asked for," I said.

"About adopting, I mean."

"Oh." I thought for a while before answering, "I think it was when I realized that I am not Sarah and you're not Abraham."

"What?"

"I don't want to sound preachy."

"Go ahead," he said.

"We're more like Hannah and Elkanah."

He waited for me to explain.

"Okay," I said, "it was one of your sermons. When you spoke that Sunday, you put *now* and *faith* together and made a one-word subject. I just re-read the verses.

"So, where do Hannah and Elkanah fit into all this?" he asked.

"Hannah taught me not to wait."

I was talking in riddles, and we both knew it. But the look on his face told me he was delighted. There was something new in me, and his eyes told me that he could sense it. He hugged me then; I hugged him back, and we finished our conversation in silence. "I missed you," he said; "I know," I said. We had learned to communicate silently for months prior to that September. I communicated without words my grief over our childlessness as a couple. He silently responded his sorrow. It was a breach that, thankfully, was not erosive because we worked to stop it.

It was hard work for me. The Big Girl family lineage could not go forward from me. I could only count to the left or right of me through my brother and sisters, their

children and grandchildren, and so on. It shattered me, and it shattered the pride I had secretly paraded all those years. The Big Girl family meant so much to me. It was a new bloodline, fresh and separate from Gertrude, but legitimate, nonetheless. Adding to it was paramount. And, I had been told I could not, something that had not occurred to me. It was even a part of my contention with the entity, a way to eliminate her. Expanding myself through procreation, enlarging the Big Girl lineage pushed Gertrude farther and farther into the trenches. And, I had never thought of losing to her, especially in this way. This was a terrible kind of defeat.

Still, I did not think of Gertrude too much, or of defeating her. It was all about me now. She had no contribution to make, nor anything to take away from the situation. Whenever she tried to ambush my thoughts, I overwhelmed her with my stifling grief. I was feeling too sorry for myself to deal with her, so she kept herself behind enemy lines. Since girlhood, I wanted to make, and have, my own family. I looked forward to it long past the time most of my friends had. When the news came of infertility, Gertrude and I ceased fire. Maybe it was my idea to call a truce. I don't like to say I gave up because I still had not surrendered my position. But the new thing that started taking shape in me when we decided to adopt had something to do with it, although I could not identify it.

I started preparing the baby's room. We carpeted the nursery and painted it before we went shopping for a crib. We found a matching changing table, and placed my grandmother Josie's (my mother's mother) rocker in the room. I decided against buying clothes because we didn't know how old, big or small, the baby would be. But I couldn't resist buying one outfit, just one, and I hung it in the closet. We were ready, but the baby wasn't. Another year passed.

During that time, friends were both encouraging and discouraging. The discouraging ones impacted me most, making comments about my faith or lack of it. One friend insisted that, like Job's friends had done, there must be some insufficiency in us. Particularly, there must be a lack of faith, he insinuated. For an example, he pointed to Abraham and Sarah, who had to wait a century, but waited. They did not wait on the promise, I reminded him; instead they contrived to work out a plan for themselves. "There's a difference," I said, "We have asked God." To this he said nothing, giving an incredulous look for a response.

It was incredible. The conclusion of this conversation helped me realize the incredible, new thing happening within me that I could not articulate. His negative attitude was insulting. It said that what we were doing was unacceptable; it was beneath us somehow, a step-down on the rungs of belief, that we had somehow failed ourselves and failed God's test. The changes in me, however imperceptible to others, were real and valid to me. My grief lightened, moving out of the way to a growing love and anticipation for the daughter we asked God for. We even gave her a name. I was expecting a baby, as surely as any mother going through gestation, only my trimesters were longer.

So, I read Hannah's story again, hoping to figure out how Hannah had gained God's favor and I had not. Didn't He perform miracles like that today? God knew. I waited patiently, never seriously considering any other option, believing that, in time, He would make it happen. Like Hannah, I asked God to take away my barrenness. When I re-read the story, I learned the essence of Hannah's joy in the first ten verses of 1 Samuel,

Chapter 2. It was in God's power, and I limited that power to a human system, bound up in human misunderstanding.

Hannah's petition is akin to the now-faith position my husband alluded to in his sermon. Once she puts her petition before God, it is not about how long she must wait for His response, but it is about the moment she gives the problem over to Him. Now-faith is about a present belief system in God's power, not how long it takes nor even the way He solves the problem. I limited my faith in God to time, and disconnected Him from the strength and power that He is. Perhaps I had forestalled my own blessing because I wanted things done my way, not realizing that God's way could be more satisfying and fulfilling. Hannah becomes victorious not only through God's ability but also under His authority. I came to realize that He would fill my void and take away my grief—in His own way, and in His own time.

On April 29, 1996, I brought home my infant baby girl to the ceramic pink room I had painted in 1993. The hat, coat and shoes still hung in the closet, and she wore them that winter. She was three months old, and her arrival that day was an all-day celebration. It started that morning when her aunt, who sold me the pink outfit, and her 86-year-old grandfather rode to Nashville, Tennessee, with us to the adoption agency, Agape, to celebrate in the official ceremony.

By God's authoritative hand in her adoption, I came to know Hannah's joy. I, like Hannah, asked for a child. My "asked of God" child, my Sam[antha], as it were, is the result of His handiwork. She is officially grafted, by His direct and absolute authority and power, into a family connected by neither blood nor flesh, as are His earthly sons and daughters. She receives the rights and privileges and the love and nurturing that any

parent gives to a child. She brought the fulfillment that *any child* brings to the heart of a mother. In this, I came to know Hannah's joy, which is in the unsystematic and infinite power of God.

Experiencing Hannah, her anguish, and her subsequent joy, made the adoption euphoric. When the call finally came from the caseworker, I was at work. It was mid-April. She announced the news conversationally: “We have a baby girl. Are you still interested? She’s three months old, and she’s been in foster care since she was two days old.”

I wanted my husband to be the first one I told the news, and I waited for my daily phone call from him. Because he worked outside, I had to wait for him to contact me. That day, of all the days, he could not get to a phone. By 4:30, I was frantic to tell him, but had to keep the news another hour and a half. The commuter ride home was like being on a train. I saw every tree that lined the highway, and if there was a pond that sat beyond a wooden fence, I saw it too.

Since I had waited so long, I decided to wait until dinner. When I casually mentioned something about being a dad, he commented with a response about what his little granddaughter would look like (Shamika, my stepdaughter, was expecting). I repeated my statement. “You mean they called!” he said. The conversation took twists and turns so erratic, I cannot recall everything that was said.

When the day came for us to see the baby, I arrived at the agency before my husband, who was working in Dickson, Tennessee, at the time. The adoption agency called to say that we could see the baby that day if it could be arranged. My supervisor dropped me off to wait. While waiting they showed me pictures and gave me a copy to keep. The staff were excited, and together, we decided I would have a peek before my husband arrived. I felt slightly guilty for not waiting, but not much.

She was decked out in pink and white, with a pink ribbon tied into a bow around her head. When I held her, we studied one another—she discovering me, and me marveling at her. “She favors you,” the foster said.

When my husband got there, I didn’t get the chance to show the baby to him. The excited social workers snapped her right out of my arms, and ran to meet him at the door. I followed behind, and heard the baby’s coo for a greeting, a sound that in later months he would make to her, a discussion they carried on. The staff and foster mother left us alone with the baby for a while. She fell asleep. We watched her until the foster mother reminded us that she needed to leave.

During the next two and a half weeks, we visited with the baby at her foster parents’ home and at their church. As part of our transition period, we could take her on outings. During longer visits, we took her to meet friends. This period of adjustment gave us an opportunity to bond, and time to get ready for her arrival, though we had been ready for a long time. As for bonding, that happened instantly.

The foster family, the social workers, agency staff from Agape, and some members of our family came to the official ceremony. The foster mother made the baby a special Easter outfit and wanted me to keep it. She had dressed the baby in it that day. It was white with pink and blue flowers with a matching bonnet. On the baby’s wrist, there was a gold bracelet, and on the ring finger of that hand was tied a gold ring, attached to the bracelet.

“She smiles when she wakes up every morning,” the foster mother said, and cried through the entire ceremony.

When we arrived in Clarksville, the official welcome continued. We introduced the baby to my husband's mother, Celia, who was not able to make the trip to Nashville, as her 86-year-old husband had. We made a quick stop to meet an aunt and two first cousins. Finally at home, the baby was tired, but the welcome visits were not over yet. By the time she was fed and had a nap, a fresh round of visitors came, largely church family members. She slept through the night, and the next morning, Tish Moss greeted me with the smile the foster family promised I would get.

* * *

Because I could not forget his attitude in our first talk, I asked my well-meaning friend why he felt biological birth was better. "Are the children better?" I asked. Hearing myself ask this question, I realized the answer was not about who the children are, but about what they are. Biology was not the only thing that made parents. My own family record proved it.

Naturally, I reflected on my father and me, and our relationship to my grandmother. Neither of us belonged to her biologically, but with all our sense of being we claimed her as our mother and grandmother. There was no connective tissue binding us, no blood ties. Yet, her essence permeated our lives in ways that reproduced her, like DNA strands of genetic code. My behavior, and my father's, reflected hers. We both adopted children. In my case, the adoption took me beyond expectation. I said as much to my well-meaning friend: "Adoption taught me something about love." As before, he made no response.

I knew he didn't understand. "It's easy to love your own," I said.

“Are you saying adoption is better?” he asked.

“No. I’m saying that I am better because of it.”

We left the conversation with his assent that he understood, but with me doubting that he really did. I applied my spiritual adoption lesson to his contention that we should have waited like Abraham and Sarah, and realized that it did apply, but not in the frame he intended. The legitimate heirs of Abraham were (and are) those who believed, not those who shared his blood.

Our combined adoption, Dad’s and mine, into Miss Big Girl’s house, perhaps, was one of the most important events in my life. It was purposeful and meaningful in preparing me to accept my infertility. It prepared me for adoption. It taught me sacrificial love. Finally, and unexpectedly, it helped me to make reconciliation.

Finally, I had to reconcile the entity Gertrude with Gertrude the woman; then it brought reconciliation to Gertrude and me. When we came to cease-fire, I didn’t really know why. I blamed it on my grief. Now, I know it was not my fight—that is, I had no cause to fight. Six decades earlier, in the third decade of her life, my grandmother adopted my father. In the third decade of my life, I adopted my daughter. Because of the presence of Gertrude (the entity as I have been calling her), my grandmother became a mother. Gertrude’s forfeiture became Big Girl’s entitlement. Because of the presence of a woman unknown to me, I became a mother. Her forfeiture became my entitlement. The presence I fought so hard to exclude was a necessary thing. Without her, no exchange in position could take place. The entity had to exist, and she had to remain a part of our lives, or we would not know these elevated relationships, having no inheritance to claim.

My daughter's birth mother exists, and, like my grandmother who never met Gertrude, I have never met her. A single agent mediated my father's adoption, and a team of agents facilitated my daughter's. Unlike my grandmother, I do not know my daughter's birth mother's name. Being nameless, she is more the entity than Gertrude, but in some ways easier to reconcile. I wanted a child, and I wanted someone else's. In order to have her, I had to accept her being given to me, no matter what the circumstances. In fact, the circumstances hardly mattered to me then. I looked for a child to become available, but once she came I could hardly ignore that she had come from someone else, and that someone mattered. That someone was a person with feelings. That someone gave up her child for some reason I do not know, but speculated about often.

I wondered about her feelings, whether she was concerned about her baby. Did she regret her decision? I wanted to reassure her. I wanted to thank her. I wanted to do as my grandmother had done, to tell my daughter that her birth mother loved her, else she would not have cared enough to place her in a good home. And with that thought, came questions. How could I scorn this woman for giving me joy? How could she be anything other than a gracious benefactor? Without her giving, I would not be entitled to this motherhood. If not her, then some other mother's child would become mine. I thought of my daughter's birth mother as a giving person; I thought of Gertrude as a forfeiting person, unfeeling, detached, and irreconcilable.

Yet, I wanted my daughter's birth mother to be reassured, comforted, and free of guilt. I wanted her to be reconciled and at peace with her decision. When she was seven, we told my daughter about her adoption, her birth mother.

“Who is my mommy?” she asked.

“I don’t know her name,” I had to answer.

“Where is she?” Like my grandmother must have answered six decades earlier, I had to say, “I don’t know.”

“But, she loves you very much,” I told her.

She did not respond; she didn’t know how. Unlike me, she had nothing on which to base such a statement. I knew my mother’s embrace, but she didn’t even have a face to look at. I realized then that my father had not had a face to see either, and I realized also the anguish my grandmother must have felt. I hugged her then, the way my grandmother had done with me on the porch when words eluded her. Like her, I silently prayed, “Have mercy” above my daughter’s head.

“One day you might be able to meet her,” I said.

“When?”

“Well, we have to wait until you are grown up, until you are eighteen,” I said.

“But, we don’t know her name?”

I fumbled, trying to explain legalities and adoption records to my seven-year-old, but in the end she seemed satisfied that when she became old enough, we would look for her together.