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Frederick Street

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ABSTRACT

FREDERICK STREET

By

Christine Jeanette Hammond

Frederick Street is a collection of short stories about life in a contemporary urban community. Each story can be read independently of the others, yet the stories are related on two levels. First, the characters all know one another, or know something about one another. The lady card players in "Josie" know Lucille, the main character in "Sweet Honey Lucille and Johnny Ray," for example.

The second, more fundamental, way in which the stories connect is that the main character in each story experiences internal confusion about intimacy and autonomy. For example, young Lindsey Nelson makes a conscious decision to avoid emotional attachments for fear of being rejected, but at the end of "Touching Day" she is beginning to sense she's made a bad decision. Each character on Frederick Street faces such choices.

for Ernestine

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Tobias Wolff said, "the writer is not necessarily the best interpreter of the story, because the writer is bound by intention, by what he meant to say...some of the most interesting things we say are those things we do not mean to say." Conversely, some of the things we mean to say never get expressed on the page. With these thoughts in mind, I have nevertheless, undertaken to write this essay in the hope of explaining what I have tried to create.

This project began with the idea of writing a collection of short stories all narrated from the point of view of a little girl who lived in a community called Frederick Street. (Does every writer begin by telling her own story, whether consciously or not?) These would not be children's stories, but mature stories in a child's voice. The limitations inherent in this approach became apparent right away.

"Touching Day," the first completed story, created the persona and voice of a young person with the sophistication to tell some stories about Frederick Street, but there were some things that Lindsey Nelson could not know. For example, I soon realized that Lindsey would

not understand enough of life to tell Janey's story in "Janey's Fortune." Lindsey's youth precluded her from discerning the delicate shades of behavior between men and women. A child's reaction to Rufus' behavior would be fear, anger, indignation, perhaps, but without understanding much about motivation. Janey's story told from Lindsey's point of view might have more directness, but less depth and truth. A child can't read the shavings left over when people rub against one another. So I realized early it would be essential to include a range of points of view to tell the stories of Frederick Street. The heart, though, of the narrative, remains a youthful one.

I also discovered that the story of Frederick Street was the story of the characters more than the place where they lived. Frederick Street exists as a concrete place in the mind of this author, of course, and it was necessary to create specific physical characteristics of that urban community and hold that vision as each story unfolded. But I made a conscious decision to minimize descriptive narrative about Frederick Street, because I think the interesting part of each story is the conflict that arises when characters try to maintain (or establish) autonomy while they continue to remain (or try to become) connected to others emotionally. This struggle between intimacy and autonomy

is essentially an internal one, and therefore, the terrain upon which this conflict arises, and plays out to resolution might be Detroit or Manhattan or Peoria, or Paris or Timbuktu. Readers are encouraged to fill in the details of their own "Frederick Street" as they react to the characters in the stories.

In developing this project, I have tried to create a unit of connected tales. The stories are intended to relate to one another on two levels; the first one superficial, and the second not quite so readily apparent. The first, and more obvious, relationship between the stories is that the characters all know or know of one another. That knowledge might be literal, as in the case of Lindsey and Bruce Radlow in "Touching Day" and "Trying to Connect," or that knowledge may be inferred by the content of the stories, as in the lady card players in the story "Josie," and the main character, Lucille, in the story "Sweet Honey Lucille and Johnny Ray."

These relationships exist even though the stories cover a span of time of roughly twenty years, circa 1955 to 1975. For example, while Janey and Lindsey never meet, Janey's disappearance becomes community folklore. In another example, Lucille of "Janey's Fortune" and

other stories, becomes Janey's confidante and Lindsey's mentor, some years later in "Sweet Honey..." Of course, Bruce Radlow from "Trying to Connect," is a familiar figure to many children and adults in the community. These are but a few examples in which the characters reach across households and across time from story to story.

But there is another underlying and more fundamental way in which these stories connect, a theme threading through the collection. The main character in each story experiences internal struggle and confusion about intimacy and autonomy. The struggle itself is common enough, and necessary for human growth and development. A mature adult is autonomous and comfortable with intimacy as well. But it can be interesting to watch as people have to, or feel they have to make choices between having close personal relationships marked by affection and love, and being independent, free and self-directed human beings.

A conscious decision to avoid emotional attachments can serve as both a defense mechanism against pain of rejection, and as a personal affirmation of existence. This is Lindsey's choice in "Touching Day." In "Trying to Connect," Bruce Radlow substitutes "involvement"

with his students for "intimacy" with Ann, and Lindsey teaches him the dangers of miscommunication when knowledge and understanding between individuals is shallow and incomplete.

Janey is just beginning to discover independence and self-direction as "Janey's Fortune" ends. In "Josie" the main character relishes her independence, but also yearns for a level of intimacy with Eugene that eludes her.

The young narrator in "Going to Town" is just awakening to the possibilities of freedom and independence as she begins to experience an emotional distancing from her good friend Patrice. Lucille, in "Sweet Honey Lucille and Johnny Ray," reveals the bittersweet existence of a woman who insists on fashioning her own free and independent self in a time when women had few choices. She understands that sometimes, especially for women, autonomy and intimacy don't go hand in hand.

In "Lindsey's Home," the main character, again Linsdey Nelson, has mastered autonomy, but she is still running from emotional connections. In the two stories, "BJ and Kevin" and "Graduation Day," the theme of intimacy and autonomy is less well-developed. At the end of her story,

Sarah knows her close relationship with BJ has changed, but she's not sure how or why. And the conflict for the commencement speaker in "Graduation Day" is essentially a question of how to "stand up" and claim her autonomy by making a solo decision. The element of intimacy is not directly at issue in this story.

The extent to which this theme of tension between autonomy and intimacy is developed in each story is, in some measure, also the extent to which each story is able to stand independently of the others as an example of one character's struggle. And the major objective for this author was to write connected tales, each with the strength to stand independently of the others.

This essay also attempts to anticipate some of the criticism of the work and respond in advance. First of all, the criticism that Frederick Street is not as well-written, in the general sense, as it might be is a given, and a shortcoming in the author which only more writing, reading, writing and re-writing can help to remedy.

Some other concerns that might occur to the reader include:

<u>Aren't your characters all living in poverty and disadvantaged means? You don't really show that. Why not?</u>

The short answer to this criticism is simply that despair as a theme does not interest me. Characters without hope do not have interesting stories to tell. For those willing to act, however mean their circumstances, their choices, their decisions, their actions are what matter. More importantly even than this, however, is the idea that fundamental themes of human existence transcend economic station:

> No themes are so human as those that reflect for us out of the confusion of life the close connection of bliss and bale, of the things that help with the things that hurt, so dangling before us forever that hard bright metal, of so strange an alloy, one face of which is somebody's right and ease and the other somebody's pain and wrong. (James 143)

Janey and Rufus were dirt poor in "Janey's Fortune," but Janey's decision to finally act against Rufus and for herself had nothing to do with poverty. She might easily have been wealthy. The story is about her making a choice, deciding to act, taking responsibility. Some may argue that Janey's actions were dictated by her financial resources. Perhaps, but that's another story.

Another criticism might be: What about the men? Where are they? Why do they all look so bad?

For this criticism I have only a thin shield, but I hold it high. I understand the lives of black women better than I understand the lives of any other people.

> Our entire experience in reading fiction is based on a tacit contract granting the [author] the right to know what he is talking about. It is this contract which makes fiction possible. To deny it would not only destroy all fiction, but all literature, since all art supposes the artist's choice. If you destroy the notion of choice, it is art that is annihilated. (Booth 53)

Fictions writers would be reduced to writing propaganda for one cause or another rather than creating art. All I can do is write about what I know.

Another criticism might be: It seems incomplete, open-ended. What happens next on Frederick Street?

In some ways the Frederick Street project represents an extended character study of young Lindsey, one of its most interesting characters. She makes a con-

scious determination not to connect with others, to minimize association with even her closest kin, perhaps as a defense against being misunderstood or misused. The lives of the women could all be seen as possible alternative futures for an adult Lindsey. Her withdrawal from Radlow, her decision to leave her home town and never return, her choice of a career, all help her put physical and psychological distance between herself and everyone else. It will be interesting to explore the adult Lindsey's character and discover what happens after she leaves Frederick Street. What were some of her experiences during the twenty years away? Was her decision a wise one? Was it a salvation, a saving grace? How does she change and grow? What does she learn? Finally, once she returns to Frederick Street, will she stay or go, and why?

I plan to explore these questions in a novel which begins after Lindsey's father's death and telescopes backward over her adult life, examining her career and relationships with friends and lovers, then moves forward to the present where she's staying on Frederick Street temporarily to settle her father's affairs and contemplating what to do with the rest of her life.

Booth, Wayne, The Rhetoric of Fiction. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1983.

James, Henry, The Art of the Novel. C. Scribner's Sons: New York, London, 1934.

Wolff, Tobias, "Interview Conducted by Bonnie Lyons and Bill Oliver, Contemporary Literature, Vol. XXXI, No. 1, University of Wisconsin, 1990.

Lindsey's Home

When Linda called to say he was sick, she wanted me to fly home right away. The doctors said hepatic carcinoma, but that wasn't it. I knew rage was killing my daddy, swelling in his heart, spilling over into his gut, eating him alive from the inside.

I told her I'd drive. Leaving first thing in the morning, I'd be home by evening. Meanness made me delay, but I needed time to think. I had been gone from Frederick Street for twenty years.

Linda's call had awakened memories long buried. I fixed myself a tall scotch, heavy ice, and took it out on my postage stamp of a balcony which looked over the Potomac. Easing into a chair, cradling my drink, I stared into the distance beyond the monuments, into the past I had left behind in Detroit.

* * *

Most of my early memories of my father involved his temper. Though he was always angry, you never knew when he would explode. Once he overturned a table full of food because mama had oversalted the rice. A minute

before he had been talking softly to Glenn about the Tigers' chances in the pennant race that year. More went unsaid than said in our house. Everyone was stretched thin with feeling things, but never feeling safe enough to say them.

He drank in the dark and talked to himself. The moon cast eerie shadows on his dusky face and lit the bottle of Four Roses as I hid in the dark and watched him. We all watched him, trying to memorize the signs that would warn us in time to move out of the way of his random violence.

His laughter, rare as rubies, was triggered as often by the hilarious as by the calamitous. Always a bright surprise, it could fill a room like the sun, lighting dark corners and shining on clean surfaces. The honest laughter of black men is one of the world's beautiful sounds. I remember when I was little, in the years before I was ten, holding my breath for long days waiting to hear that laughter brighten everything around.

When mama died the laughter disappeared altogether. Daddy was drunk most of the time after that. Glenn and I took care of each other. Both in our teens, we were just biding our time until we could get away. Glenn joined the Navy at eighteen, and for three bitter years I was alone with daddy. Then I escaped to college on a

scholarship, vowing never to return. But now one of the ancient duties was calling me back.

* * *

I left before dawn, heading east toward the Pennsylvania Turnpike, driving against the bumper-to-bumper traffic heading out of Montgomery County. I usually felt lucky to be heading opposite Washington's legendary traffic snarls, but not today. What I was heading for had already begun to tie my stomach up more than any traffic jam ever could. The engine of my big Oldsmobile hummed reassuringly as I sped along I-49 to Breezewood. Usually, being on the road put me in a good mood, but not today. I was thinking about daddy and home.

* * *

Once we were walking in the snow, daddy and I, rushing for a reason lost to me now. I couldn't have been more than four. The day was bitterly cold. I shoved one hand deep in my pocket, the other lost in daddy's huge fist. In our haste my feet seemed barely to touch the ground. I remember my right foot was much colder than my left, the sole of my brown saddle oxford

worn neatly through in a round hole the size of my thumb. Daddy's big, black work boots plowed the glistening snow out of the way as we hurried along, and suddenly he stopped short. I nearly toppled over into the snow, surprised at the sudden halt. My eyes followed daddy's to the sidewalk and the bright coins on the ground revealed in the snow. He kneeled quickly to pick up three quarters and a dime. Eighty-five cents! Daddy was smiling and I could hear that beginning rumble deep in his chest become a chuckle in his throat and finally unrestrained laughter, as he snatched me up and tossed me in the air. It was sunny and warmer as we hurried on our way. A thin, shining memory for holding on to.

* * *

I stopped to gas up in Breezewood and called Linda to let her know I was on my way.

"He's hanging on, hurry Lindsey," was all she said.

I got back into the car and sped away.

One of the few things that D.C. did not have was Linda Blake. Married now with six kids, Linda was one of the few young people never to go away from Frederick Street. Her family was desperately poor, but she

seemed not to know it. Her husband Luke worshipped her and doted on their kids.

Linda was one of the smartest people I knew when we were in school. She still read whenever she could, but that wasn't often. Once a year we could talk together about a book we had both read. It wasn't enough for me, but it was a treat for her. We have been writing letters back and forth to one another since the day I left for college and continued to share our lives with one another across the miles, wherever my journalism career had taken me.

Linda was after me to settle down with somebody, but I knew that until I met a man who considered it as much his responsibility as mine to scrub piss from toilets, I was not going to be happily married.

I had come close with Edward. But he got anxious if I had to be away on assignment for more than a couple of days. He was very gracious about my absences and understanding about my work. He said the right things, but I didn't trust those fingers drumming on the table. So I called the engagement off.

I had kept my vow never to return to Frederick Street, even though Linda wrote and told me daddy had quit drinking. I did convince him to visit me in Washington once, a few years ago. I wanted to give him a chance to see something else of the world. I was sur-

prised that he agreed to come, and more surprised at how pleased I was that he did. He complained the whole time.

"There's something wrong with the nation's capital not having a team participatin' in the national past time. That's the trouble with this country. The guv'mint says one thing, mean something else, and think they mean something else again."

"What kind of life is this for a woman, livin' all alone a hundred feet off the ground, don't even have a decent set of pots?"

"Ain't you never goin' get married? How old you think you have to be?"

He was proud of my job at the Star, but he wouldn't come again.

The Olds was eating up the miles. Just east of the Ohio state line I stopped to rest. Half way home. Several children were playing hand games while their parents sat at a picnic table nearby. Their voices reached me as I sat in my car.

Old Mary Mack, Mack, Mack,

All dressed in black, black, black,

With silver buttons, buttons, buttons,

All down her back, back, back...

Their clear, young voices melted time. It was the same chant Linda and I and the other little girls on

Frederick Street sang and played in the courtyard be-behind our houses years ago.

* * *

When I was little, I used to sit on the back porch in the shadow of the railing, making myself as small as I could, and watch the neighbors. We lived in the center of a long block of row houses, divided by tiny wooden porches. Peeking through the slats in either direction, I could watch the activities of ten families in my neighborhood, including my own.

Granny called me a watching child. She called me lots of things, actually, but she meant I saw more than I was supposed to see of grown folks' business. It was true. People came and went from the front doors on Frederick, but the living took place out back, in the large courtyard common to all ten families, maybe fifty yards wide and twenty-five feet deep. Today, people would draw a line around their property and put up a fence, but it hadn't seemed important back then, or maybe just nobody thought of it. Or somebody else owned the space. It didn't matter to us.

Kids were everywhere, playing jump rope and tag, and hopscotch in the dirt. Sometimes I joined in games of Red Rover, but my favorite thing was watching.

I saw Mrs. Davenport slice her husband on the wrist with a butcher knife when I was five. It was in the courtyard on a sweltering August afternoon that he came bursting out of their house, fell on to the dusty ground, threw his hands up, and she sliced him. Blood mixed with pale dirt as they rolled a-round on the ground until the police came and broke it up. They dragged her off to jail, wild-eyed and screaming. She was home the next day, and things went on as usual.

I had to be inside at dusk, when the street lights came on. The courtyard became the territory of the teenagers then. I would sneak to the window upstairs looking out over the courtyard, and try to make out the shapes in the dark, and make sense of the sounds coming from the shadows.

Sometimes the boys sang, harmonizing in voices so fine you'd want to cry for no reason. My cousin Eddie was one of the singers. He had a beautiful, deep rolling voice that sounded like melted caramel flowing over crumb cakes. He was killed in Vietnam when I was sixteen, before it became an unpopular war.

At one end of the courtyard was an old wooden basketball backboard and rim. The boys played all day and after school during the year, well into the night until they could no longer see the ball. Shirtless

sweating, grace in motion, they jostled relentlessly in their struggle to establish dominion over one another. The players changed, some dropping out, others joining the game, but always the competition continued. Always more players wanted to get in the game than there was room for. There were strict rules about who got "next." Anyone violating the established order was severely censured, sometimes banished from the court for some indeterminate period. The game went on, always, a backdrop to whatever else was happening in the courtyard.

* * *

After a while the little girls stopped their chanting and began running in the grass, laughing and tumbling to the ground. I started my engine and pulled back onto the turnpike, rolling toward Frederick Street. As I got closer, I tried to remember the things Linda had warned me about in her letters. It was more rundown than ever she'd said. Some of the houses had been torn down and not replaced. It wasn't so safe after dark anymore. She said she and Luke had talked about moving. I was certain it couldn't be worse than anything I'd seen in other cities, I'd assured her. But this is Frederick Street, Linda had written back.

The first thing I saw when I pulled off the freeway and onto Frederick Street was Bruce Radlow's old brownstone, now boarded up and crumbling with decay. My old homeroom teacher, he had taught me the first things I learned about the newspaper business, and convinced me I could make it there. One of the few white people who cared what happened on Frederick Street, he had not always been appreciated by those who thought he was in the way and meddling. I was one. Mean as a whip. Listening to every word he said and pretending not to care.

Thinking about Mr. Radlow made me remember screaming Victor. He'd been in my class that year. Victor was still screaming thirty years later, but he was screaming in that radical rag he published out of Boston now. Still beautiful and still angry.

Up the block, Lucille's house was gone. A vacant lot overgrown with weeds was all that remained of the first lady that treated me like I had something worthwhile to say. Granny had hated Lucille, and that made her immensely interesting to me. Warned to stay away from her, for a long time I did, half afraid of the stories about how evil she was. Then I met her one day and began to know her better. I didn't understand everything she told me back then, but I was so hungry for information I soaked up every word and saved it for later.

"Know your own body, what it likes, so you won't be caught unawares," she'd told me. "And don't be afraid to enjoy yourself, it's your right. No man, woman or book has ever given me better information on sex. Lucille was a woman way ahead of her time.

And there, five doors from where Lucille used to be was my daddy's house. Ten hours of driving, collecting my thoughts, girding myself for the moment had not prepared me to climb the steps and face him, but I had arrived. I felt like a little girl again, angry, uncertain, afraid.

Linda was waiting for me inside, as I knew she would be. She hugged me tight, too full of emotion to speak, and pushed me gently toward the room where my father lay dying.

The sheets were pulled up tight to his chin, his arms outside the covers at his sides. His head, a shock of kinky cotton, rested against plump pillows. The stubble of his beard was varying shades from black to white. I was stunned to see how frail he had become. This skeleton-man bore no resemblance to the hulking bear of a man I knew as my father. I drew closer to the bed and he opened his eyes, almost buried now in folds of useless skin. Those eyes that could dance with laughter or spit fire when he was angry held only a faint glint of light now, but were

unmistakably his.

"Daddy."

He turned to me then and said, Lindsey's home," then closed his eyes. I was afraid for a moment that he was gone, but when I leaned over I could hear his thin, labored breathing. I held dad's hand and wept. Out the window above his head I could see six young men playing basketball in the courtyard in the waning light.

Janey's Fortune

The day began for Janey like all the other long, hot Saturday's in July. She heard Grady creeping down Frederick Street in his produce truck. The old van had been repainted many times in various shades of blue. Chipped here and there, the paint created an irridescence not intended. Loaded with tomatoes, melons, peaches, beans, greens, cabbage, potatoes, and corn, the truck was a small, dilapidated farm on wheels.

"Fresh, fresh, get your fresh vegetables here. Fresh fruit, freeeshhh."

Grady's cries sent Janey to her kitchen cupboard for spare change. She hoped there was enough for fresh peaches to make a cobbler. She kept the rusting Hillsboro coffee can hidden from Rufus, and she had to reach high and stretch far for the money. Janey saved her money in the big tin because it sounded like much more when she dropped the coins in. Two quarters, a nickel and a dime rattled around in the can. The sixty-five cents would buy just enough peaches if she sliced each one extra thin. Janey poured the coins into her hand and headed for Grady's truck.

She was usually the first to greet Grady on Saturday mornings, but today someone was there ahead

of her, waving her arms, talking loud and pointing to the watermelons. When she got closer, Janey realized the new woman was complaining about Grady's prices for the melons.

Janey couldn't ever remember more than a mild grumble from anyone about Grady's prices, and here was this woman screaming and calling him a cheat. Janey reached the truck just as the woman was stomping off, hands empty.

Janey could tell Grady was hopping mad. He was so angry he couldn't stand still. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and turned in little half circles, trying to contain his rage.

"Who was that?"

"Ed's cousin from Memphis. That woman is nothing but trouble. She got sent out of there just ahead of the law, I heard. Told me I'm trying to cheat people! Say my prices too high! I told her to get on away from my truck. I don't want her business!"

Janey hadn't heard that part, but she just said, "you got some good lookin' peaches today Grady. That's all I want. Gonna make a cobbler."

Grady calmed down right away. "Beautiful peaches, Janey, straight from Georgia. Sweet and juicy. How much you want?"

Janey opened her hand, showing Grady her coins, silent.

"Let's see," said Grady.

He snapped open a brown paper sack and began picking over the tender, yellow-orange fruit. Janey watched as one peach after another disappeared into the bag, until, finally, Grady turned to Janey and said,

"okay, Janey, that will be sixty-five cents."

Janey started to protest.

"You're one of my best customers, Janey, take these, take these."

Janey backed away from Grady's truck, pleased and confused in turn. Good fortune was so often a stranger to her, she wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad.

As she busied herself in the kitchen making the cobbler, Janey wondered what kind of trouble made Ed's cousin have to run away. Her own husband Rufus had escaped from Bruce, Mississippi in a hurry. He had hit a white man with a spade. Rufus liked to brag about this to Janey when he was drunk and crazy. She had heard a dozen versions of the tale, and the facts were lost in a maze of half-truths and exaggerations. But Big Mama told Janey long ago that Rufus was wanted by the law in Mississippi and could never go back. Janey believed Rufus' mother.

She put the peaches in a wire basket and lowered them into boiling water while she tried hard to imagine what kind of thing a woman could do to be run out of

town. Had she shot somebody? Stolen money? How did they let her get away then?

Janey realized with a start that daydreaming had almost made her leave the peaches in too long. The skins were brilliant yellow and red. She took two potholders from above the stove, grabbed the handles of the wire basket and carried it, dripping, to the sink. She became engrossed in her task, and didn't think about the woman anymore. Every now and then her thoughts fluttered around Rufus -- when he would come home, what kind of mood he would be in, how long he would stay.

Janey was taking the cobbler from the oven when she heard Rufus' key in the lock. The door slammed back against the wall and she heard his muttered "damn" as he staggered down the hallway toward the kitchen, mumbling angry, incoherent phrases.

It was early afternoon and Janey hadn't seen Rufus since Friday morning when he left for work. He'd been drinking and gambling all night, and judging from his mood, had lost big. She would have a bad afternoon before he fell into a drunken sleep. Rufus appeared in the kitchen doorway, weaving slightly and reeking of gin. Janey looked at her husband of eight years and tried to remember when she had ever loved him.

"Fix me somethinaeat...fix me some eggs, Janey, honey.

Janey hurried to do his bidding. "Sure, Rufus, I'll scramble you some right now."

"I don't want no goddamn scrambled eggs, I want sunny-side up!"

"All right."

"And hurry up. You move so slow you make me sick!"

Rufus slumped down in a chair while Janey moved quickly, trying to anticipate his demands.

"Sons-a-bitches think they can shoot some craps. Show 'em. I'll show 'em who know how to roll some dice. Eddie think he know so goddamn much. Think he can do any goddamn thing. Don't know shit. Don't know who shoulda won...make me a winner...myself. He the best! Ain't that some shit! I can make 'em sing...sing... Janey! Janey! Where is mah dinner!"

Janey placed the food before Rufus and got the salt, pepper and ketchup for him.

"I want some toast, goddammit! Where is the bread?"

Janey had it ready for him as soon as he yelled.

Rufus fell on the food hungrily, shoveling it into his mouth with fork and fingers. His eyes were half-closed, and Janey hoped he would fall asleep from the meal rather than find new energy. She got lucky. As she watched, his left hand fell into his plate, egg yolk staining his sleeve. Then his head began to droop low over the plate, and his right arm dropped heavily

by his side. Janey stood perfectly still near the doorway with her fingers crossed until she heard Rufus begin to snore softly. Then she removed the plate from under his arm and left him. Janey's good fortune was still holding.

She hurried to close the front door. She hadn't dared leave Rufus' sight before. She stepped out on the front porch to breathe some fresh air, and spotted the new woman, several doors down, watching her. She smiled at Janey and waved. Janey did not wave back. Instead she slipped back inside and closed the front door.

Janey hurried upstairs to gather her keno chips and good luck charms for Saturday night cards at Lucille's. She wanted to be out of the house before Rufus woke up.

On the way to Lucille Montgomery's house, Janey thought about her ladies night out. Many of the wives on Frederick Street went to Lucille's on Saturday nights. Not everyone got away from home every Saturday, but most weeks seven or eight ladies were there. Janey was a regular. She and Rufus fought about it often, but Janey was stubborn, and recently Rufus had backed off and let her alone about it. Lucille's house was the logical place for the ladies to gather. She was a widow with no children and could plan her days any way she wanted.

Janey wondered what stories the ladies would tell. Anna Cartwright would have a new tale about something her twins had done. Joyce Blackmun would tell another outrageous story about the people on her job, and Linda Davenport would probably drink too much Old Grandad again, and they would have to try to sneak her home before Jack got in. Tonight, even she had a story, about the new woman and old Grady. Janey raced up the porch steps, and Lucille snatched open the front door before Janey could knock.

"Come on in, chile. Me, Anna and Linda been waitin' for you so we could set up the first keno table."

Lucille threw an arm around Janey's shoulders and squeezed her tight. She was unlike anyone Janey had ever known. Lucille appeared to be about her mother's age. She would never say. And she was loud, but not just loud talking. Janey didn't know anyone except Lucille who had a purple, and a red, and a gold lame dress. And her furniture! She had a red velvet chair and settee in her living room with red and gold crushed velvet drapes at her windows. She laughed loud too, and slapped people on the back. Her hair was orange, and she painted her long, pointed nails a vivid red. If Janey met Lucille at the market, or the laundromat, she was always reserved and correct, but sometimes she'd wink.

Anna and Linda were already seated, thumbing through the keno boards. Janey was especially glad to see Linda who had missed the last two Saturday nights.

Janey sat down and began setting up her charms. First she pulled her lucky coin out of her keno bag. She had found this coin on the beach at Atlantic City years ago. There was some foreign writing on it that Janey couldn't read, but that didn't matter. She never played keno without her lucky coin. She put it on her right. Next, she pulled out the tiny elephant her Aunt Esther had given her. Aunt Esther had told Janey the elephant was lucky and wise. This conversation was one of Janey's earliest memories, and she treasured the elephant. She put it on her left. Now she was ready to play. The ladies always teased Janey about her superstitions. None of them knew she also kept a lucky Roosevelt dime in her shoe. Janey didn't care about the teasing. She felt safe in her routines. Before they could rib her about it tonight, she said, "guess what? I saw Ed's cousin givin' old Grady the business about his melons this morning!"

"What you talkin' about girl?" Anna asked.

"Who?" said Linda.

Even Lucille was surprised.

Janey had everyone's attention, and was delighted to be the first with news.

"Girl, this morning that woman was givin' Grady the down in the country about his prices. Called him a cheat, do you hear me! She didn't buy nothin' either. Said she'd go to the Wrigley! I didn't know Grady could get so mad. He said she was the crook. Got run off from her home town with the law right in after her!

"What she look like?"

"A big woman, I know that, wearing blue jeans, overalls. That's all I can remember she was movin' so fast away from that truck!"

"She sound like Sam's sister Eva," interrupted Linda. She wear Sam's pants to do her housework in."

Jane gladly let Linda take over the conversation. She was more accustomed to listening.

In the next hour several more women joined the group. Flo Ellis came, and Lula Evans and Stella Gibbs. Stella brought a huge pot of spaghetti. She never went anywhere without bringing food. By eight o'clock the women had two spirited keno games going. They played cards, sipped whiskey, ate spaghetti, and told stories and laughed until near midnight, when the party began breaking up. Janey couldn't remember when she'd had a better time at Lucille's. She hated leaving, so she lingered, helping Lucille clean up, until nearly one o'clock. Finally, she collected her charms and went home.

When she got home, Janey slipped the key into the lock and tried to ease the front door open. Strong hands snatched the door and threw it wide open. Rufus grabbed Janey's arm, pulled her inside, and shoved her against the wall.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he screamed.

"At Lucille's," Janey replied softly.

"I told you to stay away from that bitch!"

Rufus held Janey against the wall, fists gripping her upper arms, while he screamed threats and obscenities. The heat of his breath, the stench, the hate rushed out and engulfed Janey.

"Answer me! Answer me!" he raged, and slapped Janey, knocking her to the floor.

Trying desperately to give him what he wanted, Janey looked up at him and said again, "I was at Lucille's, Rufus."

It only enraged him further. Janey sensed rather than saw the upraised boot. She scrambled along the floor trying to escape, but Rufus' boot crashed down on her ankle and she screamed. Rufus was off balance from the blow, and Janey was able to get up and run, limping, into the kitchen. Rufus recovered quickly and followed her, bellowing.

Janey didn't have time to open the back door and escape. There was nothing between her and Rufus' rage

but the kitchen table. She spotted the fork she had used for the eggs earlier in the day. She snatched it up and just as Rufus lunged across the table she raked his face from temple to chin with all her strength. Rufus' hands went up to grab his cheek and Janey ran past him out of the house, his screams following her into the street.

Janey ran to Lucille's. She flew up the steps, hammered on the door, and Lucille pulled her inside quickly and closed the door. Confused and disoriented, she struggled to tell Lucille what had happened.

"Shush...shush...chile. It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

Janey knew Lucille was talking to her but she couldn't understand. She nodded, vaguely certain a response was called for, and a glass of brandy appeared in her hand. Janey could hear Lucille talking on the phone.

"That's right, officer. Frederick Street. And they better send an ambulance. There's been some cuttin' and bleedin'."

"Not the police! They'll take me to jail, Lucille!"

Nobody's going to jail. You just wait here with me.

They sat on Lucille's red settee and waited. For the first time Janey thought plainly about what she had done. She saw her husband's face a bloody pulp, and

knew her fortune was changed forever. The women could hear the sirens in the distance, coming closer.

"Now don't you be scared. You was protecting yourself and you tell it like that. Show 'em how he tried to stomp you and tore up your leg."

Just then the wailing stopped and flashing red lights flickered on and off the windows and walls of Lucille's living room. The effect of all the red, walls, furniture, faces, so much red made Janey want to scream, but she regained control when Lucille squeezed her hand and hugged her just as they heard the sound of the officers' boots on the steps.

After the policemen were done with their questions, Lucille followed them to the door. When she came back she told Janey, "you won't see them no more." "You're staying here tonight. Tomorrow we will see what there is to see."

Janey offered no resistance as Lucille led her upstairs. She sat on the side of the bed while Lucille went to find one of her nightgowns that wouldn't swallow Janey up. While she waited, she glanced around the room, and she had to smile a little at the style of Lucille. The walls were lilac; the ceiling, rug and drapes, purple. There was a massive pink comforter on the bed and mounds of pillows, pink, purple and lilac. On one wall hung a portrait of a beautiful young woman.

Janey was getting up for a closer look at the portrait when Lucille came back.

"That was me a long time ago. Good looker. Looks like you a little, Janey. I've seen some things since then. Here's your gown. You go on and get some rest. This mess is not quite over yet."

The next day Lucille went home with Janey. As soon as they walked through the front door, Janey wanted to turn and run. But she kept going into the hallway, through to the kitchen. Blood was on the floor, the table, bloody handprints on the countertops and the sink. Janey was shocked.

"Is he dead, Lucille? He should be dead, all this blood!"

"No, he's not dead, Janey. Bled like a pig, but he'll be all right. Let's clean this mess up."

In a daze, Janey went to the cupboard under the sink to get rags and cleanser. She spied the peach cobbler on the counter, just as she had left it a lifetime ago. Silent tears began as she and Lucille set to work scrubbing the kitchen, washing away pain and dirt and fear.

Janey didn't visit Rufus in the hospital. She didn't want to see him all bandaged up, and she didn't want to say she was sorry. She heard that Rufus blamed Lucille for everything. Told everyone it was

Lucille's fault he'd almost lost his eye. Lucille's fault that his face would be scarred for life. Her fault that he couldn't go home anymore. Because Lucille was a witch who poisoned the minds of women. Proved she was no good when she took up hanging around with that Barbara Jean woman from Memphis. He was staying with Big Mama. She blamed Janey that Rufus was always drunk now and had lost his job. Janey tried telling Big Mama that she didn't force Rufus to stay away from home. She was still his wife. But Big Mama said, "He's ashamed. Can't you see that?"

Janey and Lucille and Barbara Jean talked about all this one Saturday while they waited for the other ladies to come and play cards.

"I been called much worse than witch," said Lucille. "There surely are a few spells I'd cast if I could, though, sure 'nuf."

"Maybe I should see Rufus, talk to him," Janey said. "If our marriage is over, I want us to end it, not Big Mama or anyone else."

Since Janey cut him she had not seen or talked to Rufus once. The odd thing was she heard more about what he was thinking and feeling now from other people than she ever had from Rufus when they were together. She wondered if it was the same for him.

Someone knocked at the door. Lucille went to

answer it and came back with one of the others.

"Now we have a foursome. Deal those cards, Janey," said Barbara Jean.

"I can't stay, Lucille," said Anna, still standing. "I just came to tell you not to count on me. Lucas is raising hell about me being gone all the time, and I'm going to have to stay in for a while to keep the peace."

"I understand, Anna."

Lucille spoke in a voice softer than Janey had ever heard her use. She walked Anna to the front door. She was gone for a long while, and when she came back, she said, "Joyce and Linda are staying in too. And all the other ladies. Some scared of me. Some scared of their husbands."

"You mean they believe that stuff Rufus is talkin' about? About you being a witch?" Janey was stunned.

"Don't matter whether they believe it or not, Janey. It's all the same. They can't take chances," said Barbara Jean.

The three ladies sat together drinking and talking late into the night about all manner of things such as pride and shame, witches and warlocks, freedom and fortune. The other women of Frederick Street did not speak to them after that. It hurt, but it could not be changed.

Janey saw Rufus only once more. They met by accident when she went to Ed's to visit Barbara Jean. He

was coming out of the house and they met on the steps. She gasped when she saw him. His face was lined with raised welts, his right eye shot through with red. What hurt Janey most was how Rufus had shrunk. He was still a big man, tall and wide, but he was folded in on himself somehow. It was something Janey felt rather than something she could see. They didn't speak. He halted only for a moment then hurried past, trying to pretend he had not seen her or been seen.

At home that night Janey slept very little. The next morning she gathered her good luck charms in her keno bag, closed the door on 201 Frederick Street, and left town.

Sweet Honey Lucille and Johnny Ray

The minor differences between houses on Frederick Street involved details of exterior decoration, gardening knowledge, that sort of thing, and, of course, degree of disrepair. But in the end, all the houses were pretty much the same.

And then there was Miss Lucille's house. The front of her house, the door, the porch, the steps, the bricks, the railing were all painted pink. The trim bordering the windows was a deep rose for contrast, and her awnings were lime green. Her house hadn't always been pink, though. Two years ago it was mint green with forest green trim.

As for flowers, most everybody tried to put a little color out front, even if it was just a few limp petunias or pale impatiens. A few folks nursed some rosebushes. Miss Lucille planted peonies, the Queen of the Flowers, lush, shiny green bushes which grew four feet high then burst forth with bright, bold, bodacious blooms of pink, white and red.

The youngest women, the teens of Frederick Street, were warned by their mamas to stay away from Miss Lucille. She was considered a "bad influence" which made her very attractive to me and my friend Lindsey.

We were dying to meet her. Trouble was we couldn't think of any reason for going there. We had no business at Miss Lucille's. That was the problem, and we worried about it all summer.

"What are we going to say when she answers the door?" I asked Lindsey.

"I don't know. Maybe we could ask her to buy something," Lindsey suggested.

"What we got Miss Lucille can use, girl? That ain't going to work."

"Well, what you think, then?"

"I don't know. Maybe we can do some favor for her."

"What can we do for Miss Lucille? That ain't going to work."

We were mired in this kind of circular thinking for weeks before fortune smiled. Lindsey and I were sitting out back in the courtyard on the swings one day, not swinging, mind you, just sitting, when Miss Lucille spied us and waved us over to her pink palace. I looked at Lindsey and she looked about as stunned as I felt. While I was still glued to my swing, wondering if Miss Lucille had read my mind, Lindsey was already racing over to Miss Lucille's back porch. I dashed to catch up with her, and we both staggered up the steps gripping the rail, gasping for breath.

"Who can go over to Earl's Market and get me a

pack of Lucky Strikes?"

"I will," we said in unison.

"Ain't you a pair. You ever seen without one a-nother?

"Yes ma'm," we said again.

Miss Lucille laughed her deep, throaty laugh. "Come on inside while I get my change."

Miss Lucille opened the screen door and we stepped into dangerous territory. It was cool inside Miss Lucille's kitchen, and very clean. A fan sat in the window facing the courtyard, spinning noislessly. The kitchen was white and gleaming, a surprise after all the pink out front.

"See any toads, lizards, kettles?"

It was embarassing to be caught with your eyes agog, but Miss Lucille wasn't mad. She just winked at us, then reached down in her bosom and pulled out a small, red leather change purse, opened it and took out two quarters and handed them to Lindsey.

"Go on you two. Hurry up, and don't forget my matches."

And that's how our friendship began, slowly at first, like the best friendships. She would call us to do an errand for her every few days or so, or she'd just wave at us from her porch or yard. Gradually it got so we would stop over often to see if she needed anything, and wind up staying for an hour or so lis-

tening to Miss Lucille talk about life and love. But I will never forget the day Lindsey asked Miss Lucille why she never got married. I'll remember her story until my dying day.

"So you think old Lucille ain't never married and had children of her own, do you? Well, sit down girlies and, if you promise to keep it to yourselves, I'll tell you a love tale."

* * *

I was young as green cane when I first saw Johnny Ray Sims and fell in love. It was nearly forty years ago. He came looking for work at my daddy's confectionery store. Not much of a store -- more like a shack propped up on every lean' side, still, my daddy was a businessman when it was mighty uncommon for a black man.

I was working the cash register behind the counter when Johnny came in. He went straight to the back of the store, to where my daddy was doing the books, and asked him for any work he had, sweeping up, delivering groceries, anything at all.

I never will forget. I was waitin' on Miss Jenkins, picky as could be. Counted and recounted her change before she left the counter. Like I didn't

know 'rithmetic. But I knew to smile up all the customers and be polite, even to Miss Jenkins, so I couldn't turn my full attention to Johnny right away. But when he strode out from the back and headed for the door, I was staring for all I was worth, willin' him to look at me. I didn't dare say a word. Aunt Lu might hear about my fresh actin' from Miss Jenkins.

I was raised by my Aunt Lu. Named after her, for a fact, my great aunt Lucille, my daddy's mother's sister. She took care of me after my mama died. And Aunt Lu was mighty particular about appearances. Anyhow, I didn't get to speak to him before he walked out the door. But at the last possible moment before it closed behind him, he turned and winked at me. At least I thought he did.

Johnny Ray Sims was a pretty man. Proud too. You could tell it in the way he held his head tilted a little to one side and kept his shoulders square when he talked to you. And you could tell by the hint of a strut in his walk. Even though he was down on his luck when he walked into daddy's store that day, the strut was there just the same.

After that day, I couldn't keep Johnny Ray off my mind. What little all I knew about men did nothing to help me understand what happened when I thought about him. I started to heat up all over, and lost strength

in my arms. My legs got wobbly. My tongue got thick, and so did my brain, it felt like. It might as well have been some disease, the way I felt, but I knew if I could just get close enough to Johnny Ray Sims, I would be fine. If only you could prepare in advance for love at first sight.

Now, a tiny part of my mind always knew Johnny Ray had a wife. The rest of my mind and all of my body didn't give a whit though. Your body juices can oil your mind into believing whatever you need to believe.

I took to dreaming about plans for getting Johnny Ray to come after me. I didn't know then like I know now, you have to lay your love light on a man, parcel it out a little at a time. I started lolling on the stoop around closing time when I expected he'd be walking by. It kept up for weeks, Johnny Ray strolling by never glancing my way, and me watching him and pretending not to. No telling how long this foolishness would have kept up, but something happened to throw us together.

Johnny Ray's wife took sick. My Aunt Lu made up some soup and took me with her to visit Martha Sims. This wasn't unusual in any way. Aunt Lu ministered to many of the sick folk in town, and she often took me along, teaching me what she knew.

My heart was in my mouth as we walked the dusty mile and a half to the Sims place. I was itching to see Johnny Ray up close and scared to death at the

same time. He wasn't home when we got there that Friday noon. When Aunt Lu knocked on the screen door a thin voice called for us to come in. We moved to the back room and discovered Martha Sims lying in bed underneath several covers, though it was a warm June day.

"Thank you so much for coming Aunt Lu. I really do 'preciate it. I've been feeling poorly, but you're a sight to lift me up."

I hung back, studying Johnny's wife. She was a small woman from what I could see. A thin layer of perspiration covered her face. On the pillow beneath her head a ring of dampness circled her hair. Her deep-set eyes were almost black. Her tan skin had a yellowish tint. It was plain to me she was a very sick woman. I had never seen anyone as young as Mrs. Sims who was so close to death. She wasn't much older than me. That scared me so bad I forgot all about Johnny Ray for a time, thinking about leaving this world before you had a chance to really live. Aunt Lu had to call to me twice before I heard her tell me to fetch some cool water.

I lost track of time as we sat there while Aunt Lu fed soup to Martha, mopped her brow and talked softly to her well into the afternoon. After a while she slept fitfully, mumbling and thrashing. Aunt Lu moved her chair closer to the bed and continued to cool her with

cloths as she slept. At the sign from Aunt Lu I rushed to change the warm water for cool. It seemed we could do little more for her.

Though I didn't hear him come in, suddenly Johnny Ray was standing beside the bed next to Aunt Lu, staring down at his wife. Aunt Lu stood and took my hand and we prepared to leave.

"Thank you for coming to see after Martha, Aunt Lu," he said.

He didn't look at me at all, didn't see me standing there staring at him. Aunt Lu just nodded, took my arm and we left.

Johnny's wife didn't live more than a month past that evening. After the funeral Johnny Ray must have holed up in his house because I didn't see him walking past the store, or in church, or anywhere in town. I was beginning to worry that he had moved away when he came into the store early one morning. He looked awful, all stooped, dirty and sad. My own heart ached to look at him and I forgot all Aunt Lu's warnings about correctness and said to him, "I'm so sorry about your wife, Johnny Ray." I knew I was being familiar, but I didn't care. He had never been Mr. Sims in my mind, always Johnny Ray.

He looked straight at me, noticing me finally. "Sweet Lucille," he said, and I was lost. Swept away.

I waited on him, but I don't remember what I was puttin' in the sack, my mind was in such a state. Your world is small when you're young and in love. It's you, the person you're lovin' and everyone else is way out beyond the two of you and unimportant. Johnny Ray Sims was all that I could see. It was a powerful shortsightedness.

That's why I snuck out to his house later that evening at dusk. I took hot food and, I hoped, all the womanly wiles I'd heard whispers of. When he opened the door to my knock, I took one small step inside the door and offered him the basket of food.

"Aunt Lu said you might be needing some of this. Chicken, pie, biscuits still warm, inside."

He took the basket from me and turned to the kitchen while I followed close behind. He'd been drinking. I could smell it on him. I had heard folks talkin' about Johnny Ray going down since his wife died.

"I'd be pleased to fix a plate for you Johnny Ray. Won't you sit down, rest yourself," I said to him soothing like.

He didn't say no, so I began moving quickly around the kitchen while he sat watching me. When I sat the plate in front of him, he grabbed my wrist and said, "your Aunt Lu know you're here, girl?" He was

gripping my wrist hard and I suffered shivers of excitement and fear.

"No sir, she don't."

"SIR! I was Johnny Ray a minute ago." He laughed out loud and pulled me on to his lap. Wrapping both arms around me he kissed me hard on the mouth. I kissed him right back like I'd been born for that moment. I was scared about what would happen next, but I didn't have to be. Johnny was gentle with me, and I opened myself to him naturally as a morning glory at the first hint of sun.

Sometimes you have to squeeze a lot of happiness into a small space and that's what we did. It wasn't long before the whole town was talking. It's not like you can hide in a town the size of Goolsby, Alabama. My daddy stopped speaking to me and Aunt Lu was ashamed to show her face in town. A thing can look quite different depending on where you stand to glance at it. My daddy must have said something like that, among other things, to Johnny Ray when he called on him to explain how things were.

We got married in the fall, Johnny Ray and me, and he was all mine for a time. But the truth is he never loved me right. Johnny Ray was longing for what he would never have again with his Martha. And I had been lusting after everything life was holding out just beyond

my reach. We had been looking past each other. When he ran off I wasn't surprised.

I had a baby by then, little Johnny, and I went back to daddy and Aunt Lu and they let me lean on them. But I have always wanted my own, and for that you have to stand up. So I boarded little Johnny with Miss Mamie Johnson while I went north to make a place for us. Miss Mamie kept a number of little babies like mine over the years. It was how she made her living. Aunt Lu had a fit, but she was getting on and I wouldn't be around to help.

I took the train to Detroit where there was plenty of work during the war, even for colored women. I managed to get a job working in the laundry. It was hot, sweaty, hard work in those laundries. The temperature was a hundred degrees summer and winter. My job was running the presser, huge metal irons that flattened sheets smooth and crisp before they were loaded in panel trucks and shipped to hospitals around town. I spent ten hours a day, six days a week on my feet, sweatin' til I thought I would melt, feeding piles and piles of bleached white cotton into the hungry jaws of those steamers.

I planned to send for my boy as soon as I had a place of my own. I thought it might take a year or more, but I was young, with plenty of life ahead, and

he was just a baby. I was wrong though, there wasn't enough time. He died of the influenza that winter. I've been on my own ever since.

Touching Day

I sat at the kitchen table watching the flakes fill up and flatten out and float on top of the watered down milk until mama started yelling.

"Lindsey, go on, get dressed girl! You'll be late for school! Why you hang back so lately?"

Mama didn't know it was touching day. I hurried from the table and got dressed so Glenn wouldn't leave me. Mama expected us to walk to school together. She didn't know that as soon as we rounded the corner where she couldn't see, he hightailed fast as he could to join up with his friends. Leaving me, but I don't care. I'm nine. Big enough to walk to school by myself.

I walked slow, taking my time. Fall is the most fun on Frederick Street. The trees along the curb, standing taller than the houses, are pure gold in October, especially with the sun shining through the leaves. I didn't have to wear boots and snowpants yet, and I could still run fast and play hard without getting too hot. Two streets over the trees had red and brown leaves and the porches and lawns were on fire in the sunshine. I surely did not want to go to school.

It was Friday, the day Mr. Radlow "touches

base with each of my students, visiting a few moments with each one, discussing work, or anything you wish during this time." That's how he explained touching day when we came back to school after summer. He don't know I call it touching day. Don't know I hate it. Sometimes he patted your hand, or put his big, hairy arm on your shoulder. Once he shook Leon's hand. I don't want him touchin' me.

My brother Glenn used to play tag with me. He always caught me and he'd hug me and swing me around in the air, me squealing nervous joy and loving it. We would wrestle sometimes, and he'd let me pin him down. Now he don't even look at me hardly. Just says sometimes, little girl you're just in the way.

I sneak in his room when he's not home. It smells like tobacco and basketball and Brut. I look around, study his things. He hates for me to go in his room, and if he catches me he pinches my arm and twists it hard. Sometimes I go crying to mama. Most times not. She's full of worry about daddy. She doesn't have loving-up moods much anymore.

I got to school just ahead of the tardy bell and Teacher had already started his visits. He better not touch me.

We're supposed to "work independently during this period," but I spend my time watching.

He's way across the room now with Wynn. As usual Wynn has a stack of papers to show off. He thinks he's so smart, but I beat him in the spelling bee. He's still mad enough to spit over that. Teacher will be on that side of the room for a while.

Most people are working at their desks. Reading or writing or drawing. Except Victor. He just sits there. When Victor's not yellin' and swearin' he's just sittin'. I think for the upteenth time what a waste Victor got the best seat, right next to the windows, when he don't care where he sits.

I'd like to sit there, or anywhere else in this room, by myself, and send everybody else out. I'd be alone to use the printing press any time I got ready to run off pictures and stories. I'd grip the smooth, black handle and churn the arm fast, faster to turn out many copies, or slow the machine way down so I could watch the rollers grip the paper and, line, by line, turn black ink and white paper into a poem, a picture, a news flash.

I love working on the newspaper. I can write perfect English, but it don't seem quite right, since nobody I know talks that way. I told Mr. Radlow this and he smiled, but he did not laugh. I liked him for that. And he knows everything about how to put a story together so people care what you say.

If I were alone in here, I'd rush to the blackboard and grip the chalk in my hand and start figuring on the board. Four times seventy-two is two hundred and twenty-eight. One-half of two hundred and sixteen is one hundred eight! Always one answer. No mistakes, no lies.

And I'd sit in Teacher's chair, the boss of everything. Or I'd go to the library corner and read all the books I wanted. Slam the book shut and start another one when the story turned wrong.

He's talking to Martha Issel now. He put his arm on her shoulder like he's her daddy or something. Don't she know he won't even know her name next year?

When daddy came home last time, mama was so happy. She didn't laugh out loud, but she smiled a lot and she couldn't stay in one place for long when she waited for him to come bounding up the stairs two at a time. First thing he does is grab mama round the waist and plant a loud, wet kiss on her lips. Then he swings me around and slaps Glenn on the back.

Lovin' is a curious thing. Daddy never stays for long. When he begins complaining that mama wears her feelings on her sleeve, and he starts smelling like day old beer, I know he'll be leaving soon.

Teacher is talking to Leon now. Leon is a nice boy. It's not his fault he smells a little like pee.

He has to sleep with his two brothers. Baby Ted is five years old and still wettin' on hisself!

He's at Aaron's desk now, getting closer to me.

I worried and worried over how I could get away from touching day. Get him to leave me alone. At first I was going to ignore him. But that's what Janey does, and he touches her anyway. Then on Monday morning I thought of it. I marched right up to his desk and I told him, "you're not supposed to be touchin' young girls. You can get in real trouble for that." I thought for a minute he was going to yell or swear or something. I watched his face go all pink and red, then back to whitest white. He didn't say anything for a long time, just looked at me. Then he smiled a little crooked and said, "you're right Lindsey."

The other days since Monday he hardly talked to me at all, and now it's touching day again.

Why does he have to check everybody's work all the time? Mrs. Johnson collects our science papers then passes them back, all red spotted with circles. We fix them up and pass them in again. She doesn't talk, talk, talk about them.

Teacher is laughing now. Aaron told him one of those silly jokes he's always making. Not funny to me, no way, but Teach always laughs.

Here he comes. He's at Janey Moore's desk now, right behind me. He hardly ever touches Janey. He talks to her standing straight up, off to one side like, talkin' in a real soft voice. Good thing, too. Janey is scared and jumpy like that puppy daddy used to whip all the time. Janey don't like quick moves and loud talking. I saw her eyes go big and round, saw her back trembling, when that old nasty Victor started his loud talking on the playground. Talkin' big, trying to be bad, cussin' and carrying on. He wasn't talking to Janey. Wasn't talking to nobody really, just talkin' up. He scared Janey though. Everything scares Janey.

Here comes Teacher, now. My turn.

Right beside me, he nods to me, passing my by without a word. Just like I said. Just like I wanted. How come I feel like he's cheatin' me?

Trying To Connect

Still half asleep, Bruce glimpsed his reflection in the mirror. He was wearing a yarmulke perched on top of his balding pate. He blinked hard twice and the vision disappeared. The Orthodox reflection usually presented itself when Bruce was depressed or agitated. Sometimes he saw himself wearing a black hat and full beard, looking more like his father than he'd thought possible.

The vision soured Bruce's normally cheerful disposition, and he struggled to banish its effects as he dressed hurriedly, grabbed a roll and headed for the door. On the way out his foot kicked a large, white envelope lying half under the coffee table. That damned dating service questionnaire! Bruce picked up the envelope, tossed it on a chair and strode out the door.

As he drove his usual route, passing some of the houses of his students and former students, Bruce's mind wandered to thoughts of his childhood on Frederick Street. He had watched it change in his growing up years from a Jewish neighborhood to the predominately black ghetto it had become. Except for time away at college, Frederick Street was the only community he had ever known, and he rarely thought of moving.

His parents had come to hate it, though, as they watched their friends and family move away while finances kept them trapped in the city. They were gone now, and Bruce stayed on in the brownstone they had left him when they died.

Bruce had crushed his parents' dreams that he would become a rabbi. He wanted to be of the world he had tried to explain to them. It was a concept he could not express then and scarcely understood better now.

"A teacher! A teacher!" his mother would scream at him. "So teach Torah at Yeshiva. Is that not teaching?" It was his mother's effort at compromise.

"A rabbi, Brucie, you're born to it. Talk to him, papa."

His mother's pain was real. She had been rock sure her choice would be her son's. The scene was an old one. Mother screaming, Bruce insisting he had to go to Yale to study history, not to Lakewood to study the Talmud. Papa struggling to quiet them both.

"That Mark, he'll make his parents proud," his mother would say. "He's going to medical school. It's all Sarah can talk about, her Markie."

Mark Babbitch was Bruce's best friend. Their mothers were friendly enemies. Bruce was the only one who knew that Mark wrote stories in secret. Mark seemed happy enough about the future his parents planned for him, but it made Bruce sad to think of his friend

stuffing his stories in a shoe box under the attic stair.

Bruce argued with his mother all summer and his parents finally gave in. Withdrawing their support from their only child was, in the end, unthinkable. The Radlows never fully recovered from their disappointment, Bruce knew, though his mother wrote him faithfully while he was at college. Bruce came to depend upon her weekly letters, but his parents never visited during the four years he was away. Their disappointment shoved aside many of love's possibilities.

Bruce's parents died within months of one another. He was in graduate school at the time, and grief and guilt bound him like a shroud for many months. Then he met Ann. She introduced herself to him and Bruce was smitten immediately. He was strongly attracted to her and at the same time acutely distressed at the intensity of his response to the beautiful blond woman.

Bruce had known few women in his life before Ann. He preferred it that way. When he needed to, he visited the bronze and beautiful Rochelle who listened without demanding. He could talk to her and she would nod in all the right places, or they didn't have to talk at all.

But Ann was different. She was the first person Bruce let himself care about after his parents died. Part of the reason he was blue these days was because of Ann. They had lived together for nearly two years

years, and Bruce missed having someone around at the end of the day. Convinced that it was over between them, he still couldn't get her out of his head.

But Ann had been jealous of the time he devoted to his students. She had said he was driven, but she just didn't understand his commitment. She couldn't appreciate the fact that many of his youngsters had no one who would take an interest in them. Damn it, they needed him and he was going to be there. Bruce fiercely loved teaching. He knew he was doing important work, and he was good at it.

Ann was a teacher too. She should have understood. But she taught in a suburban high school where they always had enough textbooks for each student, and money to fix a broken window the very next day. How could she really know what it was like?

Bruce forced all thoughts of Ann and his parents from his mind as he pulled into the parking lot of Jefferson Elementary School. He began reviewing his lesson plans for the day, mumbling to himself as he parked his car, got out, and headed for his homeroom.

The morning sessions passed uneventfully except for one incident on the playground. Victor flew into one of his rages. Bruce noticed the fit, but ignored Victor. He had learned that the best way to handle Victor's screaming fits was to ignore them. No cur-

riculum design or learning skills courses at college had taught Bruce this. It was close and dedicated observation that had taught Bruce lessons like this one.

Shortly after the start of the school year, Bruce reviewed Victor's records and decided to visit him at home. Victor lived with his father in a run down apartment house on Ferry, not far from Bruce's brownstone. He had no siblings and his mother was dead. Victor was home alone the day Bruce visited, and was clearly shocked to see his teacher. Bruce didn't stay long, but he told Victor they were neighbors, gave Victor his address, and invited him to stop by whenever he could. Victor never visited Bruce, but things improved in the classroom after that.

Recently Victor had begun to confine his screaming and swearing to recess period, where he would wave his arms and shake his fists at no one in particular. In class, however, Victor now sat quietly. He and Bruce had an unspoken truce. His playground antics were ignored, and inside they were making some progress in math and reading.

At the end of morning sessions, Bruce joined Jim Kendricks for lunch in the teacher's lounge. Jim brought up the dating service again.

"Did you get the questionnaire I sent you? Man, I'm telling you, Bruce, it is the answer."

Everything in Bruce's background and sensibilities railed against being fixed up with a total stranger.

"No way am I going to beg a machine for a date."

"Seriously Bruce, most of the women I've met are just interested in meeting someone nice, you know, compatible."

Bruce looked at his friend, divorced, lonely, sad. "My life is full," he said. "I've got my work, the volunteering at Boys Club, my freelance stuff..."

"There are no women in your life, man! You're not still hoping Ann will come back?"

"I'm over that."

"Then give the service a try. What have you got to lose?"

Bruce didn't respond. He was too busy to be lonely, but Jim didn't understand.

Most of the afternoon passed quickly. The school day was almost over, the students enjoying a free period, while Bruce prepared lesson plans, when he looked up from his book to see Lindsey Nelson waiting silently beside his desk. He was surprised because Lindsey usually took full advantage of free time. She didn't say anything for a moment, just stared, her deep-set eyes unfathomable. Then, without preamble, she said, "you're not supposed to be touchin' young girls. You can get in trouble for that."

Bruce stared back in stunned silence while a faint

smile touched Lindsey's lips, but not her eyes.

Bruce struggled to reply, "you're right, Lindsey."

He watched her turn and walk slowly back to her seat without looking back. Bruce was shocked and dismayed. The gentle touches, so natural for him, were outgrowths of the concern he felt for all his students. He was sure his kids understood that. He believed he was reaching this child, helping her. How could she have so misconstrued his meaning?

Somehow Bruce managed to get through the rest of the afternoon, dismiss his class and drive home, still dazed by Lindsey's insinuations. He climbed the stairs to his apartment, went in and collapsed in the nearest chair, exhausted from the emotional turmoil of his day.

How could I be so wrong about a kid, Bruce wondered for the thousandth time. His face flushed again remembering Lindsey's words. It hadn't been an accusation really, more like a condemnation. You're not suppose to be touching young girls. Possible consequences resulting from a charge like that made Bruce's heart pound violently. He imagined himself in court, in prison, in the gutter, mobbed by citizens, stoned, until the absurdity of his visions brought him back to reality.

He focused on what he knew about Lindsey and tried to understand what had happened. Why would she do such a thing? A highly intelligent little girl, she seemed

sensitive and aware of others' feelings. Which means she knows what a bind she's put me in, Bruce thought.

He couldn't escape the possibility that everything he had worked and sacrificed for could be gone in an instant because of one confused little girl. Despair threatened to over take Bruce as he thought first of his parents' death, then Ann's defection, now his career possibly stolen from him. Slowly, without warning, anger began to swell within him, a helpless, uncontrollable rage toward a little wench who held all the cards. Bruce pounded his fists on the chair, then leaped up and began pacing the apartment, his feet propelled by the anger he was feeling.

As he struggled to regain his reason, Bruce finally decided if she wanted to make trouble for him, Lindsey would have taken her accusations to someone else, the principal perhaps, or her parents. But, then he would have heard something from the authorities by now if she had wouldn't he? He glanced around his silent apartment, struggling to think clearly.

The furniture leaned to lines and angles, few pillows, nothing overstuffed. From where he stood, facing a blank TV screen, Bruce could just see the corner of his bed, a solid four poster oak. Sturdy frame to support his 250 pound bulk. In the kitchen a set of copper pots hung, gleaming, rarely used. Bruce ate out

most nights. Alone. And suddenly it was clear. Bruce understood that Lindsey just wanted to be left alone. She couldn't take a chance on caring.

As he continued to survey his apartment, he realized for the first time there were no photographs in his rooms, not even tucked away in drawers. No pictures of family and friends. Lying on the coffee table was a plaque his student had given him last year for being "The Greatest Teacher In The World." On one wall hung identical frames, containing pages from newspapers published by each fifth grade class he had taught at Jefferson. He used to have a picture of Ann somewhere. Where was it now? He couldn't recall.

Suddenly lonliness engulfed him. He thought of calling Rochelle. He could tell her all about his horrible day. He imagined her nodding knowingly, an inscrutable half-smile on her face, performing diligently, patiently, until he was spent. Knowing she would be well paid.

Across the room he spied the white envelope on the chair where he'd thrown it that morning. He hesitated a moment, then picked it up, opened it and studied its contents. Finally he sat, took out a pen, and began.

Single, white male. Serious. Bright. Slightly overweight, with good attitude about it. Anxious, but interested in connecting. Looking to meet female -- same.

Josie

Mama and the ladies still gossip about the day Josie left town. I know this even though I don't listen in on their conversations anymore. Sitting around the table playing cards, smoking, drinking, but mostly talking is what they do almost every Saturday night, mama, granny, Mrs. Cartwright and the others. Josie used to be with them too. She's been gone more than three years now. I was ten when she went away.

Josie would visit us often, not just on card playing nights, driving up in her old green Dodge, jumping out of the car almost before it came to a stop. I remember Josie's laugh, loud as a man's but brighter. She was tall as most men too, with long skinny arms she liked to throw in the air and wave about when she was excited. She always smelled like purple and rose.

Mama and daddy argued about Josie coming over so much, staying for days at a time sometime. But driving truck over long haul, daddy was usually away when Josie came, and she never stayed long while he was home.

Mama and Josie laughed a lot. I can't remember, or never knew, what was so funny to them -- maybe nothing

at all. Sometimes my friend Linda and I laugh over much of nothing and can't stop until tears burn our eyes. Maybe it was like that for Josie and mama. Sometimes, though, they talked real low, in whispers and sighing sounds.

Often Josie would go away for weeks or months at a time. When she got back she would visit, pulling me on to her lap to tell about her 'scursions to places like Mobile and Chattanooga and Charleston. She laughed out loud about the sights she'd seen in her old Dodge. Mama listened, wide-eyed as I was when Josie told about taking a riverboat cruise on the Mississippi or standing at the edge of the United States looking out over the Pacific Ocean, blue clear to China.

When she came back from her last trip, Josie was not alone. Eugene came too. Josie was finally going to get a chance to make somebody a fine wife, mama said. Daddy just said 'bout time.

Eugene kept his hand on Josie's knee all the time he was telling ma and me how they met in Atlanta. Josie let Eugene tell it all without interrupting once. When Josie came back with Eugene things were different. She didn't have any new stories about the places she'd been. It was as though Eugene was the best, the only thing she'd seen. She was real proud of him. You could tell by the way she looked at him while he talked, then

looked at mama and me to be sure we were listening.

He was a good looking man, I guess. A smooth dresser who wore suits and ties every day and his shoes always had a high shine. Tall and very thin, his Adam's apple stuck way out when he threw his head back to take a drag on the Camels he was always smoking. His laugh sounded nice, but he always laughed first at things that were not too funny, and he usually laughed longest at everything. He pretended to like my brother and me, but he had a way of looking over your head when he talked to you, looking at anything else and hardly listening to you at all.

Eugene moved in to Josie's house and acted like he had always lived there. In the beginning he brought Josie presents and kissed her and touched her all the time when he thought nobody was looking. He brought dresses for Josie and jewelry and perfume. They were the talk of Frederick Street, going about town in Josie's new Dodge all decked out, to all the clubs and after-hours joints. Josie didn't have time for the card players anymore, but she and Eugene gave them plenty to talk about.

"All that high livin' going to bring them down," Granny said. "Where that Eugene get so much money anyway?"

Mama shrugged her shoulders and that question just hung in the air.

After Eugene had been with Josie for a while he started acting mean. I heard mama and Josie whispering one night when they thought I was asleep.

"I can't do enough for him anymore, Grace. He's soured on us."

"It will pass, Josie. You'll see. Just ride it."

For a while things were better, and Josie smiled again. Then Eugene stopped talking to Josie and he wouldn't look at her.

Mama and Josie and some of the ladies packed a picnic, and a bunch of us from Frederick Street went to Perry Park to celebrate the Fourth of July. Eugene laughed and talked with everyone that day, and even played games with the kids. But he pretended that Josie was not there. After that, Mean Yoo Gene started going off by himself in Josie's Dodge. Josie would visit mama during these times, but they didn't laugh much anymore.

One day Eugene hit Josie. It happened in our living room one Sunday after dinner. Mama sent me away upstairs, but not before I saw the surprised look on Josie's face. I heard the front door slam and I thought I heard mama crying, or maybe it was Josie. Daddy called him a son of a bitch. I stayed in my room and worried about what would happen next.

The next day Josie called mama and asked if I could

come over and help her with dinner. At ten, I was a better cook than Josie. I silently prayed that mama would say yes. She didn't like me going over Josie and Eugene's unless she and daddy were there too. But she told Josie it would be all right and I was glad.

Josie picked me up in her Dodge, a black one now, Eugene's favorite color. I climbed in next to Josie and sat up tall as I could, breathing in the smell of stale cigarettes and new leather.

We didn't drive straight to Josie's. She went first to the park and stopped her car near the band-shell where we could look out at the barge traffic on the river.

Josie turned to me and said, "just think Lindsey, there are other lands and times just across the water."

We drove back to her house after sitting a while, but we didn't do any cooking that day. Josie showed me pictures of herself. Josie in a hula skirt, and in a dimly lit night club sipping champagne. Josie in a rowboat and Josie on a double-decker bus. When it was getting dark, Josie gathered the pictures together, tied them with pink and purple ribbon and gave the bundle to me. Then she drove me home. No one on Frederick Street has seen Josie since then.

Going To Town

My best friend and I collect pop bottles all week and cash them in so we can ride the bus downtown on Saturdays. Patrice and I will both be thirteen in September, old enough to ride the bus by ourselves. I had a tough time convincing Patrice that taking the bus to town was a good idea. Taking the bus feels like adventure to me. Patrice doesn't have as much fun as I do, I can tell, but she doesn't complain. She's a good friend, but I'm afraid one day she won't come with me. She checks out the fattest books on the library shelf without even peeking inside to see if she knows the words first, but she's real careful about some things.

Patrice wears her wiry, sandy-colored hair in a fat braid down her back. Her body is plump too, and her skin is the color of coffee with double cream. I think she's beautiful, but she doesn't. Me, I'm deep chocolate brown and skinny. Taller than Patrice by three inches. I saw a picture of an Ethiopian princess once, with a long, long neck and long skinny arms and legs like mine. It soothed me to stare at that picture.

To get ready for town we scrub up and wear clean white anklets with our Sunday shoes. Mama won't let me

wear my church clothes.

Each Saturday afternoon, after our chores are done, Patrice and I walk to the corner of Frederick Street and Fuller to wait for the bus. Some lines still have street cars, but on Fuller, spanking new buses carry people to town and back. We never wait long before a bus pulls up and stops and Patrice and I step up quickly while the doors hiss closed behind us.

On the bus people sit packed close together and everyone pretends not to see anyone else. I study everybody, trying to figure out what they do, where they live and what they want. Some people step on the bus with a quick, light step like the lady I saw once wearing the smart, blue, high-heeled shoes. She moved quickly to the back of the bus, took a seat near the rear door, and looked straight ahead with her chin sticking out a little.

Some people step on the bus real slow, dragging their feet, like the old man in the baggy brown pants and dirty work shoes. His pants were so big they hung in folds around his shoes, and you could barely tell he had legs at all. He sat in the seat across from Patrice and me, wearing a dirty red shirt and a brown felt hat. His face held secrets like the face on the man in the moon. He looked old and tired, but I knew he was certain about some things.

I saw one of the fattest ladies in the world on the bus one Saturday. She had a perfectly round head on a body that had no shape at all. She seemed held together by the huge flowered dress she wore buttoned from her neck to her knees. Her body shook and rolled with the movements of the bus, and the button holes stretched and pulled, but held. I stared, not wanting to miss the sight if those buttons popped and she began to spill out on to the seat. She was something to see raising up to get off at her stop on Baldwin Street.

On the way downtown we pass St. Luke's Catholic Church, set way back from a lawn so green it hurts my eyes to look at it. In all these Saturdays, Patrice and I have never seen a living soul come or go from that church. At New Mt. Zion, around the corner from where we live, there is always something going on any day of the week, all times of day. Bible Study on Wednesday nights, prayer meetings, revivals, four separate choir rehearsals on different days, people about all the time in that building that used to be the First National Bank.

We pass Lincoln High School, a school for the smart kids. The path there from Fordson Junior High is a mystery to me, and our teachers aren't saying how to get there. That old Mrs. Quinn gave me a B+ on my report card instead of the A I'd earned. "I only give out a few As. You're in the Commercial curriculum, not College

Prep," she said. What kind of excuse is that I'd like to know. I wanted to wring her scrawny chicken neck. I thought about going to Mr. Richards, the principal, to complain, but Patrice convinced me that it probably wouldn't do any good anyway. I'm going to Lincoln, though, and "the Q" is not going to stop me.

Near to town, the bus travels through Grant Park, a huge park split in two by six lanes of city traffic passing through the middle. By then we're almost downtown. We always ride to the end of the line, and by the time the bus pulls into the terminal, Patrice and I are dancing in our seats, anxious to see some new thing.

Sometimes we walk arm in arm through the streets the way we saw two little old ladies do once, arms locked together, each carrying a shopping bag in the other hand. Sometimes we skip along. But most of the time we stroll, pretending to be rich ladies shopping in the afternoon while our husbands are working in one of the tall buildings, and our drivers are waiting to load our packages into a limousine and whisk us home to our mansions on the lake.

We go into all the small shops, walk around all the clothes racks, and pull out things to show one another. Patrice checks all the price tags, looking for bargains. I don't want to know what things cost. I look for the brightest, most beautiful things I can find. We keep

this up until we are so full we have to rush out of the store before we burst into laughter.

We never have any money for real shopping, but we stop at the five-and-dime to order chili and a coke at the luncheonette in the basement. Sitting on the vinyl-covered stools, it's hard not to push off and spin around the way we used to when we were little and our mamas brought us downtown for new shoes.

Our favorite shopping place downtown is Mason's Department Store. We don't go in there because the sales ladies follow us around everywhere with their noses in the air. It hurts Patrice's feelings, but I want to pinch them. We do love to stare in Mason's picture windows stretched all along Fuller Avenue, a whole city block of fantasies.

That's where we saw the wedding dress. Miles and miles of lace with pleats and folds and tucks everywhere, held together by shimmering sequins. My eyes followed one pleat until it disappeared into another or took a new direction and burst all of a sudden into a shower of beads and lace. There were no beginnings and no endings to the smooth, flowing white lines. It made me think of all things new and clean and possible. Patrice said no one we knew was ever likely to have a dress like that. She pulled at me to come, but I couldn't stop staring. She finally went on ahead while

I tried to imagine what it would mean to own something so wonderful.

Patrice ran back to tell me that a few windows down men were dressed in suits that made them look like penguins. I took one long last look at the dress before following her to see the penguin-tuxedos.

Every once in a while on our trips I can talk Patrice into going to my favorite place, the river at the very edge of town. She thinks watching the river is boring, and would rather shop until the last minute before we have to board the bus for home. But I love watching the ships and barges pass back and forth, coming and going from exciting places on the other side of the world.

Patrice spends her timing counting the boats, while I watch the freighters as they disappear into the distance on their way to the St. Lawrence River and finally the Atlantic Ocean. I try to get my mind around how far that must be. How long it will take. But I don't have a way to measure the distance. The farthest I have traveled from Frederick Street is here to this spot on the Detroit River. I dream, though, of adventures across the sea.

Too soon we have to catch the bus back home. The trip from town is shorter. The bus is quiet. One man in worn blue overall sat upright, back straight,

but his head nodded and rolled, falling forward, bouncing slightly with the motion of the bus. His dented black lunch pail rested on the seat beside him.

Our driver called out each stop. "Peterboro, Peterboro, Peeeeter Boroooooo, next!" A hand reached up to pull the rubber cord. The bell sounded and two ladies got up and went to the back door. One carried a dusty blue canvas shopping bag, lumpy and overstuffed. The bus slowed, then stopped and the two ladies descended and disappeared into the dusk.

Our stop was coming soon. I didn't want the trip to end. The streets are shorter, darker, closer in as we near Frederick Street. Out the front window darkness had already begun to fall. Behind me, from the back window of the bus I looked out toward town. The sky over the towering buildings was still afire with streaks of color, deep red to purple, a promising tomorrow.

BJ and Kevin

We are a household of two, Granny and I. I am Sarah Mae Lynn Jenkins, though Granny calls me Say-ra because she's from another time. My daddy died before I was born, and my momma passed away last year. That's when Granny came north to take care of me, the house and the garden. We never had much, but my momma planned carefully and she planned ahead. Her insurance money paid off the house and we are lucky to have a fine roof over our heads, Granny tells me often enough.

I remember Mr. Frank, the insurance man, who came by every week, and I remember how momma paid the policy when she had to let other things go. Mr. Frank was one of the few white faces we saw on Frederick Street. He was short and squat with light brown hair slicked down on the sides of his head and spiky on top. He always wore dark suits that had seen better days, and run down shoes, black, sometimes brown. He carried with him a thick, black book with a record of all his accounts. Inside the book were yellowed pages with many names and line after line of tiny numbers on each page. I watched Mr. Frank make careful notes in his book after momma give him the crumpled dollar bill and coins she strug-

gled to set aside for the day when he would come.

So we were lucky I guess. But we still don't have much. We don't have a television set like my friend Betty Jean. Granny says watching television wastes time, time I need to spend learning life lessons. Granny's idea of life lessons are things like sewing buttons, starching sheets, pulling weeds, dusting figurines, and making buttermilk biscuits. These are not the lessons I am interested in learning, though this is how we spend every Saturday morning, Granny and I. I don't plan ever to use any of the stuff Granny calls "the things you need to know in life." When I'm grown, I'm going where there is noise and bright lights, music and dancing, where men bring me sweet treats and I won't ever, ever iron my sheets.

But it was Saturday morning and we were snapping beans picked fresh from our garden, picked by me, of course. At least this was an outside job. Granny and I sat on our front porch with a large brown sack between us full to over-flowing with green beans. We took turns reaching into the sack for a handful of beans, pinching off their tops with a snap, snap, snap of the wrist, breaking the stalk into crisp thirds, and tossing the pieces into a big, black pot readying them for canning.

I had to stretch some to reach the pot because my feet

did not quite reach the ground. Granny said get the foot stool, but I didn't want to. I was practicing stretching my spine. Dancers need long, straight backs. So I was getting a crick in my neck reaching for the beans and tossing them back. And it was hot. The sweat popped out on my upper lip and I felt a single drop slide down between my shoulder blades, itching in a place too tough to scratch. There was no breeze to cool the sweat, either, and I was damp and miserable.

A fly came buzzing around, interested in what we were doing. It drifted lazily back and forth between the sack and the kettle. I must have paid too much attention to the fly and not enough to the beans, because Granny reached over and pinched my thigh, bringing me back to the business at hand. This made me even more miserable and I couldn't wait to get the work done and get from under her thumb. When I was finished, I knew I'd be free to do whatever I wanted. Granny would nap or read her Bible, and I could spend time with my friends.

I don't have a great many friends. I think it's best to concentrate on just a few. I have BJ and Kevin.

My friend Kevin is a thin, frail boy who gets sick often with colds and flu. He had pneumonia once, and his ma was really worried. Granny sat with her while Kevin spent two nights in the hospital. His mother won't

let him play outside when it's too hot or too cold. He reads during those times. He doesn't have a television set either. Kevin's mother makes him wear plaid shirts in summer, and shorts with a crease ironed in. The other boys tease him about his shorts. They tease him too because he plays the clarinet, carrying his thin, black case to school each Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and to private lessons on Saturday. Kevin tries to ignore them. He is very serious about the clarinet.

Kevin lives directly across the street from me, but I actually met his father first. I found Mr. Evans wandering, lost just a few blocks from home. Kevin's daddy, Mr. Evans, was a soldier in the war. He was shot up bad, and now he has a lot of trouble with his memory. He has trouble walking and talking sometimes too. I was playing near the park when I saw Mr. Evans walking around in small circles mumbling to himself. They hadn't lived in our neighborhood long, but I knew it was him because I had seen him on his front porch rocking, or sometimes listening to the radio.

I went up to him to say hello and he jumped back like I was about to hit him. I could see he was really worried. I didn't know what to think at first. I had wanted to jump back enough times when certain grownups tried to talk to me, but I had never had that reaction from an adult before. He seemed harmless enough to me

even though his socks were mis-matched, so I just went right on and introduced myself, told him about Granny, and asked him how he liked Frederick Street so far.

We were sitting on a bench having a creamsickle when Kevin found us half-an-hour later. He had been searching the neighborhood for his daddy who had wandered off and gotten confused. We all walked home together, each of us holding one of Mr. E's hands. Kevin and I have been doing things together since then.

When I'm looking for a friend and Kevin's not around, I spent time with BJ, my next door neighbor. Her real name is Betty Jean, but nobody calls her that more than once if they know what's good for them. She is tall, almost six feet, with wide hips and full thighs, though she's not fat. Her favorite outfit is a blue jean jacket, red plaid shirt and shorts rolled just above the knee. She wears PF flyers and she plays a mean first base. She taught me how to throw a softball, putting my whole body into the follow through, and how to face a pitcher crouched low, stepping out with authority. BJ is the only girl I know who swears easy as saying how do you do. She is twenty and I'm ten. She works at the post office sorting mail. Pays good money, she says, but it's boring as hell. I want to be just like her.

I can talk about sports, or books, or anything with BJ. She never says go on away from here with that

foolishness the way Granny does when she loses her patience. I saved up questions for BJ and we would sit on her back stoop in the evenings while she explained things to me like why some women had eight babies, and some women didn't have any. And why Mr. Rufus got drunk every Saturday night and threw trash in the courtyard. And what was the clap. And who were Republicans. I could ask BJ anything and she answered me straight away. But she wasn't afraid to say, I don't know, Sarah, I'll see. Then she tried to find out and tell me.

BJ's softball team, the Ebony Jets, were playing ball at Perry Park, and Kevin and I planned to watch the game. Soon as Granny and I finished snapping beans, I took the pot to the kitchen and was free for the day.

Kevin must have been watching me from his front window, because he met me on the porch ready to cut out for the park. In his right hand he carried a black rectangular case. One corner had been ripped and carefully taped. His clarinet.

"What have you got that thing for?"

"I have a lesson after the game. I have to go straight there. I promised ma I wouldn't miss my lesson."

We had to walk instead of run to the park, so the case wouldn't knock and bang against Kevin's knobby

knees. Good thing we were early. When we got to the park a few players were already there, a pitcher warming up, two batters taking turns peppering line drives, and BJ, the captain, going over the starting lineup with the manager. When she glanced up and saw Kevin and me, she waved. I knew she would come over and speak to us as soon as she got a chance.

The ball field where the Jets played their games was not much of a field. I didn't know this until BJ took me to a park across town where they had bleachers for the fans, and a dugout protected from the sun, and a batting cage, even, and lights for playing night games. Perry Park didn't have any of that, but they had a regulation-sized field, permanent bases and, BJ says, some of the best softball players in the city.

Kevin and I came early so we could get a good seat on the grass between third base and home. Later other people would arrive with blankets and chairs, but we had already staked out the best spot.

I was looking off into the distance watching the warmup on the field, when Kevin nudged me and I looked over to see Tony and his brother Lee headed our way. Kevin didn't say anything, but he eased his clarinet closer to his side. These two were mean and stupid. One of them alone was bad enough, but together they were often out of control. Once Lee cut off his sister's

braids and flushed them down the toilet while Tony laughed at her tears and called her baldy.

I was glad BJ was close by. She wouldn't let anything happen to us. Those two idiots didn't dare mess with BJ. Nobody did.

They headed straight for Kevin until they were standing right over us, blocking our view.

"What's in the box, punk?"

Kevin didn't answer right away.

"I said what's in the box!"

This time Lee kicked the case and Kevin fell over backward in the grass, but he held on to his clarinet.

"My instrument, my clarinet is in here."

"Get it, Lee, take it from him."

Lee lunged at Kevin, trying to grab the clarinet. He lifted Kevin off the ground. With both arms wrapped tightly around the case, he held on tight.

I jumped up and started waving my arms, calling BJ to come quick. Tony shoved me down and I hit the ground and bit my tongue so hard tears shot to my eyes quicker than I could blink to hold them back.

"Leave him alone," I screamed at Lee. "Leave him alone, you shit!"

Tony smacked me across my face and I hit the dirt again. I looked over to the bench at BJ and she was standing, watching. Why wasn't she rushing to save us?

I looked back at Lee. Kevin was still holding on to his clarinet, but he was on the ground now and Lee was punching him in the face. I screamed at him again to leave Kevin alone, and I tried to jump on his back, but Tony grabbed my arms and pinned them behind me, laughing all the while.

Suddenly, finally, BJ was there. Tony saw her too.

"Look Lee, it's BJ. What you gon' do? You can't take us both."

Tony was talking bad, but he wasn't moving in on BJ.

"Leave them alone." She spoke to Lee in a real low voice, ignoring Tony.

Lee stood up, but he was still pinning Kevin with his legs. "Fuck you. Get back, Betty Jack! Jack Betty!"

BJ walked past Tony, closing in on Lee. She held a bat loosely in her right hand.

"Go away from here and leave them alone."

"I know your game, Jack Betty. You want 'em for yourself, 'specially that little sweet meat over there."

Lee was pointing to me and laughing his nasty laugh, when BJ swung the bat and caught Lee neatly between his hip and knee. He howled, and fell. Kevin scrambled away from him, dragging his clarinet case along the ground.

"You hit me!"

"You hit my brother!"

They both yelled at the same time. Simple fools. Like they weren't asking to be hit.

"Get off the field now," BJ said, raising the bat again.

They left us, backing up trying to swagger, but it wasn't working with Lee's limp.

I looked over at BJ, ready to run and hug her, but she had tears on her face, something I never thought I would see. She held up a hand to stop me, then turned and walked back on to the field. I had many new questions for Betty Jean.

I looked back at Kevin and he was still sitting in the dust. His shirt was ripped and torn, and his crisp tan shorts were filthy now. There was blood on his face and a mouse was growing under his right eye. He opened the battered old case and slowly, gently assembled the parts of his clarinet. Then he placed the mouthpiece to his lips and blew. The sound that hung over the field was a long, low plaintive wail of pain and pride I would remember forever.

Graduation Day

The small, dim, stuffy auditorium was crammed with three hundred restless, excited adolescents, impatient for the graduation ceremony to end so they could return to their real lives. Many adults were there too, the harried, hopeful parents of the honored graduates.

"I was pleased when Mr. Jenkins invited me here to deliver the commencement address to the graduates of Roosevelt Middle School, 1972. It was not very long ago that I sat where you are sitting today..."

> Before the stiff-shirted blue noses dredging our community for suitable talent hauled me off to Brookfield to be prepped for Harvard. A bright, black girl of 14, I saw the possibilities, though, and took full advantage. I got the best education in America on a full ride.

Jenkins stationed himself at the back of the auditorium where he could look out over the audience. His trusted minions were stationed at strategic points

around the auditorium so he could signal them if he observed anything untoward among his flock. All was in order and a contented half-smile softened his stern features as he listened to his guest.

After a brilliant college career as one of Morehouse College's shining stars, Jenkins came to Detroit to teach social studies at Roosevelt. He had remained for thirty years. Despite his skill as an educator and administrator, early in his career his advancement had been limited by his race, an old story. When the political tides began to turn in the '60s he had been offered opportunities to "come inside" and help run the school district. He had declined all offers.

One youngster on the front row was actually listening to the speaker intently, as he absently fingered a book in his lap, a thin, red, dog-eared volume.

"You are on the threshhold of new promise. This is the end of one chapter of your lives and the beginning of new and exciting challenges. High school awaits..."

> What could I tell them of experiences a-
> waiting them in high school? They, most
> of them, were heading for Central High,
> one of the toughest in the city, and my
> high school experience had been Brookfield

Preparatory Academy. A room of my own.
Books, papers, supplies all provided
for me. Enough food, more than enough,
and warm clothes in winter.

I remembered school before Brookfield.
Walking to school in winter without
boots, toes frozen and painful by the
time I reached school. I remembered
scrubbing Sloan's liniment into my
hands, a poor substitute for gloves.
The buttons holding my Goodwill coat
together were a haphazard match.

Spring time was almost as bad, walking
to school in driving rains, watching
for puddles. I never owned rain gear,
not even an umbrella, feet squeaking
wetness from the holes in my shoes.

I remembered sleeping six to a bed.
I remembered mayonnaise sandwiches,
rotten peaches and evaporated milk.

The young people were becoming increasingly restive. How different they looked from the youngsters of a few years ago. Back then the common fashion for young men dressed up for a special occasion had been

suits with white shirts and narrow ties. Their hair would be cropped close and tamed with pomade. The girls wore fancy dresses, every color of the rainbow, and carefully sculpted their hair in French rolls and beehives held in place with a dozen bobby pins.

Today many of the young people in the audience wore flowing dashikis and kente cloth, trying to recapture a lost heritage, flaunting boldly the red, black and green colors. Their Afro hairdos stood high and defiant against a New World standard of beauty.

The boy on the front row was dressed plainly in dark slacks and a clean white shirt, open at the neck. He leaned forward, listening intently as if recording the words.

"You have faced many challenges to make it this far, and you will be tested in high school even more. Not only will you be tested academically. In many ways academics is the easiest challenge you face. Attending faithfully, listening closely, studying regularly, reviewing carefully and questioning everything is your formula for academic success in high school. I am confident that you all can face this challenge with grace..."

In the beginning, I had been afraid to
ask questions in class at Brookfield.
Eyes were always on me, waiting for me

to make a mistake and reveal that I didn't belong. I wanted to quit, to fail so I could return to Frederick Street to things I knew and understood. Collecting bottle caps, knocking on the house with sticks, chasing spiders from their webs, playing double-dutch until dusk. Safe for a time. With no future.

I made one friend at Brookfield, my study partner, Brenda Hoffman. She told me you can't hide by keeping quiet. I thought about that for a few days then began asking questions and volunteering my own ideas, and school work became easier.

But academics was not the total Brook-field experience. I lived there with girls like none I had ever known. Some of them were mean, their cruelty aimed as much at my poverty as my black skin. Susan Anders was the worst. We shared a room. I wondered more than once whether this was the headmaster's sick joke. I knew he didn't want me at Brook-

field. I was the board of directors' experiment. I realized after a while that Susan and I were roommates because no one else wanted to be with either of us.

Susan played tennis at Brookfield and she was good. She had a national amateur ranking. She practiced every day, and one evening she came into our room dripping with sweat from her heavy workout. She pulled her sweater off and tossed the rank garment in my face, saying, "I've been meaning to give this to you since I noticed you didn't have any dress whites." That was Susan. Childish, petty and mean. Something I just had to put up with, like a bad case of chicken pox.

The boy on the front row glanced briefly out the window to where several boys lolled on the playground, marking time. He stared at them for a moment before turning his attention again to the stage.

"But academic challenges are not the only ones facing you as you move to high school. The tougher tests will be those that examine your character and your resolve..."

And here I stood with two college degrees and no life plan. What I knew was how to

go to school. I had been directed by others for a decade. The next move was up to me and I was spinning in place. I had received job offers, and I had opportunities to continue my education. I wanted my next move to be solely my own decision, but I didn't know which way to turn.

Jenkins wanted me to come back to Roosevelt and teach. He was animated, enthusiastic about the opportunity, but I remembered what it was like. There were never enough books in the classrooms, never funds for adequate supplies. Mr. Esselman, my old science teacher, had purchased many supplies on his own, I knew. And now Jenkins was inviting me to partake of that opportunity.

"As difficult as the path has been so far, you'll continue to be challenged by your peers and forced to make decisions that will affect the rest of your lives. I don't need to tell you about the pitfalls that await..."

Carruthers, one of the wealthy Brookfield alums had offered me a position with his advertising company, along with a fabulous salary and fringe benefits. When he was vague about what my duties and responsibilities would be, the offer became more transparent and not difficult to turn down.

I thought about going to law school, but realizing finally that I was only considering it because of the cachet and influence of the degree rather than any burning commitment to jurisprudence, I cast that option aside as well.

The boy in the front row glanced again out the window at his friends still gathered around the basketball court. Their numbers had grown.

"Opportunities exist. They always have and they always will. Rare perhaps, so don't squander them. Wring all you can from the smallest chance..."

When I graduated, Mr. Esselman wrote in my autograph book, "the fields of opportunity are strewn with the bones of hesitation."

That book was a ratty, green spiral note-
book I was ashamed of, but I kept it.

The boy's attention to the speaker was total now, his surroundings forgotten.

"You will be sorely tested. Prepare. Persevere. Prevail."

Would I?

The young man on the front row lay his book down on his lap and led the applause.