

P R O L O G U E

*S*ince her first whispered words, Addie Mae has been my guide into truth. Not the kind you tell other people when you're feeling righteous. But the hardest truth—the kind you tell yourself when you know there's been a lie festering inside for a long time.

We've been together longer than I expected. She held me captive, holding my heart with her surprising voice. Because of her, I now see magic where there was only coincidence, faith has

replaced fear, and time has become the most miraculous gift. There is always a chance for change.

Addie Mae and I were joined by love, by a contract I suppose we made many lifetimes ago, or maybe merely in my imagination. We never know these things for sure until we join the Invisibles. But if I created her, so has she created me. I am transformed by her presence.

It wasn't all her. I had to be willing to listen, rise above obstacles and insecurities, face fear and the darkness of uncertainty. Loneliness often flirted with me. Still, I was blessed. She was always there, reminding me that the best journeys take us through fog and fury as much as glory.

It was Mother's Day and the phone rang. If I trace Addie Mae's presence to its first guiding moment, I think this is where it all began. Not that I knew it then. All I understood that Sunday afternoon was that my father, whom I hadn't seen in seventeen years, lay dying. A heart attack, his kidneys, the drinking—whatever we chose to believe. My uncle just wanted to let us know. We didn't have to come. He understood.

I knew right away I had to go to Pennsylvania. My brother came to the same decision, so we got up early and drove two and a half hours down rain-soaked highways in anticipation. We could hear each other's hearts pounding as we walked into the room and looked at our father's frail, unconscious body. Relieved to relinquish his care to us, my uncle left and Bryan and I stayed with this sleeping drifter. A social worker asked

us to sign papers. No, we didn't want dialysis. No resuscitation order either. Let him go. Get this over with. I placed my hands on my father and practiced the healing arts I had learned. I willed God's forgiving energy into him, cleared his aura, soothed his brow. A few hours later he was still alive and it was time for me to leave.

The next day I drove alone to the hospital and put my hands on him again and prayed. I don't remember what for, but I know it wasn't to save his life. I think it was really more to save his soul, to offer peace. Every day I returned, despite my family's objections that he deserved neither my help nor my consideration. They were right, of course. But he wasn't a bad man, just afraid of life and its obligations. He was trapped in the memories of his scarred childhood, and like so many others, he couldn't find the courage to overcome it.

Then, one day, almost three weeks later, the seas of our blustery past parted and my father opened his eyes. It was as simple as that. For the time being, he had begged off death.

My other brother, Guy, flew in from the coast. In many ways, the three of us were meeting a stranger. We no longer needed him to be a father, no longer expected anything from his arms. Daddy had died years before. After initial clumsiness, we talked about our lives and the turns each had taken. I think we even laughed a bit.

Two weeks later, I checked him out of the hospital. As we passed through the doors, he turned to me and said, "I just

want one year with you kids. That's all I ask." The doctors told me he could die at any moment.

That next year was a majestic journey. We shared our July birthdays. I helped him pick out a gift for my mother's birthday in October. He spent Thanksgiving dancing at my brother's house. My father was determined to have fun, determined to spend every moment he could with us. At Christmas, he was back, wearing funny reindeer antlers, fiendishly unwrapping presents like the little boy he truly was. He gave his old watch inscribed *With Love On Christmas, From Dad* to Guy. He did the same for Bryan, on the blade of a Swiss army knife designed for fishermen, because he knew how Bryan loved to fish. He gave me a large brass hourglass to remind me of what he had forgotten.

He was demanding of my attention and time, and it wore me to the bone. I cried a lot, and even prayed for him to die so I could reclaim my eroding life. But grizzled, raw wounds were slowly healing. My brothers and I talked more often and more intimately. Even my mother, bitter from decades of broken promises, noticed a light returning to our family.

He got his year, passing two days shy of Mother's Day the following May. In a swirl of activity, as he lay on the gurney waiting for a bed at the VA hospice, he squeezed my hand. He couldn't talk but his teary eyes said it all. "Thank you, Lynn. I love you. I'll watch out for you." He died the next day, redeemed.

As I left the hospice, I noticed a worn book lying on the bench nearest my car. *The Call of the Canyon* by Zane Grey.

I sat down and leafed through its weathered pages. The spine cracked when I opened it like it hadn't been held for years. I turned to the first sentence. *What subtle strange message had come to her out of the West?* I tossed the book into the back seat and cried the entire drive home. I was free. He was free. And I had done what I knew was right. I don't think the sun ever looked brighter or more promising.

The next morning I awoke into the fleeting voice of an elderly, Southern, African American woman. For a moment, she helped me understand everything ... and then it was gone. As sleep escaped and the dream and its memories evaporated, she showed me a mountain I would climb. I never saw her face but her presence felt familiar. My heart pounded, only the fragrance of her words remained.

I immediately jumped into a consulting assignment. It was supposed to be an easy gig. A civilized three days a week quickly turned into a five or six day a week grind, hungrily devouring ten- twelve- fourteen-hour days. Laced with the gruesome occasional all-nighter, offices filled with unhappy people, and a growing dissatisfaction with advertising, I quit. I ate badly, drank too much and came to the unfortunate realization that the road I had spent my life stumbling down was not only at an end, it had been the wrong road. I ran away from home.

I don't know why I chose Sedona. I believe it chose me. Sedona's like that and those who are called there hear its

bewitching song. Soon I was on a plane with no plan, nowhere to stay, no friends, no reason.

Fifteen minutes outside Phoenix airport, my car blew a flat and I limped onto an access road that, thank God, hugged a small motel. I dragged my exhausted body into the lobby, called the car rental company and checked in for the night. Crawling into bed, I opened the book from the bench the day my father died. It was an old story about another woman from New York and her journey to sanguine canyons, to the same canyons I was being called to myself. And even though our reasons for following their call were different, we shared the same blind leap of faith.

At morning's blush, a mechanic fixed the tire and I continued two hours north. As I was swallowed into the beautiful red rocks of Sedona, Arizona, I could almost hear them welcoming me, inviting me into a secret. I bought the local paper and spent the day looking for a place to stay. By day's end I was exhausted by what I had seen, convinced I had made a terrible mistake. I crept into a lovely little bed-and-breakfast and cried. What the hell was I doing here?

The last ad I'd circled in the paper advertised a place that just happened to be up the road from where I was staying. A man named Wally, who was everything you'd expect a man who works the land to look like, met me at the gate. Wally took care of the property. Mark, the guy who owned the pretty Spanish-style house, was renting out the master bedroom suite

with French doors that opened into a hummingbird garden. I moved in immediately.

Wally knew how to nurture just about everything. He was the one I called when I found a tarantula crawling across my floor. The name I screamed as a family of angry javelinas chased me across the cultivated lawn. He brought me fresh juice in the morning and salads at night; he taught me how to listen to whispering trees. A massage therapist lived in the apartment above the garage. I was in heaven. So in the vivid sunshine—away from my father's death, designer suits and everyone's expectations of me—layers of old life began to peel away.

At dawn I'd throw on a cotton dress, and sip a cup of coffee on my patio. If you've ever seen the sun rise over the high desert, you know the cleansing power of that miraculous sight. Faces smiled at me from everywhere—the leaves, the trunks of trees, rock walls. I was told the earth spirits were happy to see me. I should have been alarmed, but somehow I was comforted, intrigued. These smiling faces eventually retreated back into their own world, but by then my body was stronger, my spirit rejuvenated, my mind ready.

The desert exudes an amazing scent. Even slight fear becomes part of its mysterious fragrance. And as morning brushes the land and mixes with this fragrance, every atom shivers with anticipation, knowing that something that has never happened before will be happening that day.

I was given books to read on raw foods, solar energy,

visualization. I gobbled them up. Soon I was taking herbs to cleanse years of accumulated toxins from my contaminated being, drinking ginger tea and imagining a different life. Every false thing about me was being stripped away.

Wally came by quite often to talk, bring me mangoes, quiet my spirit. We took long hikes in tender canyons. He taught me about the creatures and plants and energies that possessed the land. People I met talked about alien portals and spirit guides. Indian shamans walked barefoot through town and I heard of mountain men who still lived in caves hidden away within the ancient canyon walls. It was a place, a state of grace unlike anything I had ever known. When I talked to friends and family back home, I barely recognized their voices. I had passed through some slight crease in reality and was now living between worlds.

One night, I woke in the dark to an uneasy weight perched at the edge my bed. I remembered my father's promise to visit me. I turned on the lamp and huddled fearfully. Through the curtained window I could see it was black outside. The birds were still silent, but something in the air promised dawn was approaching. I thought about her. It wasn't much of a thought; just the memory of that dream, of the familiar warmth I felt towards her. I realized we were sitting within the mountain she showed me. Her tender spirit stayed in silence for



a few minutes, until the first bird broke the morning with its hopeful call.

By now, magic filled each day. Every boundary I had been raised to respect disappeared among the mighty teaching canyons. I no longer felt surprise at unexpected voices coloring the wind, or prying eyes peering at me from the shadows of an ageless rock. As Christmas approached and the promise of warmth retreated, I understood it was time to leave. God had bestowed a great gift on me. But the rest of life was calling. As much as I hated to leave, I knew there was more for me to do in the world. I had no choice but to go forward, fuse my newfound self to an abandoned past and see what magical elixir emerged.

Once back in New York, I went back to advertising, though more and more I hungered to support businesses that strove to make the world a better, happier, more conscious place. I searched for others with the same calling.

Then, one afternoon, Addie Mae laughed, and every plan I had entertained evaporated.

*It's not what happened to me that matters.*

I stopped, my heart pounded, and I placed these first words on the tips of my trembling fingers. I was afraid to look around, afraid I'd see her. She was that close. It was the challenging voice of that elderly, Southern, African American woman, bold and completely proud of her disturbing affect on me.

*Wake up, child. It's time. We're about to take a long journey together.*

I stared at the keyboard. I could sense her amusement at my fear. I listened to more of her words, let them splash into my computer, whatever she had to say. By the time she finished, a transformational covenant was born. I agreed to tell her story and once again faith guided my life.

There was a comforting promise to her voice even though I never knew where it was taking me. Like an endless, tapestried carpet being rolled onto a barren floor, each day I unfurled the sonorous colors of her words a little bit more. I asked for her name. She told me Aubrey was given by her daddy, but her first name, her God-given name, I had to discover myself. I changed it like I changed clothes while she accepted meager fragments of my time. Bertie, Sarah, Betsy, Luanne became hopeful chants. With great pride she told me the name of every other character she introduced. Jenny was my favorite.

One evening, I watched the television news commemorate the anniversary of the Birmingham church bombing that killed four little girls. Staring at me from the screen was a smiling, beautiful spirit with braids and glasses. Her name was Addie Mae Collins. Like a bolt of lightning suddenly illuminating the slumbering night sky, I finally understood. It was her name. Addie Mae would be given a life, a voice she was denied. And even though it wasn't the one she would have enjoyed if evil hadn't touched her, it was at least a life, the

remarkable life of a glorious woman.

Addie Mae came with me to visit Wally in Taos, New Mexico. He was born a migratory animal that roamed with the emotional seasons tangled in his soul. This one had called him to Taos. It was late summer. I hadn't seen Wally for a while, so my adjustment to his presence was uneasy. It was impossible to separate my love of nature from Wally. Not only because he had initiated me into its secrets, but also because he was so much a part of nature itself. I expected one day to walk out into a snowy morning in search of him, only to follow his deliberate footsteps until they dissolved between some narrow, bouldered passage into the tracks of a wolf or a bear or even the mystical raven. I didn't want to leave. But Addie Mae was stronger. Her guiding wisdom promised it would be all right.

*Let go, fool child. Can't hold to anythin' too tight.*

I jumped back into the social whirlwind of December in New York, an experience near as magical as sunrise in the high desert. By now, *Trusting the Currents* was about half finished, although I didn't know it then. All I knew were the words Addie Mae offered on any particular day, words I had to believe had a reason to exist. I wasn't even sure if there was a story to be told or if Addie Mae was just offering a string of pearls to decorate my naked soul. It didn't matter. I was grateful for her touch, her wisdom, the things she was teaching me about myself.

I finished another routine consulting assignment realizing

the life Addie Mae revealed was swallowing my old one with each advancing page. It was at the first light of this realization that she decided we were going back to Sedona. For now, I had squeezed all I could out of New York.

Once back in Sedona's intoxicating embrace, writing ascended to a trotting cadence. All I had to do was let go, pull my oars into the boat and allow the prescient current to take me. I was now being towed towards a conclusion rather than striving for one. Words flew from my fingers at a furious pace. Instead of patiently obeying as Addie Mae carefully fished her story from the swirling, indigo abyss, I was being drawn into experiences that reincarnated onto the pages.

On a blistering afternoon, a young dragonfly flew towards me while I relaxed on a rock cradled within the bantering creek. Eye to eye it lingered. I asked what it wanted. I already knew it was there to give me something. By now, I digested guidance from the most improbable sources. I offered my finger and it floated gently onto my skin. Drawing it closer to my face, I stroked its iridescent body. We stayed together for several minutes until it finally rose into a sultry gust, thrashed its angelic wings and disappeared into the clouds.

The following morning as dawn flooded my room, right where the previous day's story had concluded, a dragonfly entered Addie Mae's world, transformed her budding life and became the totem symbol of her inspiring tale. It seems I had

graduated from simply telling Addie Mae's story to living within it.

I wrote mostly in the morning, mostly in bed. Once again, I cared for my body. I exercised daily, ate well and each evening wandered through the desert seeking inspiration.

On one of those days, I sat in bed listening to Addie Mae. Suddenly, a woman called from inside of the house, asking if anyone was home. She was standing in the living room of the home I was minding for its traveling owner. I soon noticed she was blind.

"Who are you?" she asked, same as I was thinking.

She was well into her seventies, and moved slowly with a silver-tipped cane in the shape of a roaring dragon.

"My name is Lynnda. Edith is in Switzerland."

"Do you mind if I rest? I'm awfully tired," she decided.

I guided her towards the patio deck, which overlooked an enthusiastic, rushing creek.

"Join me, won't you, dear," she asked.

I reluctantly obeyed.

"Tell me about yourself."

I didn't know what to say. The person I once was had disappeared into Addie Mae's words. "I'm writing something," I replied. "A book, I think." It felt like a lie as it slipped from my mouth. Truth was, I wasn't sure what I was doing.

She stood up and leaned towards me. Grabbing my face between her hands, she stared at me with empty eyes. "You're quite pretty, aren't you?" She sat down. "Give me your hand."

For a moment she silently stroked the lines of my palm. Then, she revealed things about my self, my past, my future. “Time will be a wonderful ally if you allow its generosity.” She smiled, told me not to be afraid, that God knows my soul’s true purpose. She leaned into the fiery-eyed dragon and walked out. I never saw her again.

All through summer, scorpions prowled the house. I took to shaking out clothes and stripping my bed daily. I became terrified of getting stung. Unable to sleep one evening, I rolled over to discover one of these ancient desert lobsters watching me from the next pillow. The following afternoon, I met a young shaman who told me that scorpions represent transformation, life and death, reincarnation. He urged me not to be afraid because they were only messengers. If I would surrender my fear, trust my way to their gifts I would be given what they were here to share. It wasn’t until the Thunder Moon appeared that I understood his hopeful words.

Anointed “Thunder Moon” by past generations of Hopi Indians, it ushers in the summer monsoons, Sedona’s most haunting presence. Tempestuous clouds spit fierce, javelin light towards unimpressed mountains. Waterfalls appear like ghosts from the parched desert rock; bloody sunsets shutter each boisterous day. The full moon rose, bleaching the earth with quicksilver. I stood outside for several minutes watching stars bristle against the deep eggplant sky, spinning in fierce little circles demanding my attention.

When I returned to the house, a small shadow pierced my toe. It quickly scurried through the hallway, escaping outside. My foot stung as a lazy glow oozed up my ankle. Soon my leg was paralyzed. I called the hospital, and after receiving assurance of my survival, all fear dissolved. I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

That night I dreamed of sitting at a small wooden desk centered in a large, dimly lit room. Over my shoulder stood a benevolent, cloaked figure pointing towards the seventeen-digit number I held in my hands. Without speaking, he communicated that the secret of life, the answer to all questions, was held within that one number. He cautioned the truth was not to be found within the digits, or by their particular arrangement, but within the spaces between. And, although we perceive only one space between each digit, there were actually three distinct layers of space, each layer embracing different information. He told me most would seek answers within the digits, but that I was to explore the space instead.

It always took Addie Mae a while to arrive after I had quieted. I think she waited for me to be comfortable in that deep indigo abyss from where she came. I watched out the bedroom window, waiting for signs, symbols of her past. The defiant way the early wind kicked at the leaves, a bright blue bird crying for its mate, or a lost, lonely cloud trapped in a bound-

less sky. By now, I had learned to translate these sparks from the other side. She taught me how much we are shown in a flickering moment, how many secrets are hidden in the ordinary if we only take occasion to notice.

Throughout our journey, Addie Mae was my guide, assurance that someone had gone before me. Whether it was by chance or fate, our lives touched. Addie Mae generously decided to share what she knew. She gently guided me into experiences that brought me closer to her understanding, closer to her wisdom, to the wisdom of the Invisibles. Close enough so on that one magical day, I could hear her whispers ... and was finally ready to listen.

No matter how lonely and scary the path seemed at times, she let me know I was not its first traveler. I was never alone.

Neither are you.



*Trusting the Currents*

*Lynnda Pollio*

O N E

*I*t's not what happened to me that matters. It's what Mama said about Uncle Joe and the old house, and that little secret lying buried beneath the floorboards.

I'd mostly forgotten about the place. God knows forgetting was the best thing for me. But every now and then the wicked secret came out in a dream, or even sometimes just walking down the street on a beautiful sunny day.

I tried to ignore it, shoo it away like a swamp fly—like the ones that used to come around every spring near the water's

edge. They'd nest in the reeds and bushy punks where Jenny and I hid when Uncle Joe got into one of his mean moods. Big, blue shiny things they were, with teeth, or at least that's the way I remember them. By the time Jenny and I came out of hiding, usually around dark when Mama would call us to supper, we were bit up to death. By then Uncle Joe would be sleeping, the whiskey once again showing us its kind side. Mama always did amazing things with the greens and cornbread and whatever meat she could trade for sewing. Each night we thanked the Lord for his blessings.

Mama was known for her sewing all over the county. It was probably the only reason we didn't starve, and why those state folk who come and take away poor kids didn't take Jenny and me. Those official types always said they were doing best by the children, but most cried awful and were never heard from again. Usually their mamas just had more. Sometimes the state never found out. Country folk knew it was better to birth at home so there'd be no trace. Schooling never mattered anyhow because the only thing expected from life was the farm, and what good was reading and writing for that? Mama had a special gift. The rich ladies from Taversville would buy the lace tablecloths and matching napkins Mama made. Local folks traded pig or chicken and the occasional clutch of fresh eggs for her fine stitchery. Mama was proud of her work, and we were proud for her.

Mama's ample heart could swallow the entire county. She

was always feeding neighbor children despite our own meager supplies, believing that God provided for those who sacrificed themselves for the sake of others. Even though there were nights my growling belly challenged that thinking, time proved her right. I hate to admit this, but it took me a long while to figure the virtue in all of her kindness. Once when skinny Reggie Robinson, who I'd known from birth, come sneaking around for some of Mama's cooking, I angered at Mama giving up what should be mine. I hollered at Reggie to go on home to his own mama's lame concoctions.

Mama jumped towards me with a face full of anger. "Addie Mae, you get over here, girl!" she demanded, as poor Reggie fled from the kitchen table and out the back door, bawling.

I wasn't much of anything then, maybe eleven going on twelve, but Mama figured I was old enough for mercy to take hold. She stopped yelling, though I could still feel temper percolating inside. It was her disappointment that hurt most, blistering more than any rage she could have mustered.

I hung my head and skulked shamefully towards the table. "I'm sorry Mama, but that Reggie's always hangin' 'round like we don't know what he's truly after. Maybe me or Jenny gonna want your cookin' later."

For a flash Mama looked at me like I wasn't her daughter, like some other mouth released them harsh words. Then she smiled with her usual forgiveness, settling with me at the kitchen table.

"Givin' up somethin' ya own is hard to consider. I know

that Addie Mae. All through life you gonna be forced to let go a things you reckon to be yours alone. Nothin' belongs to nobody. We just borrowin' from God and the land and them pesky spirits that try our nature. You gotta learn to give back if you don't want God's magic circle to be broken. When you offer somethin' to someone in need, it's like puttin' love in the bank. One day that love will return just when you need it yourself, reappearin' in the shape of your own heart's desire."

Mama sat there waiting for me to understand, waiting for that loving spark to catch fire. I'd like to say her words turned my thinking, but they didn't. They only changed my behavior, which I guess was enough for her right then. I moseyed over to Reggie's house and apologized, coaxing him back with Mama's griddlecake kindness.

On most days Jenny and I would wake at dawn, Billy Milgrin's prized Red cockadoodledoin' so to wake the dead. We didn't mind though. We were young and full of life, and for us, life began at dawn.

Mama was already up. Uncle Joe, usually sober yet, was out tending the fields. Morning was glorious, the sun coming up over those big strong oaks, turning the land all sparkly and new. The smell of coffee was somehow reassuring, though Mama never let us touch it. It was just one of them grownup things we reckoned; one of those things we'd get our own chance at in due time. And we sure seemed to have lots of time ahead of us.

Of course, chores filled most our days, either helping Uncle Joe in the fields as he got drunker and lazier, or walking clear past the Robinson place for water as we did but twice a week.

We never stopped talking. Our jawing began the day Uncle Joe showed up with Jenny after Jenny's mama died in a terrible fire that also swallowed her baby brother. Rumor was Uncle Joe started that fire, be it by accident or not. But because Uncle Joe was Jenny's stepdaddy and only family, they let him go, warning to leave town quick. So he did, showing up one morning on Mama's doorstep.

I saw them coming that day. This big dark man with even darker eyes being trailed by Jenny who wore a pretty yellow dress covered in lilac flowers. With her long chocolate hair and blue eyes, she looked very different than me. I'd never seen blue eyes before. I once asked Mama why Jenny and me looked so different if we were cousins and all. She told me about Jenny's grandma and how she got pregnant by a white boy passing through town. This boy was traveling the country doing God's work, that's what he said, and Jenny's grandma was supposed to be one of his converts to a better God. By the time he left town, she was more than converted.

Jenny was the first one in the family to get the blue eyes of God's work. This did not make life easy. Her mother did the best she could, protecting Jenny from the hate-mongers who called her the devil's child. Black folk in this part of the country still had raw rememberings of the slave days, and

Jenny's blue eyes reminded them of this painful past. So, she spent most her days alone, walking along the river, listening to the birds rejoicing.

Jenny loved the woods and its coolness. Even on the hottest summer afternoons she found refuge near that glimmering river. Lying long on dark green moss, cheek pressed to the soft ground, Jenny would watch a parade of ants march over the hill as they made their way to the base of an old tree stump. She'd park there for hours, jawing to herself and her ant friends, watching the leaves frolicking above her head.

It wasn't until her baby brother was born that Jenny had another soul to talk to. He didn't speak of course, the tiny thing. He simply was, and when he smiled, Jenny imagined he loved her. On the occasional days her mama traveled to town for provisions, she'd let Jenny take her baby brother to the woods. Jenny loved sharing her magical place with that magical new life.

By now Uncle Joe was already drinking too much, blaming her mama for all his life woes. He hit her once or twice, always apologizing straight off then not touching a drop of liquor. It never lasted though. After a day or two he'd be railing on again about his fate in life and how much better he could have done than Jenny's mother and that bastard child of hers.

Jenny smelled smoke one Saturday afternoon as she sat with her ant family. She figured it was Marvin Torrell burning his bad crops again and thought nothing more of it.



Walking home she was suddenly seized with the knowledge that her mama was gone. The fear was so strong, its fiery energy charged through her small body, popping out of every one of her fingers and toes like firecrackers. It was like a new Jenny was born, and by the time she arrived home to witness the last timbers fall, she was almost a grown woman inside.

She circled her burned house, crying in vain for her little brother. The fire was so hot, Uncle Joe and his friends never did find little Eddie. Then again, they never looked all that hard.

Uncle Joe disappeared and didn't come back until two days following the funeral. He stunk like whisky. The local sheriff had words with him, and most in town suspected the worst. But small towns don't like bad news, so the sheriff decided it was easier just to tell Uncle Joe to take Jenny and leave.

That's how Jenny and me started our talking. She had so much stuck inside when she arrived, I don't think her voice stilled at all in that first week. It finally did quit though, and when she tried to talk she sounded like one of them little birds she loved so much. It was one of the first times I ever saw Mama laugh hard, and laugh she did, watching Jenny chirp her most mattering of believings.

Jenny was near the same age as me, only older by two months and four days. Still, she knew more somehow, like some old woman stole her body. I didn't understand much of what she talked about in those early days, but she sure liked jawing. So, I'd just listen, smile and nod, I guess. Her fuddling words

did nest in me though, incubating beneath my growing limbs. In time they all hatched and one day I finally understood her words and the things she believed, even though I didn't quite believe them myself.

We were just eleven when Jenny showed up, and already she was talking about boys, having Mama shorten her dresses just a bit. Billy Milgrin was the first I knew about, but I suspect it was really his older brother Bobby that Jenny let touch her under her dress early that summer.

Bobby was always hanging around, sugaring Jenny on how pretty she was and all. Jenny seemed to need to hear such things. She was beautiful even then, as I think back. Being so white-looking though, most boys kept away, almost out of some sort of fear of her. Bobby was different. Somehow he sensed Jenny's womanly beginnings and decided to see what a part-white girl looked like down there. He wooed her, picking flowers and wrapping them in lacy pink ribbons. Mama did her best to warn Jenny away from this nonsense, but a young girl with her first admirer ain't hardly got a chance now does she?

Jenny never told me what happened between Bobby and her. By August, Bobby barely regarded her no more, and young Billy seemed to want something. Soon he was bringing Jenny flowers, touching the skin of her naked arms whenever he could.

It was late August. The three of us traveled ten miles to the county fair. I'd never seen so many folks, white and black mixing together, nobody hooting over each others' color. For the first

time I realized that life-long beliefs, born purely from being a child of Oakville, were not all true. I was not who others decided me to be. I could change my identity by simply altering my location. Perhaps I was the daughter of a very wealthy man. Or a peculiar-tongued visitor from far away. Could it be that I was smarter than anyone there? Or, was I the dumbest girl in school? Amid the crowds, watching all those scattered strangers, I decided it was within my own power to pick the “me” I chose to be. No one else had a say in any of it if I didn’t let them.

Jenny and Billy and me strode around the grounds, laughing at the clowns, picking the cows and pigs we liked best. There were some rides. We stood watching while other children played on them. Having no coin ourselves, dreaming was all we could do. I was watching a whirly-thing that flies in the air when I noticed that Jenny and Billy were missing. I searched for over an hour. I felt both angry and fearful and not sure which, until I finally spotted Jenny walking back from the far side of the fair. It was anger. Jenny came up to me and I screamed at her in a voice I didn’t recognize. It startled me, this loud, mean sound escaping my body. So much so, that I stopped. That’s when I noticed Jenny was crying. Well, yelling at a crying person solves nothing, so I hugged her, and asked what happened and where was Billy?

That’s when she told me the story. It wasn’t rape, I don’t think. Jenny and Billy found a trailer where the animals were kept at night. Billy jimmed open the door and both of them

fell in, wrestling as they hit the sharp hay. He was on her all at once, kissing her, jawing that he loved her. Jenny pushed him away. Billy was honestly confused. He was a good-looking boy. Working the fields since he took his first step, he had unusual size and strength for a boy of fourteen. Unlike his brother though, he had no gift for the word. He had brawn instead. Billy yelled at Jenny, calling her a tease. Then he tried kissing her again, this time crawling his farm-craggy hand under her white dress. She kissed him back, holding that hand just as close as she was willing. That's all Billy needed.

Jenny continued kissing Billy. Only God knows why she didn't stop, but Billy finally decided kissing time was over and wanted to see the things his brother must have told him about. He climbed on top of her, clutching both her arms with his strong hands. At first she giggled, flattered that a boy would find her so attractive. Billy pulled her underpants down and Jenny got scared.

"Stop it now, Billy!" she ordered, squirming beneath his ample frame. "You a fine-looking boy. Much cuter than that Bobby. An' I can tell you smarter, too. Must be 'cause a your pretty mama and how much more she loves you than the rest a her brood."

These pleasing lies eased Billy's grip long enough for Jenny to escape. Instead of running, entertaining that particular opportunity, Jenny tugged hard at his crisp, dusty hair. This seemed to arouse Billy even more. Pulling down the top of her

dress, he placed his mouth on her small breast. Jenny struggled and tried to scream but Billy covered her mouth with his hand. The weight of his body did the rest. Jenny said it really didn't hurt so much. It was over fairly quickly, and Billy did up his trousers, thanking her for a good time. He sincerely meant it, according to Jenny.

"So, why you cryin'?" I asked her.

"He wouldn't buy me some cotton candy. I know he got a little bit a money, enough to buy one cotton candy. But he wouldn't."

Jenny and me got a ride home from the farmer who lived not far down the road from us. I'd like to say from that day on she had the sense to stay away from those Milgrin boys. But I can't. Jenny would always be confusing her body with her heart.

*Lynnda Pollio*

T W O

*I* know it was hard on Mama raising two wild things. Jenny may have been foolish with her body, but my bullhead and the mouth that served it gave Mama just as much trouble. Back then girls weren't expected to give double talk, especially to their daddies. Uncle Joe, I kept reminding Mama, was no daddy of mine and I would be taking no mouthing from a good-for-nothing drunk. That attitude got me more than one beating in my life. Luckily, Uncle Joe couldn't run so fast. Usually

by the time he remembered what had angered him, he was too tired or booze-soggy to whip me.

It might have been fine if Uncle Joe had been a good man except for the drinking. That wasn't true. He had been born bad. Even as he was departing his poor mama's body, I know he was cussing, blaming her for his troubles and pain. Some people are born that way, no matter what else we want to believe. God drops them onto this planet; dark, angry clouds that threaten the rest of us. They rain on our heads and into our hearts and all over our wishful lives. It's only our faith that the sun will shine and they will see the light that keeps us trying with them anyway. I expect Uncle Joe was born a nest for evil, like God himself touched his soul upon being conceived and said, "You, Joe, gonna teach folks the terrible meaning of wicked."

Somehow I knew, because of the unfortunate turns his life took, that Uncle Joe had to fight more than the rest of us for goodness to take hold. Maybe he never had a real chance. Birth was his penance for some poorly lived past life. Or maybe he was actually doing God's work, and in some peculiar way he was an angel sent to teach folks. See, most of us learn nothing from happiness. Only suffering brings us closer to God's understanding, and Uncle Joe sure brought enough of that to every living thing he touched.

Uncle Joe met Jenny and her mama on the road to church. Not that he had ever seen the inside of a church. But Jenny's mama had, and she was righteous sure she could change



Uncle Joe into God's child through the power of love. Even when Uncle Joe's own sister shooed Jenny's mama away, warning of the evil that lurked in her brother's bones, Jenny's mama loved him. She believed in the sun coming out and saving that dark cloud, proving to all his silver lining. She believed in Uncle Joe. That reckless faith would eventually be the death of her.

"Will you please hurry, child!" Mama yelled to me from outside. "The minister is waitin'."

Jenny was always better behaved than me, saving the boys. Mama held her up as a good girl, one who listened to her elders and followed the rules. She was very punctual. Mama pointed out this fact each and every time I was just the littlest bit late. Jenny kept her room tidy and completed her chores even before being asked. She never questioned the right or wrong of things. She never wondered why something was the way it was, or even if it was the way it should be. She lived easily within the corral of life, unlike me who was always kicking and stomping and trying to jump over it.

"I'm comin', Mama," I called, rushing through the door, throwing a Sunday cardigan over my shoulders.

Jenny stood there smug in her shiny black shoes and ribboned hair. "We always waitin' on you," Jenny said, knowing it would gall me. Then she smiled, and I knew she was teasing. I pulled up her dress as she turned. Jenny screamed, prompting Mama once again to chastise me. Jenny grinned sugar-sweet,

squeezing my hand in hers. The two of us held on tight, jawing and skipping along together, gleefully following Mama up the dusty road to church.

When we got there the choir was already singing “Alleluia” on high. I loved the sound of the organ and those voices rising as we approached the church. The anticipation of God always pleased me greatly. But when I entered those big wooden doors; heard the minister preach about sin and obeying and staying in one’s place in life, I kind of lost interest. Gazing up, I daydreamed about the pictures tangled in the stained glass windows.

Mama always taught that God lived in the goodness of who I could be, in the love of family and friends, in the tolerance of those I didn’t understand, and in the courage to do what was right. So, while the minister railed on about hell’s fury and all, I watched the morning sunlight bring the jeweled images to life, imagining the holiest of saints taking me away on a beautiful white horse, flying high above the world for all to see my glory. I couldn’t believe I was meant for small things, and no God of mine was going to try and keep me there.

Our church was a tiny building, well-loved and it looked that way. Its white paint was eternally fresh. Every surface that could be polished shined with a luster that Mama said reflected the angels. There were brass plaques that hung under each of the signs of the cross. The neighbor church ladies cleaned them daily. They scrubbed the floor and the little

cubicles where statues of saints could be prayed to for a nickel. The altar was cleaned by men. As the minister said, only those made in God's image could enter that sacred place. And, God I guess, must have been a man.

I was sorry, though, when services ended because the music would stop. After church, people would sell their cakes and cookies. We children would tear around the field in our finest clothes, no one bothering to slow us down. The adults were wrapped in their own lives, exchanging stories and recipes, gossiping about this person or that. It was pretty harmless, or so I thought. I soon discovered gossip is never harmless. That's the first troublesome lesson I learned in life. The first time I saw the power of words hurt someone.

Mrs. Clausen had come from Taylor, across the river some. Her husband left her with five children, running off with a girl young enough to be his daughter. Mrs. Clausen was a proud woman, always keeping her kids clean and well fed. She washed other people's laundry for her living, and everyone said she was the best in town. She charged more than anyone else, but still had more work than she needed. One of the families she serviced was the Hudson's. They also had five children, about the same ages as her own—the oldest boy being seventeen.

Mr. Hudson owned a small corner store where he sold mostly textiles and items for the home. Business was good for Mr. Hudson and the more things he bought for his family, the more laundry there was for Mrs. Clausen. Mrs. Hudson took

sick one day and had to go as far as Fayetteville to get the right kind of doctor. She stayed with her sister for six weeks recuperating. During that time, Mr. Hudson took the family laundry to Mrs. Clausen every few days, mostly accompanied by his oldest girl, Marybeth. It was right proper, but Anna Carlotta, who happened to be Mrs. Clausen's chief competitor in the laundry business, took it upon herself to gossip about the goings-on between Mrs. Clausen and Mr. Hudson during his wife's absence.

None of it was true mind you, and in some righteous way everyone knew it because they all liked Mrs. Clausen so well. Probably because they had nothing much else to talk about and their small lives were all fairly dull, fool people gossiped anyway.

There were whispers outside the church and at Trini Bartow's kitchen beauty parlor and over conspiring fences every afternoon. Mrs. Clausen became tarred even before she knew what her neighbors were talking about. Soon ladies stopped bringing their laundry to Mrs. Clausen. Anna Carlotta was more than happy to take on the extra work, for an extra charge, of course. Other children made frightful fun of her kids. Even when Mrs. Hudson returned to defend her husband and Mrs. Clausen, the gossip did not stop. The damage was done. Without work, Mrs. Clausen could not pay her bills. One day one of those state folks came and took all but the oldest boy into "custodial" care—that's what they called it. Mrs. Clausen cried and cried. I prayed never again to witness such pain in any one woman.

I'm not exactly sure what happened to Mrs. Clausen after

that, but overnight she was gone. I was told her boy got a job near the orphanage where her younger children were being kept. She moved there so to be closer to being a family again. All my life I thought about Mrs. Clausen, wondering if she was ever reunited with her beloved children, wondering in all divine mercy if that wrong was ever made right. I hated to believe my God tolerant of such abiding cruelty.

Following Mrs. Clausen's departure, life returned to normal in Oakville like nothing happened, like no injustice had occurred. We all just retreated to our Sunday bake sales and church socials, waiting for the next great scandal to break our boredom.

Jenny never paid much mind to the whole Clausen affair. She was more interested in the new boy who moved into town. Julliard (that was his name) was handsome enough and he dressed like his daddy had some money. Jenny was smitten right from the start. He was two years older and came from a big city far to the north. His father was foreman of the new factory built at the edge of town. They were turning cotton into bed linens and fabric for clothing. The town was thrilled about this modern place because it meant jobs, a way out of the fields and into the future. Julliard had a private teacher because his daddy didn't think our little school could prepare his son for what was expected of him. This dismayed Jenny, as she couldn't get her claws into him the same way she snagged them into most boys. Fortunately, there were only

so many places to go in Oakville and Jenny knew them all. Eventually she met up with Julliard in the produce store where a soda fountain had just been installed. Julliard was sitting alone, finishing a lime rickey when Jenny slid past, claiming a seat a couple stools away. No use in looking too anxious. That was pure Jenny.

Julliard was shy, not at all aware that he was the town's grand prize of a boy. Almost sixteen, he was tall and lean with dark skin like molasses. It was his teeth that Jenny liked most. They were very white with perfect pink gums that glistened when he smiled. They were the charmed teeth of someone who ate well and could afford to have small cavities erased.

A short quiet passed between them. Jenny wiggled in her seat and ordered a large root beer.

"I like your hair," Julliard finally said.

Jenny acted surprised and peeked around like he must be talking to somebody else. "Why, thank you. I wash it most every day with a fancy coconut shampoo my mama sends me from Hawaii. Can you smell it?" She leaned closer, making sure he could catch a glimpse of her blossoming bosom.

Julliard took a long, deep breath. "Sure, I can. It smells grand."

It wasn't long before Julliard and Jenny were sneaking around town, kissing behind everywhere they could find. Julliard didn't know anything about Jenny, about the Milgrin boys and the others. He liked her hair and the way her clothes embraced her body, and even the bright blueness of her eyes.

See, where Julliard come from there were lots of white folk and they were considered better somehow. Julliard figured Jenny being partly white must've meant she was partly better. I know it was a terribly wrong idea. Just as wrong as the notion some folks had that Jenny was worse for her whiteness. My Lord! Anger still burns up my spine thinking of it. I never understood why it mattered at all! Jenny was a kind, loving spirit. That's the only measure I ever cared to understand.

It was at a party when Julliard discovered Jenny's mama was dead.

"She ain't got no real mama," one of the mean girls informed Julliard. "Her aunt an' drunken stepdaddy be raisin' her. I hear told he killed her mama an' brother in a fire right before she come to Oakville."

The other girls around him laughed with an astounding cruelty that only the young and innocent are capable of. I overheard and rushed to warn Jenny of the questions Julliard would be asking.

She didn't care at all what those girls had said. "Let them jaw what they want," she told me, her dimpled chin held high. "I can get Julliard to smell the coconut in my hair anytime I please."

That was pretty much true. Jenny had this way with boys that was quite amazing and grew stronger over time. Within three years of arriving in Oakville, Jenny's ugly duckling past belonged to a lonely child I barely recognized anymore.

By fourteen, Jenny was a woman by almost anyone's standards. She had developed earlier than me and was taller by a full three inches. And like always, she knew more things than me. I was full of questions. Jenny owned nothing but answers.

Jenny heard things, got them sure answers from somewhere, someone else. When no one was talking that I could hear, I'd catch her listening to the masquerading stillness like she had slipped herself into some slight crease in the vacant air and coaxed out a secret gospel voice, a sage soul that only let her know of it.

Jenny promised there were hidden doors to other worlds all over the earth, but most folks never quiet themselves long enough for those doors to open. So, wise voices on the other side had no mind to utter anything to anyone in Oakville but her. She alone believed in them, and them in her. Some poked fun of Jenny and her strange ways of jawing with the Invisibles. Still, there was something comforting about Jenny and that iron faith in these distant voices that drew folks to her. Seems just being near her brought them closer to their own magic.

For a long while, Julliard followed Jenny around like the puppy Uncle Joe killed one day while I was at school. That dog went everywhere with me. Mama had brought him home from a neighbor's house on my ninth birthday. Mama knew how much I wanted a puppy, yet up until she walked through the door with Badger—that's what I called him because right from the start he badgered me—she whined and moaned about the



responsibility. I suspect she said all that just to make the gift an even bigger surprise. And surprised I surely was when that little fuzzy face peered over the edge of the milk box, yelping straight at me. I yelped straight back in delight and from that day on Badger and me were best friends.

I came home from school one afternoon and Mama was standing out in the yard waiting on me. I could tell right away something was wrong. Mama never had much time to be standing around. I didn't see Badger and I started to cry, not even really knowing why yet. Mama started bawling, too. Uncle Joe was nowhere to be found.

She sat me down on the porch swing and told me about Badger, and how Uncle Joe had accidentally hit him with a shovel while digging a ditch for a peach tree he was planting. She told me right off Badger was dead so I wouldn't hold out hope in the story; thinking maybe he was just hurt, and that old man Tepper, our neighbor who took care of sickly animals, was tending him. I never looked at Badger's body, not wanting to charge my heart with the memory of seeing him so forever still.

We buried my best friend in the same box he arrived in. Uncle Joe never said a word to me about it and I never forgave what I knew he done. Anyway, Julliard was reminding me about Badger because of the way he followed Jenny around. Little did I know just how much like Badger he would turn out to be.

It was storming something fierce that night. Rain was

battering our roof so hard the house shook, almost like it was trembling in fear of being washed away. The lightning was constant and glowed eerily in the mean sheets of rain coming down. Jenny and me sat in the window seat like we were watching a picture show. Somehow she knew all about the rain, and how lightning and thunder was made. Jenny had a natural feel for the outdoors. We watched Uncle Joe between the bursts of lightning, trying to save his favored melon patch. He didn't care anything much about the house and how little pieces were flying off the roof, dripping rain through the ceiling. But that melon patch had charmed him. He fought for it more than he would have fought to save either of us. I hate to admit this, but it pleased me some to see Uncle Joe in even a touch of pain and worry. We watched him covering his babies with everything he could find, cursing the heavens with fists held high, like God would be scared of him like we were.

Suddenly, a ghost appeared in a tremendous explosion of light then dissolved back into the dark. It returned with the next bright bolt and we saw it was actually Julliard walking up the path to the house. Jenny squealed, leaping up in excitement, reaching the door before I could move a stitch. Mama was sitting at the kitchen table sewing when Julliard come in all dripping and shivering.

"What are you doin' here?" Jenny asked, high-grinning ear to ear.

"My question 'xactly," Mama chimed, leaning against the

kitchen doorway, hand poised on her aproned hip. “Why you not home takin’ care a your house, boy?”

“Well, Ma’am, all this rain got me worryin’ about Jenny, an’ you two of course, an’ I wanted to see if there was anythin’ I could do.”

Jenny was smiling so proud and pleased with herself that Julliard would come all this way on such a night. It was then that Uncle Joe burst through the door, full of anger at God and the damn storm. Jenny was in his way. Uncle Joe pushed her hard. It was obvious that Uncle Joe was doing more out there than trying to save his melons. A potent cloud of whiskey trailed him.

It was the first time I saw Julliard act like more than just a nice boy. He walked up to Uncle Joe, who was having a hard time standing on muddy feet. “Apologize to Jenny, sir.” Julliard’s voice was polite but sturdy.

Uncle Joe couldn’t believe his big eggplant ears. Those disgusting boils that hung long, wiggling when he jawed with any bit of feeling. Here was this nothing of a boy demanding an apology. “Go t’ hell!” Uncle Joe’s okra-colored teeth snarled like a junkyard dog beneath sun-cracked lips cornered in thick, brown whiskey spit. He was the ugliest of sights to behold.

To everyone’s surprise, Julliard pushed Uncle Joe and he stumbled back, landing hard on his butt. We probably shouldn’t have, but we all laughed.

Uncle Joe was not laughing, and when he was able to pick

his lumbering body up, he lunged at Julliard and the two of them crashed through the front door, landing on the porch. It really wasn't a fair fight because Uncle Joe was so inebriated. But, he was big and he was mean and it's hard stopping that stew. Soon the two of them were in the yard slopping in the mud, trading air swings. Before he knew it, Uncle Joe was rolling in his melon patch and Julliard was tearing up the plants.

Right then I knew life was taking a turn. It's funny how you can sometimes sense when you're having a life-altering experience; a strange charge dances through your veins. And in that one brief, illuminating moment you behold your future veering in a whole other direction. Watching Julliard and Uncle Joe out there in the melon patch, I knew I was having one of those moments.

The rain and the whiskey and fighting were finally too much for Uncle Joe. He gave in right then. We all knew it wasn't over, though. Uncle Joe had simply run out of spit for the night. The look he gave Julliard worried Jenny. She'd seen that look before.

Uncle Joe left his melon patch and lurched up the steps to the house. Mama told Julliard it was time to go home. He gave Jenny a quick peck and walked away without saying a word. I could tell Julliard was exhausted. Mama and Jenny and me entered the house with dread, expecting Uncle Joe's flying fists. To our relief, he was already passed out on the couch, snoring, half-naked. His smelly, wet clothes scattered defiantly across

the floor. Mama sent us along to our room. Jenny and me put on our warmest nighties and crawled into bed. We didn't say much. We just hugged each other, listening to the telling rain, both trying hard to wish the night away.