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## None of My Idols Were Worth Worshipping

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*Cleveland State University*

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NONE OF MY IDOLS WERE WORTH WORSHIPPING

CHARLOTTE MORGAN

Bachelor of Arts in English

Cleveland State University

August, 2006

submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2011

This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

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Thesis Chairperson, Imad Rahman

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Department and Date

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Dr. Michael Geither

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Department and Date

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Dr. Mary M. McDonald

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Department and Date

First, let me acknowledge my Savior, without whom nothing is possible – you expanded my imagination and my creativity. I dedicate this project to my parents, the late Charles Henry Morgan and Era Ann Chisholm Morgan, who brought literature into my life. I also dedicate this work to my late brother, Charles “Chip” Morgan; we learned to survive together.

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*NONE OF MY IDOLS WERE WORTH WORSHIPPING*

CHARLOTTE MORGAN

ABSTRACT

*None of My Idols Were Worth Worshiping* is a personal narrative that uses fiction literary techniques – dialogue, scenes, etc. to tell the story of a black girl who becomes a music journalist instead of a novelist like her idol, F. Scott Fitzgerald. The story is divided into chapters, and the first 16 chapters constitute the following thesis. There is a critical introduction, which is followed by the text.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	v
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>NONE OF MY IDOLS WERE WORTH WORSHIPPING</i>	
PROLOGUE: ALL OF MY IDOLS.....	10
BEGINNING OF THE DREAM.....	22
DREAM FOR A DIME.....	25
SUGAR.....	32
MY SWEET LORD: THE BEATLES.....	39
THE WITCH OF GREENLAWN.....	45
DEWEY DECIMAL SYSTEM.....	54
I BEGAN TO SEE THE FUTURE.....	60
MY SECRET LIFE.....	71
METAMORPHOSIS.....	82
PLAGUED.....	94
STARVED.....	99
MY FIRST RECORD REVIEW.....	108
SUMMER OF DRUGS.....	120
PHOENIX RISING.....	137
HOUSES OF THE HOLY.....	148
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	164

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I've had a love affair with both literature and journalism most of my life. I knew that my thesis had to be a project that would inspire me to write. After all, being a writer was the bedrock of my identity. This project was originally written in the *literary journalism* style where I presented "reportage" on the events that took place during the period where I worked as a music journalist. In this draft of my thesis, I was immersed in the music business and recounted stories involving different bands, promoters, editors, etc. This meant that there were countless names and places listed in the narrative – subsequent workshops revealed that younger readers were unfamiliar with the musicians in the text and as a result, they couldn't connect to the story. There was no personal presence of the author. I wasn't able to get away from the inverted pyramid of journalistic writing, even though it was subjective writing as found in the New Journalism writing of Hunter S. Thompson, Gore Vidal, George Plimpton, and Joan Didion. During the 2007 Imagination Conference, I had a one-on-one conference with author, Honor Moore (*The*



*Bishop's Daughter*) and it was suggested that the manuscript would be more effective as a memoir. I had to start my project from scratch.

Moore suggested that I read Joyce Johnson's memoir, *Minor Characters: a Young Woman's Coming of Age in the Beat Orbit of Jack Kerouac*. I couldn't relate to the story – it was New York, the characters were white, and I didn't think the voice or the tone was suitable for the story I wanted to write.

I happened upon my mother's copy of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I sat down that very day and read it from cover to cover. I was immediately struck with the presence of the character of "Marguerite". I loved the pathos in the text; it was perfectly balanced – not too tragic. I knew this was the memoir that I needed to deconstruct.

What Angelou does brilliantly is to demonstrate the child-like naiveté of Marguerite. She balances the child's innocence with the brutality and civility of a racially divided southern town, Stamps, Arkansas, where white women have the right to call a Negro by whatever name they choose. The first few pages of the narrative takes the reader up close and inside the head of Marguerite – she is near delusional as she describes a hand-me-down dress. She describes her blue eyes and good hair. I could completely relate, and in fact, I was uncomfortable with the intimacy Angelou had created – I felt embarrassed for Marguerite because I had been her.

In my one-on-one time with Moore, she described the sadness she sensed lurked in my text. She asked me pointed personal questions that let me know that she sensed the story that I wanted to tell – one that included molestation and rape. And as Phillip Gerard, noted creative nonfiction writer, suggests memoir doesn't recount the life, it tells the

“memory of a life”. I needed to tell the life that I remembered, and not give a *factual* account of it.

I began a journey to learn the difference between literary journalism and personal narratives. Gerard also suggests that in creative nonfiction, there is the subject and a deeper one. The reader often is compelled by the deeper subject to continue reading. In her seminal text, *The Situation and the Story*, author Vivian Gornick explains that the situation is one thing, and the story is where the writer’s emotion will be found – that thing which compels him to write. In my case, it was the drive to become a published author without really knowing how to achieve that goal. I wanted to write about my frustration, I had to tell what happened to me.

*The Portable MFA in Creative Writing*, produced by the New York Writers Workshop, proved to be an invaluable text in creating this project. Teachers and writers passionate about these genres examined the craft and theories of personal essay writing, as well personal narratives. Peter Bricklebank suggests in his chapter on “Personal Essay and Memoir,” that a “Personal narrative, unlike the essay (which can be analytic or endlessly reflective), is just what the term suggests -- a narrative, an ongoing story.” My initial hesitation in writing this narrative rested with the uncertainty that the material was *interesting* enough.

I learned the more important feature of the memoir is the approach, or how the writer constructs the story. Bricklebank teaches that the personal narrative is not about the whole life; but instead the term implies that “a part of a life is being recounted.” (113) He further suggests that you don’t need an “exciting” life in order to write one’s memoir because what makes the memoir readable is the author’s approach or how the writer

frames the period that he or she is writing about. I framed my story within the period during which I worked as a music journalist who wanted to be a novelist. The first half of the story, which constitutes this thesis, is occupied with setting up the situation: A young girl comes of age through literature and struggles to discover how to become a novelist while dealing with repeated molestations and the breakup of her family.

Janet Mason Ellerby, author of *Intimate Reading: the Contemporary Women's Memoir*, suggests that memory writers choose factual narratives with a clear purpose: "Memoirists write not just for self awareness, but to confront the moral dilemmas of a dissonant culture. If we are to be rigorous interrogators of dominant ideology, we can learn from memoirs not to flatten the complexity of lived experience into fanciful bumper stickers." (xx) In *None of My Idols*, the character, "Charlotte", molested time and, time again by her ophthalmologist, wonders why he goes unpunished. There are other instances of molestation, however, the ophthalmologist, Dr. Oppenheimer not only crosses boundaries of decency, he wields influence inside Charlotte's home -- he convinces her father that his daughter's vision is so poor that she will never be able to drive. Many of her choices as a music journalist were driven by the inability to drive. What I hoped to achieve with this project is to demonstrate that I have learned my craft.

#### MY ACADEMIC PLAN

I came to Cleveland State to learn the craft of writing. I knew that it was now or never. My plan was to take the necessary courses and look for a mentor to assist me in learning my craft.

My academic career at Cleveland State began with my ENG 301 class with Dr. Neal Chandler. This was my first workshop. In this course, I learned how to give

feedback to other writers by carefully reading their manuscripts to discover the elements of craft. I wrote an essay, “Mr. Eddy’s House”, which was about the deconstruction of a house in my neighborhood. Dr. Chandler’s feedback was memorable. He told me that writing is what I should be doing with my life.

In my ENG 241 course with Dr. Jennifer Jeffers, I learned the parts of fiction writing including character, plot, setting, voice and rising action. Finally, a teacher explained what rising action was by pointing it out in a story. I read Gabriel Garcia Marquez for the first time. Dr. Jeffers taught how to find scholarly text and this began my scholarly aspect of my academic career. I met a librarian, Stacie Brisker, who was working on her MLS at Kent State University. She took the time to reacquaint me with how to use the library. She supplied me with numerous links to databases. I discovered that I was a natural scholar – I could find anything. I often helped my classmates find scholarly texts to use in writing the WAC course papers. Stacie provided me with tools to assist me in writing logical transitions from one idea to the next – laminated cards to prop up on my workspace while writing. Many of my papers were returned with comments about my illogical or lack of transitions. These tools solved this problem.

My next workshop was ENG 305, which is playwriting with Sarah Morton. In this class, we read plays by Arthur Miller, and Tony Kushner. Morton taught me that my characters are defined by action. I will never forget the one exercise where we had to stand at one end of the room and imagine what our character would walk a mile for; then walk five miles for; and finally: What would your character walk one hundred miles for?

Next, I took ENG 305 Imagination. My faculty was Zee Edgell. I read *Becka Lamb* prior to the encounter. My manuscript, “McGrady’s Last Sermon”, was about a

disgruntled pastor. Today, I cringe when I read it. Zee told me that I wrote beautifully, however, I needed to learn my craft. She recommended two books: *Structuring Your Novel: From Basic Idea to Finished Manuscript*, by Robert Meredith and John Fitzgerald, and *Aspects of the Novel* by E.M. Forster. Now I was armed with the information I needed to move to the next level of craft. I would previously imagine an idea and just sit down and write. I never considered audience, point of view, voice, tone, setting, or plot. I couldn't believe I had been so careless about my work. But at the same time, I knew that I was close to a breakthrough.

For instance, in Forster's text, I finally understood what story meant. I learned that it was like a tapeworm that runs through the novel. Forster explains that story "narrates the life in time." He also suggests that story is what begs to be read aloud. And I understood what he meant.

During this particular Imagination, I also had a chance to work with Dan Chaon. I read his *Among the Missing*. Dan's work is a little creepy – I mean, a whole family found in a car underwater dead? I loved it. He talked to us about the freedom found in short story writing. I also worked with Karen Joy Fowler. I had the chance to read her *Sarah Canary*. Karen was very honest with the group about the structure of our pieces: She lambasted us for writing our stories with no plotlines and chided us for all starting our stories in the same manner. She encouraged us to read more and look at what other writers are doing. I also had a chance to meet author Alice Seibold and I had the opportunity to read, *Lucky*, a text that would be used for a workshop in the near future.

My ENG 307 course dealt with style. Dr. Eric Gardner charged us to spend some time copying passages from great works of literature in order to closely exam what the

author was doing. He taught us to vary the length of our sentences for affect and to impact voice or point of view. He was very good about having us consider our audience before we considered what voice to use.

My ENG 347 course was a seminar that featured the plays of August Wilson. During this class, Dr. Louis Barbato encouraged me to apply to graduate school here at Cleveland State. The lesson in characterization was reinforced in this class. He also helped me fine tune my transitional phrase work. He allowed me to work with graduate level students in presenting my papers.

As a graduate student, I was awarded an assistantship. While working with Dr. Neal Chandler, I am able to read his extensive library of creative nonfiction. I had to declare that I was a creative writing track student. I had to begin thinking about my thesis. Stacie Brisker purchased a text for me: John Lannon's *The Writing Process: A Concise Rhetoric*. I used this text to craft my *plan* for writing this thesis. Since I had been so careless with my writing, I knew that I need to take time to plan out this process. The text was crucial in considering audience and purpose.

One of my strategies for success was to commit to spending each weekend in the library reading nonfiction and examining the canon for nonfiction literature. I had planned on writing about my time as a music journalist; however, I had planned on writing it as literary reportage. Therefore, my research involved learning about New Journalism. I began to read literary journals: *River Teeth*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, etc., because they were freely available to me during this time. Dr. Chandler kept copies on his desk and there was a rack in the hallway with back issues. There were also lots of articles to assemble for Dr. Chandler's classes. This allowed me to begin reading work by

John McPhee, Phillip Gerard, Annie Lamott, Kristin Olson, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, and others. Many essays were from the *Best American Essays* collections, which Dr. Chandler kept in his library.

Another of my strategies: Research the time period during which my memoir takes place. While I lived during this time period, I had to make sure that I verified the events written in my journals. Many of the entries were illegible – the ink had faded in some cases. I used the databases on the Cleveland Public Library website as instructed by my librarian, Stacie Brisker. She helped me learn keyword searches so that I could find articles more easily. She also routed work to me when I sent over the search words.

My ENG 602 course, another class with Dr. Chandler, was a nonfiction workshop. For the first time, I presented material from my thesis. The feedback was positive; however, students felt that there was no rising action, just exposition in the chapter. During this class I became acquainted with memoirs by Frank Conroy, Annie Dillard, Henry Louis Gates, William Zinsser, and Charles Seibert, among others. That summer, I took Imagination and met author, Alicia Erian. I read her book, *Towelhead*. She explained plot to me as simply cause and effect.

My next workshop was ENG 602 was a fiction workshop with Sheila Schwartz. I had never been able to get a class with Sheila because of scheduling or unavailability – the class was always full. This class gave me the opportunity to have Sheila work with me on plot, voice, characterization, narration, and setting.

Finally, my last Imagination class was with Honor Moore and Michael Patrick McDonald. As I stated earlier in this introduction, I used the feedback to begin my research and project all over again.

I took workshops in memoir writing with Dr. Neal Chandler for the last three summers and continued reading; however, now, the emphasis was on memoir writing. I have had two essays published in *MUSE*, the journal of Cleveland's literary center, The LIT. A chapter from this thesis, *Plagued*, was a 2010, Lantern Award Finalist in the category of Nonfiction: Personal Essay. I have begun sending out work to nonfiction journals.

I have successfully learned how to plan and write a project. And I feel my goal of learning my craft by attending college is not complete, but is just beginning. There is always more to learn.



*NONE OF MY IDOLS WERE WORTH WORSHIPPING*

PROLOGUE: ALL OF MY IDOLS

Tuesday, May 9, 1997, I sat backstage in a Cleveland's Renaissance Hotel ballroom. I had come to watch rehearsals for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction performance by the band, Parliament-Funkadelic. For the first time, the ceremony was being held in the city where the actual museum was located. An epic battle had been fought in order to have the hall established in Cleveland – the true home of rock and roll. The city had no other claim to fame. I had no claim to fame at this point; I still hadn't published my first novel. Being a published music journalist had given me a modicum of notoriety that was dwarfed by the disappointment of being an unpublished novelist. I had agreed to attend. I came because my idol, singer-songwriter, Joni Mitchell was an inductee and honestly, I wanted to meet her, or see her perform.

I sat in a chair against the wall trying not to look at the band members. My letdown had nothing to do with them. I took it all in – their leathery faces, and their sad

eyes, complete with bags and dark circles; and there were lots of gray hairs and pushy pot guts. I stared straight ahead at the door. My friend Sheila, a vocalist with the band, was busy explaining the stranger to people. I was the stranger. She gestured towards me. I lifted my chin up in a makeshift nod. “You know Charlotte,” Sheila said. “We used to hang out together all the time when we came to *Cleveland*. She used to manage The Brides, remember?”

There was some faint recognition. I realized that I looked different too. I looked around for Kidd Funkadelic, Michael Hampton. He was the flashy guitar star from Cleveland who was featured on the classic Funkadelic song, “Maggot Brain”. Cleveland disc jockey, Billy Bass from WMMS 100.7 FM, played the track each Saturday night – it was a local tradition. Michael wasn’t as weird as other band members, although, he had allegedly stabbed his girlfriend, Dawn Silva. Dawn had lied a lot. I didn’t know what was true.

Back in the day, Jeff and I exited the highway at West 130<sup>th</sup> and dropped by Michael’s house. Gold and platinum records lined the wall going up the stairs. Inside his bedroom, Michael would play his guitar along to rhythm tracks, which featured P-funk beats that hadn’t appeared on albums. We had heard the track, “Funk Gets Stronger” from the Funkadelic album, *ELECTRIC SPANKING OF WAR BABIES*, in its infant stages. Michael had a dresser in his bedroom filled with cassettes. He spent hours in United Sound Studio in Detroit, and he had a four-track recording studio at home. He’d bring out a cassette, read its label, and mull over its contents and then, pop it in. Jeff and I sat in anticipation – Jeff more than me. Michael was another Jimi Hendrix who just happened to be from Cleveland. Today, I didn’t see him backstage. Someone said that his

brother Wayne was hosting a party at the Wyndham Hotel up the street.

\*\*\*\*\*

I had met my friend, former Brides of Funkenstein and P-funk backup singer, Sheila Horne (Brody) earlier at The Comfort Inn on 18<sup>th</sup> Street. The hotel was actually the old Swingo's Celebrity Inn, the place where I had spent days and nights hanging out in the Keg and Quarter to see the rock stars that I had read about in *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Stories written by reporters like Cameron Crowe inspired Jeff and I to sneak into the hotel to hang out with Led Zeppelin, The Rolling Stones, Rod Stewart, Peter Frampton, and Aerosmith.

George Clinton's Funk Mob used to stay in Holiday Inn hotels. Lead guitarist, Gary Shider wore diapers made out of hotel towels. The band had its own culture – their unique language, gang-like signs, traditions, and clothing – part rock and mostly black pimp and drug culture, which had taken years to figure out and less time to weary of; familiarity had bred contempt – it had fueled my disappointment in the band's music. I knew too much, and I had written about it in a silly fanzine called *Poor Elite Magazine*. I admit the contents were queer: The black and white portraits of white Hollywood movie stars that were on the cover, and fake advertisements, and scathing reviews of popular culture on the inside. I nearly froze my ass off on the basement floor cutting and pasting it all together.

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I was proud that I was there and my former friend, Jeff Wright was not. I was

early because I didn't have to wait for Jeff. I loved being on time. I could depend on myself. I drove *my* Volvo down the parking lot ramp and *I* rode up the elevator we had used to sneak past security and camp out on the floor where The Stones were staying because Jeff had desperately wanted to see Bianca Jagger in person. I called Sheila on my mobile phone to find out her room number. These days, I didn't have to go to the house phones – things had changed so much.

\*\*\*\*\*

The ding of the bell signaled my arrival on the third floor. The doors opened up and I was overwhelmed by the smell of marijuana. When my feet touched the carpeting, for a brief second, I felt transported back in time. The Comfort Inn décor was notches below what I had expected for a place where David Bowie had stayed; and Cher had partied. Ella Fitzgerald had decorated the lobby by wearing a full-length mink coat. I doubted any visitors wore fur anymore; this looked like a family hotel.

I walked down the hallway looking for Sheila's room. I hadn't smelled marijuana smoke since the last P-Funk show I had attended down in the Flats at the Nautica amphitheater – a lavender cloud had floated over the audience. And that was the second time I had gone to see the band without Jeff. I was happy Sheila hadn't asked Jeff to come to the Hall of Fame induction.

Sheila's door was open and I saw her on the bed looking at photographs. She got up and hugged me quickly and went back to her bed. There was a white girl on the other bed loading Kodachrome film into what looked like a Nikon 35 mm camera. Sheila introduced her as Marcy Guiragossian, the band photographer and publicist or something

to that effect. Marcy was new. This was the first time we had met. Marcy represented the new generation of P-Funk employee. They had arrived after the music had died, after George had ceased being relevant.

Sheila and I talked. I was glad that she didn't ask me how Jeff was doing. Band members floated in and out of the room. Marcy answered their questions about travel arrangements -- how to get out of Cleveland and to the next gig. I didn't know any of those gypsies.

Sheila looked over at me and decided that we should get our stuff and head down to the lobby to board the shuttle. "Charlotte, you parked in the garage. Leave your car here, and ride the shuttle with us."

I wanted to say 'no'. The inquisitive reporter with not so much a nose for news, but a gift for seeing the future, knew one day I'd write about this adventure. I was going to be immersed with the band. I knew some of my other friends, *Poor Elite Magazine* readers, were in town. There was Tim Kinley, the collector from New York, and David Mills, the former *Washington Post* reporter who had become a well-known television scriptwriter. They were loitering around Cleveland looking to hang out with band members. I knew they would get a kick out of knowing that I was riding with the band. I was legend, because I was there when it happened; I wrote about the albums, and the shows, and in addition, I had traveled with the band.

Tim, David, and Jeff, a classmate from high school, were obsessed with funk music. Even though I was a black journalist, I had interviewed artists across genres. I had something else going for me – I had not only written about P-funk, I had actually managed *The Brides of Funkenstein*, which was one of George Clinton's more successful

off-shoot bands. *Rolling Stone Magazine* had named The Brides' *NEVER BUY TEXAS FROM A COWBOY* as one of its top 50 coolest albums of all time. *Village Voice* critic, Robert Christgau had dubbed The Brides as the next great girl group after the Supremes and Labelle. Next generation P-funk fans had blogged about my contributions. In some small sense, it was ironic that I got to witness the band's induction considering how I had criticized George.

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I got in the shuttle bus, a small white unmarked van, with the rest of the musicians. Everyone was politely buzzed. I was shocked that everyone spoke to Sheila because she'd had so many battles with the guys. I had never known what *misogyny* meant until I had met Parliament-Funkadelic. I remember the incident in the Holiday Inn Lakeside elevator when guitarist, Blackbyrd McKnight took his guitar and jammed it onto the left foot of a pregnant woman who wouldn't leave him alone. To be fair, Sheila's volatile temper and an on and off again relationship with George had earned her a reputation as an instigator. I think she told me that once, Billy Nelson, the bass player had tried to choke her, and that George Clinton had allowed his dogs to attack her. On this day, I observed a quiet unity; I felt a subdued excitement from the band.

As we made the short ride down from 18<sup>th</sup> Street to Public Square, the guys passed joints to one another. The smell was so pungent that I feared I might get a contact high. I was supposed to attend bible study after the ceremony. I was careful not to cast a judgmental eye in anyone's direction. I had no idea what they thought of me; I was that *bitch* who published *Poor Elite Magazine*. Michael "Clip" Payne was a vocalist with the

band and he was very vocal about hating me because of the critical articles. He was chatting a stone's throw away from me. So that he wouldn't notice me, I sat small and very still. I had learned to become invisible – a nifty trick used to blend in with wealthy, drug abusing rock stars. Clip would never even remember that I had ridden the shuttle. I had remembered Clip as a wardrobe person who stole the girl's panties and sold them to fans. I might be mistaken.

I feared some of these newer guys had heard my comments about how George had treated band members. He had ripped off my friends and messed with their heads so much that they couldn't comprehend work outside the funk. I had spent too many years trying to help them to break away from the organization. Now the band was being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame; they had survived to become like the Grateful Dead – a band that tours endlessly, has generations of followers, and all without having new recordings or radio airplay.

When we arrived at the Renaissance Hotel on Public Square, we were ushered through the expansive multi-level lobby. Polite black men wearing red jackets guided us to the elevators. Sheila and Marcy thanked the men. I nodded my thank you. Sheila and Marcy were used to having strangers in new cities giving them orders and showing them hospitality – they were professional gypsies.

We rode up to the floor where the ballroom was located. You could hear the disembodied voice of a sound technician at work on the sound check: "Testing. One, two, three, testing." I heard a snare and bass drum being struck in a random fashion. I wanted to hurry to see what was going on in that room. We moved through the hallway and ran into musician, Prince Rodgers Nelson, and his bodyguards leaving the ballroom. Prince

had deliberately turned away from us after giving us a classic smirk. He was really short and his bodyguards were really large. Prince had on a purple suit and full makeup – it was only two in the afternoon.

I walked into the ballroom. The room was large; the ceiling was high. Everything was very ornate. The ballroom was dotted with tables dressed with white tablecloths. There were hotel staff members putting the finishing touches on the place settings. I was really looking around for someone with Joni Mitchell's band. I had no idea who was playing with her these days.

We worked our way up to the front of the ballroom where Joe Jackson and Jermaine Jackson were sitting. A stage technician, who wore a headset, stopped us: "During the Jacksons' rehearsal, Michael wants the ballroom cleared. Thank you." He turned and walked away before Sheila could respond.

I looked at Sheila and she looked at me. We sat down at the tables near the front of the stage. I overheard someone mention that Joni Mitchell wouldn't be coming. She had met her long lost daughter. I felt foolish for wanting to see her. I tried not to let my disappointment show. Diana Ross and her entourage walked past our table. It was the first time I had ever seen her in person and I couldn't see her clearly because there were so many people surrounding her. I saw only a big mane of hair. You didn't need all that security in Cleveland.

Joe Jackson cast a glance over at her as she went past. She was going to introduce his sons, but she didn't seem friendly towards Joe. Sheila and I exchanged glances again. "I'm not leaving this ballroom. I'm here with Parliament-Funkadelic. We have the right to be here just like anybody else."



Archie Ivy, longtime personal manager for the band, came to take the rest of us to the backstage area. I hadn't seen Ivy in years. Maybe I had never met him. His was a voice over the phone when I needed backstage passes left for me in will call -- the box office of the venue -- or when I wanted to do an interview with the band.

Like many of the men in the funk, he had a full beard. He looked older and like all the musicians I'd met along the way, he was distinguishable by his clothing. Whether they wore army fatigues or funky tour t-shirts – you knew people who worked for the organization.

In the beginning of my career, I waited for my editors, Mark Kmetzko, Marc Holan, or Keith Rathbun, to get my interviews. In time, I had figured out what to do: I used the label promotional people, band managers, and publicists to arrange my own interviews. As a freelancer, I had hustled successfully to get my own stories by making those connections, which resulted in job offers from local magazines and newspapers. I was finally rewarded with a regional correspondence desk on a national music magazine. I almost had a job on another national magazine run by writer Anthony DeCurtis. However, when it folded, DeCurtis eventually landed a job on *Rolling Stone Magazine*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sheila and I found seats together in the room backstage. Archie was walking around and Sheila stopped him to introduce me. I hadn't met him before.

“You remember Charlotte? She used to write about us for *Scene Magazine* and *Rock and Soul Songs*.”

Archie stared at me through eyes that had heard so much bullshit, or at least that's what I imagined him thinking. These guys were always weird; they were always high. In

fact, you never knew if they were wasted or just crazy. I wasn't intimidated any longer. I knew I could leave.

"I just wanted to say thank you Archie. George was my first cover story back in 1977 and I appreciate all that you guys did for me – I loved writing about the music."

All Archie could do was stick his hand out to shake mine. His stone face didn't fool me. I had met too many people in this business. I knew he had read those stories in *Poor Elite Magazine* – those anti-George Clinton pieces, Jeff and I had written. I had no idea a photocopied fanzine would go around the world. I could only afford to make 100 copies – I never understood how that kid in Poland got one.

Archie shook my hand slow and steadily. His hand remained cold and his stare remained affixed on what he thought was my soul – funk voodoo bullshit. Raymond Spruill, the road manager, used to do the same thing before he handed me my passes. I put more force behind my smile and more love into my handshake – that darkness had no power. Archie gave in and said, "You're welcome."

I saw legendary rhythm guitarist and vocalist, Gary Shider, sitting over in the corner laughing and talking with one of the musicians. Sheila had resurfaced. She was pissed off. "I'm not staying back here. We're being inducted too. Why can't we go out front? I don't understand why we can't."

I knew what was going to happen. She was going to drag me out there. I didn't care. I wanted to go. Before I finished my thought, Sheila had grabbed me and we went back out to the ballroom floor. We walked stealthily by the stage and out onto the floor and took our seats at the table where Joe Jackson, Michael's father was still seated.

He nodded at us and my eyes were drawn to the stage. Michael Jackson was

rehearsing. A surgical mask dangled from his pointy nose. Our table was so close to the stage that I knew he could see us – what was he going to do? I was a guest. I didn't care if they threw me out of the room. He pulled his mask up and gave some instructions to the sound guy.

Jermaine was drinking some water or something at the table with his father. Then he got up and went to the back of the room. Some people seated next to Joe Jackson talked about Joni Mitchell. I heard that Shawn Colvin was going to accept the award for her. I heard that Neil Young wasn't going to be onstage with Crosby, Stills, and Nash. I didn't see any of those guys in the huge ballroom.

By now, people in suits were all over the room. And they were still working on place settings. They had to clear the tables in the front of the room where band members had waited for their turn to rehearse. As they worked, they watched Michael Jackson.

The room quieted when Michael started singing fragments of Jackson hits. I realized that his brother, Tito, was on guitar. But my eyes went back to Michael as he glided across the stage in small snippets of actions. He appeared to be conserving something for the night's performance. He had on a white shirt and a white V-neck undershirt. I could see his nipples. He had on those black tuxedo slacks. I could see his white socks. His face was completely without color. His eyebrows looked as if they had been drawn on. I almost swore I heard him say something about the rehearsal being closed. I looked over at Sheila and she looked at me, and I knew I had heard him. His mask had fallen down.

"I don't care. I don't give a damn. This is our night too. We're being inducted just like the Jacksons. They can't put me out of here, I'm with the band and you're my guest."

When I looked behind me, to the left of me, a small crowd of people, many of them members of Parliament-Funkadelic, had formed an audience. They lined the wall to watch Michael Jackson work. I saw Kidd Funkadelic, Michael Hampton, and Prince was back in the room watching. Prince was going to introduce George Clinton. I think I spotted Miss Ross walking along the wall as well.

I felt like my life had come full circle. In my time as a music reviewer, I had the chance to hear some of the greatest music of the twentieth century. My love affair with reading, with literature, and in particular, the beautiful prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald, had led me on a journey to become a novelist. Instead, I had become a music journalist and I was sitting in the Renaissance Hotel Ballroom waiting for some of the biggest names in rock music history to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I wish I had at least one novel under my belt.

## BEGINNING OF THE DREAM

Ten years had passed. My portrait sits on the corner of the end table I had purchased at the Salvation Army Goodwill store. I looked over at the metal frame. The afternoon sun bounced off of it, casting a yellow glow onto the white stucco walls, which caused me to travel back in time to West Hollywood where near the end of his life, novelist-turned-hack, F. Scott Fitzgerald pounded out scripts in Sheilah Graham's apartment. The image of the knocked kneed little Negro girl in the photo with the cat-eyed frames, Ultra Sheen permed hair styled in a French roll, and the A-line dress made from a Butterwick dress pattern, wrestled me back to earth – Cleveland, Ohio, to be precise. I'm writing in my office, which used to be my parents' bedroom. It was the place where there had once existed a portal to other worlds. And it was located right above their King-sized bed on their headboard bookshelf. When you slid back the doors, there were books by authors that I weren't allowed to read. I was punished for not taking out the trash or not washing the dishes clean. However, my parents never cut off my television privileges because I had stolen a novel by Leon Uris and stayed in my lower

bunk under a blanket until I had finished it. They knew I was a writer.

I smiled. The yesteryear look in the photo was from the early Civil Rights era. Years after the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the Reverend Jesse Jackson, had appeared on the stage of the Glenville High School auditorium and shouted: “I am somebody!” He made us say it over and over again. We jumped up and down. I jumped as high as I could. Our fists punched the air. I cried while thrusting my fist higher and harder than everyone else. I was the little girl who nurtured the quixotic dream of becoming a novelist like her idol F. Scott Fitzgerald – I needed to believe that my time had come.

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But it wasn’t the 1970s. I wasn’t 14 years old, nor was I a successful novelist. I had opened up my portfolio, and run my fingers across the yellowed pages of the clippings from the many magazines and newspapers that I had worked for; without permission, the clippings had become worn. I didn’t know why they hadn’t taken better care of themselves. I didn’t want to get caught up in reading the reviews and interviews. I couldn’t stomach the juvenile writing. Instead, I run my fingers across my skin and then across the image. My glasses were so thick. The ones I wore now were thinner, more fashionable; but the protective coating has shamefully eroded and if I happened to be outside, you could see a rainbow smear on the lens.

That little Negro girl in the photo used books to leave home. She traveled to different times and places in the created words of her favorite authors. There were times

when she grew languid after reading a particular beautiful novel fearing she would never learn to create one. Sadly, she had no idea about time; she thought there was plenty of it; and that it was her friend.

At heart, I was still that little girl, so I put down the photo. Thinking about my past was like pouring time into a vacuum – it sucked the hope out of me – however, I had to. I had learned time was warped purposefully; and made specifically difficult to navigate. To my surprise, the path was different based on who you were. I had become someone with a philosophy: Hidden within the folds of time was success – the ability to write sentences and create words and worlds as beautifully as F. Scott Fitzgerald.

I picked up my copy of *The Beautiful and The Damned*. I read Fitzgerald each summer. I had already read *Trimalchio in West Egg*, an earlier version of *The Great Gatsby*, hoping it would inspire me to write. I would have to find inspiration from within. My father had died six months earlier and the dream of handing him a first edition of my first published novel was dead and with it a fear was birthed – I was running out of time.

*Of all the needs (there are more imaginary) of a lonely child,  
the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a  
hope of wholeness, is the unshaking need for an unshakable God.”*  
- Maya Angelou, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sing.*

## DREAM FOR A DIME

My parents, Charles Henry Morgan and Era Ann Elizabeth Chisholm, had met in Lorain, Ohio. Unmarried, they moved to Cleveland and had one daughter, Michele Lattice Morgan. Two years later, I was born. Our family moved to Wade Park Avenue, where we lived in a large house off the main street. I remember it was a big white house with a porch in the front and one on the left side. There were lots of rooms and a long closet, which ran along the side of the house -- it was a great place for playing hide-and-go-seek.

My sister Michele attended the big faraway school, John D. Rockefeller Elementary, while the other kids in the neighborhood went to nearby Wade Park Elementary. Soon, I got two baby brothers, Robert Craig Morgan and Charles Henry Morgan, Jr. Dad immediately gave the boys nicknames. He called them Craig and Chip. Michelle was called Mickey and she had a second nickname – “Number One Daughter.”



I had no nickname.

I started school during the winter because I was born in January. I attended Wade Park Elementary School kindergarten in the basement of the Salvation Army building on the corner of 71st and Wade Park. My mother said the regular building was too crowded. On my first afternoon, my mother walked me to the building and left me to wait in line with the other children. She wanted me to be a big girl. She wanted to get my little brothers back to the house.

The first day was cold and snowy. The street was slippery and I slid for fun. “Stop sliding and get in line!” My mother turned her back on me and walked my little brothers back to our house.

I slid down the ramp of the driveway. I fell and bit my lower lip and I cracked a front tooth. The other kids were wrapped up warm and tight in their coats, hats and mittens. They stood around me and laughed. No one helped me up. I rested my face in the warm snow. I remember it turning red. I didn’t want to get up. I wanted to look at the blood. I tried to sniff it – I wanted to know what it smelled like. I looked up at the red and white Salvation Army sign because it was buzzing and blinking. I couldn’t hear the laughing anymore. I stood up, unsure of my footing and wiped the snow and slush off my coat and off my face. I went to the back of the line as my new kindergarten teacher opened the white door.

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I played in the big hallway on the second floor when I wasn’t in school. My sister and I watched the “Beany and Cecil Show” and we got a Beany and Cecil doll – it was

actually a Beany doll – for Christmas. Beany, was a little blond boy, who wore a blue cap with a propeller on it and he had a drawstring that I could pull: “Help Cecil, help!” I pulled the string over and over.

My little brothers spent most of their time with our mother. I played with our imaginary friend Boney when I was left alone. He wasn’t a monster. He was a friendly ghost like Casper. I talked to him as I sat on the floor and wrote on paper. I wrote and drew on paper until Momma called me for dinner. One day, I was playing on the second floor when I was called down to eat or so I thought. Something was going on downstairs. Dad had brought a piano into the living room and we would have something new to do.

“We’re going to start by learning to play our scales,” he announced.

The wooden stand-up piano stood in the corner of the front room. We lined up as a family in front of it. I heard my sister talking about Little Richard -- he played the piano. The whole house filled with the smell of oatmeal raisin cookies. I wanted to know when the cookies would be ready. Chip clapped with joy.

My Dad was a musician. He had golden saxophones that he practiced on when he was at home. We didn’t know that he played the piano. We watched as Daddy made music by working his hands across the keys. We would get a chance to make music too and afterwards, eat cookies.

My sister, Mickey wasn’t interested in playing piano. She always wanted to do something else after dinner. We had to do it together as a family, and that included me. I picked up the scales — I guess I understood how music worked. Momma had rules for us: “If you don’t practice the piano, you can’t go to the movies.” Daddy added: “As long as you’re in my house, you have to have a hobby. An idle mind is the devil’s workshop.”

Mickey and I took our allowance and went to the movies each weekend to see all the Annette Funicello beach party movies and the Hammer horror movies. Sometimes we went to the Ezella Theater on East 71<sup>st</sup> Street in Superior or we went downtown to the State or Ohio Theater on Euclid Avenue. Our mother had taken us all down on the bus and we sat behind the red rope in the section with the other Negroes and watched “Cleopatra” starring Elizabeth Taylor as the Egyptian queen. I knew Liz Taylor and Richard Burton because they were in the *Photoplay* magazine that my mother had brought home. When the movie was over, we had to wait until the white people left the theater before we could go down the stairs. There were lots of Negroes sitting in the balcony.

Afterwards, we walked over to the Forum Cafeteria on 9th in Euclid Avenue. We sat in the section with the people who looked like us. We got in line with our trays and got our food. Momma got angry because the mashed potatoes and green beans served in the Negro section were cold. She complained to the Negro lady, who got a white lady to speak to Momma. Mickey snatched Chip up and put on his coat. Era Morgan told us to get our coats on; we were going home. “You’ll never have to worry about my ass coming back.” Before we got on the bus, we went to Woolworth’s near Public Square and got hot dogs; but we had to stand at the counter while our mother got the wieners that came in toasted buns.

On the way home, Momma told us that we could be anything we wanted.

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Some months later, Dad came home from the steel mill and called me to come

into the house. I was in the backyard playing. I ran across the uneven grass as fast as I could. I saw a cat strolling near the fence where the cherry tree stood. He was black and white and gray. He walked while I ran. Then I heard my father's voice again.

I wondered what I had done. My heart was pounding. I had picked off a handful of hard cherries from off the low branches of the cherry tree in the next yard. Mrs. Ford lived next-door. She was on her porch, maybe she had told on me. She was a big fat woman who was always in our business. Her son Mortimer was fat too.

"Sha-lette, your Daddy is calling you, get in the house!"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm, I'm going."

I slammed the screen door on her voice.

My father stood next to the kitchen table with his right hand on top of a stack of books. He didn't look mad. He was a short man who wore black glasses and had on a cap. I glanced out the big kitchen window on the left side of the room and saw Mortimer going into our backyard, he was looking for my bicycle; but I had left it in the basement. You could pull apart our curtains to see who was walking alongside the house. You could see the milkman when he brought the milk and butter my mother had ordered. Sometimes I was in the kitchen when the white man came up the porch to announce that he had our coal. The white man would open up the doors on the side of the house and pour the coal into our basement.

Momma stopped stirring the pot on the stove. She was making turnip and mustard greens and I could smell her cornbread in the oven. She didn't look mad either; she wiped her hands on her towel and came over to the table where I was seated.

My father sat down and he pushed the stack of books towards me. He said he had

bought them over at the Goodwill Store in the Salvation Army across the street. I remember there was a *Little House on the Prairie* book by Laura Ingalls Wilder as well as a copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is The Night*.

"Can you read any of the words in this book?" First, he handed me the Fitzgerald book. My mother said that I looked at him as if I was puzzled. Dad didn't realize I knew my alphabet and my numbers. Momma's sister, Betty Chisholm had taught me to read comic books. I would sit at the kitchen table with paper and pencil copying my letters while my aunt cooked. My parents went out of town with their lodge. They wore funny hats and aprons with symbols on them. We used to go to the skating rink to watch the big kids skate while our parents were upstairs in their meeting. When they were out of town, Betty, who lived in Lorain, Ohio, watched us.

Betty was thinner than our mother. She had the same cheekbones. She was brown like our mother and she was a good cook, but not as good as Era Chisholm. With my aunt in charge, we all spent time at the kitchen table copying pictures of Beetle Bailey and Superman. We had our own thick navy blue Laddy pencils and white paper to draw the black letters, which filled the bubbles on the pages. Betty told me what the letters were and how to put them in a row on the page. Soon, I had learned to make up words -- big words and small words. The round letters and the square letters were easy to copy and we always had pencils and paper because Daddy wrote music. Betty fed us neck bones and potatoes to eat, and Cherry Kool-Aid to drink while we learned how to read and write.

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In the kitchen, my parents watched and listened as I held my new book in my

hands. My eyes went over the magical letters of the words on the pages. I could hear them aloud in my ear, and my mouth knew how to form the words.

Momma said I struggled, but that I read most of the words on the pages. I figured out the ones I had never seen before. I laughed when I finished. My mother said she clapped. She told my father that the teacher was going to move me to a higher grade.

“I’ll be damned. I only spent a dime. I could have bought more books.”

Momma said it was good that the Negroes got all the education they could get because she didn’t finish school. And my father said, “I didn’t finish high school either. I pay my taxes for my kids to go to school. Don’t waste my money.”

## SUGAR

Wednesday afternoons in the summer, a truck drove down Wade Park, and brought treats to Avery's corner store. The deliveryman, Mr. Moe who wore blue jean overalls, performed for us; he took a large shiny knife, a machete, and whacked this long stick and turned it into a free piece of candy for each of the neighborhood kids who gathered around his truck, which he parked in the alley in front of our house.

I had seen his rickety green truck as it cruised past Mrs. Ford's house on 71st Street. I peered through the chain link fence in our backyard and watched my school friends, and my sister, as they rode their bicycles. The driver, Mr. Moe, sang: "*Sugar*, get your sugar cane. *Sugar*, get your sugar cane."

I had to play in the back yard alone. My friend Barbara Weinstein was away at camp and my best friend Winthrop Nash were away with his family. I had a book and my doll babies to play with in the backyard. I knew I could always play with my imaginary friend, Boney, he knew that I was the middle child.

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My big sister rode her red Schwinn bicycle, which our father had purchased from a bicycle shop at 79th in Superior. She pedaled alongside her best friend, Mortimer. Since I had to stay in the back yard, I knew when Mr. Moe had arrived. I heard his truck coughing and the kids screaming as they ran up the alley. I stopped playing with my invisible friends and ran out to the front of the house.

The neighborhood children, Mortimer, Bankman, his sister, LaNiece, Miss Sally Powell's six children, my sister, and Al and Donny Avery – who lived over their family's store – formed an unruly gang at the driver's side door of the truck. Mr. Moe with his beady beard, missing front tooth and railroad conductor's cap, jumped out the truck. He had power – he had sugar.

I got pushed to the back of the pack by my friends, Wednesday afternoon alley visitors, who jumped up and down and begged to get a free piece of sugar cane from Mr. Moe. I was always the last to get a piece. I always had to wait. I didn't like looking at him. His smile was too wide; his arms were long and wrapped in plaid shirtsleeves, which he rolled up to his elbows. He stuck the stalk out to me and snatched it back if I reached for it. He kept smiling. I stopped trying. His teeth were Hillbilly juice yellow, and his gums were Bazooka bubblegum pink. I looked down at the ghost shadow he cast on the ground. When I lifted my head up and my eyes off the ground, it happened -- he handed me the largest cutting of all. I would run back to the side of the house, up the stairs and into the kitchen where I sat at the table and chewed my sugar cane in peace.

The other kids jumped back on their bicycles and rode down the alley out to Wade Park and around the corner of 71st Street. I could only imagine because I wasn't allowed to walk to the end of the driveway without my big sister. Mickey could go to



Avery's to get the *Cleveland Press* and packs of Kool-Aid. I imagined that the other kids pedaled fast past the white house with the large yard. There was a huge cherry tree in the corner near the fence. Each of our friends had dared to pick cherries from the tree at least once during the summer. The big kids said that a witch lived in the house.

"She cooks cats and little people in a big black kettle in her backyard Charlotte,"

"Stay out her yard, she got traps for little kids like you."

The smell of cats and people cooking -- I was never going on her property.

Anyway, Momma had told us to stay off other people's property. I satisfied my curiosity by looking through the fence. I wanted to see the big pot or at least the old woman.

On this Wednesday, I had watched as the rear of the green truck wobbled from side to side. Mr. Moe backed all the way up the alley until he was within a few feet of our front porch. The truck was filled with bundles of sugar cane. He got out, let down the back flap, and climbed up on the truck bed. He took a bundle off the pile and hoisted it up on his left shoulder and he jumped down to the ground all in one motion. Dirt splattered from his black boots when he landed on the ground. I waited until I heard him stomping up the alley to Al and Donnie's store.

I came from around the corner of the house, went to the back of the truck, and tried to pull free one of the long stalks of sugar cane. I tugged and tugged until a long stalk came loose and I dragged it to the back yard. The end of the stalk left a wet trail on the ground. I was dressed in my pink sleeveless short set. Without thinking, I sat on the brick pit mother used for cooking on the holidays. I tried to put one end of the stalk in my mouth but it was too big. I tried again. I put my stick next to the pit.

I went into the kitchen. I rambled through drawer after drawer looking for

mother's machete. I heard the kids laughing and screaming as Mr. Moe passed out his treats. I finally found not a machete, but instead the butcher knife, the one with the long handle, in a drawer with other smaller knives. I ran, knife in hand and I pushed open the side door and heard it slam behind me. I jumped down all three stairs and ran back to the waiting stalk; but it was gone. I walked to the other side of the house to see if the stick had legs since it had walked away. What I saw was Mr. Moe leaning up against the side of our house waiting for me with the sugar cane stick in his hand.

My knife hit the ground. I headed for the back fence. When I looked back, I saw that Mr. Moe was coming after me. He walked like Frankenstein. I climbed up on the fence, but my right sneaker fell to the ground. I walked across the top of the fence. Something hurt in my right foot. I had stepped on a spike in the fence. Mr. Moe kept walking towards me. His smile was gone. He kept my sugar cane in his right hand, dragging it across the grass.

As I reached the lowest limb on the cherry tree, I remembered Tarzan, and so I swung on the limb, and landed on the ground in the witches' yard. I looked back at Mr. Moe. He stood at the fence with his overalls and dirty boots. I kept walking across the field and I kept looking back at him. I saw him turn and head back for his truck. Then I tripped; I had stepped in a loop of wire hidden under the grass and dirt. I fell hard on my right shoulder and dirt coated my right arm.

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I remembered the first time he had given me my sugar cane. As soon as the other kids' voices ran down the driveway, he stooped down to be closer to me. He teased me with the candy – handing it towards me and taking it back. I know I frowned. He made

me come closer. Then he grabbed me by my shirt. I screamed but it wasn't loud enough. His raggedy truck made so much noise. There was dark smoke coming out of the truck; I couldn't get any air. Mr. Moe pulled me between his legs. He was breathing on me. He breathed on me while he stuck his tongue in my ear. I struggled to get free of the warm wetness of his tongue and I wiggled free. He tossed me a giant piece of sugar cane; I picked it up. I wiped his spit off my ear and ran for the house. I never looked back. I promised not to let him touch me again.

Momma was in the basement washing clothes. I went in her room to watch TV and that monster Quasimodo was on the afternoon movie. I chewed my candy in peace. I remember enjoying chewing all the sugar out. I wanted more; but I didn't like Mr. Moe.

That night, I couldn't sleep. I kept seeing Mr. Moe's face. I cried and my stomach hurt. Mickey told me to shut up and go to sleep. She didn't ask me why I was crying.

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I got up. My right sock was dirty. I knew I would get a beating for getting my clothes dirty. My foot hurt and my shoulder hurt. I looked around the witches' yard. There was no black kettle with little people in it. There was a rusty garbage can with tree branches in it. I could smell the wood burning. I went over and looked in to watch the orange flames and blue smoke.

I saw the big white garage; it was closed. I looked through the windows and saw an old car. I limped over towards the white house where Mortimer said the white witch lived. There were a lot of trees; so many that when I looked up, I could barely see the sky. The white house was tinted green because the sun shone through the leaves of the

big trees – I had learned chlorophyll gave leaves their color. I saw other fruit trees. There were smaller fruit trees: Peach, apple and another cherry tree. There was no one around, so I picked a hard yellow peach. I went over to the crab apple tree and pulled a small green apple and put it in my pocket.

It was pretty quiet until I heard an alley cat crying like a baby. I turned to look for it, but I didn't see anything. I limped towards the edge of the field – I could see the street. I saw Mortimer riding past on my blue Schwinn bicycle -- my tires were pressed down near flat. There was my sister Mickey on her bicycle, in her clean outfit. She and Mortimer were laughing and chewing on their sugar cane.

I walked up the driveway and out to 71st Street. For the first time, I got to walk around the block by myself. It took forever because my foot was hurt. There were cars going past and other kids laughing as they rode their bikes in the street. The Salvation Army, my old school, with the big red and white sign was on the corner. People were coming out with shopping bags – they had been to the Goodwill store.

I stood outside the side door for a minute the side door. I knew my mother couldn't see me because her back was turned, but she could feel me. Momma knew everything. When I went inside the house, Momma turned and asked me what happened.

“Mr. Moe man grabbed me and put his tongue in my ear, so I stole some sugar cane from him.” She was cooking dinner. She dropped her big fork on the floor – it was the one she used when she fried chicken. The chicken smelled like garlic. She reached down and grabbed me by the shoulders.

“You talking about that farmer with the raggedy truck? You tell me when someone puts their hands on you or I'll beat your ass!”

I dropped my peach on the floor. She snatched it up and threw it in the trash.

“And what did I tell you about other folks’ property? You were in that woman’s yard?”

She grabbed me and spanked me hard. I didn’t count how many times she hit my legs and my bottom. I stayed up on the second floor before dinner while everyone else watched “American Bandstand”. Mickey had to see Dick Clark each afternoon. She sat in front of the television and jumped up when one of her favorite songs was played. She knew all the dances.

## MY SWEET LORD: THE BEATLES

Not long after I had told Momma about Mr. Moe and John F. Kennedy had died, Daddy moved the family to the northeast side of Cleveland to Greenlawn Avenue. I missed my classmates Winthrop, Barbara, and Maria. We had been together since the first day of kindergarten. Winthrop always teased me about falling down and busting my lip. I teased him about being a “yellow boy.”

I had played post office with Al, Donny, Winthrop, Barbara and Maria, in the apartment building that was in front of my house. One of Miss Sally’s six kids – the tall skinny one, had caught me teaching the boys how to put their tongues in the girls’ ears. I ran first. I pushed open the hallway doors and ran up the alley to Wade Park. We ran around the block until we tired of running. We laughed outside the school building the next day. Barbara was mad because she couldn’t run as fast. She was kind of fat.

There was the time that I had climbed under my desk and whispered to Barbara and Maria as we trained for the nuclear bomb that the Russians were going to drop on our

country. We lined up in the hallways of Wade Park Elementary to have our scalps examined for lice and to deposit our nickels into our bank accounts. I was sitting next to Winthrop Nash on the day in November when the principal came and told us to go home because the president, John F. Kennedy had been shot. I walked home with Winthrop and Barbara. My family gathered around the black and white television to watch Walter Cronkite give the news. Daddy was home and we were all together when Jack Ruby shot Lee Harvey Oswald.

Our family watched the president's funeral. I cried when little John John Kennedy saluted his father's casket. Months later, we were all seated around the television when the Beatles appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show". I had never heard screaming like that before. John, Paul, George, and Ringo -- there was a real British invasion.

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Our new colonial house was covered in fake brick tile. We had three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs and a toilet and sink in the basement. We had a large living room and a tiny kitchen. We had a big basement with a laundry room side. There was a bar in the basement too. Our backyard was smaller than the one we had on Wade Park. Now we lived closer to the lake than ever before.

Dad would drive straight up East 105<sup>th</sup> to take us to the aquarium at Gordon Park and afterwards, we would eat ice cream. When we lived on Wade Park it was an adventure to ride straight up Addison to the lake, because sometimes the white kids chased us on their bikes and called us 'nigger' and told us to 'get out of their neighborhood'. I was never scared with Mortimer. I sat on the handlebars of my bike

while Mortimer pedaled. He was the biggest kid that we knew. He protected me. One Halloween, some big boys snatched my pillow sack of candy and Mortimer chased them down and took it back. But Mortimer was back in our old neighborhood. We had to meet new kids. I got moved up from one grade to another, I never stayed with the same kids for more than a semester. Momma said I was smarter than most of the other kids, so I was moved up by my teachers. I started school in the fall with more new kids at Columbia Elementary.

Greenlawn was a pretty street. The houses were smaller than the one we lived in on Wade Park. But the front yards were like nothing we'd ever seen. There were green lawns and flowers everywhere. The people who lived next door and across the street looked like Caucasians; there was another family two houses down and they also looked white.

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Mickey and I went back to our old neighborhood. Dad dropped us across the street from the Ezella Theater – we were going to see “A Hard Day’s Night”.

There was a red and white ambulance parked in front of the brightly lit theater. My sister yanked my left arm and it woke me out of my daze. We had to move up in line. Girls were clapping their hands together and jumping up and down. Photographers aimed their cameras at us and shot us with flashes of white light. My knees had started to buckle -- lack of air I guessed. Mickey gave the woman in the booth our allowance money. We had gone to church and done our chores. Momma said that we could go.



When we found seats in the theater, I looked around and saw girls screaming until they passed out and the movie hadn't started. The theaters' yellow light lit the scary faces of those girls. I sank down in my chair.

I asked, "Why they screaming like that?"

"Because they're white I guess," Mickey told me. "They've never seen the Beatles before maybe."

Mickey had all the answers. She listened to the radio practically all day. She knew the names of the couples on "American Bandstand". She was going to be a teenager soon.

When the movie started the screams got louder and white uniformed nurses came and took those girls out of the theater. I sank down lower in my seat because the noise was so loud. I wondered why no other Negro girls wanted to see the Beatles. All I saw were these arms in the air waving back and forth.

I wasn't sure if I should scream too. I loved their haircuts. Mickey played her 45s on a small portable record player and now I wanted to buy my own Beatles' records. I already had my own books coming in the mail; I was going to ask about getting my own record player. I watched the nurses come up the aisle to get a girl. On the screen, the Beatles were running from screaming girls while singing their songs – Ed Sullivan called them "hit singles". I was able to hear just enough over the screams to feel the excitement.

I was tired when the movie was over. The girls were still jumping up and down on the way out the theater.

Craig asked about the movie, Chip was too little to understand.

When we moved to Greenlawn Avenue, I made friends with Marie Ellington who lived across the street. Marie spoke French and wrote poetry. I liked that she was a writer, but I didn't like that her house was dark on the inside. I would look in their living room when she opened the door. I used to pick Marie up so that we could walk to school together. Her parents drank a lot of liquor. When they were gone, they turned the tree stump on their porch to the right so that Marie knew they were still at work.

Marie and I loved the Monkees. She had a crush on Davy Jones, and I was in love with Peter Tork. We watched the show together at my house because Momma didn't like me going over to people's house. She said, "Stay out of folks house, and you'll stay out of trouble."

We started our own Monkees Fan Club. Marie was president and I was treasurer. We also watched the "Man From U.N.C.L.E." on NBC, the station with the peacock. All the kids on the street watched the show. My brother Craig was Napoleon Solo, the American spy and I had a crush on the Russian, Illya Kuryakin.

I didn't spend all of my time watching television. I had books. I received a new copy of the Happy Hollisters series each quarter. I had Nancy Drew mysteries to read. I got my next Fitzgerald novel, *The Great Gatsby*. I retreated to my bunk with my book and stayed there for hours. I had to be called for dinner. When I came downstairs, I announced to my family that I was going to be a writer; I was going to be the next F. Scott Fitzgerald. My sister Mickey punched me in the stomach as I took my seat.

We spent hours reading Betty and Veronica comic books. Momma liked Batman and Superman. We also listened to WIXY 1260 AM and CKLW 800 AM, to hear the British Invasion and the Motown Sound. We used our allowances to buy 45s at Giant

Tiger on St. Clair Avenue. We weren't allowed to buy Motown Records, and Mickey loved Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Everyone loved The Supremes. Momma said Ed Sullivan loved Diana Ross more than the rest of the girls. Daddy said there would be no James Brown records and no blues records allowed in his home. He didn't care who appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show" unless it was someone he liked. He wanted everyone to be quiet when his favorite drummer Buddy Rich was on doing a solo. Dad didn't even like Elvis Presley.

We bought the Supremes' records anyway. Our family watched "The Ed Sullivan Show" together on Sunday evenings. We also watched "The Wonderful World of Disney" on NBC – it came on before Sullivan.

## THE WITCH OF GREENLAWN

Life was good on our new street. My parents agreed to let me get more books in the mail. I sent off for a crystal radio from an ad in the back of a Ritchie Rich comic book. My parents were bringing home more books and storing them on their bookshelf right where I could find them. My mother read Dashiell Hammet's *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*. I read them quickly – one at a time – and put them back in their place.

We had “Hullabaloo” and “Shindig” to watch now and we spent time listening to as music as we could. When I wasn't listening to music, or reading, I had started working on huge jigsaw puzzles because Daddy had taken us to a hobby shop. He was always making sure we were busy. He didn't want any trouble on our new street.

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I used to sit on the front steps and watch our next-door neighbor; Mildred Malloy tightly grip her new broom as she delicately swept the ground in front of her two story

Colonial home, all the while cursing those who dropped paper. Momma said Mrs. Malloy had “funny ways.”

She was a little woman who looked like she was white—from her skin color to her hair texture. Her husband Paul—who we rarely saw—could also have passed for white with his blondish grey hair and blue eyes.

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The first day we had moved on to the street, my little brother Chip chased a mysterious cat that had found its way into our house. I never saw this cat, but Chip swears he was trying to get it out the house so that our father wouldn’t get angry. My brother Craig had told him not to chase that cat, but Chip never listened. He ran the cat down the stairs to the side door and he couldn’t stop himself. Momentum, well gravity, propelled Chip forward. He fell down the stairs and his right arm knifed through the glass of the side door. I ran down the stairs chasing the sound of the crash. When I got to the side door, my little brother was sitting against Dad’s canary yellow 1965 Dodge Dart bleeding.

Our father was less concerned about the injury, and more pissed off that someone dared touch his car—even if by accident. “Get him off the car Era!”

Our parents had to take Chip over to Forest City, the black folks’ hospital, off Parkwood Drive to get stitches.

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Our new neighbors, the Netters, the Jones, the Cassidy’s, and the Ellington’s, were all older. They lived in colored boxes made of brick and wood. Daddy lectured us

on the American Dream while seated at the head of the dinner table – we were trapped. He said it was the ability to own a home. He said, “Don’t offend your neighbors. They won’t appreciate new neighbors bringing young children onto the street if you break windows and leave trash on the ground.”

“Niggers hate glass and grass,” Daddy said. “You don’t need any help to be a bum. You see these Negroes fighting for civil rights, but they don’t take care of where they live. They always want a handout. You got to work hard, get an education, and you can be anything you want in this life.” I heard those words each time there was something on the news about the civil rights movement.

Everything you needed was in our neighborhood—grocery stores, furniture stores, delicatessens, drug stores, restaurants, clothing stores, florists, churches, hardware stores, and a library.

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At first, we saw little of our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Malloy. The street club represented by Mrs. Beatrice Netter of 10720 Greenlawn, brought us a basket of fruit and canned goods. Mrs. Netter had thick grey hair, which always looked like it needed to be combed. She was very tall, but she was heavy and walked stooped over like she was carrying something heavy.

Mrs. Netter always was nice to us. She baked cookies—her own special recipes, revamped oatmeal raisin cookies featured broken pecans and molasses. She delivered them to our side door. Or she called us over to her side door and ushered us up the three stairs into her homey kitchen. There were large glass containers of flour and sugar on her

shelves. She had the cookie tray on top of the stove.

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Mrs. Malloy, with that mess of brown and gray hair, was outside sweeping in front of her house. I noticed she swept each morning. Her ritual consisted of coming out to check her property for damage, sweeping in front of her house, and then watering her lawn and flowers. Next, she went in the house, got her vacuum cleaner and vacuumed her porch. Afterwards, she went back inside the house and magically appeared on her upstairs porch where she watered more flowers.

Momma said her house was a show place. The rose bushes were always trimmed. There were red, yellow and pink roses every summer. She had a rose bush in the center of her tree lawn; and one on each side of her house. She had a white fence lining her side of her property that faced ours. It received a fresh coat of white paint twice a year and so did her house. The awning got a fresh coat of burgundy paint.

Then we noticed that her driveway was painted as well, only you couldn't really discern the symbols from the ground. It took Mr. Jones who lived next door in a white and green house, to Mrs. Malloy to tell us that there were symbols painted in burgundy on the ground. Mr. Jones was superstitious. He thought Mrs. Malloy was witch.

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Freddy Jones was a short brown and thin man who wore suspenders all the time. He lived alone in his house. He had dirty indoor-outdoor green carpeting on his porch. Freddy was diabetic who used to drink. He had retired from Republic Steel after suffering

a stroke. “Mr. Jones ain’t been the same since he retired,” Slim, our streets’ mail man reported. Freddy would say all kinds of strange things: “Somebody ‘round here been killing animals. I smell flesh cooking.”

He always heard a few strange sounds at night and saw people walking on the street at night looking like they were going to steal someone’s car. So we grew leery of Mr. Jones’ warnings about Mrs. Malloy. “She ain’t nothing like that white woman what’s on “Bewitched”. But she got powers. Don’t twitch her nose or nothing, she got this white powder she put down and it does the trick. You mark my words, she gets mad, and she put the powder on you. Just like she did to me,” he said. He told us that everything in his house broke after she put that powder on him.

Mrs. Malloy seemed sweet and quiet, always working in her yard, pruning and raking. But over time, we began to think she was odd because *all* we ever saw her do was clean her house. And from the large picture windows in the front of her house, we could see the fruit of her labor. Her house was worthy of a magazine spread and in fact, had earned six pages in “House and Garden Magazine”.

The Greenlawn Street Club had encouraged everyone to cut their grass and sweep their yards. The club had its own lawn mower that you could borrow if you didn’t own one. They had a snow blower too. They plowed the sidewalks on each side of the street so that the mailman could deliver our mail. We didn’t throw the paper on the ground. If you did, Mrs. Ida Taylor might be sitting on her porch—you couldn’t see her because her porch was enclosed—and she’d holler from across the street: “Baby you know better than that. Pick up that damned paper!” Mrs. Taylor used to live down the street. She had moved into the Ellington’s’ old home. Marie and her family had left soon after we



arrived. She couldn't really play outside anyway. She was always busy studying French and poetry. The photo shoot was successful and we saw the finished photos in the magazine.

We played in our driveway. We played catch and basketball—we had a hoop on our garage. When the sun began to go down, we knew we had to be in the house. We never ate outside or drank water outside. “Animals eat outside,” Daddy said. “We could have stayed on Wade Park if you wanted to eat outside.” We never made the mistake of coming out the front door with a cup in our hands. Our father didn't want us sitting on the front porch either. He said it was “country” and we weren't down south. He had a lot of rules for our new house.

We couldn't play music loud, we had to clean our room before school and we had to do our homework before we could go outside. We had to be good neighbors. Dad didn't want us to do anything to offend our neighbors. “Good neighbors are there when you need them and you shouldn't notice them otherwise,” he said.

For some reason when the ball went into Mrs. Malloy's yard, she would get angry. She felt her beautiful flowers would die if the ball touched the petal of one of her delicate roses. She was right, but we couldn't see her point.

Craig bruised a rose bush; I didn't see the damage, but Mrs. Malloy did. She was in her basement eating. She and her husband lived actually in the basement of the house. She cooked downstairs so the smell of food didn't affect her living room. We didn't know why, she never had any company. The only time people came over her house was to paint or repair something. Oh, yeah, the man from the security company would arrive after a siren went off following an attempted robbery.

When the alarm sounded, gates slid down over her windows and water drizzled down. Lights flashed. We thought it was cool.

One day, the Coleman kids were playing in the street. Their ball landed in Mrs. Malloy's yard. She was sweeping and we were on our porch reading Spiderman and Superman comic books. She was putting white powder right along the tree lawn when the ball rolled past her ankles. She was pissed. Eric Coleman apologized for the ball getting in her yard, but the old lady didn't look like she accepted it. Chip asked me if I had ever seen anyone parked in front of Mrs. Malloy's house and I told him, no. Repairmen didn't park in front of her house.

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We had a family feud going with the Coleman's who lived next to us on the other side. My sister Mickey used to baby-sit for Jean Coleman. Mr. Coleman had left his family and Jean Coleman had to get a job. The babysitting job ended when Mickey found a pair of soiled panties, gigantic white ones with a lengthy skid mark. My sister laughed at the dirty drawers. Diana and Eric told their mother that her drawers had been seen. Jean Coleman fired my sister.

We were really feuding because Chip and Craig were caught fooling around with Diana and Vicky Coleman in our garage.

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As time passed, I had forgotten all about Mrs. Malloy. My brothers shoveled her snow and she paid them well. We lived together in peace for another year. My little

brother Chip had thrown a soft ball up against Mrs. Malloy's house and it made a sound loud enough to cause her to come outside.

When she saw Chip with the ball continuing to play after he had defiled her home, she was angry. Chip wisely apologized for hitting her house and but he foolishly kept on playing. In one day the ball had gone in her yards seven, eight times. That was enough. Afterwards, Mrs. Malloy complained to our mother.

"Please try to keep the kids from playing in my yard," she asked.

Momma mentioned that our neighbor was hunched over more than usual. In fact, we never noticed how hunched over she was or how pointed her chin was. Mrs. Malloy began confiscating any ball that went over her fence on the side of her house.

"Anything in my yard belongs to me," she said.

Our father was angry because he had to go out to Sears and buy another basketball—another official Spalding NBA basketball.

"Them balls cost money," he said.

One day my brother Chip was going outside to put the trash in the cans, when he stopped at the side door. He looked out of the glass and saw some white powder on the ground. While he thought it was odd, he went in the backyard following the powder; the white substance that looked like powdered sugar had formed a perfect circle around our house. It went over the chain link fence—there were traces of it on the fence—making it seem as if the person who made the circle was flying.

The fact that the person or thing had to be flying low to make the powder circle was disturbing. "Like something off the "Twilight Zone" or "Outer Limits", Chip said.

Momma unraveled the garden hose and rinsed the powder away.

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Not long after the powder was rinsed down the driveway and into the sewer hole in front of our house, the refrigerator broke down and that meant a repairman from Sears had to come. Then the washing machine, a Kenmore I believe, it broke down. The wiring in the house was older and my mother and father had fought over whether or not to remodel the basement. My father wanted it done while my mother felt he should invest in getting the wiring down first.

The basement was remodeled. We got a new pool table. There was a new stereo. And everything was back to normal. My brother Craig continued to shovel snow for Mrs. Malloy and she paid him. Since it was winter, we had forgotten all about the war. One day the snow cover melted and spring was beginning to walk from its sleep.

Momma had started doing day work for Dr. Gerlach and his wife. We needed the extra money.

## DEWEY DECIMAL SYSTEM

I ran up the stairs of the Glenville Public Library. This was the most beautiful building that I had ever been in, well except for the movie theaters downtown. There was shiny brown wood on the tall double doors, my mother had told me the doors were coated in a varnish – the kind she wanted to put on the nightstand that she was refinishing. I stood on the porch – my mother called it a terrace – in front of the library and tried to calm down. There were so many books inside and I wanted to read them all. I looked down at the railing where there were kids waiting I guess, for their mothers to walk them home.

Momma made me calm down. She wanted to finish her Winston cigarette – Winston tasted good like a cigarette should. I saw that in a magazine. Kids went inside with their parents while I waited. Inside the tall double doors was a large oval wooden desk, which rested in the middle of the floor. To the left were the Children's books and to the right were the Adult books. I wanted to go to the adult section, but I was too young.

Mrs. Gerlach, the lady my mother worked for, had taken an interest in me. She sent books for me to read and I got a paint-by-numbers kit. My parents allowed me to join the Academy Award Club, which sent out a volume every few months featuring the history of film for a specific decade. The book was made of heavy glossy stock and featured beautiful black and white Hollywood portraits. I would spend weeks looking at the photos and memorizing the Best Picture winners. The first Best Picture was “Wings”, starring Clara Bow.

When I get inside, I go up to the desk where the older women are standing. They are handling books. I go obediently to my side of the library and a white lady stops me to ask me if I’m there for the class. Not knowing what class, I reply yes. My mother waves to me and disappears into the Adult section. I know that I can sneak in there when my class is over. But I also know that she will want to ruin the day by stopping over her cousins’ house on Helena Avenue afterwards. I was tired of being called a “bookworm motherfucker”, or “corny four-eyed fool”. My cousins didn’t read. They could do all the latest dances and even the ones that Momma wouldn’t let us do.

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The librarian leads me over to a table. She says that this is the Dewey Decimal System class. The room is large with windows that start at the floor and reach the ceiling. A lot of light fills the room. It’s fall and there is warmth, which comes from the golden light that falls on the floor near the windows.

The rest of the children – there are four others – are seated at one of the long wooden tables. There are three girls and one white boy in a short-sleeved plaid shirt.

There are short yellow pencils and white squares of paper. There was a drawer from one of the cabinets on the table. I was the only black girl at the table. The rest were either white or one of those high-yellow girls who lived on Parkwood Drive. I had seen them at the library before. They walked by themselves.

The white lady librarian looks like she was trying to style her hair like former First Lady, Jackie Kennedy. The other white librarian at the circulation desk had a hairstyle like Janet Leigh in “Bye Bye Birdie”. We had seen that movie downtown at the State Theater.

The Jackie Kennedy one said her name. I don’t remember what it was. She began showing us how to use the Dewey Decimal system. That is how they arranged all of the colorful books on the shelves. I thought: “Now I’ll have the power to find any book that I want to read.” When I go to the adult side of the library, I can find all the grown up books that I want, all the F. Scott Fitzgerald books that I don’t own.

We were shown the chart, which broke down all of the numbers. Lots of zeros, I thought. But it made sense. The numbers floated off the charts and onto the tall shelves. I was excited. I wanted to start looking for books.

The lady in the navy blue skirt and yellow sweater had made us write down the numbers. Then we were released to go to the shelves and find our book. I came back first with my book. I guess she thought it was funny to have me find *Charlotte’s Web*. I hate that book. I don’t hate books; but I hate that book because the kids at Stephen E. Howe always grab it off the shelves when we go to the second floor for library time.

They act like the only reason we go to the library is to make fun of my glasses or to make fun of my name. But I never cry about it while I’m in the library. I find other

books to look at. I see the words on the paper and imagine myself writing them.

I always felt alone because I had to sit alone. I was the only one who really looks at the words – I am the only one who lifts up out of their seat and travels to Wonderland with Alice. I am the only one who cares about the words. I always ask to no one in particular: Why don't the other kids want to go somewhere new in a book's world?

I push my glasses up on my nose when big Charlotte Croom smacks me on the shoulder with a book. She is a raggedy tooth monster who hates me because we have the same name. But no one makes fun of her teeth or her dirty clothes. I think the boys are scared of her. They go in the opposite direction when she comes around. Everyone knows that I know I am scared because I cringe when she comes near.

She hovered over me threatening me about something and I could smell the odor of being outside. Momma hated that smell. She made us take a bath after we played outside. Charlotte didn't smell like Jergen's lotion or Dixie Peach hair grease. My mother had put Dixie Peach on my hair to make it easy to comb. She made me lotion my arms and legs good with Jergens. My mother hated for us to go to school and have our limbs ashy.

Charlotte Croom probably didn't have a mother in her house, I never saw her parents at Open House. She was a lonely monster. None of the kids made her leave me alone. My friend Dawn Miller, who lived on Tuscora, which was around the corner from the school, turned her face away from me. I knew she wouldn't help me. And I wouldn't walk home with her after school anymore either. The librarian finally came over and made Charlotte sit down. I didn't understand why she just stood over me waiting for me to cry. I never cried when she hit me anymore. I knew I could cry in peace at home.



I knew I would see her ugly face in my mind and smell her stinky breath and underarms. I would see her big eyes and fat nose. Today was the first time there was nothing crusty around her nostrils – she usually had something jammed around her nostrils, and her fingernails were always nasty. Her fists were ashy brown. Why did we have the same name? I wanted to write a story about her and put it in the newspaper, but my teacher, Mrs. Downs probably wouldn't let me. I think Charlotte was mad because Mrs. Down let me sing in music class. I played the auto harp and sang the "Do Re Mi" song from "The Sound of Music". I could read music because of my father. Charlotte said I was bragging.

I was the editor of the Stephen E. Howe Elementary School newspaper. I had volunteered because I was a writer. I got to go to the office and behind the desk where there was a Gestetner machine. I typed up the school news and put the carbon paper on the wheel. Then Mrs. Downs let me turn the wheel around and around to copy the news onto white paper. The lettering was always deep purple.

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I was rewarded with the opportunity to go find another book. I looked through the card catalog and wrote the numbers down and went directly to the shelf. I rubbed my fingers across the bindings of the books until I found *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The librarian told me, "good job". I was allowed to go on and pick out books to check out.

Afterwards, I stood by the entrance to the adult side of the library and my mother got up and joined me at the desk as we checked out our books together.

As we walked, my mother asked about what I had learned. I told her as I looked over at Helena Avenue where my mother's cousins, Kathryn and Rose Wiley lived in a two-family house.

"Don't worry. We're going straight home."

I looked up at my mother and happily swung my library bag.

When we got home, I put my books on the floor up under my bed. Momma had gone in her bedroom to put up her books. Then she went down to fix dinner. My brothers were outside playing and my sister Michelle was on the porch listening to her radio.

I went into Momma and Daddy's room. That's where she had put her books. I wanted to see what she had checked out. In her bag were Arthur Hailey's *Airport* and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. I didn't know which one to read first. I couldn't wait to use the card catalog to find all the Fitzgerald books. There was a list of books on the inside front cover of my copy of *Tender is The Night*. One day, my book would be in that card catalog.

## I BEGAN TO SEE THE FUTURE

“Charlotte, you have to get up at six o’clock because you going on that field trip,” my mother said. “Set the alarm clock.”

I went to my room. I don’t remember where Mickey was. I went to sleep and I woke up. It was like someone had tapped me kindly on the shoulder. “It is 5:52 am,” I said to myself. I looked over at the clock and it was about ten minutes to six.

I went to the bathroom. My mother was in the hallway. “I knew you’d be up. We never had trouble getting you up.”

I looked at my face in the mirror. I hated my glasses. I was in junior high now, and I was a writer. I worked on the school newspaper – my second one. I had my own typewriter and a stack of composition notebooks courtesy of my father. “A writer has to have their equipment. I’ll buy your first typewriter, and you’ll have to buy the next one – if you’re serious about being a writer.”

As soon as I started reading more, I began to have trouble with my eyes. I couldn’t see from the back of the classroom and Mr. Hamlet, my homeroom teacher,

talked to my parents. I began wearing glasses, which meant going to Sears. That's where I met Dr. Oppenheimer. When my eyesight changed, I knew I would have to go back to Sears to pick up my new ones. That meant Dr. Oppenheimer. I had to tell my parents.

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*I walked down a long corridor made of glass and concrete and I floated in shoes made of wood. There was a large mound outside the glass and I looked at the mound to find my way home.*

I'd see myself doing something simple like walking in a hallway and having a conversation with a person I didn't know. Then, I'd find myself in the midst of *that* conversation and realize this was the person from that vision.

I was paralyzed by familiarity with people I felt I already knew and places I'd already felt I'd been. I felt there was something wrong with me. I knew no one else experienced this. I knew I couldn't tell anyone. I had one of the episodes while I was in my room. I listened to my crystal radio—the flesh tone earpiece buzzed with the voice of the on-air jock.

“It's the top of the hour on CKLW!”

I watched a slice of life float by before my eyes. It scared me because this time it went past my eyelids so slow that I fell asleep.

I enjoyed my time with my new gift. I daydreamed more than ever before because I never knew what was memorable. I saw myself on the “Mike Douglas Show” and with Barbara Walters. I was being interviewed about my new book. I noted that I had no glasses on and I squinted. Barbara had me on her special, which always aired before the

Oscars. That was a relief.

“You’re going to get your glasses Saturday,” Chip said.

My little brother always knew what was going on because he hung out in the kitchen all the time trying to learn how to cook.

“I know you don’t want to go do you? You scared of that escalator ain’t you?”

“Shut the hell up, you don’t know anything!”

“Damn, Charlotte you just so stupid, you fell one time,” he said.

I went outside to sit on the swing set in the backyard. It was on its last legs, but it gave me a place to escape.

Seated on the broken swing gave me a chance to slip into a daydream. I don’t remember what I saw. I didn’t write it in my journal because I was afraid someone would find it like they always did. This was too scary. I remember mostly the moment, that feeling of traveling to another place and when I came back, the sense that I knew something. I had to tell my parents what happened to me.

I waited. I expected an episode but when it hadn’t happened by Thursday, I tried to make it happen. I went to bed right after school. But I couldn’t sleep. I stared up at the bottom of Mickey’s bunk. I hoped if I stared hard enough I would see something. Nothing happened. I heard my brothers fighting in their room; I got up and went downstairs to the basement to paint. Mrs. Gerlach had encouraged me to draw and paint, and she had bought me a telescope for Christmas – I was the only kid on the street with one.

I turned the bend and as I hit the landing I saw it: Dr. Oppenheimer’s face. I don’t know how they knew.

The inquiry took place in the living room. I sat on the gold couch in the corner while Momma stood in front of me with a towel tossed over her shoulder. She was getting ready to sear the London Broiler before she put it in the oven; earlier, she had made fresh loaves of bread. Daddy sat in a chair from the dining room set. He had on his black jacket from work and I could smell the steel mill on his clothes. I could see the dirt on his black plastic rimmed glasses. Momma didn't like him coming in her living room with his dirty clothes on. She liked to keep the house clean at all costs.

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"Well did he say anything?" my mother asked.

"No, he just started breathing on my while he was looking in my eye with the light and his left hand started rubbing my chest. He kept on breathing faster and faster and then I moved so he'd get off of me."

While I talked to her I could see the giant "E" on the wall behind Dr. Oppenheimer's head as his nose brushed against mine. I'd never been so close to a white person before. Playing with Barbara my friend from Wade Park Elementary didn't count because she had nappy blond hair and Winthrop said she wasn't white. I never understood how he knew.

My father never opened his mouth. He just looked at me. I couldn't for the life of me understand why he didn't march out the side door and head over to Sears and Roebucks, his favorite fucking store and kill that white man.

"Why didn't you tell us when you came out his office?"

"Momma the door was open. I don't understand why I had to go in there alone

with that man. Why did you make me go in there alone?”

“Well....”. She just looked at me. She wasn’t crying or nothing.

“I tried to tell you the first time, but you wouldn’t listen to me. I told you that Dr. Oppenheimer smelled like pickles, the garlic from pickles and it made me sick. When I think about him I get sick because I smell those pickles. Every time I come home from the doctors I go in my room because I get sick from smelling him and him rubbing on me. So I tried to go to sleep so I wouldn’t see his face or smell his pickle breath.”

My father looked at Momma like he was mad at her. He was always mad at her. It wasn’t her fault that man had touched me. He walked out the living room and got in his car and pulled out the driveway. I don’t know where he went. My mother just sat there. She looked at me like I did something wrong. I thought for a moment she was going to make me get the ironing cord or a switch. I thought she was going to beat me like Daddy beat her. But she sent me upstairs until dinner was ready.

I said to myself, “I’ll never tell my parents anything ever again.”

Now I had to face my brothers.

I went up the stairs.

My little brother Chip peeked out the door of his room.

“Charlotte I know that doctor did something to you, didn’t he?”

I came in their room. Craig was lying on the upper bunk bed watching with his eyes opened wide. Behind him on the wall were photos of athletes he’d cut out from magazines.

“What did he do? Touch your breasts?” Craig asked.

“Shut up Craig.” Chip turned to me.

“He touched you right? Y’all gonna have to go to a new doctor, watch. Daddy doesn’t say anything; but he’ll do something. Don’t worry Charlotte, Daddy’s gonna do something about it.”

“That’s why you suck your finger?” Craig asked. “You be in there crying and sucking your fingers! Ha, ha, ha! That’s why your teeth are bucked. You better stop!”

“Go to hell you motherfucker!”

“Craig was the one who told. He read your diary. I keep telling you to take it with you at all times!”

I went into my room and got on my bunk and pulled my blanket over my head. I didn’t eat dinner. All I could smell was Dr. Oppenheimer’s pickle breath. I sucked my finger all night long.

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We went to Union Eye Care on Carnegie in downtown Cleveland for a while and then we began going to Frederick’s at the Caxton Building on Huron Road in downtown Cleveland. We had a new eye doctor. The eye doctor was next to the music store. But lo and behold, within a short period of time, Dr. Oppenheimer came to that office. He’d left Sears and come to Frederick’s to torment me.

My heart sunk when I saw him there. He was smiling and welcomed me into his office. He was a small man with brown hair. He smelled like pickles even though I knew he really didn’t. He spoke with me as if nothing had happened. But that was nothing new. He did that each time after he had touched me – pretended that nothing happened.

I swore I’d never go to the doctor again.



“You will never be able to drive with this eyesight Charlotte. You have no peripheral vision. ”

He went on about something pulling on the nerves in my eye socket or something or another. I heard the word myopically; I didn’t understand.

“Well I want my father to come in and you can talk with him,” I said.

He didn’t say anything. He looked at me real funny style, as Chip would say. And he put his hands in the pocket of his white jacket.

“Okay.”

He brought my father in the examining room and Daddy looked at me and then at the doctor. My father had his cap in his hand and he sat down in the chair while I sat in the examining chair looking down at him. This is your chance to stand up for me Daddy.

Dr. Oppenheimer and my father discussed my condition. I was nearsighted they said. I would not recover because of my age. Dad never asked him about touching me. They talked and talked and I think I blacked out and left the room and left earth actually.

*I saw myself in the front of a room filled with students. I was dressed in blue jeans and a comfortable gray sweater. I lectured. Then I saw myself at a typewriter writing something. I then saw myself seated in an office. Soon I snapped to -- my father was asking me a question.*

“Charlotte can you get your coat,” he said.

My visit was over. He hadn’t put his hands on me. He knew things were different. My brother Craig went in for his examination. Chip was laughing, he wanted to know did anything happen.

“Nope. They said I’ll never be able to drive because I can’t see.”

“That white man doesn’t know what he talking about. I hated him the first time I saw him. Don’t worry, Daddy will teach you to drive.”

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I felt I was seeing the future, but I had no one to talk to about it. My mother was involved in her life and her work around the house. The only time I really felt like we were a family was when we traveled to her mother’s house in Lorain.

Grandma Chisholm was a storyteller. She took us kids out on the lake to go fishing. And we all loved fish.

After we caught the fish, she would take the fish out of the newspaper and scrape it with a big knife and scales and blood would be all over her kitchen sink. We watched sometimes, but other times we played with Frisky, the dog. I don’t remember what kind of dog Frisky was, but he was the smartest dog I’d ever known.

Grandma would tell Frisky, “Go down there to the store and get my paper.” The obedient brown shorthaired dog sat attentively listening to her instructions. When the last word exited her mouth, Frisky bounced his head up and down like, “I got it”, and he headed for the screen door, which he opened he opened with his nose. He ran down the stairs and within ten minutes, he appeared with the paper in his mouth.

The first I saw this trick, I was surprised, but not really. I knew there were unexplained things that went on in everyday life that ordinary people didn’t see or want to see. But I did. I wanted to see them. I wanted to be special.

My grandmother was special. Lulamae Chisholm told ghost stories. After we fried black bass, we’d eat the fish with white bread and grits.

“You got to look for the bones,” she told us.

But we'd learn quickly. We all loved fresh fish. You learn to pinch the hot white flesh of the fish and squeeze it between your fingers. I didn't put hot sauce on my fish until I felt for bones. And the bones were the color of the meat, so you had to look carefully.

Chip loved fish almost more than any of us. We'd sit on the floor in her living room where Grandma sat in a big easy chair getting her scalp oiled and scratched by my cousin Patti Chisholm.

Patti loved to scratch white flakes of dandruff from Grandma's scalp.

"Stay out of people's houses, because ain't nothing but trouble in going in folks houses," she said. "Watch people who talk on that telephone. If they talk all the time, they lie."

But then she'd tell her stories. Her glasses were off because she didn't want the white flakes on them. Sometimes Patti would try and tell us one of her stories. There was always story involving my mother's oldest sister Kate. No one wanted to go over Kate's house because there were always ghosts there. As she spoke, I realized my grandmother and my mother could see the future too. I learned that my great grandmother Walston, a Blackfoot Indian, had the gift.

So while Patti spun her tale, I was transported out of the room. This time I saw the railroad tracks. In Lorain we walked along the railroad tracks picking up slugs so we could put them in the pop machine to see if they worked. But what I saw was the view from a window overlooking the train tracks. There was a pile of steel gray gravel and on top of that pile was a witch, dressed in black cackling at me. There was this see through black fabric blowing in the wind and she held a black broom in her hand.

I snapped back in the midst of Patti's story. But I believed I really saw something. And there were times when my Grandma told stories or taught us about nature while we were fishing that made me feel alive. She had always made me feel that I was connected to something powerful and it wasn't merely nature.

If we were fishing, she might sniff the air.

"Rains coming, we got to go in."

My brothers and I would look at one another like, what is she talking about. As if she could hear us, she'd say:

"Can't you smell that? Smell it? That's rain a comin'."

As soon as she said it, I smelled it. I always had a thing about my nose. I could smell people and know things about them. I thought I knew if a person was bad by how they smelled. So it was no stretch to imagine that I could tell the weather by smell.

"I smell it," Chip said first.

"Feel the soil," she instructed. She pinched some nearby soil between her fingers. "That's what dirt feel like when rains a comin'."

What's so strange is that my grandfather just sat and fished while we received our lessons. Grandma made us proud to know that we had a little Indian blood and that it connected us to nature.

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Momma said she had seen Chip falling down off the porch at her mother's house before it happened. Grandma lived on the second floor over Gaul's Hall. The white two-story building had a gravel driveway. The white stones made a crunchy sound when we

pulled up, but it was awful slow trying to run across them stones.

“Chip stay off that porch,” Momma would say.

But Chip was the baby and he loved playing with Frisky. And one day, we were inside when we heard Chip screaming and Frisky barking at the screen door. Chip had fallen off the porch.

Momma knew that Frisky had tried to save Chip. Frisky told her in his barking when they got to Chip’s body.

I didn’t bother to question how a dog could tell you something when it didn’t speak English. I knew Frisky had been assigned to take care of Chip and he failed.

Momma hollered at Chip for playing on the porch when she’d told him not to. Chip claimed Frisky pushed him off the porch and we all knew that wasn’t true. Everyone believed the dog had tried to save the boy.

Frisky was never the same afterwards. He was depressed and he wound up getting hit by a car. Momma had seen it before it happened and tried to tell her mother.

## MY SECRET LIFE

After dinner, I ate my dessert; washed the dishes, and then, took out the trash. Everyone else went to the living room to watch television; I went to my room to write in my brand new journal. I had drawn the planet Jupiter on the inside cover in anticipation of the sci-fi tale I planned on writing.

*Jordan Jupiter wanted the story written and she was determined to see it printed in her publication. She was the editor and the publisher. Jordan had known that the president was keeping secrets from the rest of her world. Nimron Baal's assassination had been the only threat to Global President Michael Agamemnon's power. Now, that the Americas' leader was dead, shot in the head with a phaser that had fried his brain to bits, there was no one else to run against Agamemnon.*

I recited the story out-loud when no one was around. And I secretly mumbled my story as I walked to school or the store. Later, I wrote down the updated story, line by line in my notebook when my sister was out of the room.

*Veronica Peacemaker was sure that Jordan was lying. She had never thought Jordan would lie to her though. Jordan had brought her onto the magazine as an investigative reporter. Ronnie, as Jordan called her, had a nose for news. So why had Jordan thought she could fool her about who killed president Nimron? Ronnie's psychic powers had given her an advantage. She had known what people were hiding because she could read their minds. Jordan Jupiter had proof and was holding out on her staff. Ronnie had thought Jordan trusted her, but obviously she did not.*

The cramp in the web of my right hand throbbed and threatened my output. Undaunted I rocked my head back and forth to pour out more imaginings, but nothing came out.

I needed snacks. I had a bag of Cheese Twisters and an Almond Cluster bar. I had snuck the snacks upstairs in my library bag because my mother didn't want us eating junk food before dinner. She knew I was a writer, but she knew little about my kind. I needed peace and quiet and snacks.

*Jordan had remembered meeting the young writer at a bar in downtown Metrotopia. Ronnie had responded to an advert on a kiosk by the Metrotopia rail station. Jordan had brought Thorogood Temple with her to the meeting. He had been her best friend, and later, her boyfriend. He wasn't a journalist, he wrote detective novels. Jordan did not hold that against him. He knew people. "That's her right there, the tall one with the big eyes," he said.*

*Ronnie stood up and stuck out her hand; she was greeting family as she shook her new editor's hand.*

*"Have we met before?"*

*“I know it feels like I know you from somewhere. But I just moved here, so I know we didn’t go to university together and I never lived in the Hilliard province in the Midwest.”*

*“How do you know I lived in Hilliard?”*

*“Come on, it’s obvious, our friend here is a seer, just like us. This is rich,” Thorogood said.*

*Ronnie blushed with embarrassment. She had not realized that there were other foreseers out there. That was her special advantage.*

I tucked my journal underneath the mattress on my bed and went back downstairs to watch “Laugh-In”. I carried an empty one or one with few new notes just in case my nosey ass brothers got a hold of it and wanted to embarrass me.

*Ronnie just blurted it out: “Jordan you know that I can see. Why are you lying to me?”*

*“If I tell you, then you’re in danger as well. You’re family Ronnie. We’ve built up the Metro’s circulation from barely noticeable to near global. I couldn’t have done it without you. You’re the sister I never had. But this is bigger than all of us. A one world government is dangerous and you know it.”*

*“I know it is Jordan, but you have to trust the people to get this right. We have to report what we find out. It’s not our job to shield the public citizen and you know this.”*

To my amazement, the story had gotten away from me. How could a story that I made up have a life of its own? How could it independently decide that it wanted to go in a different direction? I had thought writing was the one thing in life I could control.

*Ronnie sat quietly in her seat in President Michael Agamemnon’s office. She*



*smiled with glee because that was the only way she could reconcile backstabbing her colleagues. They didn't understand her ambition. She wanted a global Pulitzer. This interview would cement her reputation as the Lois Lane of her generation -- only she was a real reporter working for a real magazine.*

I sat on the bottom step in the living room telling my story to no one. Some days I didn't even write in my journal. I was excited to work on my story. Jordan was my character, the person I set out to create, but now that the story had a life of its own and I was both fascinated and angry. How did F. Scott Fitzgerald control the words that appeared on the pages of his works? I had sat on the edge of my bed thinking about where I could find answers and I heard it as clear as a bell – *the library*. I went to the main library, ran up the stairs to the Fine Arts department. Arthur Mizener's *Fall of Paradise* was the first biography of the author I read. This led to *Save Me The Waltz* by Zelda Fitzgerald.

I sat at the large wooden table by myself and read as much as I could about the schizophrenic wife of my favorite author. Soon I became of student of the roaring 20s. I couldn't read enough about the era or about Fitzgerald.

*Ronnie soon realized that she had poor judgment. "My dear, you seem to believe that an interview with me would grant you the global Pulitzer? What are you willing to do to earn such a prestigious honor and how will it benefit my administration?"*

*Be careful what you wish for thought Ronnie. And just what was she prepared to sacrifice? She had already lost Jordan Jupiter's respect. What more was there to lose?*

"Charlotte, who the hell are you talking to in there?" Craig startled me with his question. When I had gotten home, no one was around.

“I never know when you or Craig are home because y’all don’t make any noise. Now Chip, Mickey or your mother, they want you to know they’re home,” our father would say. He had divided his family by type.

“Fool, come on out here. I need a favor,” Craig asked.

This normally meant, I stole something out of your room and I’d like more of it. “What is it?”

I came out of my room. Craig sat on the top step with his glasses on. I leaned on the cabinet where our mother had kept her clean linen. He rarely wore his glasses. He was embarrassed by how thick they were. This didn’t stop me from wearing mine out in public. I had learned how to pretend no one could see them and only when my so-called friends had surprised me with their degrading words did I see the folly in my make-believe appearance. My thoughts were interrupted with:

“Charlotte, I just need two dollars so I can get me a pop, and a candy bar. And yes, I know you have money.”

“Oh so now you read minds?”

“No, I rummage. I can’t help myself. I go through people’s things. It’s a habit and don’t try to pretend like you don’t do it. I know you be in Momma and Daddy’s room reading their books. Oh, I know about the nasty book in Daddy’s top drawer. I seen it and you didn’t put it back the way *I* left it. And I know Daddy ain’t had time to read because he was working eleven to seven.”

“So you want to *borrow* two dollars?” I asked.

“Yes nigga’, let me *borrow* two dollars from you, I’ll give it back when I get my allowance Monday.”

“You only get two dollars and fifty cents, you not giving me all your allowance.”

“Well, I’ll pay you a little at a time okay?”

I went in my room and got two dollars out of my stash – in a pair of socks in my second drawer in the back corner. I sold candy at school and everyone in the house knew it. I made good money by dumping boxes of Lemonheads into my clarinet case and selling them to my classmates.

“You going back in there to talk to yourself some more and write in that black and white notebook? Who is Jordan?”

“Leave me alone.”

*“Ronnie we know you spoke to the President. You let him know that we had the evidence to expose him?”*

*“He already knew. What did you think you were smarter than the world’s leader Jordan? Come on. I’m just as savvy as you and even I knew that,” Ronnie said.*

*“You’re a bright kid alright. Got a bright future. I know you want that Pulitzer. But this isn’t the way to go about it. If you work hard and work your way to the –”*

*“Jordan, I’m doing what’s best for our world and you know it. When I leave this office today, I’m not coming back, I quit.”*

*Ronnie got up from the desk and huffed out the door. She never looked back. As she walked past the rows of desks the other staff members all turned to watch the betrayal. Now it wasn’t just office gossip, it was real. For some Ronnie had been their first and only Northern Hemisphere editor. She hired several writers who struggled with questions of loyalty. However, they knew how hard it was to keep a good job nowadays, so they kept their mouths shut and their fingers on their computer typewriters.*

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I walked down to the Glenville library because I didn't feel like going downtown. No, I was broke and didn't have bus fare. I had begun to feel my neighborhood library's selection of biographies was lacking and there were so many books to read on Fitzgerald at the main library. But I had felt a need to look at books for inspiration; to see if I could find a book where the author kept control over his character.

When I got to the library, as soon as I went up the steps and pulled open the heavy wooden door, I realized I had made a mistake. There were lots of little kids on the juvenile side and I wanted to look through the card catalogue in peace. The white librarian in the glasses was giving a class on how to use the Dewey decimal system – there was no way I could just go over and grab the short yellow pencils and white squares of paper necessary for my research. I would have to interrupt them. I couldn't draw that kind of attention to myself without wondering if anyone noticed that my breasts had grown or that my hair was not smoothed down around my temples. Of course, I had not bothered to brush my hair before leaving the house as my mother instructed. I was on a mission. She would have never understood this. I shouldn't have run down Parkwood Drive.

I walked around the backside of the oval wooden desk in the middle hallway. My mission today was to get a couple of books and get out without having to take the Dewey decimal class again. The white librarian couldn't believe that a black girl knew where the books she wanted to read were shelved or that she knew the card catalogue numbers well enough to find material on her own. I wanted nothing to do with that white lady.

The kids were are one of the large table and the white lady with the glasses was standing up holding a drawer full of cards from the catalog. The five kids seated at the table looked bored like they wanted to be free to run around the library and touch all the books. *At least they're reading*, I thought. Most of the kids I knew hated to read or do their homework.

Then I realized it! Mystery writers controlled their characters -- made them commit crimes at will. Mystery writers decided who died and who lived. They even determined who solved the crime. I was trying to write a mystery story in a sense. I couldn't believe that I didn't know how to after all those Nancy Drew and Happy Hollister books. I had already begun reading my mothers' Agatha Christie novels, I'd grab one when I got home.

The white lady had not noticed me browsing the stacks. I grabbed "The Great Gatsby" off the shelf and rushed over to a table in the back of the room near the window. It was early afternoon. I owned no watch, but I always had a sense of time and I knew I had two hours to read before I needed to run home for dinner at six.

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When I got home, I snuck into my mother's room and grabbed an Agatha Christie book off the shelf over their bed. *The Mirror Crack'd* was the title. I closed my parents' bedroom door quietly and went quickly into my room. Mickey was in the basement doing laundry, so I could read pages as fast as possible. Sometimes I cheated and read the last two chapters first to find out who committed the crime. Then I would go back to the front of the book to see how it was all pieced together. Agatha Christie could control her

characters. She made them speak, she made them cry, she made them kill and she helped to them to think for themselves in a sense. I could do the same thing.

*Veronica Peacemaker was found murdered at the rail station on Tremont Avenue. A phaser weapon had fried off her hair. When Jordan got to the scene of the crime what she looked for first before identifying the body, was the bag that she knew her colleague and friend carried. In that bag would be Ronnie's notes from her interviews. Jordan knew if her best friend had betrayed her for a story, it had to be bigger than any of them realized. That meant that not only was the president involved, other members of the Federation were involved. But when Jordan looked at the body, she noticed that there were no rings on Ronnie's right hand. This was a careless mistake; too careless in fact. Her friend's face was burned beyond recognition. This was probably Ronnie's android double. She fried it herself for protection. But if it hadn't fooled Jordan, it certainly wouldn't fool the Global police.*

I wanted to stay up all night and talk the story out loud – this was my secret life. Instead, I wrote it all down on paper and stuck it underneath my mattress. Sometimes, I pulled the covers over my head and dreamed about my story. When Mickey had the sound on our black and white television loud enough, I mumbled to myself until I fell asleep.

*Global police found the real Veronica's body; they used her eye print to verify her identity. Jordan thought it was strange that someone stood that close to her friend and fired a weapon in her face. Why destroy her face? Why had she let them get that close?*

Sometimes I was amazed at how exciting my story had become. I needed to put it all in my notebook. I had parts in my head and on scrap pieces of paper. I imagined what

the cover of my novel look like on the shelf.

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I had waited on the steps just inside the doors of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, my junior high school. Our school was famous because the creators of the Superman comic books used to go to school here. We lined up on the stairs of the hallway waiting to go to homeroom. For me it was time to lean against the wall and observe the other kids, but more importantly, I spent time daydreaming about my characters, Jordan and Ronnie.

“Char-lette”, a voice interrupted.

I snapped to when my friend Valerie King called me again. “What were you thinking about? You looked like you was on another planet or something?”

Valerie was always smiling that white-toothed smile that made everyone like her. Deborah Miller, her best friend was standing next to her. Deborah and Valerie were inseparable. “Charlotte girl, you can’t stand out here in a daze with nasty ass Everett Horton loose in the hallway. He’s been grinding on girls’ butts all afternoon, be careful.”

*Everett Pilgrim was found guilty of murdering Veronica Peacemaker. We all knew Pilgrim was working for the government, but the crime appeared to a simple robbery. But we knew better. When Mr. Pilgrim went before the global magistrate in Istanbul, he looked skinny and afraid, not at all like a young man capable of such a brutal crime. We had learned that he wasn’t as innocent as he appeared. Pilgrim was a gifted opera singer who met had Ronnie Peacemaker while she was covering the 2018 Olympics in Rome. He had performed in the opening ceremony along with 10,000 other*

*American singers and performers. He was a struggling singer -- a fill-in for another male vocalist Robert Negero who had become ill at the last minute. Negero had disappeared from his Seattle, Washington province home. Pilgrim became a celebrity at the games and Ronnie of course was attracted to his rags-to-riches tale. 'The street urchin turned star'. She would think it was straight out of Dickens and if he had been born when Ed Sullivan was on the air, he would have made his debut on the Sunday night variety show and become an even bigger star. She had been set up.*

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“Charlotte stop talking to yourself, and come on out the bathroom,” Chip said. “I gotta pee real bad!”

I had been sitting on the toilet for God knows how long. I pulled up my pants and flushed the toilet.

When I opened the door, there was Chip leaning against the banister. “You could have gone in the basement and went to the bathroom.”

“What and miss out on hearing your corny ass story? Hell no! I wanna know what happens. You ain’t a storyteller like Grandma.”



## METAMORPHOSIS

While I had been preoccupied with reading and writing, adolescence moved on to another unsuspecting child victim leaving in the wake of its absence, a series of physiological and emotional changes. For me the changes weren't subtle, and they had included a body odor that I had never encountered before even after playing outdoors all day. Puberty had hardheartedly moved in and now I had real breasts, small lumps, which despite their size had still caused Dr. Oppenheimer to try to feel me up while giving me an eye exam – that wouldn't happen again. I had ordered a red knife from all places, a *Jughead* comic book. Of course, when it arrived, it was smaller than my thumb, but carrying it made me feel safe. I had to protect myself. While the strange odor was shocking, nothing was more bizarre than the wiry and unsightly hairs, and mysterious bleeding. I didn't understand the blood at all.

I had come upstairs to the bathroom to have my new breasts measured. Momma was taking me to Sears to get a new brassiere for high school. "You can't be outside

flopping around like that.” I cringed each time she said it.

“You know about your menstrual cycle, when it starts, you have to be prepared. You have to carry a little purse with your pads in it. You have to keep yourself clean or else there will be an odor.” She was right up on me, right in my face.

I couldn’t look my mother in the eye. I knew she could see every thing I had ever done with my body – like trying to wash off Dr. Oppenheimer’s garlic smell – there were still marks on my chest. I exhaled. I realized that my mother knew I had started my period. She had figured out that I had used up her toilet tissue to form napkins until I could get up to Ellison’s Drug Store on 105<sup>th</sup> Street to buy Kotex napkins. My period was an enemy in my book – a foe that appeared at will, bringing with it back pain, breast soreness, vaginal odors, and overall embarrassment. So many girls at school had been humiliated by wearing light colored clothing only to have their period appear in ketchup colored stains on the back of their skirt. I didn’t need new ways to be disgraced; being short, smart and blind gave bullies enough reasons to come after me.

Deciding to tell my mother was difficult; Era Morgan knew I would be the daughter who would keep secrets from her – I caught her watching me as I was watching her. If I had become sneaky, it was her fault – I went through the cabinets up under the kitchen sink where I found Argo Starch to eat. I ate cigarette ashes left in ashtrays after my parents’ guests had left the comfort of our living room. I used to sneak and drink the liquor that they had left in their glasses until my father caught me in the act. I was careful to turn the glass around and not put my lips on the red lipstick marks and I never drank from a man’s glass. I made sure to peek into the living room to see where my parents’ guests were seated. I always ran when my father would ask me to come in and say hello.

They would tell their guests that I was shy.

My mother knew I was already ashamed of my body. I wanted her to know it wasn't my fault that against my will, bad things had happened to me. I had never told her about Doll Baby, the babysitter Era Morgan had hired when we lived on Wade Park. I still got that pain in my stomach when I thought about how Doll Baby.

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Doll Baby had seemed like a nice girl, but there was something in her eyes that reminded me of that look I had seen in Mr. Moe's eyes. He was a trickster like that Br'er Rabbit in those Uncle Remus stories. And so was our new babysitter.

My parents had gone to a lodge meeting and left us with a neighbor's daughter. Our friends, Al and Donnie, said that Doll Baby was cute. One afternoon, I had come into the kitchen and found her seated at the kitchen table reading a movie star magazine.

I had walked past the babysitter with the intentions of going up to my room to play with my toys, but she called me. I stopped in my tracks. She put down my mother's *Photoplay Magazine* and asked if I wanted some of her candy. Doll Baby might have heard about Mr. Moe. I looked back at her because I didn't know what she really wanted – I had learned from Mr. Moe that grown people lied. I told her no.

But Doll Baby was slick. She *was* a nice girl and it took all summer for me to let my guard down and allow her to make my peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She made my chocolate milk the way I liked it and I had made the mistake of liking her and before I knew it, I was standing near her reading comic books when she tried picked me up and put me on her lap. I don't remember how *it* happened. But I remember feeling

uncomfortable *down there*. I took her hand away and I jumped down off of her lap. She told me that I better not tell anybody. Doll Baby never treated me the same; she was always mad at me.

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I was scared that if Era Morgan got too close to me, she might want to talk. I couldn't bring myself to tell her that she had made me feel like a victim all over again whenever I had reported an incident. I wanted to know why adults didn't get their sex *shit* from other adults instead of bothering kids. I didn't want to tell her about the knife.

Spending time with my mother reminded me what a stranger I was in my own home. When my father's mother, Pecola Morgan came by to visit, she would take everyone else back to her house in Sheffield, Ohio. But for some reason, my mother didn't let me go with the rest of her children. I had known that I was different, but I didn't think it was the writing; there was something else.

Momma had that yellow measuring tape over her shoulder and it was ready to take my measurements, but I wasn't ready to make the transition; I didn't know how. I stood in the middle of the bathroom daydreaming. My mother snatched me around and took her damned numbers and wrote them down on her papers. Is she really my mother I wondered?

I had often wondered if she was my mother. I didn't look like my family; I was a different color, and my hair was different – completely straight on top and wavy in the back.

As I put my top back on, I realized how ungrateful I had been. The sex education

class at FDR had taught me what to expect when my body changed; I hadn't been paying attention. I was spared from having to talk to my mother about the birds and the bees. Why even have the conversation when your parents own an anatomy and physiology book, which they kept on their bedroom bookshelf. Of course, I had looked at the human body in full color illustrations. I hated when my mother tried to talk to me about sex; she made everything a horror story with her graphic images from the family oral history book – I think she had been raped and was forced to marry the boy. I had a half sister named Barbara Crisp who lived in Lorain, Ohio with her grandmother. We didn't talk about my half sister.

My mother's bitterness had been easily transferred to me in a series of lectures about boys. I had already learned to be mistrustful. There was always some lurid story about what boys wanted to do to you and there was always the sharing of wise words that she had gotten from her mother. I didn't seem to see how the words had done my mother any good.

Even though I had blossomed into some new creature, I was still allowed to watch ABC's "Wide World of Sports" with my brothers and father. I couldn't miss a Muhammad Ali fight. I sat on the floor with my roasted peanuts and root beer, but my heart was somewhere else. I knew I needed to change. I didn't want to be outside running around with my little brothers anymore.

I was going to be in high school. My mother's employer, Mrs. Gerlach was still encouraging me to listen to classical music and paint. I was sent to the Cleveland Institute of Art, in nearby University Circle, to study still life drawing and Japanese watercolor painting. I couldn't let puberty distract me from the task at hand – I was going to be a

novelist.

I had purchased F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and The Damned* and I decided that it was better than *The Great Gatsby*. I promised myself that I would read it each summer. I wrote each night. I was going to publish a series of best-selling novels by the time I was 21.

My first day at Glenville had begun with the long walk down Lakeview Avenue and up the tilted driveway that led to the school. I had walked there by myself and I was very nervous. The new building was larger than FDR, which was the old Glenville High. I went around to the front and through the tan double doors. The hallways were long and there was a big trophy case. I wanted to look at some of the statues, but there were adults ushering us to the auditorium where over 1400 students were seated. Our principal, Leo Clayton, a tall, thin brown skinned man with a neat mustache and authoritative voice, made a speech welcoming us to the beginning of the rest of our lives with a warning: "Look at the person sitting on the left and right of you. I guarantee you that they won't be there come graduation day."

I don't remember who sat next to me, but I do remember looking around the auditorium and being amazed at the number of kids. They were different shapes and sizes. All different sizes and types of cool Afros.

On the way home, I had prayed hard until my head hurt that I wouldn't get treated like at Franklin D. Roosevelt. I didn't want to worry about being in the hall and getting bullied by big thick boned girls who were so old that they were dating 35 year old men by the time they were 15. No, I wanted to fit in and not stand out. I knew the punishment for getting noticed — you got beat up.

“Remember how *Charlette* More-gan used to act in class? We’d be playing and *Charlette* More-gan would look at us all serious like. She told Mrs. Hall that we didn’t know *The Iliad and the Odyssey* because she was too busy talking about her dinner party with Carl Stokes. Damn, we ain’t never had a black man for mayor; I wanted to hear about the guests and that good food. But not *Charlette* More-gan. She was always so serious,” Geraldine Fletcher had said. We were in front of Franklin Delano Roosevelt taking photos. We had just graduated. I kept looking into the lens of Algie Smith’s camera.

When kids wanted to jump on me, it was an older looking classmate like Geraldine whose big bright smile and loud voice had stepped in with common sense to break up the situation, “Why y’all don’t like *Charlette*? What did she do? She just different.”

Geraldine was the one who was different in my book. She had a boyfriend named Charlie and she talked about him all the time. I think Charlie Brown was a big drug dealer. I couldn’t imagine having a boyfriend in junior high.

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“If you can survive your family, you can do anything,” my father once told me.

Cousin Jerry Chisholm was my mother’s favorite nephew. For some reason, he was allowed to stay at our house the summer before high school started – my father loathed his wife’s family. Jerry was an alcoholic, funny and completely irresponsible. He had those Chisholm cheekbones and he was crafty. Jerry was a musician who always had his drumsticks and a 12 pack of Miller High Life beer around.

While he was at the house, most of his time was spent looking at the babysitter, Valerie Hempstead who worked next door at Miss Coleman's house. I was busy just trying to hang out with him. He was like his mysterious mother, Betty Chisholm, whom I had barely gotten a chance to know.

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When we lived on Wade Park, Aunt Betty ran out of the side door of our house and all I remember was blood on the shrubs that lined the fence. She was screaming and hollering. I think she was stabbed by one of the branches on the tree.

Some white men came and they took her away. I later found out that Aunt Betty was an alcoholic. She was suffering and I didn't know what detoxification meant. I heard some of the cousins say that she was a dyke, but they never explained what that meant.

Momma and Daddy never explained, and Aunt Betty remained a mysterious woman who died of a massive stroke. Her son Jerry actually liked me. He never put me down because I was always reading and writing.

"Charlotte, you real smart. You might do something one day girl." As we sat on the banister of the porch, Jerry asked me if I wanted to get my ears pierced like everyone else.

"Sure."

He went in the kitchen, got an ice cube from the freezer and a needle from my mother's sewing machine.

"Just sit still dummy or else this is gonna hurt. I'm gonna hold this ice on your ear and it'll get numb, okay?" I wanted to change my mind.

He leaned over and pressed the cube up against my ear and my earlobe went



numb. I never felt him slide the needle through to the other side; I felt the tickling of the white thread on my neck. Now my ears were pierced thanks to Jerry and I told everyone about it. Chip and Craig both thought I was a fool to let Jerry touch my ears. They didn't know that it was important that I was able to go to school with pierced earrings. My mother was mildly upset that Jerry had pierced my ears.

Now, I felt a little older, but I looked so young. I don't know what I wore, that first day; I think it was a dress that my sister had sewn. She always had those Butterwick patterns that we bought from Sears. Mickey was good at making those A-line dresses. She saved a lot of money by making our clothes. Dawn Miller, my best friend since elementary school still lived on Tuscora. I went up her street and waited outside the front steps for her to come out. We walked up Lakeview to the school.

According to the half sheet of yellow paper that I had received in the mail, I was in Homeroom 735. Freshman, were on the third floor, juniors on the second, and seniors, on the first. The school was designed like a huge rectangle. I walked in the building and up the stairs to the third floor. I turned right and my room was right there – 335. My homeroom teacher was the music director, James Turner. Mr. Turner was a friend of my fathers' as was damned near every black musician in town who could read music. You stayed in the same homeroom throughout your academic career.

I walked in the band room and found a seat. I was surprised how large the room was and all the instruments stored there had reminded me of being in band class in junior high. But then I felt all the strange eyes looking at me – I was smiling. I looked happy. I suddenly felt goofy; the moment was ruined.

“Who is that goofy ass square?”

“Four-eyed bitch!”

“What kind of hairstyle is that?”

I knew my thick glasses might give bullies an open door. And I had really soft hair that couldn't be styled like most girls. I had brains though, and I was a writer. I had just purchased my first typewriter – a Royal – from Cleveland Typewriter on Lee Road. My father took me over there one Saturday morning. He let me pick it out all by myself. I rode the bus downtown to Burrows on Euclid Avenue to buy two ribbons for my machine and a ream of 20-pound paper.

I remember walking through the crowded aisle browsing for a machine to write the next great American novel – written by a black girl, and it would be my ticket to the “Dick Cavett Show”.

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As I had browsed through the shelves in Burrows, my eyes spotted an oversize coffee table book of Hollywood portraits. It was on sale for two dollars, which I thought had to be a mistake. I picked it up – I knew it was mine. I loved visiting Burrows because I was always rewarded with a wonderful purchase – a great pen, nice paper, a cool looking new journal, or a new novel by an author I hadn't previously read.

I had purchased my copy of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* at Burrows. Horace McCoy's novel was turned into a movie starring Jane Fonda. I had also bought Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* at Burrows. Some books came through the Book-of-The-Month Club, like the copy of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. Popular titles that didn't appear on the small colorful list of monthly selections were purchased at my favorite

stationery store.

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Mr. Turner stood in front of the class of freshmen students and made a series of announcements, most notably, the promise to show us our new lockers, which we would have to share with another student. Then the principal, Leo Clayton, who we had met during our earlier orientation, made a series of announcements over the loudspeaker system. Then, we went out to the hallway to see the lockers, which were a funky mint green. The lockers lined the inner core of the building and the outer walls.

I lucked out by getting to share a locker with Dawn. Mr. Turner had passed out cards with our locker number and combination. Dawn and I walked down the hallway looking for our locker when we heard a loud rumbling sound.

I *felt* the sound of cattle stampeding under my feet; it grew louder and louder. A hot wind came from around the corner. Then we saw them. I instinctively flattened my body against the wall as a herd of students dressed in black and red burst through the hallway doors.

“We got one hundred eighty days for the Senior A’s. Hey. Hey. Hey. Goddamn. No shit!” They said it over and over. They ran – in a synchronized fashion -- with their hands in the air. Some freshmen got slammed against their lockers. Or they got their Afros smashed. The larger boys in the front of the pack were brutal towards freshmen boys who looked weak. I felt the intensified hot wind and the smell of body odor as they went past me. This big fat kid led the pack of stampeding students. The few stragglers in the line were girls and they had tried to push me, but I ducked out of the way of their

outstretched hands.

Dawn said, “It’s a tradition. Your class runs through the halls singing how many days before graduation. That was Melvin Johnson in the front. He is the most popular senior in the school. We’ll get our chance to be in the front.”

## PLAGUED

Our mother, Era Morgan, victim of a *loveless* marriage and domestic violence, had run away. She left behind a bitter husband, Charles Morgan and three of her children. With no mother, our home died slowly of neglect. Opportunistic mice and roaches and termites moved in and took over.

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The night brought terror. The mice wanted food. I wanted sleep. I wrapped myself up in a blanket, making sure to cover my head. I turned my television down low so I could hear the entry of vermin into the room.

My bed was in the corner. There was a hole in the plaster. The walls were a dingy lemon yellow with a white trim. Momma had painted the room herself. A winter storm captured an entire pane of glass from the back window. Father swore he wouldn't fix anything anymore.

I cut cardboard from a yellow legal pad into a square big enough to cover the missing glass. I stapled it in place. Next I took plastic from my father's dry cleaning, and stapled it over the entire window. I had no heat in my room because our father had refused to do what Momma asked, "Get that damned heat duct repaired."

Fully clothed and wrapped in three blankets, I peered out from my fabric fortress when I heard a mouse run across the room. I kept a shoe nearby and I threw it in the direction of the sound. All was quiet for a moment, and then it started up again.

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I had the brilliant idea of stuffing clothes in front of my door to keep the mice out. They just pushed their way in and eventually one jumped on me while I slept.

Then I took a *Cleveland Press* newspaper, rolled it up and stuffed it under the door. I took Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett paperbacks and stacked them up to block the door. I was safe.

I got under my blanket and turned my radio on, but down softly in case there was a breach in my security. I had forgotten to factor in going to the bathroom. I had to open my door and go pee. The hallway was freezing. A basement window was broken.

The toilet seat was cold and the linoleum was missing under my feet. There were holes in the floor around the toilet. The wood was exposed. There was no electricity in the bathroom so I had to finish fast.

On the way back to my room I saw that my father's door was broken off its hinges. I saw the light from his television. Then I remembered what my little brother Chip had said, "We got termites in here. I think that's where all these holes in the floor

are coming from.”

I went in my room. Set up the security measures and got back in my cold bed. I formed my cocoon and tried to sleep. It was 1:38 am. Something jumped on my head. My father banged on the wall – “Quiet!”

I needed a new idea. The mice weren’t coming from under the door; they were coming in from beneath that gap between the floor and the wall.

“I’ve got it! I’m going to fill that space between the floor and the baseboard with plaster,” I thought.

My brother Craig remembered Momma’s bag of plaster in the basement. I went down and got some. I made the gray mixture in one of my mother’s best bowls. She used to mix cake batter in it.

I got on my hands and knees with a butter knife and filled in the space. The smell of fresh plaster trumped the staleness in the air. The magazines and books my mother had warned me about keeping in my room, were covered in dust. I stopped to read a page from Vincent Bugliosi’s *Helter Skelter*. A thick splinter stabbed me in the knee. I pulled it out, but some fragments remained.

I got back on my knees anyway. I moved furniture to get to the baseboard. I found coins, an old journal, more dust bunnies, pens and mice droppings galore.

No one called me for dinner. After I had completed the perimeter of the room, I got cleaned up and into bed. I turned on the television to watch “The Avengers” on the CBC. I had forgotten to put my other security measures in place. I heard a mouse in my wastebasket.

I threw a shoe and hollered, “Die bastard, die!!” In response, it screeched. The

plastic on my window rippled in the wind, I pulled my blanket tight and tried to go to sleep.

A week later, a calico cat had climbed in the broken basement window and made herself at home. She ate the mice.

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One day I had a plate in my room. Out the corner of my eye, I swore I saw something brown moving up the wall. Momma had told us to never bring food in our rooms.

The next time I saw a cockroach, I was in the kitchen during the daylight hours when I cooked. It moved across the salmon pink counter top.

“We got roaches,” Craig said on his way to the bathroom.

Our father had bought these little gray anti-pest boxes. One was on the floor under the kitchen table. A red light pulsed on and off. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that he was one plague behind. Or maybe there were mice in his room terrorizing him.

Chip asked, “Did you see them boxes he bought? Doesn’t he know that shit don’t work?”

“Do you want to tell to him? Hurry up and clean this up. Momma hated a nasty kitchen. She said, ‘If you see roaches, get Boric Acid.’ We need to fill in this crack behind this sink,” I said.

Sure enough the space behind the sink and the wall housed roach carcasses. Craig stole money out of our father’s Muriel cigar can to buy the Boric Acid. He snuck past our father who camped out in his lounge chair watching “The Wide World of Sports”. Chip



and I kept him talking while Craig ran down to Ellis' Drugstore.

“Black people always got their hand out looking for the white man to give them something. They don't buy property. They take their money and play the numbers. I tell people I hit every two weeks — with my paycheck. Look at how y'all destroyed this house. Your mother...”

I could take it up until he started in on Momma. Luckily, Craig was at the side door with a bag. Chip took the yellow and red bottle and cut the tip off of it with the butcher knife, Momma used to slice her London broiler.

I snatched the bottle from Chip and squeezed it generously and white powder shot out and went up my nostrils and into my eyes. Terror struck! My imaginary asthma attacks were worse than real ones.

“Charlotte, give me the damned bottle,” Craig said. He snatched it from my hand and went about applying the powder to every surface and in every crack where we thought a roach might crawl. I never saw another roach.

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Some time after we beat the mice and the roaches, Chip said, “Have you noticed Daddy hasn't been to the grocery store?”

## STARVED

Our father had decided to stop putting food in the Kenmore refrigerator. The lack of new groceries had closely followed our mother's untimely disappearance. My brothers, Chip and Craig mocked me, and called me stupid because I didn't remember our parents fighting. Fighting indicated problems in the marriage and had led to our mother's unhappiness. She had a plan. Apparently our mother had promised, "Once Chip is old enough to take care of himself, I'm outta here." I knew nothing of the pledge because I was otherwise occupied with my reading and writing.

"You always up there talking to yourself and writing in that damned notebook so you miss everything," Chip said.

One day I took notice of the change. I was on the floor of my room reading – I was in Jerusalem with bitchy Hercule Poirot, who was after Raymond Boynton in *Appointment with Death*, and I felt the hunger pangs – it was time for lunch. I went down to the kitchen and noticed there was no bread or any Nestlé's cocoa for chocolate milk.

My brow furrowed. I can't have a peanut butter and grape jam sandwich (Momma never bought 'jelly' because it didn't spread across her freshly baked bread). I was annoyed. I went to cabinet and looked again to check – no cocoa. I looked in the refrigerator – no milk.

Our father still poured steel at Jones and Laughlin, and still worked the swing shift. He normally found time to go shopping on Wednesday or Saturday. He wrote his grocery list with the red calligraphy pen he used to compose his band's musical arrangements. The list, usually left on the dining room table, was not there. Normally, we took turns looking at the list, adding items Dad left off, and admiring the handwriting.

"You must practice your penmanship each week," he told us. He had long hands and fingers. He issued out lined paper and thick black pencils with *Ticonderoga Laddy* imprinted on the side. We practiced writing our names over and over again until we saw a change in our cursive writing. Afterwards, we would have three freshly baked cookies and a glass of milk.

This week there was no list on the table.

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Normally, when he brought groceries, we ran from different parts of the house – me from my room; Chip from his room; and Craig from the basement – and we rushed outside to help our father bring in the bags. I looked to see if he'd bought Tang or Nestlé's Quick; Chip for steaks or pork chops; and Craig for glazed donuts or hard salami. We knew there would be Virginia smoked bacon – no one bought prettier bacon than our father. If he shopped on a Saturday, he would fry bacon, smoked Kielbasa, and

make a huge omelet for dinner.

Weeks passed and he still had not gone shopping. I started to get scared. “Do we have *any* meat up there,” I asked. Chip had his whole head was in the freezer looking for pork chops to go with the pork and beans he’d found in the cabinet. “Ain’t this a bitch?”

I stood and watched. I was so confused. Where had all the meat gone? There was nothing in the freezer down in the basement. I leaned on the kitchen door; Craig leaned on the stove, while Chip continued to look through the refrigerator.

“Why don’t we just ask him why him to buy some groceries because we’re hungry,” I asked. Chip took his head out of the refrigerator and looked at me.

“Bitch, are you crazy? You don’t see any groceries. That means he ain’t buying no fucking food! He’s trying to starve us to get back at Momma.” He slammed the refrigerator door.

Craig had disappeared up the stairs and I knew what that meant – time to hit the Muriel Cigar stash and steal some Kennedy fifty-cent pieces. Craig went out the front door and was on his way down to the store.

Terry’s Market, located on the corner of Pierpoint and East 105th was one of the remaining black-owned stores in the neighborhood. The place had become a little grimy — the floor wore a coat of neglect – scuff marks, tossed gum, and dried leaves. When you came through the steel double doors, bare shelves, high prices, and the smell of pine cleaner greeted you.

The bright lights over the cooler seemed to magnify the pine smell. The meat was neatly packaged – the pork loin chops, which laid one on top of the other, were bright pink and cheap – six for \$1.78. He bought two cans of Del Monte’s whole kernel corn,

which cost \$.75. With the rest of the money, Craig stopped over my friend CC's house on Kempton, and bought a tray bag of marijuana, which amounted to enough weed to make three or four joints.

Chip and I were in the living room watching Bugs Bunny cartoons when Craig came in the side door with the bag and sat it on the counter. "I got some chops and corn," he announced.

"Did you go over CC's?"

"Charlotte, please."

"Gimme the bag," Chip demanded. "I'll roll the joints."

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Craig fried the pork chops in a stick of margarine. He'd put Lawry's seasoning salt all over the chops until they were colored orange – he was trying desperately to mask the taste of the pine cleaner. He put another half of stick of margarine in the canned corn. Chip and I were laughing at Bugs and Daffy when Craig brought us our plates. The chops looked great. The first bite reminded me why I hated Terry's Market – the meat tasted like Pine Sol. "Why does this goddamn meat have to taste like this?"

I missed my mother. I missed getting my chocolate milk and peanut butter and jam sandwich in the afternoon. I longer for her pot-roast and fresh baked breads; I cried out to any god who could restore the contents of the blue cookie jar in the kitchen.

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Getting up was a chore. There was nothing to eat for breakfast. My favorite meal by the fifth week of the grocery strike was a tablespoon of peanut butter with maple syrup squeezed on top of it. Soon as you went into the cabinet, one of my brothers came running to make sure that there was peanut butter left for their breakfast.

We survived by eating the last of the canned vegetables in the cabinet. Our mother had stored canned goods in the basement on shelves outside of the bathroom. She also had a freezer where a half of cow was once stored.

I loved going down to the basement to pull out a package of t-bone steaks for our dinner. Sometimes, Momma sent me to get the pork chops – she had kept both pork and beef in the big stand up freezer. She knew I could find the chops because I had helped her label all the cuts. Maybe our father was angry because we didn't like his cooking. He never had to cook because he had a wife.

“You better eat what I put before you. My mother used to make us stewed tomatoes and bread.”

We used to sit at the dinner table together and pretend we were a family without our mother and Mickey. Our sister was pregnant and had moved out to a raggedy house on Garfield. A family meant having good food. Our father was a lousy cook. We missed our mother's fried chicken, pot roast, fresh fried donuts, fresh baked bread, barbecued spareribs, and mustard and turnip greens. She made cherry pie and apple pie. She broiled steaks with fresh garlic and we each had our own whole steak. She made fresh lemonade with lemons and lime. She had a silver bowl, which she filled half way with slices of fragrant lime and lemons slices. She poured sugar over it and took a large spoon and mashed and mashed and mashed the limes and lemons. Then she poured it all into a

pitcher with water and ice. Our father was a poor substitute for Momma in the kitchen.

In fact, we had a process where we took the food off our plate and threw it out the back window when our father wasn't looking. Or, we fed it to our dog Sam. Even our German shepherd didn't want to eat the food our father prepared -- he couldn't cook and fixing his mother's recipes was like adding insult to injury.

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Our father had three sisters: Loretta, Shirley, and Barbara. We had gotten tired of going without food, so we called Loretta and told her. We actually used the phone to make a long distance call thinking that our father would be embarrassed by his sisters who would be outraged that we weren't being fed.

"I can't believe Junior would do that, you kids are just lying," Loretta said.

Craig was on the phone explaining, "Bunny, he won't buy us any food, we don't have any food in the house. We're drinking instant coffee and eating a tablespoon of peanut butter for dinner. Now I don't want to steal from my father, but I'm not gonna sit up here and starve."

Craig had stretched the yellow kitchen phone cord out completely; and he pushed through the swinging doors into the dining room so that we could see him. He pointed to the phone and mouthed, "I can't believe this!"

"I wouldn't lie about starving," Craig said.

"What is she saying Craig?" Chip asked.

"Bunny he's not. He hasn't bought any food in weeks and we're hungry over here. Your brother isn't buying food! We don't know what we're gonna do!" Craig

slammed the phone down.

“They wonder why no one wants to come over their fucking house for Thanksgiving,” he said.

“That’s why nobody calls them,” Chip said. Now he was sitting on the couch petting Sam. “I knew they wouldn’t believe us.”

“They don’t believe us because of what Daddy says to them,” I said. “All they do is call our Momma a whore. She was an unwed teenage mother. My grandmother shouldn’t be talking about our mother like that.”

“I’m going up there and get more money,” Craig said.

You were going up there anyway I thought. However, I didn’t say anything. I didn’t feel like fighting. I knew he was angry and looking for a fight. Let him and Chip go at it. I knew where a can of corn was hidden because I had hidden it. As soon as they left, I would have a feast of whole kernel corn with the last of the margarine.

Craig went up, got more money out the can, and headed to Terry’s. I heated up my corn and went back up to my room to read my new book – Norman Mailer’s Marilyn Monroe biography. My latest Book Club selection was missing and with it, three dollars.

“Where is my goddamn book Chip?” I hollered over the banister when I heard the side door open.

“Ain’t nobody got your shit, shut up,” he said.

“Stay out of my room!”

They laughed at me, which meant other things were missing. There was no privacy in the house.

“What happened to the last fucking can of corn?” I heard Craig hollering



downstairs. I guess Chip had taken the can for himself. When I ran downstairs, the empty can of corn flew past my head and slammed into the wall near the front window. We ate the chops without corn.

I knew when our father came home; one of the neighbors would let him know we were fighting again.

Why doesn't he buy some groceries? I didn't understand.

"If you can survive your family, you can do anything," our father had said.

We cleaned up the mess in the kitchen and then I went back up the stairs and in to the boy's room to fetch my Marilyn Monroe book, which was under Chip's pillow. I found the wrapper for an Almond Cluster bar, and an empty bag of Dan Dee's corn twists. There was a plate on the dresser with remnants of a fried bologna sandwich. That was my three dollars.

Another week had passed. Our father had the day off and he brought a small bag in from his car. He made pinto beans for dinner. He hadn't figured out how to make cornbread like his estranged wife, so we just had sliced tomatoes and onions on the side. We sat down at the table as a family. We gulped down our food. Even the dog Sam seemed excited that there was food in a pot on our stove. He danced around the dining room table. No one spoke at the table though. In the background, Garrick Utley anchored the "NBC Nightly News".

After dinner, Craig took out the trash and Chip washed the dishes. Dad took his pad with him and sat in his lounge chair to write the grocery list. I sighed with relief, and went to my room to start Agatha Christie's *Witness For The Prosecution*. "Mr. Mayherne adjusted his Pince-Nez and cleared his throat with a little dry-as-dust cough that was

*wholly typical of him.”*

The next day, he went to Dave’s Supermarket on Payne Avenue, and bought groceries. As we put away the food, I asked, “Chip did you know the washer was broken?”

## MY FIRST RECORD REVIEW

Music battled with books for my attention and music was ahead. No matter what was haunting me and there was plenty – some real and much of it imagined – music helped me through the day. My other passion was writing. I continued to write, making up stories, which I later wrote down in my composition books. My brothers and sister did not understand what it meant to be a writer; they teased me and made my life miserable. My parents, however, were supportive. By this time, I had a new electric typewriter, which Dad had purchased from Sears. Even though Dad said he wouldn't buy me another one, my faithful use of my old machine had prompted him to visit his favorite store to replace my manual machine. "Charlotte, you ain't nothing but a Daddy's girl. He's going to get you *another* guitar for Christmas. I heard him talking about it on the phone," Craig said. "And then you can play that corny ass Crosby, Stills, and Nash".

I was reading *Rolling Stone Magazine* with regularity. This motivated me to comment on the food we ate, the clothes we wore, and of course, the music we heard. I

loved journalists. I loved to watch network news and I knew all the anchors from all three networks. During the Democratic conventions, I had become familiar with all the floor reporters and likewise, during the Olympics, I had learned the names of all the sports anchors.

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I raided my father's record collection when he was out of the house – we all did. I listened to Sergio Mendes, Astrud Gilberto, the Beatles, Carmen McCrae, Lou Rawls, Stan Getz, John Coltrane, Herb Alpert, and Dave Brubeck, trying to hear what my father loved about these recording artists. I had my own growing collection thanks to Columbia House record club. Dad bought vinyl record cleaner from Olson's Electronics store. I sat on the floor in the living room to watch Dad clean off his records. After he put a few drops of the liquid on his Thad Jones record, he took a soft yellow cloth and delicately wiped it in a circular motion. He cleaned off his diamond needle with a little red brush. He always kept his albums in their cover, which is why he hated for us kids to touch his music. We didn't put the albums up properly – that's how we always got busted. I tried to handle my records with the same care my father gave his records.

"You bums don't know how to take care of nothing. I fixed up this house, and you destroyed it. Your mother never taught you anything." No one wanted to hear his mouth.

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My first year at Glenville, I traveled with the seniors to the State Track Championship in Columbus, Ohio. Melvin Johnson, president of the Glenville Pep club

had rented a luxury bus with leather seats, a television and stereo system. There was even a bathroom on his bus. Michele Wilson's brother Rodney was a senior, and he had arranged for us to buy seats. As freshmen, we normally wouldn't have been allowed to ride on a senior bus. Valerie King and I were impressed with the luxury ride. Melvin sat up in the front of the bus with the driver. He led us to the field and he cheered the loudest. I guess we passed the test because we didn't get thrown off the bus.

When we got back to Cleveland, Melvin Johnson towered over me and said, "Charlotte, you're going to be the next president of the Pep Club. I like you. You're smart and I know you can do this. Do you want to be president?" I knew he was high; I knew I was high. I was afraid and I didn't want Valerie or Michelle to think I was stupid. They were standing beside me looking like: "Why in the fuck would he choose you?" I had busted Michelle down on the senior's floor telling Tony Griggs: "You should ask Charlotte. Her glasses are so thick, I bet she could tell you what the weather was like on Mars."

I said yes. Valerie and I joined the Pep Club. Michelle was already a junior varsity cheerleader. Being a cheerleader was a ticket to popularity. I needed help. Melvin lobbied during our school elections. He made it clear that I had shown the most school spirit and I deserved to be his successor. If Melvin said it was okay, it was okay. He was the hippest and coolest person at Glenville. Deborah Miller, another classmate from FDR, had also joined the Pep Club.

The next year as president, I used the skills I had learned in watercolor and still life studies classes at the Cleveland Institute of Art to create logos for each one of our East Senate foes. For the East High Bombers, I created a logo where the "O" was a bomb

with a lit wick. People seemed to like the inventiveness of my banners. I designed buttons, t-shirts and the painted banners, which Valerie and Deborah hung in the hallways of the school. I was a junior in high school and I was already a leader.

My schedule as Pep Club president was hectic. I had to stay after school some days to hold meetings, and attend athletic events. Sometimes there were wrestling matches, or basketball games in the gymnasium or indoor track meets on the third floor of the building. But on the weekends, I traveled to downtown Cleveland where I took enrichment classes with other bright students. I listened to the guidance counselor as she spoke with my parents about my development. I was sitting in a hard plastic chair outside the office. All I heard was: “She has a near-genius I.Q.” I didn’t know what it meant. I had tested off the charts and I would be able to graduate at age 15. They were getting a divorce, but they agreed that I needed more enrichment activities and that I was too young, and too little to graduate early.

Not long afterwards, I started attending the Supplementary Center. There I studied classical music and astronomy with other bright students.

I didn’t want anyone at Glenville to know that I went on field trips with a bunch of squares from all over the city. We sat in a cold theater holding sheets of music listening to sections of Mozart. I went to Severance Hall, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Cleveland Health Museum to enjoy the city’s rich culture. I rode the St. Clair bus downtown and I folded up my star charts so that no one could see them. When I got off the bus, I looked back because people were staring at all the yellow and black school buses parked in front of the planetarium dome, which was the signature feature of the Supplementary Center – it reeked “squares”.

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My classmates didn't read *Rolling Stone Magazine*. They didn't read *U.S. News and World Report*. They didn't read. They went to house parties, and the movies. They smoked weed, played sports, drank Boone's Farm Apple wine, had sex, and went to school so that they could tell people about their activities. I did my reading at home away from my classmates. I was busy handling double duties: Being Pep Club president and treasurer of our social club, the Ooja Omegas. I kept my school life separate – when I went home, I could be myself. I could write. I could read. I could dream. I dreaded being called a “bookworm bitch” while walking down Parkwood Drive with goodies from the Glenville library. I hated having my book slapped out of my arms by the neighborhood *cooties*. Most often, they were my mother's cousins. I stole copies of my textbooks when I could so I wouldn't be seen carrying books home or to school.

I stole books and cut up in classes. In fact, I got suspended my junior year. I was bored and I knew it. I wasn't getting high much when the school yet started. In fact, I had only started getting high after my mother ran out on us. My mother's nephew Allen Little sat on the front steps of our house and lit up a joint. He invited me to take a hit; and I did. A warm feeling trickled down from the top of my head, over the front of my face and my eyes felt like they were bugged out. I knew I was viewing the world out of tiny slits. I went down into the dark basement and plopped the needle down on Led Zeppelin's “Stairway to Heaven”. Next, I put on the *TARKUS* album by Emerson, Lake and Palmer. I spent the rest of my high listening to music. Allen had spent his sitting outside turning my brothers on – we had all gotten high that day.

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I was in Michelle Wilson's basement over on Amor Avenue. We were waiting for our club meeting to convene. Each senior class was responsible for giving their own after prom party. Social clubs raised funds by giving house parties and charging at the door. I knew that our membership could also make money by renting buses and selling the seats. I had already been doing it as Pep Club President. As a result, I was voted treasurer of our club. I kept the books and created ways for us to make the money for our after prom party.

I sat my father down and explained my latest activity. He was supportive. He drove me over to Berea Road to rent buses to so that we could travel to Glenville football games, basketball games, and track meets. Dad had parked his pine green Dodge Corona and we got out and went up the steps and into an office where he signed a contract for me. I paid cash and booked the trip. He helped me open up a bank account with the other officers of the club: Usher Scott, and Sharon Harden.

I took the cost of the bus and divided it by the number of seats. There were normally 40 seats on the bus. I never included myself in the equation; I had no intention of paying. And if Valerie helped me sell tickets, she never had to pay. I always fixed the price so that we would never miss the money from our seat. I always made money.

A kid named Rodney Menefee was our artist. He had designed the logo for our t-shirts and sweatshirts – another avenue for making money. We worked together on creating flyers for our trips. It was Rodney's idea to buy an ounce of weed with club funds and I bought two ounces of weed – one for the club, the other for Rodney and me.



We rolled joints, and sold them to passengers who wanted to get high on the ride down to Steubenville, Ohio or Columbus, Ohio. I was really getting tired of smoking weed. I had gotten sick at the beginning of my junior year. I was taken to the hospital with a bad case of bronchitis. I had vomited up large orange chunks of junk. Shortly afterwards, I was diagnosed with asthma. This didn't stop me from getting high; I was suddenly very popular.

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I saw Sly and the Family Stone on television and I fell in love with Sly's *THERE'S A RIOT GOING ON* album. After Woodstock, seems Sly was always wasted and on Dick Cavett or the Merv Griffin talk show. And after Woodstock, the murder of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Bobby Kennedy, black musicians had become conscious about our struggle – we had albums with messages. Marvin Gaye's *WHAT'S GOING ON?* And Stevie Wonder's *TALKING BOOK* had also captured my attention. However, Sly Stone's band was different – there were white, black, and Latino members. Then, there were male and female musicians; and I knew they were from the Bay Area.

Deirdre Smith was a musician who went to Glenville. She played piano like Roberta Flack, bass like Larry Graham and the trumpet like Cynthia Robinson of Sly and the Family Stone. Deirdre had her own rock band and they performed in our school's annual talent shows. They could play anyone's music and sound just like the record. The talent show was the first real concert that I had ever attended. I wanted to see Sly live in concert; but I had to settle for watching him on television. I brought my copy of the Sly and the Family Stone album to our club meeting.

“Can we put on Sly’s album?” Dead silence.

Michelle’s basement had dark wood paneling on the walls. We were on the larger side where there were two couches and a chair. It was usually dark and there was the ever-present smell of Patchouli and Musk incense. Michelle, well actually her brother Rodney, had those glow in the dark Zodiac calendars -- ones with the girls in animal print bikinis -- on the wall. Michelle was operating the small record player, and everyone knew that Barry White and the Love Unlimited Orchestra was her currently her favorite recording artist. She liked Steely Dan and Grand Funk. We had to hear the *E PLURIBUS FUNK* album over and over. I knew the lyrics to “Foot Stomping Music”. But it was Michelle’s house, her drugs, and she was responsible for the music and the mood. We had meetings at her house because her parents were okay with us smoking weed in their home. And she was a cheerleader.

“Girl don’t nobody wanna hear that!” Michelle said.

“Come on let’s get this over wit!” Ronald Fuqua whined. He was sitting next to Michelle on the couch.

He was a tall chocolate football player. He had one of the most beautiful physiques we’d ever seen, but he wasn’t exactly handsome. Fuqua was always mean, and he was always mean to me — like it was his job. And we had most of the athletes, Carl Brown, John Eberhart, Usher Scott, Bobby Jenkins and a few others. We had cheerleaders, Michelle, Renee Givens, Denise Hatten, Cynthia Johnson, and Barbara Jones, in our group.

People were sitting around drinking punch and eating chips and dip while we waited for our president, Usher Scott to arrive. His girlfriend was Sharon Harden. We

knew they would arrive together. I used the time to I tried to explain that this was Sly's most important album and there would be five or six hits off the album. Why is no one else excited by Sly's lyrics on "Brave and Strong" or "Africa Talks To You 'The Asphalt Jungle'"? I knew "Runnin' Away" would be a Sly Stone classic. My comments fell on death ears. This was my first album review. My high school peers couldn't see the future – they weren't my audience. I impatiently awaited for my chance to tell people what I thought of music.

I had a meeting with my parents and guidance counselor during the fall of my senior school year. He wanted my parents to know that I only needed one class, and I was required to take at least four courses. I could get out of school early, but I had to take at least two study halls. The guidance counselor suggested that I join the Olympiad Yearbook staff and *The Torch* newspaper because they were activities that I might find interesting. I didn't really have a choice since I couldn't graduate early. I joined the yearbook and newspaper staffs.

Most kids my age were already going to concerts. They went to see vocal groups like the Jackson Five, the Temptations, the Dramatics, the Slyvers, or the Stylistics. Not me. My sister Mickey had gone to Leo's Casino to see Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. I remember her talking about getting so close, that she had wiped the sweat off Smokey's chest; she talked about it for weeks. Our parents were going through their divorce and they were not concerned with my desire to see a live concert. I went to watch my father's band perform; but that wasn't a concert – that was a duty – it was a command performance for his friends.

Le Magnifique Orchestra was performing at Juvenile Hall. Chip, Craig, and I, sat

on tables backstage. We were dressed in our finest. The boys had been taken over to Robert Hall's Department Store in Collinwood where they were fitted with matching navy blue suits. I can't remember what kind of dress I wore; but I knew we were cleaned up. Our father was known as "Boss Cat" in the music community. He was a horn player who was hired out by the Musician's Union to play with big name jazz acts when they came to town and needed a rhythm section. Dad said he got hired a lot because he read music. Our father's band mates came by to greet us and Johnny Moss, one of the other saxophone players, dubbed us the "Boss Kittens". Charles Morgan was also known in the music community for his arrangements and it was the reason why he always had work.

We always had movie soundtracks and the sheet music to go along with them. I knew all the melodies to the music from "Mutiny on The Bounty" or "My Fair Lady" or "Peter Gunn". Dad loved composer, Henry Mancini's work and this meant that we were forced to love Mancini's work – it was played gently in the living room. We all knew the words to all the songs from "West Side Story" and "The Sound of Music".

The Boss Kittens sat awaiting the start of the show. We were bored. Soon, musicians started coming to check up on us; they gave us money. We were each given dollar bills and 16 ounce bottles of Dr. Pepper or Pepsi Cola. Our father came by and told us, "You look out there at those kids. They can't go home like you at the end of the night. If you ever cut up, you'll wind up here."

We all looked at one another and vowed never to do anything to wind up in juvenile hall. Those kids seated out in the audience looked sad and they certainly didn't seem to enjoy the music. They looked like a captive audience. Kids that age didn't like

my father's music.

"Yeah, why don't you get out there with your guitar and play them Carole King songs?"

"Shut up Chip!"

"You could whip out that corny harmonica *and* your guitar. That would go over with this crowd. They'd probably attack the stage."

"Shit, if I still played drums and trombone, I'd get out there. Look at the chicks sitting on the front row. They got to be here for the musicians. They ain't juvenile delinquents," Craig said.

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I stopped carrying my Sly Stone album to school. I was right about Sly and the Family Stone. In 1972, I went to John Carroll University to see Sly and the Family Stone. They were touring on *THERE'S A RIOT GOING ON*. Valerie King heard on the radio that Sly was going to play John Carroll's homecoming and we were going.

Sly had a reputation for arriving late for his shows and this one in the John Carroll gymnasium was no different. We sat up in the stands on those hard ass bleachers for hours waiting for the band to arrive. We got high with some white boys who generously passed us thick joints to smoke. By the time the show started, Valerie and I were stoned. We had worked our way to the main floor, and up to the front of the stage. The music was so loud, but good; it thumped. I rocked to it. I looked up at bassist, Larry Graham. He was sweating so much that I had to wipe some of it off his arm. I saw those big chunky silver rings as the stage lights reflected off of them. I was fascinated how he

plucked and thumped the strings on his guitar.

When Rose Stone sang, “It’s A Family Affair”, I watched how Graham popped the strings right up under her words. I watched Sly rock back and forth on his stool while banging out the keys on his keyboard. Freddie Stone looked tall and lean as he stroked the strings on his guitar.

Everyone down front was laughing and reaching for the musicians. Freddie Stone was trying to weave magic with his wah wah pedal, when these two girls tried to grab his legs. He stepped on the pedal, and casually took two steps back to escape their grasp and start his guitar solo. There were people dancing and smoking joints of marijuana. I watched a guy weaving through the crowd to get to the edge of the stage near where Valerie and I were dancing. He pointed the nose of a black 35mm camera towards Sly. I thought it was really cool because I had seen concert photos in *Rolling Stone Magazine* and *CREEM Magazine*.

## SUMMER OF DRUGS

We had graduated from Glenville High School and were trying to figure out what we wanted to do with our lives. Dad was still angry that Momma had run out on the family.

“I can’t pay for school right now,” he said. “I got to get them windows fixed because you bums don’t take care of anything,” he said. He stood over the stove making stewed tomatoes for dinner. We’d sit at the dining room table as a family because our father had insisted upon it.

Chip would look at me and I would look at Craig. Our goal was to pick over our food until our father had finished his plate. Then we’d sit at the table talking with one another. Eventually, our German shepherd, Sam would come into the dining room to beg for scraps. Sam had lost some weight since Era Morgan had moved out of the house. Sam feasted on table food scraps, which we added to his dog food. We tried to feed the food to Sam who often dropped his head down to suggest that he didn’t want any of that shit.

We continued to toss the tasteless food out the back window; or we stuck it up under the table. There was food rotting under that table; and the stench had become sickening. Our father hadn't noticed the smell. We eventually we had to throw the table away.

Dad had promised I could go to community college. But that was in the fall, I had a whole summer to experience. There was nothing else to do but party with our classmates until they left for schools all over the country. I smoked marijuana from the time I got up until I passed out at night.

Kathy Douglas, who lived on Parmalee, was someone I had gotten high with regularly at Glenville. She had an orange Volkswagen Cabriolet that she left unlocked in the school parking lot for me to use whenever I wanted. There were some days during the spring when I had fit 12 people in the car. Some kids had their backs up against the roof of the car, just to take a couple of hits off of a joint. Someone would count how many people were in the car, and the next day, we would try to break the record. Light-skinned Jeffrey Lohry would find me and take me out to smoke a joint in the storage room on the playground behind the school. I never asked how he knew the building was unlocked. I didn't care. He was fine. I wanted to be seen out with him. I did not want to be bothered with some people. Carol Williams would see me in the hallway and ask, "Girl, where you going Charlotte? I know you going to get high, come and get me before class." I tried to avoid her, but we had class each day.

Carol and I were editors on *The Torch* – I had the editorial page while Carol had the entertainment page. We were responsible for making assignments, collecting copy, and designing and editing our pages. Every two weeks, we went with our Journalism



instructor over to *The Call & Post* newspaper. Our newspaper was produced there, and the staff was on hand to help us with line edits.

When the paper was delivered, the staff was responsible for selling it. The column, “Wouldn’t It Be Strange” was very popular. Kids bought the paper to find out if their name was in the column.

My girlfriends would find me so that I could score the marijuana – they were afraid to go into the dope man’s house. One dope man lived in East Cleveland on Third Avenue. I went up the stairs and knocked on his door. Normally, a scantily clad chick answered and let me in the kitchen where a muscular yellow dude sat at the kitchen table counting money. In front of him was a mound of marijuana – that’s what I came for – and there was always a big black gun on the table.

“Why Kathy always send you in?”

“I don’t know.”

“They dumb for not coming in. Here, you light up this joint. What you getting today?”

“We want a nice ounce.”

“A *nice* ounce,” he repeated.

He would get up and go in the other room to get a bag. I tried to inhale as much weed as possible – the end of the joint was bright orange. I had reached over and scooped up some of the weed on the table and fixed up the mound just when a tall chocolate chick came in the kitchen. I exhaled the fragrant smoke. The front of my skull had begun to warm. The girl had on gold metallic hot pants, go-go boots, and a white halter-top. Her huge Afro was frosted yellow -- obviously a wig. She went in the

refrigerator and got a Baby Champale. My heart was pounding.

“Hi baby girl, you want something to drink?”

“No thank you.”

I don’t think she saw me. I could feel my eyeballs start to warm over – I was already buzzed.

When Michael came back in the room, he had a fat bag of weed. He handed it to me. I handed him our money – a couple of five dollars bills and the rest were singles.

“Tell Kathy to come in and see me. Here’s a couple of joints – these are for you. Don’t share with your punk ass friends. You a brave little short thing.”

On the way down the stairs, I took some of the weed out the bag and put it in my jeans’ pocket along with the joints and rest of the weed I had stolen. I put out the joint out Michael had given me. I put that in the breast pocket of my army jacket.

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I made the pilgrimage down the street and around the corner to Michelle’s house. I knocked on the side door. The doorbell didn’t seem to be working. When she opened the door, I followed her up the stairs to her new room in the attic. We sat near the windows so that we could blow out the smoke.

We spent the afternoon smoking weed and listening to music.

“Dickie and them don’t care about us gettin’ high as long as I go to school and don’t get *preg-nant*,” Michelle said.

If we didn’t get high at Michelle’s house, we would go to my sister Mickey’s apartment on East 40th and Outhwaite to watch “Lucy” after class or after Michelle had

cheerleader practice. My sister was at work and I had a key. If we got high there, Mickey knew there would be a joint or two left in her ashtray. But we stopped going over there when Michelle wore her white rabbit fur coat to school.

We had walked from Tri-C Metro up Quincy to 40th. But this time we were stumbling over the cracked pavement, high as a kite, when Michelle had started tripping.

“You know I think that car is following us,” she said. Her eyes were larger than normal. I knew she was scared. I knew she wanted me to be scared.

“I thought I seen a white Monte Carlo back at that light,” I added.

“Yeah that’s what I’m saying, they following us. We have to go in the grocery store because I’m not giving up my coat.”

We hid in the store across the street from my sister’s apartment until Michelle’s father came to pick us up and drive us across the street.

The next day, or so, Michelle called to admit that Miles Benfield had laced the weed with Angel Dust. I was instructed not to smoke those other two joints. My brothers had already stolen the joints out of my army jacket.

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Valerie King and I went to see Sly Stone down at Tri-C. When Sly married Kathy Silva at Madison Square Garden in front of 23,000 fans, it propelled him to superstardom – no one black had ever done anything on that scale. I saw the pictures of “Soul Train” host Don Cornelius in *Jet Magazine*. He was the emcee of the wedding. Cornelius posed backstage with a designer named Halston, who was responsible for the gold costumes Sly and his wife wore.

“Valerie, here they come,” I said.

Sly and his background singers were dressed in gold lamé. Valerie and I leaned on the banister and watched like groupies as the band entered the gymnasium. They strolled along without a care in the world. Both girl singers wore jumpsuits and had gold medallions nestling in their cleavage – the peace symbols were a way to protest the Viet Nam war. Make love not war. The movement of their gold bell-bottoms hypnotized me. “It’s a family af-*fair*,” the lyric repeated in my head over and over.

“Valerie, can you hear that?” The song played loud in my head.

She had that stoned chocolate smile on her face. Valerie was dressed in her trademark Army jacket, a smoker’s best asset. She pulled a small memo pad and Bic pen from her pocket so that she could get Sly’s autograph.

Valerie hung out with me because she had no brothers or sisters. She was the only person I knew who didn’t live in a house. I visited her apartment on Massie Avenue, to find out what it was like to come home high and smell other people’s food cooking or hear other people’s lives bleeding through thin walls. Admittedly Valerie was fun loving, but she was guarded about her family. And with good reason, her uncle was boxing promoter Don King.

Valerie was cool enough to ask a celebrity musician for an autograph when we had been running from the police in Forrest Hills Park less than an hour ago. For some reason, she had wanted to see what it was like to walk in the park after dark. A police car dropped down the hill to pursue us, so we ran like we were on “Mod Squad”; at least that’s what we said after we were safely on the St. Clair bus.

“Sly can I get your autograph?” she asked. “Sly!”

“Uh, Valerie, that’s Freddie Stone,” I said. Freddie looked down and smiled and kept strutting. Valerie was so stoned she couldn’t tell difference between Sly and his brother Freddie and they didn’t look at all alike.

I could smell weed wafting through the air. It was flowing from the band’s black and gold tour buses parked in front of the school’s tennis courts.

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I had started getting high in the back yard behind our house, even before Momma had moved out. I snuck out the side door and cut through the space between the garage and the house. There was an opening large enough for my small frame. I would lean against the white aluminum siding only to get a coating of white substance on the back of my clothes. I’d strike a wooden match against the box and love the sound of it. A firm scratch meant the match lit the first time. I had a cigarette-sized joint hanging in the corner of my mouth.

“Light me, strike me, and fire me up.”

“Charlotte you outside?” An intruder.

“Damn it!” I quickly light the joint and took in as much smoke as possible burning my throat in the process. Greed is good. Greed never pays. I was coughing my lungs out.

My little brother Chip had slipped outside. He standing there looking like our mother Era Morgan, chiseled cheeks and all. He smiled and had his hand out -- he wanted my joint. *My joint*. I handed it to him.

“Girl you so stupid. I can smell it in the living room,” he said. “Me and Momma

are watching “Ironside”.”

“Shut up! She’s downstairs? She *was* in the basement.”

“You know how Momma is, she don’t ever sit down,” he said squeezing the words out of his pursed lips. He closed his lips to keep the smoke in his lungs. He lets it out.

“You think she smelled it?” I reach for my joint.

“Damn, I can feel it already! Where you get this? White Gregg? She smelled it. Momma get high I bet.” He wouldn’t hand me back my joint. He finally passed me the joint. “Since she already smelled it, you might as well come on back in dummy.”

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Mark Jones’ red Trans Am was in the parking lot at school. Valerie, Michelle, and I had followed him to his car to smoke some weed and listen to WMMS FM 100.7 FM. The station was premiering David Bowie’s *DIAMOND DOGS* album.

“Check this out,” Mark said as he cranked up the sound. He pushed in the lighter, put a joint in his mouth and handed me a Glad sandwich bag one-fourth filled with already rolled joints. This was that substance that tall Jerome St. Cyr had told us would make us lackadaisical. Jerome knew because he smoked from a stash that was grown in his bedroom closet. His advice was too late; I hadn’t turned a paper in on time since I had started college. Not that I didn’t do my homework, I didn’t show up for class if someone had suggested something better – like getting high.

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Dr. Terrence Burke my English instructor had told me, “Miss Morgan, you could

be an A-student if you'd just turn your papers in on time."

I hadn't cut Wednesday's class because we had a paper due; Valerie and I had decided to go to the movies. My paper was in my bag.

Dr. Burke was the first college instructor to tell me that I could be a writer. He was a tall, thin man with a thin mustache, and he wore colorful sweaters all the time. I remember he loved British Literature.

"You're lackadaisical. But with work, you *could* be a writer," he said.

"I am a writer," I said. I had gotten back my paper. I had written about Billy Wilder's "Some Like It Hot".

"Imagine, if you'd turned this in on time, you would have gotten an "A". I want you to take my class next quarter, okay? You've got a good vocabulary, not great. But good. I know you read, so just keep reading. And don't be absent Friday, I want to discuss Chapter 9 in your McCrimmon."

*McCrimmon's Writing With Purpose*, a composition textbook, was Dr. Burke's holy bible. He swore by it. Dr. Burke had interrupted my drug phase with those words. I had almost forgotten my dream of becoming a novelist. My instructor's words had hurt my feelings and made me feel ashamed because I wasn't working hard anymore. I didn't go to the library like I used to. I had stopped reading biographies and there was a stack of *U. S. News and World Report* magazines that had gone unread since last summer.

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Back in Mark's car, guitar riffs open Bowie's "Rebel Rebel". I remembered that this kid I had band class with, Cecil Rucker, was photographed in the *Cleveland Press* in

his uniform among the legions of fans at Swingo's Celebrity Inn when Bowie had arrived in Cleveland. Since Cecil was so short, he was nearly lost in the sea of androgynous white kids crowded around Bowie. The photo had made Cecil a rock star in school.

I happened to read about Bowie's visit to Cleveland in *Rolling Stone*. I wished I could have written that piece.

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Valerie was already giggling over in the corner backseat and Michelle was in the front seat asking Mark could she drive his car. He liked her. Michelle was a deceitfully wicked person on drugs. Her devilish mind whirled with plots against folks – ones strategically designed to mess with my high. You had to always be on your guard around her.

“Char-lette, there go your father,” Michelle said.

“Argggggggg!! No way, stop it! Don't mess with me Michelle.”

“No girl, there he is,” Valerie chimed in. “Put your head down so he won't see you. But gimme a shot gun first.”

She wasn't smiling and I knew it was real. Mr. Morgan was on campus today taking that damned photography course. His musician friend Harold Gator took classes this semester as well. Gator the pimp was only in school to pick up young girls my age. And I used to like Mr. Gator before he started wearing a Kango hat, which matched his hot pink polyester pants. Nobody wore clothes like that. And buy some damned pants that fit! I was tired of seeing old ass men on campus with their pants hiked up above their ankles.



There was my father, Charles Morgan, carrying a black briefcase, wearing an red Indians' baseball cap and a silver Epicure Lounge jacket. I wondered if he was colorblind?

"He can't see me in all this smoke. Let me hit that Valerie. If I'm going to get busted, might as well be high."

"Phewww, please, he *will* see us if he keeps walking on this row. Get down!" Valerie instructed. Michelle just blew out another puff of smoke.

When I ducked down behind the red leather seat, I listened to the lyrics:

*"Rebel rebel, you've torn your dress*

*Rebel rebel, your face is a mess*

*Rebel rebel, how could they know?*

*Hot tramp, I love you so!"*

I shut my eyes so my father couldn't see me. "I got class in a few minutes," I said.

I lied. I wasn't going to class. I had a meeting to attend. I wasn't going at first, but now I knew I really want to go. The black student newspaper, *The Muntu Drum* had staff meeting today and I had been invited to attend. I had signed up for a news writing class. I didn't want anyone to know where I was going. I knew they'd be pissed off if I started having ambitions.

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I was walking in the tunnel. I was high, and excited. We sat in the staff room, which was a large space on the ground level of the Student Center. There were rows of

desks with typewriters on them. I sat at one in the back of the room and waited to see how this worked before I offered a story idea.

Unbeknownst to my friends and family, I had prepared myself to write about music. I had kept several of my speckled composition notebooks filled with reportage on my neighbor's adulterous activities, the street's supernatural activities, as well as happenings in the world of music. I knew one day I would do something with all of it – after all, most of my favorite novelists had been reporters. I had spotted a yellow flyer soliciting staff writers for the *Muntu Drum* newspaper posted right outside the bookstore. I was already signed up for a writing lab; I knew it was time to get on the paper.

The brothers and sisters were all down with the black movement – they had discussed Ghana's president, Kwame Nkrumah, Angela Davis' trial, the Patty Hearst kidnapping, and other topics of interest, about which, I knew nothing. There were discussions about upcoming student government activities. The girls in the tight jeans and t-shirts with huge earrings were all intellectuals. I had to find something to write about.

The second staff meeting was different. I had gone to the campus library. Outside the doors were used books for sale. I had money in my pocket. George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and a copy of Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. I read them privately in my room. I didn't go out with Michelle or Valerie; I had to get inspired or educated so that I would have something to write about and soon.

We were going to see Minnie Riperton in concert at Cleveland Public Hall. I loved Minnie's voice; I had never heard anything like it. I bought her *PERFECT ANGEL* album and devoted hours of my life sitting in the basement listening to it under my father's Realistic headphones. My pattern a simple one; go out behind the house, light up

a joint, take a few deep puffs, and run down into the basement before Chip and Craig could sniff me out. They usually could smell the weed from the second floor before I could get comfortable and in a dream-like trance; and when I did, I drifted off into the future, lingered back in the past, and, if I got high enough, I forgot about the present.

We had no mother, no washer, dryer, iron, lights, or working refrigerator – almost all the appliances in the house were broken. The only time we had a good meal was when Craig or Chip brought food home from John Carroll where they worked as line cooks.

Those Saturday evenings, when they brought home thick porterhouse steaks that were left over after feeding the John Carroll football team; we ate like it was a holiday. Craig propped open the refrigerator – the lights were out in the kitchen – and he laid the steaks out on a clean plate, seasoned them, and then he placed them in Momma's black cast iron skillet. Chip cooked home fries – potatoes and onions. After the steaks were done, we fixed our plates. We put Heinz ketchup on our home fries and A-1 Steak Sauce on our meat. We then headed to our spots in the living room to watch television. Saturday night meant the "Mary Tyler Moore Show" on CBS.

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The following Saturday night, I got ready to attend the Minnie Riperton concert. Valerie, Michelle, and I arrived at Public Hall. We had smoked a couple of joints on the way down. We climbed up to the upper level of the horseshoe shaped hall. The lights from the stage made the cloud of smoke in the room visible – it hung over the first floor. In fact, there were some wires hanging over the first floor, which looked like a swing. I wasn't afraid of heights; however, I did feel a rush of anxiety whenever I looked at the

wires.

As luck would have it, I remembered that my cousin, Allen Little, had given me some tablets of mescaline. He had given me a choice of strawberry or chocolate. I had reached in my jeans pocket and held out the tablets to Michelle and Valerie in the car on the way to the show. I think I had chosen the chocolate, Valerie and Michelle, the strawberry. The concert moved along and the music was great. By the time Minnie Riperton had taken the stage, I knew something was different – my high was different. I had remembered the tablet.

“Are you okay?”

“No.”

Minnie Riperton’s voice pierced my ear and made me sick to my stomach. I had to get out of the hall. I was near the end of our row. I was the only one sitting down anyway. I stood up and saw that swing. I saw myself on it. I knew I had to get out of the room before I tried to figure out *how* to get across the wires and to the swing.

“Charlotte, are you okay?”

“No.”

“Take her to get some water.”

Valerie and Michelle dragged me up the stairs and out to the hallway. There was an echo. “Loving you is easy cause you’re beautiful. Makin’ love with you is all I wanna do.” There was a three or four second delay between the lyrics.

“Do you hear that echo?” No one responded. My lower lip had picked up a piece of paper. I realized I was being dragged across the floor. “I can walk damn it!”

“Girl, if you could walk, we wouldn’t be dragging your ass,” Michelle said. I

knew that was her voice. She loved to play pranks when I got high. She liked fucked up mind games.

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Michelle was the one who kept saying, “The drinks are on me. The drinks are on me.” Then she put her glass on my shoulder. “The drink is on you. The drink is on you.” I was frightened that I had to pay for everyone’s drinks and she knew I didn’t have any money. When I looked around the room, I realized we were in Lawrence Brown’s living room. I didn’t need any money to pay for our drinks – took the whole evening for me to figure it out. I was paranoid that I couldn’t enjoy my high. An Isley Brothers album was playing in the background and Valerie’s boyfriend George Jones was talking to me about *The Teachings of Don Juan*, by Carlos Castenada, a book that I had borrowed. Or were we reading it aloud? George’s mustache looked shiny. As soon as I had found a peaceful moment to dwell in – “Don’t forget Charlotte, the drinks are on you. Fool, you gotta pay for these damn drinks!”

One night when we were walking home, Michelle had waited until we were near the bushes on the corner of Earle and Parkwood before she began threatening me.

“Charlotte, I will kick your ass as soon as we get to them bushes at Celeste Crockett’s house. I’m going to push your ass in them bushes and leave you.” The bushes grew larger and larger.

“Don’t think I forgot to kick your ass. And ain’t nobody going to help you. They want to see me kick your ass.”

Why did she want to hurt me? I thought we were friends. The next thing I knew,

Valerie and George had placed me on the front steps of my house. Valerie pushed back my shoulders so that I was sitting up right.

“Charlotte, you’re home. Wake up! Give me your key.”

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I can’t believe that I couldn’t walk; then it rushed into my head – I didn’t trust Michelle. I wondered was this one of Michele’s tricks? At first, I was sitting in a chair in the nurses’ station. I never knew there was a fucking nurses’ station in Public Hall. Next thing I remember, I was on a table. The nurse was an older white woman with a large nose. She was eating popcorn from a red and white bag. Something smelled stale in the room, I didn’t know if it was the popcorn or this broad in the white nurses’ uniform. She smelled like lavender toilet water.

Minnie Riperton’s voice echoed its way into the nurse’s station, and smacked against the ceiling because it had no where else to go. It didn’t vex me anymore – I was free. I wanted to go watch the end of her set. I tried to sit up. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Can you tell me what you took?” She put a few kernels of popcorn in her mouth and proceeded to crunch them – the kernels were helpless in that bitches’ mouth. Her teeth were big and brown; probably drank a lot of coffee and mud as well.

“Nothing. Do you have to crunch that popcorn in my ear?”

“Does my popcorn bother you?”

“What kind of fucking question is that? I’m okay. I’m going back to my seat.”

I got up. Valerie and Michelle were in the hallway. “Are you okay?” Valerie looked concerned.

“That was some good shit Allen gave me!”

Michelle laughed. “Don’t go back in there and try to get on that swing, because I’m not going to stop you again. Get a grip.”

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At the next staff meeting, when they went around the room to ask what people wanted to write about, I put my hand up in the air. “I have a review of the Minnie Riperton concert at Public Hall.” I was lying; however, I knew I could crank it out in fifteen minutes.

“Good,” my editor said. “We don’t have anyone covering entertainment. Can you do one for the Labelle concert?”

I said yes. Ollie Bell Bey said that I should give him 400 words on the Labelle show and give him at least two good photos.

## PHOENIX RISING

Being a full-time reporter with *The Muntu Drum* meant finding story ideas, interviewing subjects and writing copy in the lab after my classes. I had a regular column called, “Campus Camera”. My advisor, Ulysses Glen was a photographer who had encouraged me to learn the craft. He suggested that I get in the dark room and learn how to process film and make prints. “You have a better chance of getting a job if you can shoot your own photos,” he said. I had never thought about being a photojournalist, but the timing was perfect – Dad was taking photography at school and he had just purchased a Yashica 35mm single lens reflex camera. My father believed in having your own equipment, so he went out and bought an enlarger, the trays, the paper, and all the chemicals to develop his own film and print his own images.

One evening after dinner, my father called me up to the bathroom to learn how to develop film. Our bathroom was small and I didn’t want to be crowded in there with him, but I wanted to learn where everything was stored so that I could work on my own when



he was at work. The only reason Dad called a repairman was so that there was power in the bathroom – turns out all he needed were .59-cent fuses.

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I had worn my cool three-inch high clogs to school – I liked the added height. I was in the concrete tunnel that formed the underbelly of Tri-C Metro, on my way to the journalism lab to work with my editor, Ollie Bell Bey. We were going to load black and white film on rolls so that I could get my photos shot. I loved walking in the tunnels because I saw everyone I knew in those hallways. As I looked out on to the green mound, which formed the center of the campus, I saw students I didn't know out on the grass laughing, talking and eating their lunch. Then, I almost stumbled – I was in the center of a déjà vu moment – I hated when that happened.

As I went past the bookstore, I saw a girl that I had used for my photo column. She was carrying a copy of the newspaper. I think her name was Rochelle. She had asked me for prints of her image and she was willing to pay. I had a new hustle – selling prints. I wondered if the other students I had photographed for the issue would want to buy their prints. I could sell prints and make enough money to buy concert tickets, books, magazines, and records.

After class, I walked through the tunnel back to the bookstore to get something to eat on the bus ride home. A new *Scene Magazine* was on the rack. *Scene*, was a free regional music magazine that came out on Thursdays. I grabbed the magazine and headed out to the bus stop. I browsed through the advertisements and saw that the girl group, Labelle, had finally rescheduled their concert at the Allen Theater in downtown

Cleveland – my heart almost stopped. I looked out the window of the bus. This was it – this concert would change everything for me.

I was so desperate to see the group that I was willing to go alone. I didn't have time to convince people that "The Wear Something Silver Tour" was one of the most important events of the decade. They didn't read *Billboard*, *Rolling Stone*, *CREEM Magazine*, or *Soul Magazine*, which I had dubbed the black Rolling Stone; I didn't expect them to know what was going on pop or rock music because they didn't see the importance of knowing who played guitar on what album, or who produced what album, or who was on tour. Black women doing rock and roll, wearing spacesuits designed by Larry LeGaspi – black glam rockers. Going solo was an opportunity to be a music journalist like the writers I had been reading in *Rolling Stone*. If I had a driver's license, I'd have driven myself to the Allen Theater. My nemesis, Dr. Oppenheimer, the prick, didn't have his hand on my breast anymore, now he had his hand on my life – I hated him.

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My father had let me drive his car – the Dodge Corona, to Glenville one day, and of course, I drove over the curb, which only confirmed that I couldn't see – I had run over the curb because I was looking down at the ground, and I was trying to keep from hitting a big pothole.

In the car, I had gone through all the proper procedures: I adjusted the seat, and the mirrors. My hands were placed in the required position. I stopped for a full moment at the stop signs. I had used my turn signal properly. Then, I saw my classmate, Renee

Givens walking towards the building, and while it was a cool idea to pick her and give her a ride, she could go to school and tell everyone that I was a lousy ass driver. The ride was uneventful at first; however, as soon as I had run over the curb while turning into the driveway at Glenville, I could hear my father telling my mother that I couldn't see. I could see Renee running to homeroom to find Michelle and Valerie to announce that blind Charlotte can't drive. I had already busted Michelle telling people that I could see the weather on other planets because my glasses were so thick. I could see my father out the corner of my eye – my peripheral vision had picked up his resolute facial expression. There was a look of disgust on my father's face, the look he wore when his mistrust of his children was confirmed. I never got my license.

Dr. Oppenheimer had managed to remain a part of my new life; he was like a portentous ghost who hung around where he wasn't wanted – like Topper – trying to exert influence over my life. I tried not to remember his crisp white lab coat, his white hairy hands, and his garlic breath. I still struggled to understand my parents' lack of response when I told them what had happened. I didn't understand why my father let him get away with it when I knew he had a .38 special and a German Luger that he kept in a strong box in the back of his closet. Chip was caught brandishing the .38 in the hallway one afternoon; he was set on shooting our neighbor, Miss Coleman because she was fat. He said, "I just hate the bitch."

My eye doctor, a would-be *Mr. Humbert Humbert* sort of a freak, had left in place a legacy: He had convinced my father that I would lose sight in my eyes one day and that I would never be able to drive – I was near-sighted, and had no peripheral vision. His diagnosis was punishment for not allowing him access to my breasts – I'm sure he had

other victims, white ones, why punish me?

Taking drivers' education was a joke; I didn't understand why my parents had signed the permission slip. I thought it was a small reward for making me stay in school an extra year. And even after I had passed my temporary license exam, I couldn't get a driver's license because the Dodge Corona I had used for the exam didn't pass inspection. On the way home from the test, I waited for my father to comfort me by saying that I could schedule the exam again. I thought he would offer to let me use his new car so that I could complete the process – my father had said that he hated when we didn't complete things. "Don't waste my time or my money, if you're not going to finish something, don't start it." He always accused us of not having any discipline like he did; we got our lack of discipline from our mother. But after six weeks, my father still hadn't offered to let me take the exam in his good Chrysler. My brothers advised me not to ask to take the exam in the new car. "You know good and damn well that ain't happening," Chip said. "Be glad you got your temps."

Going alone meant that I would have to ask one of my parents for a ride and I didn't want to bother my father, so I picked up the phone and called my mother. She lived in the nurse's dormitory on Euclid Avenue. Now that she was a feminist, my mother was independent. She had gotten her license, a job at the hospital, and a new car. No more carrying groceries home on the bus.

I found out that she was a feminist when she invited me to attend the National Organization of Women's Convention at Public Hall. I never understood why she wanted me to go with her, but I was glad that we had the time together even if it meant that I had to undergo an intense scrutiny – she checked to make sure that my hair was combed, my

face was washed and that my clothes were clean and pressed. Telling her about the broken iron, washer, and dryer was out of the question – it only proved she was right to bail out on us. I didn't have to tell her about my hair because she could see it was dull and lifeless, the result of a botched perm given to me by her hairdresser – Mrs. Valentine. I had been forced to wear a wig my junior and senior years. No point telling mother that each day was a battle to keep some punk at school from snatching my wig off; she wouldn't understand why teenage boys enjoyed humiliating girls who didn't have hair.

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When we had arrived at the Convention Center, we joined hundreds of mother and daughter couples who wanted to explore their femininity and identity, which caused me to realize Era Morgan, must have been exploring her identity for a long time. She even looked different with her hair piled on top of her hair in a bun, and her new makeup. My mother looked modern, and she fit right in with the other women who walked around the exhibits. Before she had moved out, Momma regularly watched “Maude” on CBS because she identified with Bea Arthur's independent character; meanwhile, she didn't care for Florida, the black housekeeper played by actress, Esther Rolle. My mother had been a wife, mother, and a cleaning woman. Maybe this women's movement had taught Era Morgan that getting an education was a way out of a loveless marriage and day work. I hadn't put all the pieces together: I knew my mother read *Ms. Magazine*, we were a family that ordered magazines, books, and records – it wasn't strange to see an odd magazine in her room; she had Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, Linda Goodman's *Love Signs*, as well as a copy of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*. She

had changed right before our eyes; her family was too preoccupied with their own lives to notice.

The star of the evening was comedienne, Lily Tomlin, who performed sketches featuring her famous characters like Ernestine, the telephone operator and Edith, the five year-old kid. I knew all of Tomlin's characters. Monday nights at our house were reserved for watching "Rowan and Martin's Laugh In". My mother had loved the show. When I ran down to the stage after the performance to get an autograph and to shake Tomlin's hand, my mother was right beside me with her own pen and paper. "If I sign your autograph, I'll have to sign everyone's," the actress said. I was disappointed, but thrilled to see someone famous up close.

Era Morgan had carved out her new life. "Just because I left your father, it didn't mean that I abandoned my children." One night when Chip and Craig were running across the field at John Carroll University trying to catch the last bus, they were confronted by a group of young white boys who chased them and called them 'niggers'. Chip was really scared and Craig told him to shut up and keep running. When they got out to the street and down to the bus stop, they saw the bus pull off and they knew they were screwed, but their mother had parked her car nearby and she was casually eating peanuts while she waited. Her boys saw the car and ran over to ask, "Momma how did you know we needed a ride?" Her answer, "I just knew."

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The night of the concert, my mother came and picked me in her white Nova with the red interior. Snow swirled in the air and the streets were covered with slick and slippery snow.

“You got change to call?” Momma asked. We had neared the theater. I could see the lights on the marquee. She had prepared a snack pack for me with a couple of candy bars, a box of Cracker Jacks, and some nuts. I put it in my bag, which also contained my father’s Yashica camera, a couple of rolls of black and white 35mm film, and my reporter’s notebook – I knew I had two Bic pens in my army jacket pocket.

“Yep. The show should be over at 11:30. I read they were doing a two hour show,” I said. “I’ll call you.”

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The snow kept falling on the windshield of my mother’s car and the rhythm of the windshield wipers became hypnotic. She pulled right up to the front of the theater to let me out. It wasn’t as awkward being with Momma by myself as I had imagined. We hadn’t spent more than eight hours together since she moved out of the house. I didn’t know why. Maybe I was a Daddy’s girl.

Even though I had only attended four other concerts, I had already determined that the Allen Theater was one of my favorite concert venues. The high ceilings, chandeliers, and fancy carpeting, I knew that the venue was small and the sound was great because Michelle and I had just seen Herbie Hancock and Graham Central Station there a few months earlier. *Rolling Stone Magazine* reviews always featured the name of the venue, so I had become familiar with the top venues in New York, Detroit, San Francisco, and London. I saw couples in line getting drinks, and people were smiling and very friendly. I wasn’t hungry because my mother had trained us to eat before we left the house. I wasn’t old enough to buy a drink and I didn’t want to spend my money on food

just in case I saw a Labelle t-shirt. I knew none of my friends would have one.

I decided to go to my seat, at least to see where it was located – I didn't plan on sitting there, but I needed to get organized. I took my coat off, and took the camera out of its case. The girls on my row watched me. I hung the camera around my neck. I was there to work as music journalist and photographer; I couldn't cover a concert from a seat in the back of the room or up in the balcony. I started thinking about how I would work the stage.

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The theater had started to fill up and there was a buzz of anticipation. I had made friends with a British photographer who wanted to know who I worked for; I told him a college publication.

He told me to follow him to the apron of the stage with the other photographers. I picked up my things and followed him. We kneeled at the corner of the stage. I sat on the floor looking back at the packed house. They were still setting up equipment when a guy came out onstage to apologize for the show's delay. Apparently the weather had slowed the band's arrival, but he assured the audience that things would get underway momentarily. A huge cheer went up from the crowd. There were no empty seats in the house. I went back to chatting with some white girls in the front row who were smoking weed. I turned down the smokes because I was working. I was already making notes in preparation for my story when the house lights went down.

All I remember was the music starting and Patti Labelle, Sarah Dash, and Nona Hendryx being lowered from the ceiling. Patti flapped her arms like a big bird. When they landed on the stage, I pointed my camera and started taking photos. I turned to look



back at the audience and everyone was on their feet dancing.

By the time they performed “Lady Marmalade”, I realized that I was covered in sweat. Nona Hendryx had come right over to me so that I could shoot her. Sarah Dash had dropped a couple of feathers from her skirt and I reached over to grab them. The two young white girls were right next to me. We were all resting our elbows on the stage. I had stopped taking notes, I knew that this had to be the climax of the show – they couldn’t take the audience any higher. Funk, soul, gospel, and rock; Labelle had done it all.

After the show was over, I hugged my new friends from Willoughby. They told me that they’d see me around. The tall photographer next to me introduced himself, his name was Patrick, and he was a freelance writer and photographer. He told me to send him some of my prints and he’d help me get them in a magazine.

My ears were ringing, and my throat was dry. I hadn’t touched my snacks. My coat was down on the floor and my camera bag had been left open all evening. I gathered my things and headed out to the front of the theater. I had forgotten to call my mother. I looked around for a phone, but something told me to go outside. My mother was parked in front of the theater.

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At the staff meeting, I told Ollie Bell Bey that I had the Labelle review. I had 500 words on the greatest concert I had ever seen. When the review was printed, I cut it out and put it in a notebook – time to start saving my clippings. I developed my photos and made prints in our bathroom makeshift studio. I wasn’t really satisfied with my prints.

I didn't tell anyone. I had already written Epic Records to request a photo of Labelle – I found the address on the liner notes of the album. I was already a member of one fan club – I had joined the Graham Central Station club. Epic had sent me a package a few weeks later. I received a black and white 8x10 glossy of Patti, Sarah, and Nona dressed in their costumes from the “Wear Something Silver” Tour. I taped the feathers from Sarah's costume to the photo and posted it on the wall over my dresser.

## HOUSES OF THE HOLY

I was on my way to the school to hang out with friends before class. Since I had started taking courses in the Communications department, and joined the newspaper, I had new colleagues to hang out with on campus, and they were students who were actually interested in journalism, politics, science, and music – they were writers. Since Valerie had run off, I had to get used to riding to school by myself and, if I missed that bus that went up 30<sup>th</sup>, I would have to walk by myself.

I got off the bus in front of the school and walked past the Administration Building when this guy in a brown leather jacket stopped me. I think his name was Raymond or Bernard. I knew him from somewhere – maybe he was a friend of a friend. I couldn't remember. I was tired. I had stayed up late reading a new book, the reward for my diligence – I had rifled through a stack of discarded books left in a box outside of the campus library and found a used copy of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* for a dollar.

My 'friend' took a joint out of his jacket pocket and asked me if I wanted to get

high. I could have said ‘no’ and gone on to the cafeteria, but I didn’t have any weed, so, I said yes. We walked to the back of the school, the side that faced Woodland Avenue and I-77. Valerie and I used to get high back there because it was isolated.

It was cold out, and the wind was uncontrollably blowing the smell of burning marijuana. I watched the smoke form a white funnel-shaped cloud that leaped past us and flew off towards the quad. The last thing we needed was for security to follow the smell and find us. I had never been busted, nor had any of my friends been busted for possession.

We rushed through what was a nice joint – nice taste, even better smell. He had rolled it, well, whoever had rolled it, they had formed a perfect cylinder about the width of a Ticonderoga pencil – I was near impressed. I knew the feel of EZ-Wider cigarette rolling papers. As much as I wanted to rush back to the cafeteria to get away from this guy, I wanted to enjoy my high and read my book. I might even consider doing my homework, which consisted of reading *The Kingdom and the Power* by Gay Talese for Mass Communications class; we were studying the newspaper of record, *The New York Times*. I would have read it sooner, but I still re-reading *All The President’s Men*, which was about the Watergate break-in; I was all into *The Washington Post* these days. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward were rock star reporters in my opinion, and I didn’t know the names of any *New York Times* reporters. I had become aware that the competition was intense in my department – some of these kids were already working on professional papers. My path was different; while they were working on newspapers, I was trying to write a novel in my spare time.

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The pale yellow sun pushed through the gray winter clouds. I looked over at my host, he was smiling, but all I could see was facial hair that needed to be trimmed. Was his name Melvin? He had broad shoulders and long arms; I could see that through his jacket. How can you have a meaningful conversation with an athlete? Did he want to talk about literature or politics? I had just finished some Simone de Beauvoir, you know *The Second Sex*? Just because this guy had a wrestler's body, it didn't mean he was dumb, and it didn't mean I owed him anything. "I know your friend Michele, the cheerleader who hangs out with Terry. We got high in Terry's car, don't you remember?"

I lied. "Yeah, I remember. Terry and Marcus?" I did remember.

"Yeah, they *is* my dudes. Marcus like that girl, Turtle."

"Yeah, Vernita, went to Glenville with me and Michelle. She just got here this semester. Are you from Alliance too? Oh no, wait, you don't play basketball, I remember, you are a wrestler." I was out of conversation. I wanted a cold Dr. Pepper, a hot grilled cheese sandwich with fries, and I wanted salt and chocolate -- an Almond Cluster and some Dan Dee's Cheese popcorn.

"I got to go to class. You can finish this," he said.

"No, that's okay. I'm good. Thanks." I was surprised that he actually attended class.

We walked towards the quad. "You know I want to do that Campus Camera thing next time."

What a relief, he just wanted his photo taken. "I'm shooting this Thursday. I'll be in the cafeteria or game room. I'll look for you. Thanks."

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I trotted down the stairs and headed towards the Student Center. I saw Valerie's face float past my eyes. I saw her struggling to breathe in the desert. She had run away from home to live with the black Jews in Africa. My mind went back to the time we had gone to together to see the "Exorcist". I had read William Peter Blatty's novel and I knew Valerie had read it too. We had gotten dropped off at the Colony Theater on Shaker Square. We went for a short walk around the square so that we could get high before the movie started. Valerie wanted to drop a microdot; I didn't want to be tripping on acid; weed was enough. After the movie, we were so freaked out that we had vowed not to get high ever again. The next Monday, we got high on the way to school so that we could talk about how scared we had been.

After graduation, Valerie had also learned she couldn't go away to college; she was going to attend Ohio State University. One weekend, I had my father drive us to Columbus, Ohio so that we could attend Ohio State's homecoming weekend parties with our former classmates Thomasina Pitts, Deborah Miller, and Aurelia White. We stayed in Morrill Tower, which had a view of the football stadium. We got high with Michael White, Marsha White's brother – he was student body president. We had sat in a circle in the hallway of Lincoln Tower and played a game where you had to take a hit off a joint and then quickly pass it. The loser was the one who didn't have a joint in their hand when Michael called time. I liked any game that guaranteed that you could get fucked up off somebody else's weed. The roar from the stadium was so loud that it shook the building.

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At first, our last summer together was uneventful. We partied, which was nothing unusual. Valerie and I had walked over to Sandra Spivery's house, which was on the corner of East 93<sup>rd</sup> and Adams. Sandra was glad to see us. We sat in the kitchen watching her fry green tomatoes in a black cast iron skillet, and the next moment, we were on the corner talking with Michael Jacobs, a guy from Glenville. He was in the front passenger seat of Robert Pittman's Ford. I remember there were copies of *Mad Magazine* on the back seat. Michael was going on about some religious group he was a part of and how they had the "secret".

I hadn't known him to be spiritual. I don't remember hanging out with him at school; he may have attended our house parties. I had wondered what he was doing at Sandra's house? I know he had taken the Ooja's bus down to Columbus to the State Track Championship and he'd made a fool of himself by getting too drunk. I remember Michael standing up in the middle of the aisle of our bus whining and babbling as the sun came up over the horizon and Keith Simpson's contraption – two speakers, a multi-band radio, and a tape deck – coddled our intoxicated passengers with Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy*. I was on an aisle seat; I think I had sat next to Sandra's best friend, Vickie Tidwell and I had told him to sit down and shut up – he was killing our high. He started crying. Some of the guys told him to shut up, he responded by passing out in the aisle. His head hit the floor so hard that it left a knot on his forehead. He was the talk of the school for the entire week.

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I had asked Michael, “What secret? Is it in *Mad*?”

“This ain’t no joke, Charlotte,” he said. “Those aren’t my magazines!”

“Michael what do you know about religion, the last time I saw you, you were drunk on the Ooja’s bus.”

“Sandy, forget about that. I want to invite you guys to come to a meeting with me and find out for yourselves.”

“I ain’t got nothing to do with this,” Robert said. “And I ain’t driving.”

Valerie never said a word. Sandra and I laughed. We went back into her house and ate the fried green tomatoes; and afterwards, Valerie walked me home. I didn’t see her for a few weeks. One day, she came by the house to visit. She was carrying a large straw hat. I was down in the basement playing with my niece Carol. My sister Mickey was at work, and I had offered to watch the baby. I was getting ready to give her a bottle, but Valerie offered to do it.

I don’t remember what we talked about because we weren’t talking, Valerie played with Carol. She changed the baby’s diaper and told me that she had to leave. I picked up the baby and we walked my friend out. I stood at the edge of the driveway and watched Valerie walk down the street. She waved, but she wasn’t smiling, which I thought was odd.

A few days later, I got a call from Deborah Miller asking me if I had talked to Valerie. I told her no. “Valerie had dropped by the house and changed my niece’s diaper. We didn’t talk much and she had a straw hat.”

“Did you know that Valerie ran off to Africa with that punk ass Michael Jacobs? She had come to my house acting all strange – she was saying goodbye.”



I told Deborah that Michael said he belonged to some religious group that had the secret.

“I didn’t pay that fool any attention. I can’t believe that Valerie fell for that bullshit.”

“Valerie was depressed. Her father had caught her having sex with her boyfriend George on the couch in the living room.”

“I’m sorry, that don’t sound like a reason to run off to Africa.”

Valerie was an only child. Her father, Huey King had remarried. When I had visited Valerie’s apartment on Massie Avenue, her stepmother was friendly and her father was always pleasant. During our senior year, most of the Ooja’s had thrown a party. Valerie’s party had spilled out to the front of the building. I had arrived in Kathy Douglas’ car. We had crammed six of us on the back seat and three people in the front. When we pulled up to Valerie’s apartment, I was already stoned. I had gotten so high that Valerie had to put me in her bed so that I could come down. Of all my friends, Valerie was the only one that my brothers liked.

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By habit, I had headed to the game room; Valerie and I had other reasons for sitting in there before class. There was some deep shit going on in the game room that had caught our attention. A girl from our high school, Terrell Whitsett, was always in there. She never left to attend class like most of the students who came in to play cards, ping-pong, or shoot pool. And Terrell was always overdressed for school. She wore after five garments – clothes that you would wear if you were going to a cocktail party. Terrell

was dressed like this all year round, I knew because I came in the game room each day I was on campus. And when I couldn't check, when Valerie was on campus, she was tasked to the game room to watch Terrell. She saw the same routine: Terrell and her friend, Ernestine shot pool while wearing micro mini-skirts and halter-tops. Each of the girls wore heavy makeup, big earrings and high platform heels. When they were courting a trick – a man who came over to their table, which we also noted was the same one; the rear table on the left side of the room – they were really loud. At some point during the encounter, the conversation would turn to a whisper, and afterwards, Terrell or Ernestine would leave with the men.

During an hour, I had observed Terrell go on five dates. She was a prostitute and Valerie and I loved trying to prove it by sitting in that game room and counting how many men Terrell dated during an afternoon. We were Theresa Graves in “Get Christy Love”, only we weren't undercover detectives – just nosey kids. Now Valerie was gone, I was determined to continue my investigation.

I was headed to a table on the wall, my regular one, when someone spoke to me. “Hi Charlotte, you remember me?” I looked over at the guy speaking to me and realized it was a kid I had journalism class with at Glenville.

“Hey Jeffrey,” I said. I sat down.

“Hey. I just started down here; I've never seen you before. Hell, half of Glenville is down here. I was at Point Park College and I came back home,” he said.

He stopped talking after about 20 minutes; I remembered why I didn't like him. I looked around for Jerome or Joe or Rochelle, anybody who could rescue me. He had a brown bag with records in it. He had a *Billboard Magazine* opened up to the Top 100

Singles chart.

He wrote his number down on a piece of paper. “Have you noticed Terrell Whitsett, they used to call her “Sleepy”, I think she’s a hooker. She left out of here three times with three different men.”

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I had met Alton Jeffrey Wright in 1972 during my senior year at Glenville. He was a junior. Valerie and I were on the Yearbook staff and the student newspaper. I don’t know what he wrote about because I don’t remember any of his stories. I was a columns editor, and he was a staff writer. He was the chocolate kid that sat across from me in the back of the journalism classroom.

“You want to look at this?” he asked.

I didn’t respond. He handed me the latest Alice Cooper album and it was an import version. He also showed me a copy of *Billboard Magazine*, *Melody Maker*, and *NME*. The latter two were British publications, which he stored in a crisp, brown paper bag; he must have skipped his morning classes and gone downtown to a magazine stand.

“Oh, what’s that?” Judy Knowles asked. “That’s that Alice Cooper you was talkin’ about Jeffrey?”

She came over and sat next to us. We were in the lab at the back of the journalism room. We had typed our stories and snuck and ate our food back there. We would put our money together and send someone up the street to Kim’s, the chicken wing spot. The door was closed and when Judy sat down, it started to get warm.

“Here comes our valiant editor. Have you smelled her?”

“Ha, ha, yeah,” Jeffrey said. “She smells like she has been doing it or something. She smells like that each day if you think about it.”

“Why is Donna Shanks editor of this newspaper?” I asked.

“I still don’t know who voted for her,” Judy said.

“Me neither,” Jeffrey said. “I don’t know what she did to Miss Wilkins, had to be a hell of a spell. She’s the reason why people don’t like dark-skinned folks.” I had looked over at him and back at the blackboard where Donna was writing our distribution schedule. He was weird.

I had wanted to be editor of *The Torch*, but I didn’t have the votes, there were a lot of juniors in the class. Somehow, Donna, who didn’t seem to be interested in writing at all, had won the editor-in-chief position, and a kid named Richard Nevins was voted assistant editor; I was a page editor. I knew I was the only writer in the room and the only person with any journalism experience. I knew none of my classmates were familiar with the biggest story of the past year, the release of the Pentagon Papers in *The New York Times*.

Donna had opened up the door and let the unwanted smell of sex and funk flow into the room.

“We’re ready to have our staff meeting, y’all come on,” she said.

Her bell-bottoms were wide, her zodiac t-shirt was dingy, and her dark brown hair was disheveled. Despite her unkempt look, her lack of leadership, and lousy writing, our advisor thought Donna was a good editor.

We all looked at one another, and then continued talking. Donna had closed the door and went out to her seat.

“Her ass don’t even come to class,” Judy said.

Other editors had entered the classroom and Donna was out there playing her role as editor-in-chief. She hadn’t been in class for the last two days. When Valerie came in the room and saw Donna there, she pointed to her and mouthed, “She’s here?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Alton where you get these imports?” I asked.

“Don’t use that name,” he said.

“What is your name?”

Judy chimed in, “It’s Alton Jeffrey Wright”.

Just then, Miss Wilkins, our journalism teacher, a pale slim woman who always looked like she was on the verge of crying, came into the classroom. We automatically got up and went out into the main room. Jeffrey went to his side of the room and I went to the back corner. Judy sat in the middle of the room on the front row.

The next day, we looked at Jeffrey’s import copy of *GLITTER* by Gary Glitter. Everyone owned a copy of “Rock and Roll Part 2”. The Glenville band performed it at football games, and the WGHS, the radio station, had made it our school anthem. Jeffrey had brought the album to journalism class months before it broke in the States. What I didn’t like, he always interrupted me while I was writing in my journal to show me albums as if I would be impressed with his latest acquisition. He didn’t know me – I was serious about my writing.

“You know Eleanor is going around saying that she has a tumor in her belly when we all know that she’s pregnant?”

Valerie laughed, “That girl Cheryl who sits up front, she said that she just has a

beer belly.” know if she’s a real student. Sabrina Banks is pregnant too, no more cheering for her.”

“I don’t know why they are afraid to be pregnant?”

“Charlotte, have you ever seen Eleanor with a boyfriend?” Valerie asked.

“No. I don’t think I have ever seen Eleanor anywhere on campus except in this room. I don’t know if she’s a real student. Sabrina Banks is pregnant too, no more cheering for her.”

For the rest of the spring semester, people talked about the pregnant girls on The Torch staff. I think it was Jeffrey and Valerie who put the item in the “Wouldn’t It Be Strange?” column: “Wouldn’t it be strange if people with beer bellies and tumors were really pregnant?”

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I lied to him about losing his phone number; I had thrown it away in the trash. I called him because he was getting on my nerves. I had stopped going to the Student Center because I didn’t want to run into him. I was busy covering news on campus. I was the only reporter in the auditorium the day activist and actress Jane Fonda, and her husband, Tom Hayden presented their Viet Nam film. Jane had allowed me backstage to answer a few questions and meet Tom. I was surprised that no one else was here to cover the event. I was devastated that my photos were grainy because I hadn’t set the aperture correctly.

I eventually ran into Jeffrey because I was in the student center lounge to interview Jay Fisher, who was a Socialist intent on teaching students about Black Panther, Huey Newton. After I finished my interview, I rode the bus home with Jeffrey.

I didn't call him right away because there was something that I didn't like about him. I couldn't put my finger on it. I gave up and had decided to go over to his house. He was coming to pick me up. I went downstairs to wait for him. Chip started in on Jeffrey first. "Charlotte you know that nigga' is a weirdo, I only seen him one time and I could tell he was gay," Chip said. "You ain't trying to get none from him? He don't like girls I'm telling you."

"I don't like him either. Coming over here with that shit-eating grin, that nigga' is a freak. I hate him," Craig said. "I don't like that motherfucker!"

"He comes over here, he can wait in the driveway," Chip said.

"I'll kick his black ass," Craig said.

I waited down in the basement. I had to wonder, was I going over his house for sex? I hadn't been on a real date since white Jeffrey Lohry had asked me out for drinks. I called him "white" Jeffrey to distinguish him from Alton. He had come and picked me up in a nice white car. My brothers had no nasty comments when he showed up, in fact; they were shocked that I had such a handsome date. I had thought that Jeffrey was dating Sandra Spivery; I knew she was in with love him. I didn't know anything about love, and I didn't know anything about guys. When he arrived, I admit that I was excited when I smelled his cologne; but within five minutes of pulling off from my house, Jeffrey had handed me a fat joint – felt like Top's paper – and I lit it and sucked as much smoke in as possible. "Damn," he said. "You know you can smoke a joint Charlotte."

We went down to Jicky Czar's on 30th and Euclid Avenue. The club was on the top floor of the building. I remember being so high that I sat stiff as a statue for the remainder of the night. I don't remember talking and I don't remember drinking. He

never asked me out again, and I realized had blown my chance with him. I guess.

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Jeffrey had come to pick me up in his mother's chocolate-colored Dodge Delta 88. He was the same color as the car. He had a wild smile on his face, which unnerved me. I got in the passenger seat and he immediately lit up a Kool – I had told him that I had asthma and that I was allergic to cigarettes. He blew the smoke in my direction. He lived on East 108th Street. In fact, one of my friends, Donna King lived behind him. Jeffrey had known the King family all of his life. His family lived in a white and yellow two-family house. We went straight down into the basement. His parents, Ardella and Albert Wright had a tenant name Jan who lived upstairs; the smell of meat frying upstairs greeted us as we entered the hallway. Jeffrey's mother was a teacher at Louis Pasteur Elementary, and his father, owned a Sohio station on the corner of East 105th in Cedar. The Wright family also owned a store and a towing service.

As I came down the stairs, I saw all kinds of clutter. I thought I had smelled a dog, but I didn't see one. There was a bathroom, bar, couches, chairs, and an old stand up piano like my family used to own -- this one needed polish. I sat in front of the bar and regretted coming over to his house. He was behind the bar playing host. I imagined that this was his routine: Pull out his favorites records, magazines and books in the vain attempt to impress his guest. He was an only child.

He went over and put a Bowie album on his turntable. I noticed he had a nice stack of records on the floor; lots of import albums encased in thick plastic covers. I noticed that several of them were from Record Revolution on Coventry – the hip record store in Cleveland Heights, actually it was considered Coventry Village, the place were



all the hippies and counterculture people made their homes. Next, he began showing me his books.

“I got this Stones’ book and this Led Zeppelin book. You know they follow Aleister Crowley, the Satanist. So, I went to the Point Park library to look at Crowley’s books. I told you that one of my friends knew choreographer, Debbie Allen. Anyway, I had decided to try out one of the spells in the book. I didn’t believe any of that shit, but I wanted to try because Mick and Keith had done it. Jimmy Page swore by Crowley.”

He wouldn’t shut up or let go of the Stones’ book, so I had to wait for him to turn the page, which was annoying. He talked so damned much. I was impressed by the quality of the black and white photos of Mick, Keith, Charlie, Bill, and Brian – they were so pretty. After he did his spiel, he let me look through the book. I was taken with the detail in the photos, the clothes, the hair, and of course, swinging London.

Even though I was looking at the photos in the book, he handed me a Polaroid, which he had fished out from behind the bar. He kept talking.

“I made the mistake of going at night. I tried to recite one of the spells and it sounded like something was running down the hall after me. To be honest, that’s really why I left the school – that thing kept following me. I couldn’t tell my parents, they wouldn’t believe me. My mother was pissed. She told me I didn’t know what to do with my life.”

I looked at the Polaroid. It was a close up of a black man’s erect penis. I was frozen for a split second, then my instincts kicked in and I knew not to react or stare too long at the image. I appeared unperturbed when I handed it back to Jeffrey. Next, he pulled out his Ouija Board for me to look at. I didn’t touch it. He put it back behind the

bar. “Connie and I used to play with this when we were kids. We could make it spell words. Momma gave it to me for Christmas one year.”

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