

Part I

At the End of a Dirt Road

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Middle of the Night North Florida, 1947

“Wake up, girls! Get outta bed!” Daddy yelled. Awakened from a nightmare, my half-awake eyes searched the cold, dark room. Dim moonlight shining through the bare windows helped me make out Daddy’s flailing silhouette as he yanked quilts off my sisters and me. He grabbed my arm as I scrambled, trying to climb over Patsy and Anetha and off the cot we sisters shared. In my three years of life, I’d never been more scared. My heart pounded.

That night had started out like any other.

In the kitchen after supper, soapy water dripped from Mama’s fingertips into the chipped enamel dishpan as she lifted her arm to brush loose strands of permed dark hair off her forehead. She couldn’t stand hair in her face. Bangs like Patsy had would have annoyed Mama no end. Curls like mine that dangled to my eyes? Pure torture for Mama.

“C.G.,” Mama called to Daddy. “How ’bout bringing in a washtub so the girls can take their baths by the fire?”

Through the kitchen doorway, I had a clear view of Daddy, sitting in a straight-backed chair by the hearth. Logs blazed. Daddy was studying a lesson in his Sunday school book that lay atop his

open Bible. Expecting him to look up and answer Mama any second, I stared at the crown of his head. His hair was nearly as dark as Mama's, except when the sun or firelight hit it just right. Then, you could see sparkles of auburn. His barber clipped it short, as if Daddy still trained with the Florida National Guard. With his hair only an inch long, he didn't need to plaster it down with Brylcreem the way most men at church did theirs. Daddy didn't even need to comb his. You couldn't tell if he did or didn't.

He kept reading, not answering Mama. She rewarmed the dishwasher with steaming water from the white enamel kettle on the oil stove and swished the dishrag around plate after plate before handing each to Patsy. We had our assembly line going. Patsy, who would soon start first grade, rinsed the dishes in another enamel pan before handing them to Anetha, the next oldest, who stood ready with a muslin towel. The dishes, pots, and pans ended up with me, the one everybody still called "the baby," even though I was already three years old. I put them away. If, that is, I could reach the proper shelf. Mostly, I couldn't, so I set the dishes and a few other things on the cook table for Mama to put away later. When we finished, Mama opened the kitchen shutter and tossed the dirty dishwasher through the dark space onto frostbitten four-o'clock bushes in the backyard.

Daddy had been talking about adding a kitchen sink and pipes that would bring well water into the house and take it out again—"indoor plumbing," he called it. Our grandparents, who lived just up the road, had all that in their new house, built in 1944, the year I was born. They even had an indoor toilet!

"C.G.?" Mama called again.

Daddy was thumbing through the Good Book as if searching for a certain verse, but he finally looked up.

"Yeah, Ethel, I heard you. I'm studying my Sunday school lesson. I'll get the tub *to-reckly*." To some people, that might mean *directly*. But from Daddy's lips, it meant "not right now."

The tub they were talking about was a #3 laundry tub that doubled as our bathtub. We had two. Each hung on a big nail in the open hall, or breezeway, that ran through the middle of our house. Later on, I learned that some people called ours a *cracker house*, but to me, it was just *home*.

Mama went out to the hall, brought the tub inside, and set it down hard in front of the fireplace near Daddy's feet. The tub's metal handles clanged against the side of the tub, sounding like a cowbell.

"Ethel, I told you I'd get that!" Daddy said, clearly annoyed, as he got up. He dropped his reading materials in his now empty chair, bumped the tub hard with one foot, and headed for the door. A few minutes later, he came back inside with a bucket of water in each hand. After



Home

he poured the cold water into the tub, Mama added hot from the kettle, then bent over and swirled the cold and hot water together.

"Who wants to go first?"

"Me! Me! Me!" we all said, since the first to get in the tub got the cleanest, warmest water. This night, Anetha got to go first. Later, dressed in our flannel nightgowns, we begged Daddy to put on a shadow show. With his hands positioned between the dangling overhead light bulb and the wall, he moved his fingers so the shadows looked like a barking dog, a scampering rabbit, and an eagle in flight.

"Show us a string trick!" Anetha said.

Daddy could loop a string, its ends tied together, around his

fingers to make the outline of a cup and saucer, crow's feet—even a fancy Jacob's ladder.

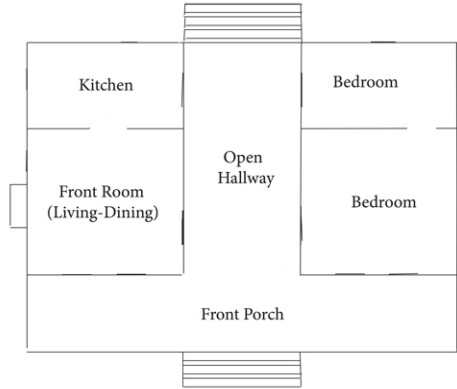
“Yeah! Do a string trick,” I begged. I liked the one where he twisted a string around his fingers and pulled it a certain way, so it looked as if he'd cut off one of his fingers.

“No string tricks tonight,” he said. “Time for bed.”

Mama walked us to the bedroom we shared with her and Daddy. She reminded us to wee-wee if we needed to before we hopped into our bed, a metal Army cot that Daddy had lugged home from Camp Blanding when he left the Florida National Guard.

I pulled the enamel slop jar from under the crib—the baby bed I'd outgrown—and “went.” The cot squeaked as I climbed up on the cotton-stuffed mattress and slid under the quilts between my sisters. Anetha slept next to the wall. Patsy had the choice, outside spot. If she reached her arms out, she could touch the footboard of Mama and Daddy's double bed.

As Mama tucked us into bed this chilly night, she leaned over and brushed hair from our faces. She then tugged the quilts to pull them up around our necks before kneeling beside our bed. We closed our eyes—well, I closed mine so I don't really know about anybody else—and recited



Floor layout

Camp Blanding

During World War II, Camp Blanding (southwest of Jacksonville, FL) was one of the largest military training facilities in the U.S. It sprawled over more than 170,000 acres. From 1940 to 1945, more than 800,000 soldiers received all or part of their training there.
<http://www.usfcam.usf.edu>

“Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.”

Mama was walking out the door when Patsy decided she wanted to move to the foot of the cot. Mama said okay, so Patsy switched ends. That put me in the choice spot, closest to Mama and Daddy’s bed. As I closed my eyes, I hoped I wouldn’t have another nightmare or an accident.

In most of my bad dreams, an animal chased me. Some nights a black bear got after me, even though I’d seen bears only in storybook pictures of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears.” If it wasn’t a bear chasing me, it was a blacksnake—the one Mama called a “corchwhip.” Eventually, I learned it was spelled coachwhip, named after the horse-and-carriage whip, but we pronounced it with an *r*, the way some people say *Warshington* for Washington.

Sometimes we’d see a corchwhip slither across the sandy rutted road as we walked to our grandparents’ house. In fact, we once saw one that was five-and-a-half-feet long, as long as Daddy was tall.

I’d heard that a corchwhip could outrun a man. And if a snake could outrun you, I figured it could outsmart you too. I was pretty sure the serpent our Baptist preacher talked about—the snake that tempted Adam and Eve and introduced sin to the world—was a corchwhip.

After I fell asleep that cold winter night, I dreamed it was summer. I was walking barefoot through the woods, between our house and the nearby Suwannee River, minding my own business, when I heard the rustle of leaves behind me. From the sound, I knew it was a snake, so I took off running. Faster and faster I ran. Branches, brambles, palmettos, and persimmons slapped me in the face as I flew through the woods, the soles of my feet barely touching the ground. Just when I thought—out of breath and panting—that I’d outrun the snake, I heard the rustle of leaves again and screamed into the darkness—

“*Sn-n-a-a-a-k-e!*”

Daddy flew out of bed like he’d been shot from a slingshot, and

started yelling for us to wake up and get out of bed.

“My Lord, Ethel! It is a snake!” Daddy yelled as Mama jumped up and pulled a cord that turned on the overhead light.

Daddy threw quilts off the cot, and Mama shook them as my sisters and I jumped around, shivering. But after much shaking and re-shaking of the covers, no snake fell out.

“You must’a mistook the girls tangled-up legs for a snake,” Mama said to Daddy.

“Crawl back in bed and go to sleep,” Daddy finally said. “Susannette was just having another nightmare.”

Just a nightmare? Go back to sleep? Daddy didn’t understand. I could not go back to sleep.

Everybody else was soon breathing heavy while I lay staring into the dark room, unable to think of anything but the snake. I wanted to scream “Snake!” again so everybody would wake up and keep me company. But I’d heard the story of the little shepherd boy who cried “wolf” once too often.

How I wished I could quit having scary dreams. Just as I wished I didn’t have that other nighttime problem, the one Mama called my “bad habit.”

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My Bad Habit

Around daylight, I jerked myself awake as I tried to catch hold of something—anything. I'd dreamed I'd fallen through the cut-out in the loft floor of our packhouse, the hole made for the wall ladder to reach the barn's loft. I woke up just before hitting the feed barrel—the steel-rimmed barrel Anetha once fell into for real.

Just another bad dream, I realized. I hadn't fallen. I was fine.

Well, no . . . I wasn't fine. I was wet. My flannel gown was sticking to my legs as if coated with sticky paste, the white stuff Mama made with flour and water for us to make paper chains for the Christmas tree. Why couldn't I wake up when I had to pee? I dreaded what Mama would say when she saw me. Not "Good morning, Sleepyhead," like Daddy sometimes did. No. Mama would ask what she always did. "Susanette, d'you wet the bed again?"

I always wanted to say, "No, ma'am," but lying was the same as stealing—wasn't it?—one of those "thou shalt nots" in the Bible. If I lied, I'd burn in Hell. But would I burn in Hell anyway for wetting the bed?

Mama used to call my wetting the bed an accident. Now she called it a bad habit. She had scolded and spanked me, trying to break my bad habit. Nothing worked. Not even Great-Granny

Dosia's remedy that Mama had started using. "Rub her nose in that wet spot," Granny told Mama. "And she'll soon learn to pee in the pot. Remember? That's how we cured your little brother, Harold."

I couldn't imagine handsome Uncle Harold wetting the bed. I knew him mostly from the framed picture of him in his Navy uniform that sat on my grandparents' cabinet radio. He now lived with his wife, Aunt Louise, way up in Indiana, wherever that was.

Now, every time I wet the bed, Mama used Granny's remedy. She would put her hand on the back of my neck, push my nose into the wet spot, and rub my nose back and forth, back and forth on the soggy, smelly sheet. I would hold my breath till I couldn't. The rubbing left my nose feeling raw, but what I hated most were the staring eyes of my big sisters. How I longed to be grown-up like them. *What was wrong with me? Why was I so different?* I knew I shouldn't pee while I slept. But after I fell asleep at night, I totally forgot what I knew while awake.

Every time it happened, Mama would strip off the wet sheet, and Daddy would hoist the mattress onto his shoulders, take it outside, and throw it onto the front corner of the wire fence that surrounded our yard. Mama said the fresh air helped get the stink out.

When that pee-stained mattress lay astraddle the fence, I felt glad we lived at the end of a long dirt road instead of a busy highway. But throughout the day, I worried. *What if company comes?*