

Prologue

It was the kind of day she would have loved.

What you might call postcard-perfect with the sun high and blazing against an aquamarine sky.

She had always been miserable in sweltering weather and I could almost hear her sigh of relief at the gentle breeze and low humidity.

I didn't notice much as I stared out the window of the limousine, where cars and people passed by in a blur, as if they were on a reel being fast forwarded to their destinations. But I barely acknowledged them.

The normalcy of everyday life continuing is something I refused to accept because I didn't want the memory of this day.

But still, I couldn't help but notice how much she would have loved this bright, sunny day.

I wish I could enjoy it and focus on its beauty and all the lush greenery and bloom that summer brings, but bright days always turn into dark nights.

And for Doris Lorraine Walker's children, this was the darkest of them all.

She was gone.

I couldn't wrap my head around it. I still couldn't accept the finality of it and tried to bury the thought deep in that part of the brain where we subconsciously put things too painful to recall or deal with in the present.

I had helped my siblings pick out the casket and flowers, arrange the wake and funeral services. I wrote and read a tribute to her during the service at Calvary Baptist Church where the minister delivered her home-going ceremony with a fiery sermon.

But not even seeing her lying peacefully in her casket made it real as my mind rebelled against it.

I didn't want her to be a memory. I didn't want her face, her smile, her special "James" look to be something I had to recall.

So, I just refused to allow it to sink in and let reality tread water.

Maybe it was because to do so really meant saying goodbye and my heart was not prepared to do that. The world without her was inconceivable to me.

There were still too many shared memories to be laughed or cried over and too many more to make.

There were too many summer picnics, family get-togethers, holidays, and way too many days left to just sit around the kitchen table talking and watching her cook.

And her seven children still had too many birthdays left to be in a world without her there celebrating with us.

But she was gone.

Michelle, Allan, Jackie and myself were in the lead limousine followed by Chimene, Paula and Natasha in the second car. We referred to them as the babies because they started arriving seven years after Jackie was born.

There were moments of idle chatter while we rode, but mostly, we sat in silence and stared at an empty space in front of us filled with memories.

Our mother died unexpectedly, her sudden death shaking the foundation under our feet.

Everything had centered around her. She had been the compass on our long journey out of domestic violence.

There was something reassuring in her soft, brown eyes; something safe and comforting in the way she smelled and something knowing in her step as we followed behind her down each new path.

She died August 28, 2004, one of those days a person never forgets where they were when they got the bad news.

I was a reporter on assignment covering a Native American festival for the Norwich Bulletin when I got the phone call.

The diabetes had swollen her once slender frame and her dresses and high heels had given way to roomy sweatsuits and men's sweat socks. The socks had to be cut at the top so the elasticity wouldn't cut off her circulation and there didn't seem to be anymore blood left in fingers worn out from decades of being stuck with needles to check her sugar.

It had not been an easy life for her and as we grew into adulthood and responsibility, there came a deeper understanding of what she went through during her 75 years.

But the violent beatings, the horrifying screams, the fear and intimidation, the fire, the escape, the years of hunger and evictions, then the murder, then the suicide, were now behind her.

She was finally at peace.

We had her casket placed on a caisson that was drawn by a white horse through the streets of Middletown, Connecticut, to what would be her final resting place beneath an old oak tree in Indian Cemetery.

I wanted the horse because I never forgot how she and her friends sat on the living room couch and cried during the funeral scene in the movie "Imitation of Life."

For years, whenever my mother watched that movie, she mentioned those white horses.

Forty three years later, it would be her seven children who couldn't stop crying and passing tissues to each other as the white horse slowly drew the flowered-draped casket through the streets.

I relived many of those moments from our childhood as we followed behind her as she led us on our final journey together as a family.

Every ugly beating and every piercing scream had been seared and branded into my brain.

Over and over, those moments from my youth flashed before my eyes as I rode.

But so did the time she resolved "no more" and with one minute of courage, gathered her children and stepped into a world hostile to single Black mothers.

And became our hero.

I don't think anyone looking had anything good to say about her when they saw us huddled in abandoned doorways, sleeping on park benches or dragging our meager belongings in garbage bags behind us as we searched for shelter, day and night.

But what they didn't know was that she was saving our lives, and she fooled everybody.

Doris Lorraine Walker wasn't supposed to be able to raise seven children on her own with no skills, no education and no real friends, but she did.

She wasn't supposed to overcome poverty, drag her children from home to home and still keep them strong and united, but she did.

She wasn't supposed to turn out children that would eventually become ministers, social workers, actors, health care workers and a journalist, but she did.

And she did it alone.

That's what I was thinking as I stared out the window with each painful memory taking me back to my childhood and our long journey: she did it alone.

I guess a lot of the pain for me came from my own shortcomings and the unfulfilled promises that I had made to myself that one day she would live like a queen.

I had vowed that one day she would have what she wanted and not have to make do with what she had.

But that never happened as I remained wrapped in a straitjacket of mental illness, PTSD and decades of instability.

She left before I could give her my version of the field of dreams that I so much wanted her to have.

She left before I could buy her the nice home, the fur coat and make her last days worry-free.

She left before I could make any dream I had for her come true and sometimes, I wonder if I let her down.

She always told us how proud she was of her children and their achievements.

But accomplishments are measured by time and substance and ours paled next to her character, strength and will. More than proud, it is we who were honored to be known as the children of Doris Lorraine Walker.

And she always did have it wrong. She, not her children, was always the star and we would have followed her light anywhere.

But for years, her light was dimmed in the darkness of Egbert Randolph Walker. And when it was all over, their ending was my beginning.

No matter what I did or where I went; no matter how many drugs altered my reality or how much I prayed, the memories of their time together filled the path in front of me with ghosts that would not get out of my way.

And they have always been my problem.

I am haunted by the memories that I can't stop remembering.

Chapter 1

Newark, 1956

“Goddamn it!”

That was my father’s favorite expression and he yelled it at the top of his lungs as he jumped back furiously brushing away red iodine that had splashed on his immaculately pressed pants with one hand, while using the other to hold the bottle away from him.

I was lying on the kitchen table, twisting and turning and bawling at the top of my lungs right along with him. The outer side of my right foot was split open and blood was all over the place.

The gash probably needed about seven stitches and I should have been in an ambulance on my way to a hospital with parents fretting over me.

But a doctor would have asked how such a wound could have happened to such a young kid and Bert Walker was not in the habit of offering explanations to anyone.

My father’s idea of fixing the cut was to clean it out with iodine, tightly wrap gauze bandages around it and let it heal naturally. He was pouring the iodine when the sting of the antiseptic hit the open flesh and caused me to jerk back and start kicking and screaming.

He turned on my mother in a rage. “Goddamn it, hold him, Doris,” he said between clenched teeth.

“I’m trying to, Bert,” my mother quivered. “Honey,” she turned to me, “I know it hurts but you have to sit still so we can make it better.” She was still struggling to hold my foot and get the towel I had kicked away back under it.

The ragged edges of the wound were throbbing merciless and I was franting my brains out. Everyone that lived under Bert Walker were franters. Franting is what you do when you’re helpless and frustrated and everything’s all bottled up inside you and the only way to express it is through tears. Sometimes it’s tears of rage, sometimes loneliness, sometimes because there’s nothing left to do.

I was still in shock.

All I wanted was the cookies my parents kept in one of the top cabinets in the kitchen.

We lived in a five-room apartment on the eleventh floor in Columbus Homes, a housing project in Newark, New Jersey.

It was a small place, but my mother kept the windows sparkling and the wooden furniture with its thick, flowered-cushions shining Pledge-clean.

The rectangle-shaped kitchen was small though bright yellow walls and a slight nook, where the refrigerator was lodged, made the room appear somewhat larger.

The stove and sink were on one side of the room. It was actually a double sink; one side was used for washing dishes, the other side for washing vegetables and meats. My mother always washed her meat before cooking it.

Cabinets ran the full length of the wall above the stove and were covered with yellow, white, and brown contact paper. The countertop of a lower cabinet, located next to the sink, was crowded with a flowered pattern breadbox with matching tin canisters for sugar, flour, tea and coffee; the bottom section of the cabinet was used to store onions and potatoes.

On the other side of the room, which was about four adult footsteps away, was a table with a white and brown Formica table top and six brown vinyl chairs. A standard-size window allowed for a breeze in the solidly constructed concrete building.

I was barely out of diapers but had figured out the only way to reach the top cabinets was to pull a chair up to the lower cabinet and climb up. Then I could open the top cabinet and grasp the treasure my parents kept stockpiled out of my reach.

The chair was much bigger than me, but I pushed and pulled it across the brown linoleum floor until I got it into position. Then I climbed until I was standing on the counter top of the lower cabinet. I had just reached into the cupboard of the top cabinet and was holding the prize I sought before turning and looking up into the eyes of my father.

It was as if some primitive instinct had kicked into my brain. His eyes were flashing what I came to recognize as danger. His pale right hand was red with fury as it gripped a wooden hanger, the kind he always hung his starched white uniformed pants on.

Before I understood that he didn't share my joy at getting to the cookies, he snatched me by the arm and I went hurtling into space.

He beat me with the hanger until the wood fell apart. An exposed nail from the hanger caught in my foot and ripped a gash about an inch and a half long.

It was my first warning that another emotion existed that wasn't happiness or joy.

It was the first, but not the last time I understood the man I called Daddy could and would hurt me and hurt me badly.

I understood that day he was the boss and no matter what I wanted, felt or thought, his will was absolute.

It's the first memory I have of him and a lasting one, but only a suggestion of what was to come.

For the next eight years, his fury would know no boundaries on my body. He would use it as a playground for his demons, punishing it with scars that would last a lifetime.

His verbal and emotional abuse would cripple me, leaving an empty shell penetrated only by insecurity and the fear concealed under it.

His footsteps would shadow me, making every decision and every minor triumph or major stumble a consequence of his unrelenting hazel eyes.

I've never known why he hated me so much, but I do know he's given me many reasons to leave no doubt that he did.

So there I sat, my mother pressing the bloody, ragged edges of the wound together while my father wrapped gauze and tape around it.

Years later, she would tell me, 'Your father was afraid to take you to the hospital because he knew the doctors would ask questions.'

I've often wondered why she didn't take me once he left for work. Maybe she was afraid of the questions, too.

Maybe things might have turned out a lot different if she had ... maybe.

Ironically, when it was all over, I got some cookies.

Somehow, they tasted different.

My parents would eventually have seven children, but at the time, there was only my brother, two sisters and myself living in a household wrapped in fear and bathed in intimidation.

I don't know what happened during the two years after my father tore open my foot, but I do know whatever happened had to be bad; it was bad enough for me to psychologically block those years.

All I know is that by age five when my memory picks back up, I had retreated and psychologically changed sides.

“James, why did you do this?” The demand came from my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Johnson, as she furiously waved a piece of paper in front of my face as though hoping the air would erase whatever was on it.

Standing in front of my desk, she glared at me over glasses that hung on the tip of her nose connected by a chain around her neck.

She threw a hand on her hip and leaned ominously forward, "I'm waiting, young man."

I didn't know what to tell her. What was I supposed to say about what I had written?

“I don't know,” I answered truthfully, staring at my hands.

She had given the class a blank outline of the American flag along with red, white and blue crayons and told us to color it using the real flag that hung on a pole in the classroom as a guide.

I had taken the red crayon and in big letters written FUCK across the front of the paper.

Mrs. Johnson's expression left no doubt she was downright shocked.

Words like fuck just weren't tossed around casually in everyday conversation. It wasn't a word you heard, rather one you read on bathroom walls. Even grown-ups didn't use it. Curse words such as damn, hell or son-of-a-bitch, were the curse words of choice for men.

And women never cursed; at least, married women and mothers didn't. Only street women – prostitutes and whores and partygoers, did. And even they didn't use the word fuck.

The other kids had stopped playing and were watching us intently; knowing by the teacher's tone that I was in big trouble.

“Well, I'm going to send this home with your sister and ask your parents for an explanation.” She was certain they, too, would be horrified at this desecration of everything she held sacred, particularly as it occurred just ten minutes after I had stood by my desk with my right hand over my heart and pledged allegiance to Old Glory.

She seized a chunk of my shirt, yanked me out of my seat and marched me down to the principal's office.

Plunking me firmly in a chair outside the principal's office, she ordered me to “stay,” like I was a puppy, and she went off in search of my sister, Michelle.

There were other kids sitting with me in the area. Some looked fearful every time the door opened, expecting an embarrassed parent to burst through with a strap raised high; others were unconcerned, giggling and whispering conspiratorially to each other.

Soon, the teacher came back with Michelle dutifully trailing behind her.

She triumphantly strode over to me, turned to Michelle and boomed in a voice loud enough for everyone in the building to hear, "I want you to take this home and give it to your parents immediately."

Handing Michelle the offending drawing, along with a note, she glared at me. Drawing herself up majestically, she fidgeted carefully with her clothes as if they were robes of gold and smiled benignly at Michelle as if she was a favored subject. "Now, I know I can trust you to make sure they get it."

She was right. After school I caught up with Michelle and begged her not to give it to my father.

My pleas fell on deaf ears. She walked stone-faced, her eyes riveted to our building, the incriminating evidence clutched in her hand, determined she was doing the right thing.

Once my father got the note and saw that word, I knew my life wasn't worth two cents. He didn't allow us to even use "butt" when talking about someone's ass. Instead, we were taught to say "behind." It was pretty much the same with other expressions like "you farted!" You may as well have played "Taps" if we used that word. We used the more polite, "you broke wind." And hell would be paid if we did that.

Columbus Homes consisted of eight widely spaced buildings on a huge parcel of land located between two streets. Four buildings, each with a parking lot separating them, were located on the Seventh Avenue side; the other four buildings, also separated by parking lots, were on Sheffield Drive.

Situated between the two sets of buildings was a huge, blacktop playground enclosed by a tall wire fence. On one end of the playground was a community center, which we called a keep well station because people received health care there. On the other side was McKinley Avenue Grammar School.

My mother could look out our bedroom windows and watch us walk to and from school. The closer Michelle and I got, the more I panicked. I didn't know what I was going to do but I knew for sure that I didn't want to go home.

I decided it would be best to run away and hide in a stairwell in one of the buildings on Sheffield Drive.

Michelle continued on to our home while I hung back. As soon as she entered our building, I took off and made my way around what, to me, was an enormous distance to get up to Sheffield Drive.

Each building in Columbus Homes had twelve floors and each floor had eight apartments of varying sizes. Actually, it had thirteen floors if you count the lobby, where a huge ten-room apartment was located in every building. Mrs. Scottie, with her thirteen kids, twelve boys and one girl named Carolyn, lived in ours.

Reaching one of the buildings, I breathed a sigh of relief. My heart was pounding because I hadn't really thought I would make it this far. I had expected every adult I ran past to stop me and demand to know where I was going all by myself. Small kids just didn't walk or play by themselves.

Walking into the building, I got on the elevator and took it to the twelfth floor. Getting off, I ran as fast as my legs could carry me to the opposite end of the floor to the end stairwell before anyone could open their doors.

Above the twelfth floor in every building were two flights of stairs that led to the roof. On the first level was a flat square area about ten-by-ten which led to another flight of stairs that ended at the door to the roof. I headed up, got about halfway before stopping and covering my nose.

The small area stank of urine and alcohol; half-eaten food and cigarette butts were scattered everywhere.

Pushing aside bottles of Rheingold beer and empty syringes, I blew at crusty old tissues before sitting down. The stairs were cold and moist. I was both scared and excited. Everything sounded loud and big, just like grown-ups sounded to me most times.

A door slamming on the first floor and people walking up and down the stairs all sounded as if they were one flight below me. Some guy brought his girl into the hallway and was on the level under me arguing in hushed voices.

I tried to hold my breath because I was afraid they could hear me breathing.

The last level in the buildings on Sheffield Drive had reputations as being places where drug addicts hung out.

I sat there for what seemed like a long time staring at the windowless, stark walls. But it began to become too real. I had never been on my own for such a long period of time.

I was hungry and wanted to go home. I was always the first to rush to the dinner table, pull back my chair and yell, "Whoever don't want theirs, I'll eat it" before I sat down.

Hunger wasn't something I was prepared for; neither was the isolation. I had one of those imaginations where everything lingered in shadows but sometimes, I had to change sides just to make things better.

Whenever I changed sides, that is, when I hid inside my imagination to block reality, I felt safe. But sometimes, even in there, the monsters invaded; they just couldn't hurt me.

A door banged shut on the eleventh floor and I heard footsteps start up. My eyes shot wide open as I jumped to my feet in panic, my heart slapping rapidly against my chest. Fear screamed in my mouth.

The footsteps really got my attention because they weren't normal footsteps, but trying-to-be-quiet footsteps, the kind you walked when playing hide-and-seek and was getting closer to the hide-ee.

There was no doubt in my mind those footsteps were going to stop inches from me and I was going to look up into a pair of hazel eyes.

The footsteps stopped on the twelfth floor and the door opened. I muffled a heave of relief, then froze as the hall door closed and the footsteps started up to the last level; they were not my father's footsteps, which I knew very well.

The footsteps turned and headed up the last flight where I sat in the shadows.

It started bawling, gripped in fear.

The sudden wailing caused Alfred, one of Mrs. Scottie's many teenage sons, to let out a startled yelp and stumble back, grabbing for the guard rail to keep from falling. The blood drained from his face as though someone had just flushed it. When he q whao itli His eyes looked dazed as if he was in shock, or seeing a ghost. "Don' you know everybody, 'cluding the cops, is lookin' for you? Your mother and father is gon' crazy. They's gonna whip your ass."

Without waiting for an answer, he picked me up and threw me over his shoulders like a sack of nothing and carried me home, laughing at the flurry of punches I threw at his back.

"I foun' him in a hallway on Sheffield Drive, Mr. Walker," Alfred said when my father's icy stare appeared from behind the steel gray door to our apartment.

A sound rushed from my mother's lips as she ran across the room and drew me close, wrapping one arm around my upper torso and the other around my head. She was squeezing the last drop of life out of me but I didn't care; I just huddled in the safe smells of her body.

"Are you all right?" She pushed me back, running her hands over me. "Why did you run away?"

For a second, I thought I had gone through this for nothing, that Michelle hadn't given them the note, but quickly realized that wasn't what she meant.

"You must be starving," she said. "Come on, let's get you something to eat." We headed toward the kitchen but my father's calm, quiet fury stopped us cold.

"You're not feeding him anything," he said, through clenched teeth. "Get him out of my sight before I kill him."

My mother didn't have to be told twice. She hustled me back to my room. Later, she snuck me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of milk.

My father must have been a lot more relieved than he wanted me to know because he didn't lay a hand on me and I don't remember him ever questioning me about the flag.

Chapter 2

I don't think my siblings and I realized that happiness was supposed to be a continuous thing.

For us, it was like those bubbles we blew from our little plastic blowers; the moment you reached out to feel what it was like, it burst at your fingertips. So, in those rare moments when happiness passed by, we snatched at it greedily.

Christmas was the only time it felt like there was less tension in the air, almost like a fog lifting.

My parents went out of their way to make it big fun and kept us in a constant state of anticipation. The days before the holiday were always busy as we shopped for food, ornaments for the tree and best of all, gifts.

We did most of our shopping at the Newark Slip Factory. It was a huge discount store on High Street in Newark that had been a staple for poor shoppers for years.

The store was so well known, the owners never bothered replacing the old red-and-white sign that hung outside the brick-red building, where the gray letters bearing its name were fading and barely discernible.

We dug into large bins for school clothes and shoes that were tied together by a piece of thin plastic.

It wasn't the kind of place where you went into a dressing room to try on clothes, rather the clothes were held up against you to judge if they would fit.

We picked through wads of loose curtains hoping to find a matching and found pots and pans, some without lids.

Shopping during Christmas, we always split up. My brother and I would go with my father and my sisters would head off with my mother.

My father would give us money and for the next hour or so, Allan and I would pick out gifts for our mother and sisters.

We made a game of ducking behind a column or display case when we saw them so they wouldn't know what we were buying or considering buying. We had no idea they were doing the same thing.

Then we switched; Michelle and Jackie went with my father, Allan and I with our mother.

I had already seen what I wanted to get my father and it was so cheap, I thought they'd made a mistake with the price. I could buy it and still have some change left over to jingle in my pockets.

The gift I had chosen for my father came in a long, bright red box that had a green bow painted on the outside. Inside were four small bottles of cologne, each a different color and each in its own niche. I opened and sniffed each one gingerly, making sure all smelled good.

I was so excited because it was like giving him four different gifts. I snatched it up quickly and asked my mother if he would love it. She said yes. It was very important that he loved it.

I figured it was better than those white handkerchiefs that come four in a box and had a plastic cover that a person could see through and spoil the surprise. And all the handkerchiefs were the same; two that were all white, one that was white with blue stripes and another that was white with brown stripes. And he had plenty of handkerchiefs.

After picking out our gifts, we'd join up ready to get home, the four of us kids bursting to tell each other what we bought, but knowing it was a secret.

Two days before Christmas, we dragged out the previous year's decorations, inspecting the little bright-colored balls to see if any were broken and putting new hooks on those that weren't. Frustrating hours were spent untangling strings of lights and checking to see if we had to buy more.

We mopped floors, washed walls and dusting tables and lamps without complaints.

Allan and I grunted and groaned as we thought we were helping move furniture to make room for the tree.

We were kept motivated by singing along with our favorite Christmas songs by "Alvin and the Chipmunks" playing on the record player.

We never got our tree until Christmas Eve when my father said trees were cheaper because the tree sellers couldn't do anything with them afterwards.

On that night, we hustled into coats and hats and wrapped scarves around our necks while my father went out to make sure the chains around the tires were secure and could handle the snow.

Then we bundled up in "Old Buggy Wuggy;" with Allan, Jackie and myself scrambling over each other to get to the seat nearest the window. Michelle, always the smartest, simply waited until we were in and got in behind us, thus assuring her a window seat. We could only stare at her like we had been conned.

We took long drives through different neighborhoods, looking at big homes that sat far back from the road, some behind large iron gates. We gaped at brilliant lights extravagantly woven through trees and lights that colorfully spelled out messages, like "Merry Xmas" and "Peace on Earth."

My father rarely tolerated noise and rarely displayed any emotion other than anger. But he laughed as we argued which house looked the best before changing our minds and picking another.

He had a big laugh. The kind that filled a room. It unexpectedly burst out of him, his head jerking back while his face lit up, leaving no doubt that whatever he was laughing at was really funny.

After touring different neighborhoods and seeing homes we could only dream about, we pulled up behind a cluster of cars at a stand selling trees.

It was crowded with last minute buyers. We spilled out of the car to a cheerful "Merry Christmas" from a smiling owner. The aroma of pine, incandescent lights and Christmas music created an atmosphere that was inspirational and intoxicating.

There was something really spiritual about Christmas and "Peace on Earth" and "Goodwill toward Men" were said with heartfelt sincerity.

Selling trees was a family affair. Kids barely my age were asking, "What kind of tree are you looking for?"

We trudged through the snow, pushing through crowded lanes of trees and families. My parents talked with other parents and shopped for the tree while we kids threw snowballs and played in the snow. After finding our tree and tying it to the top of the car, we headed back home.

We sprayed fake snow on the windows in the shapes of snowmen and mountain peaks and placed candles on the window ledges in the living room and kitchen.

They weren't real candles but plastic, electric ones about twelve inches high, ivory in color and shaped like the real thing. Six candle sticks sat in a row on a single base or you could buy just the singles. Small light bulbs shaped like a flame on a real candle were screwed in on top and came in lots of colors.

The colors we used were white, red, and blue, green, yellow and orange. When we plugged them in, the bright lights cast different hues off the snow-sprayed windows.

My mother, spreading newspaper and sheets down where the tree would stand, called out directions.

"Jim, bring the bucket over here, and Michelle, you get the stand."

I ran and got the bucket and Michelle placed the little red and green stand in it. You needed a bucket to put water in so the tree wouldn't dry out and catch on fire. This done, my mother covered the bucket with more sheets.

At last it was time to put the tree up. It had been propped up in the corner by the front door, its fragrance scenting the room. My father picked up the tree and set it in the stand and tightened the screws that held the tree in place. It almost touched the ceiling.

We put the bulbs on first ignoring the little needles pricking at our fingers and arms as we meticulously hung each one, spreading them out evenly and making sure no two colors were hung together.

The lights came next, followed by candy canes, the big ones toward the back, the smaller ones up front. Silver tinsel was then tossed over the entire tree before we sprayed it with the last of the snow.

It was now time for the angel. Our tree wasn't complete unless an angel, dressed in white satin and crinoline, sat atop, as if she were a guardian protecting the tree from any harm.

Picking up the large gifts my parents had already wrapped for relatives and each other, we arranged them under the tree. Then, we kids stood back and stared at our work.

While Bing Crosby crooned "White Christmas" in the background, my mother moved toward the kitchen and my father toward the tree.

"Hurry up, Mommy," we cried breathlessly as she turned off the light in the kitchen and walked slowly to the light switch in the living room.

"What's the rush?" she teased, putting her hand on the switch. "Everybody ready?"

"Yes! Mommy! Yes!" we cried.

"Daddy, please. Hurry up! Plug it in! Plug it in!" we begged.

Simultaneously, my mother turned off the living room lights as my father plugged in the lights for the tree.

We gasped in wonder, jumping up and down clapping our hands in excitement as the colored lights twinkled and sparkled off glittering tinsel, luminously casting shadows that danced off the walls and ceiling.

The angel, her wings spread majestically, enclosed the room in her arms, leaving it warm and cozy and glowing. We ran up to the tree, wide-eyed and stimulated, touching the lights and shrieking with enchantment.

Quickly, we gathered up the rest of the presents and hurriedly put them under the tree and hung our empty stockings in their places.

I always counted each present with my name on it and looked to see who it was from. I shook each one and tried to guess what lay under the festive wrapping paper; the gaily colored ribbons and bows daring and tempting me to rip them off.

We were always allowed to open up one gift, but there was never any real mystery about what it would be; a new pair of pajamas or a robe or a pair of slippers.

We stayed up long past our usual bedtime: the girls helping our mother wash the turkey, cut up onions and peppers for stuffing and grate cheese for what would become baked macaroni.

Allan and I played Zorro, using the cardboard tubes from empty wrapping paper as swords and garbage bags as our capes before stuffing them into trash bags along with empty tape dispensers, broken tree branches and the rest of the garbage before disposing of it. Otherwise, the two of us just made a nuisance of ourselves.

The slightest sound sent us racing to the window, sure we would finally get a glimpse of Santa and his reindeers, especially Rudolph.

Living on the 11th floor, we had an unobstructed view of the skyline clear to New York. We were sure we would see him as he made his stops from chimney to chimney. And we knew Santa had to come through our window because we had no chimney.

But all we saw were lights blinking on and off for miles and miles.

At last we were told Santa was on his way to our house so we had to get ready for bed. We took baths and put on our new pajamas. After putting out milk and cookies for Santa, our parents tucked us in.

I lay in bed wondering if Santa would forget. More than anything else in the world I wanted a "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" robot.

It stood about twelve inches high and was painted red, blue and gray. Its eyes were red. It operated on batteries. When it was turned on, the robot walked with its arms swinging back and forth and its legs, stiff and regimented, moving inflexibly like Wooden Soldiers. It was the neatest thing I had ever seen and each new commercial for it sent me howling to the TV set.

Every year, Santa always brought us the biggest toy on our lists. But this year I wasn't taking any chances. I spent hours going over my list, furiously scratching things off, making sure I didn't ask for so much he would get confused and get me something else beside the robot.

Somehow, I managed to get to sleep.

Early the next day, when morning was little more than a hint, we raced into the living room, our shouts waking our mother who soon joined us. Toys and gifts were jammed everywhere, spilling over furniture and tables and onto the floor.

We each had our own special place where our toys were put. Allan and Jackie split the couch; Michelle and I had the chairs.

Michelle squealed when she saw her "Patty Play Pal," one of the first life-size dolls. I think it stood about three-feet high.

Jackie let out a whoop when she spotted her "Chatty Cathy," and already had it gripped by the hair. When you pulled the cord on the back of the doll it would ask questions like, "My name is Chatty Cathy. What's your name?" A really stupid girl toy, I thought.

Allan was gushing over his train set, already laying down the tracks and announcing its immediate departure by yelling, "All aboard."

I was the only one not squealing. On my chair was no "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" robot. There was a GI Joe, plenty of trucks and cars and other assorted toys and games, but no "Rock 'Em Sock 'Em" robot. I was bitterly disappointed.

"What's wrong, Big Man?" My mother inquired. She was trying to calm Jackie down while putting batteries into her doll.

"Nothing," I said, the disappointment obvious.

Then from the hallway, I heard this whirling, mechanical whining noise. I turned around with my heart pounding and there it was! My "Rock Em Sock Em" robot! Its arms were swinging with its legs kicking out as it marched grandly into the room from the hallway.

My father, in pajamas, was trailing behind it, bent over with his arms outstretched as if to catch it should it fall. A big grin was spread wide across his face as he looked over at me.

There are moments in your life when no matter how badly a person has hurt you that will stay frozen in your mind forever.

Whenever I have to submerge deep to salvage one of those rare moments of happiness with my father's face lighted around it, this is the moment that plays over and over. It is a moment I clung to through the years, because it is the only time he made me feel as though I was special to him.

Columbus Homes was a pretty good place to live.

All kinds of people lived in its 392 apartments. There were lots of Blacks and some Puerto Ricans and a few Chinese people. Everybody else was white, but I don't remember there being a problem where race was concerned.

Most of the grown-ups hated living in the projects but I didn't know why. There were lots of kids to play with.

But buying a house and moving their families out in the fresh air where they could see the stars and smell flowers was pretty much the conversation when they talked.

For the most part, I learned it was just talk, although some people actually did it, mainly the whites because I began to see less of them. And the projects seem to be getting more crowded.

On the floor where we lived, there were eight families; three black, four white and one Puerto Rican, headed by a man named Felix.

He must have worked as a waiter or bartender in one of the better restaurants because he always wore a black tux with a multi-colored cummerbund.

And he clearly patterned himself after the character Ricky Ricardo from the "I Love Lucy" show on television. Ricky Ricardo was a bandleader and singer in a nightclub on the show.

Felix sure wanted to be a singer and anyone unlucky enough to get within listening distance was quickly serenaded in off-key Spanish.

Dinnertime in the projects was like walking through a food gallery as the hallways were filled with mouth-watering aromas.

I liked being at people's homes when they were cooking because you always got a taste of what was in those pots and pans. I knew everybody on our floor but never knocked on their doors because my parents considered it impolite to stop by somebody's house when they were cooking.

I didn't understand why, but later learned that most people had just enough to feed their families.

Despite the multitude of people they talked to everyday, it was unusual for either one of my parents to have company. They didn't have any friends that just dropped by. They knew people, but except for a few women from our building, they were never in our home.

My mother grew up in Camden, near the bridge leading to Philadelphia, a good distance from where we lived. The only people she knew were the ones she met after marrying my father. But he grew up in Montclair, less than a fifteen-minute drive away.

Still, I never heard about or saw any of their friends or childhood friends, except that one time when we were all bundled in the back of the car. Most of the people who came to visit were my father's brothers and sisters.

When my father watched the "fights" on television Friday nights, his only companions were a six pack of beer, a stick of pepperoni and a wedge of aged provolone cheese, which we kids always called "stinking cheese," because the odor smelled like one giant, silent fart.

He always broke off a piece and chased us around the living room, laughing while we ran holding our noses and squealing at the top of our lungs. If we pestered him long enough, he would let us lick the foam at the top of the glass after he poured the beer.

I never thought it was strange that they didn't have company, mainly because we weren't allowed to hang at other people's homes either.

That was ironic -- because it was other people's homes that would soon play a big part in our lives as my father's abuse escalated and my mother sought to get away.

We soon found ourselves sleeping on park benches in Branch Brook Park to get away from him but food and shelter won the war and back we went.

And the violence just got worse.

I often think about what it must have been like for my mother to know she was going back to a man that was going to hurt her but had no choice. I often wonder what was going through her mind when she stuck her key in the lock and opened the door knowing what she faced.

And I often thought if we kids weren't around, she could run away. Before long, my siblings and I were separated from our parents and placed in a shelter.

And things went from bad to worse for me.

Chapter 3

1960

I was lying in my bed pretending to be asleep with a coarse woolly blanket pulled tight to my face. Lights had been out for quite awhile, but I had no sense of knowing how long I'd been awake.

When you're six-years-old and anxiously awaiting your seventh birthday or something fun and exciting, time seemed to take forever, which I didn't understand at all because older people always complained how fast time went.

But it was late because there were stars in the sky and the windy night March air was already leaving a light frost on the windows.

I was in a room in the boy's section of the Belleville Children's Shelter in Belleville, NJ. It seemed enormous to me, big enough for a pilot to park an airplane.

At any given time, about forty kids between the ages of five to eighteen were my roommates. Sometimes it was more, but never less. That's because some of the boys that were admitted didn't stay more than a few days, but this was rare.

Most of the boys in the room were already at the shelter when me, my brother, Allan, along with my two sisters, Michelle, whom everyone called Mickey, and Jacqueline, shortened to Jackie, were dropped off by our parents and a social worker.

Many of the boys came from Newark, which is where we lived, but I didn't know any of them. And the seventeen and eighteen year olds were really considered men because they had to find jobs and leave as soon as possible to make room for more kids. There were a lot of kids who were having problems.

The shelter was part of a sprawling compound that consisted of five red brick buildings with impressive granite columns lining the outside of the structures.

The municipal-style buildings, with the exception of the hospital, were two and three stories tall. I don't know what all the buildings were used for but if we got sick and needed a needle, we were bundled up and taken into one of them immediately.

I think it may have been a government facility at one time because the buildings were constructed atop a series of subterranean passages.

It was a good way to move around unseen, or maybe it was just in case the Russians dropped a bomb on America. This was a big fear. In school, a siren would sound across the PA system and we practiced getting under our desks and putting our heads between our legs just in case there was a bomb.

Maybe they thought if we couldn't hear the bomb, we wouldn't mind dying when the time came.

We played in the tunnels all the time, even though we weren't supposed to; and we used them all the time to walk from building to building when it rained.

The large building where the boy's quarters were located was set far back from the road in front of a wide circular driveway. All the rooms in the old imposing structure were massive. The room where I slept faced the front of the property and took up half of the building on one side. Immense windows with intricate black iron framework lined one side of the enormous room under twenty-foot ceilings.

It was very dark in the room as I adjusted my blanket as noiselessly as possible. The only light was cast in from the lampposts that bordered the distant curb and shined through the windows. The dim glow creeping through the naked tree branches dropped shadows into corners and slithered sporadically over portions of the walls and beds.

But still, the alabaster globes gave someone with a reason to stay awake, just enough light to take a cautious look around.

It was a long and wide room crammed with iron-framed beds. The room was divided into three sections, according to age. The older boys fifteen to eighteen slept in the rear section of the room; juveniles eleven to fourteen, slept in the middle section and in the first section, which is where my brother and I slept, were kids five to ten. Allan is five.

A group of beds were placed horizontally and ran lengthwise against the wall nearest the windows. The same pattern was duplicated on the opposite side of the room against the wall. The bulk of the mid section was taken up with beds that were positioned vertically. Two pairs of columns set in the aisles on opposite sides of the vertically placed beds. They were used as the dividing line that separated the age groups. There was no room for "ripping and racing."

Just beyond this room was the play area, which is where the entrance to our section was located. The area was filled with chairs and tables and bookcases with lots of books that showed you how to do your ABCs and how to add and subtract.

There were plenty of coloring books and crayons along with games and lots of puzzles that you could spend hours putting together. They had stuff for the big kids, too. You could also make all the noise you wanted. We spent a lot of time there because we weren't always allowed outside our section.

Just beyond this area was a dorm-size lavatory with rows of urinals and toilets. A large shower area was to the rear.

My eyes darted suspiciously from bed to bed, zeroing in on the outline of each sleeping figure and watching for the slightest movement, scanning my eyes over clothes thrown haphazardly on the ends of bed rails and across footlockers. Some shirts and pants were balled up on top of shoes and sneakers, as if the wearer had just peeled everything off and stepped away.

I listened very carefully but other than snoring and worn springs groaning in protest when a body shifted, the only sound came from the long corridor outside the room, the faint echoing footsteps of a night counselor on her rounds.

It took a while to make sure everything was all right.

Luck was with me tonight. It was one of those rare evenings when everyone more or less drifted off to sleep as soon as the lights were turned off. Normally, the switch being turned off was a signal to grab pillows and attack the boy that slept next to you. That always started the mad skirmish that sent the night counselor charging back and forth with blazing eyes and menacing threats.

But after wearily listening to another lie-filled adventure from a kid whose nickname was Red, the last restless boy had settled down.

Everything was quiet.

Lying there, I awaited with growing impatience the night ahead.

The day had started routinely. We made our beds, cleaned our area, and ate breakfast. Then it was a wild dash to the playground where our imaginations ruled its limited resources. We used a ball and crudely drawn chalk line to play lively games of volleyball. A small tree branch fueled dramatic finishes in tag team races.

We paid no attention to the corroded steps of the ladder to the sliding board.

I was playing softball with my brother and two sisters but it was getting near lunchtime so I ran back to my room to use the bathroom. Most of the older guys didn't spend time on the playground and when I entered the room, there was a card game going on called Bid Whist. About five younger guys were standing near watching.

I ran into the bathroom and came out a few minutes later to a lot of laughter, which wasn't unusual, but what they were talking about stopped me dead in my tracks.

I was almost seven and though I didn't exactly know what sex was, I knew it was what made you a man. It was something every kid I knew giggled about when they heard the word. It was a big secret and something that was only for grown-ups. This forbidden and mysterious thing only took place at night when no one was around and only happened behind closed doors. I knew this last tidbit for a fact.

One night, Michelle had walked into my parent's room without knocking and my father went ballistic, which was normal, and she couldn't sit for a week. I figured if that was the price you paid for learning about sex before you were supposed to, I could wait a few more years. I really wasn't that curious. For the few brave kids I knew who dared to ask, a swift, incisive slap quickly discouraged any more questions.

I couldn't wait to get older. I hated being a kid, because you were powerless, something my father made sure I understood. Everything and everybody around you is so big. And people always think you are too young to understand anything important, or to figure things out on your own.

I understood a lot. I knew why Miss Fula, who lived across the hall from us in the projects, was scared for her husband to come home. And I knew why Mrs. Mary Wynn, who lived in another building, would always have to wear a brace and one of those big, ugly black shoes and walk with a cane. I understood we were here in the shelter because we didn't make our father happy and he kept beating us and our mother.

The trouble was, understanding it didn't make it any better.

I walked nonchalantly toward them with my eyes glued to the cards as if interested in the game, not the conversation. But I wasn't given a second thought.

I was just part of a group riding out the storm with everybody else. Everybody was waiting to go home or become legally of age so the state could say "good riddance." Some of the guys took you under their wing like a big brother. They let you follow them around and they taught you things you hid from your parents.

Having someone older looking after you was normally a good thing, although at times you paid a price. They knocked you around a little; sometimes hurting you a lot more than you let on, like when they playfully boxed with you and at times damn near left their fist print in the middle of your chest. The blow always left your chest stinging and flashing a hot SOS.

Something in their eyes always made me think they did it purposely. There was no genuine concern in the eyes to match the "I'm sorry" that came when you gasped at the punch. But you didn't want to run off crying because they allowed you to hang.

I listened eagerly to the conversation about sex, immersed with guilty pleasure and fascinated that something so sinful was being talked about so openly. I was enthralled with my newfound acceptance and mesmerized by words such as “fucking” and “pussy,” which they sometimes called “snatch.”

"Yeah, I had tha' bitch screamin' fo' mo'," said Billy, who was thirteen, to roaring approval. "Ah'm serious, man. She kep' sayin' 'I never been fucked like this befoe'."

Everybody laughed and started giving him some skin, what is now called a high five, as he re-enacted the scene by imitating the girl's high-pitched voice while using a series of gyrations. I had no idea what any of this meant.

Red jumped right in. "Ah know what you mean, man. That wha' the las' one I was fuckin' kep' tellin' me."

Red was the same age as Billy and not about to be outdone. "Man, when ah stuck it in her she couldn' get enough. Ah fucked her about ten hours straigh' and kep' on bussing nut after nut," he boasted.

Eyebrows rose in surprise and the heads of the four older guys turned toward each other in disbelief, a look of skepticism slid across their faces. I may not have understood everything they were talking about, but I did understand expressions and numbers.

They didn't believe Red. So, I changed my expression to what I hoped exuded disbelief.

Not that his story wasn't good, but Red was fat with a stomach that hung low and moved with a mind of its own, something he pretended not to notice.

When he was viewed from the rear, his pants were always bunched up right under his ass, causing him to constantly tug at the material. He also had a shock of freckles that made you want to start connecting dots like on a roadmap.

Given the combination, it was doubtful he even had a girlfriend, let alone one who couldn't get enough of him.

Red, whose real name was David, always had the best and biggest of everything: an enormous house in a rich, exclusive section of New Jersey called Short Hills, and a mother and father who drove big Cadillacs. He was only here, he said, because his parents were on vacation and he hated camp. Red lied a lot.

"Yeah, well she ain't gonna want no dick for awhile 'cause I long dicked that pussy so hard she got knocked up," Victor announced.

The revelation was so startling it was like someone had snapped their fingers in your ear to get your attention. A respectful hush settled over the boys. Expressions instantly changed from arrogant to humble. Suitably impressed, Red and Billy stared admiringly at Victor with the kind of awe usually reserved for heroes like Jackie Robinson or Mickey Mantle.

Victor was tall, light-skinned and good looking. He had sandy-colored wavy hair, chiseled features and thick eyebrows. He was outgoing and friendly and all the girls loved him and whispered and giggled to each other when he walked by.

All the young boys looked up to him because he was light skinned and considered cool.

All the dark-skinned boys hated him.

His self esteem properly bolstered, Victor authoritatively pointed out fucking a girl was one thing but getting one pregnant put you in exclusive territory: It earned you the right to be called a man.

No one disagreed.

All of this sounded very exciting, but I figured they had to be lying. If this was what my parents were doing behind closed doors, I never heard my mother screaming and hollering like they said. The only time she did that was when my father was hitting her, which was a lot.

And the baby part couldn't be true!

Though I knew nothing about sex, I certainly knew where babies came from. When you wanted a baby, a big white stork came flying out of the sky and put one in a woman's stomach where it grew until it was ready to come out. Your mother then went to the hospital and when she came home, you had a little brother or sister.

There was nothing dirty about it. My mother and father had explained this to me very carefully.

If any more proof was needed, all anyone had to do was turn on the TV and watch as the stork delivered the Gerber baby to its parents. I was astonished that someone Victor's age didn't know this. Maybe he didn't have a TV; a lot of people didn't.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Babies come from the stork."

To my surprise, everyone roared with laughter, giving each other some skin and shaking their heads at the same time.

"Who tol' you tha'?" asked freckled face.

"My mother," I declared, with the full confidence of someone who'd gotten his information from the utmost authority.

"Well you' mother lied to you," he said, and everybody laughed harder.

I was a little embarrassed at being laughed at.

"Aw, leave him alone, man. He just a lil' kid, he don' know," said Billy.

"What's your name, little man?" Victor asked.

"James," I told him.

"Look, James, this is how it works. First you get your dick hard and then stick it in a girl's pussy. Pretty soon you bust a nut and this sticky white stuff comes out your dick..."

"What white stuff?" I interrupted.

I believed the part about getting hard because I had heard boys my own age say they had seen their father or older brothers with one, and that sooner or later we would have one too. This was supposed to be another sign of manhood but I was secretly afraid to have one because I was afraid it would break. But this was the first time I'd ever heard of the white stuff.

Before we got any further, a loud bell indicated lunch was ready. On our way toward the cafeteria Victor pulled me out of the crowd of screaming kids stampeding toward what they thought must be their last meal. He asked if I wanted him to show me the white stuff; what he called a nut, and how it came out to make babies.

I hesitated. Not because I was afraid, but it sounded really gross. But Victor hadn't posed it like a question but more like a big brother that was going to let you in on a secret.

And it was almost like being double-dared to do something you knew wasn't exactly kosher, like when your mother's pocketbook was sitting on the couch with candy in it and she was nowhere around, but had told you "no more candy!" You just couldn't resist.

And I remembered something else.

About a year ago, Allan, Michelle, Jackie and I were sitting in the back of my father's new car when my parents saw a friend they hadn't seen for at least six years. I knew it had to be that long because he looked shocked when he saw us and asked if we all belonged to them. Michelle was the oldest and she was six at the time.

When my parents admitted we were, he said to my mother, "Goddamn, Doris. You don't give him a chance to put his pants on, do you?" They howled with laughter.

Michelle and I had looked at each other trying to figure out what was so funny.

So maybe there was something to all this. I could picture the envious looks I would get from boys my own age when I carefully -- and in great detail -- laid out the real facts for them. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

But the biggest thing was talking to Victor. The fact that he actually wanted to take the time to teach me something made me feel...important.

So I said, okay.

" Well good, but you have to keep this a secret between you and me and promise not to tell anyone till after I show you," Victor said. "I know you pretty smart for your age but I could get into a lot of trouble teachin' you about this. Your father might try an' kick my ass if he found out. In fact, now that I think about it, maybe you are too young. You just a baby. You'll probably run and tell everyone and get me in a lot of trouble."

The pride I felt at Victor acknowledging my intelligence quickly deflated.

"No, I won't!" I said, indignantly. "I can keep a secret." I had no intention of telling anyone and missing my chance at glory.

"Well...all right," he said, looking unsure while his eyes studied me.

"I'll tell you what," he said, finally. "Soon as everyone is sleep tonight, I'll come get you. Do you think you can stay awake that long?"

"Sure," I replied, a flick of my shoulders producing a gesture I'd seen older boys make.

Victor started to walk away but turned back toward me looking as if he was still trying to figure out what to do.

" You sure now, right?" he asked, as if he needed to be absolutely sure there was no doubt in my mind. "You really sure you want me to show you? I mean, this is what you want, right? 'Cause I won't show you 'less you really really want me to."

I had already started planning my big speech and wasn't about to let Victor back out.

" I'm sure," I told him with conviction.

" Okay," he nodded his head. "See you tonight. And remember. Don't tell anyone!"

I breathed a sigh of relief.

The rest of the day dragged on for me.

I wasn't interested in playing any games, including my favorite, bombardment, sometimes called dodgeball. We weren't allowed to play this game a lot because you could get seriously hurt, but it was very popular. You could play it with as little as two people, but the more, the better.

But I suddenly felt too grown-up for games. Victor didn't play games and neither did the other older guys. Since I was now part of them, I wasn't going to either. Every now and then the frenetic screams coming from the playground made me race to the window, but nothing enticed me to go outside.

One of the boys who slept in my section ran into the room and asked me to go exploring the tunnels. I was tempted. It was great fun pretending to be on an imaginary adventure in the hot subterranean corridors where there was little light.

We discovered what seemed like hundreds of doors that were bolted shut with thick chains and huge locks and we wondered what lay behind them. Could it be bodies or treasure?

But, my thoughts were elsewhere. Reluctantly, I told him no.

Finally, it was time for bed.

I was pretty sure everyone had been asleep for at least an hour as I waited anxiously for Victor. As the minutes crawled by, I began to panic. Did he change his mind? Maybe he forgot? After a while, I began to drift off.

A hand on my shoulder shook me out of the stupor that's somewhere between sleep and consciousness. Victor, wearing a white tee shirt and white Fruit of the Looms underwear, stood over me with a finger to his lips.

I was out of bed in a flash and reaching for my pants when he grabbed my arm. Startled, I looked up as he pulled me toward him, whispering urgently, "C'mon, we gotta hurry up."

"I can't walk around a girl in my underwear," I whispered back, somewhat alarmed. My father had strict rules about this.

"Don't worry," he shook off my concern, his voice barely above a murmur, motioning for me to follow. "She won't see you." He turned and walked away, looking back over his shoulder at me as he did so.

I followed him into the bathroom, anticipation leaving behind the ghost of innocence screaming a soundless warning of the apocalypse ahead.

I shivered and folded my arms together at the blast of cold as I entered. Someone had left a window open. I thought Victor would close it but he didn't even notice it as he continued walking.

A bright naked lightbulb hung in the middle of the ceiling, flinging its rays across the glossy, bright blue paint. The walls were slick and still streaked with beading sweat from showers taken earlier, despite the cold air. My nose cringed from the smell of urine splashed on the blue tiled floor near the row of urinals that were double my height.

To the left as you walked into the bathroom were the stalls. The doors were frail with use and sagged precariously on stripped hinges. Against a far wall were porcelain sinks supported by old-fashioned bear claw legs. The sinks were chipped and dingy yellow, which only seem to highlight the hair and grime clinging obstinately to the day's scum. A constant drip of water from an unfixed faucet created a permanent rust-and-green stained path that led down to the drain.

Crumpled toilet paper lay on the floor beside a single overflowing garbage pail situated underneath the sink. The mirrors above were spotted with splattered toothpaste and soap. A metal dispenser had been affixed to the wall on the side of the sinks where a white cloth towel that had been rolled down and used again and again hung from it, blackened with dirty fingerprints.

Victor headed back toward the showers. Ready to cover myself, I looked around, wondering who and where the girl was. I didn't know how the "white stuff" came out, or exactly what you had to do to make it come out, but I knew from the earlier conversation a girl was needed.

"Where is she?" I whispered, the level of conspiracy deepening with each step.

"C'mon, she's back here," confided Victor, continuing toward the shower room and again gesturing I should be quiet.

I took a couple of steps after him and then hesitated, my confidence wavering. It was dark back there and suddenly, I felt uneasy. It was the same feeling I got when I stayed up late with my mother watching a monster movie and thought it would jump out the TV and get me.

But there was no monster here.

Still... something was wrong. Everything suddenly felt... dangerous.

I smiled bravely at Victor who smiled back and disappeared into the dark. But the spooky feeling closing in rushes around me wouldn't let my legs move. I took another look around, but everything seemed normal.

My father's face popped into my head. Daddy wouldn't like this. You're supposed to be in bed. My courage was fading fast.

"What's the matter?" Victor asked. "You can't hang? You scared?" His whispered voice taunted me from the shadows.

I was plenty scared but didn't know why. And I didn't want to tell him because it might be a big joke; the kind when everybody knew what was going on except you. I had been part of things like that and knew the embarrassment would follow you until it was no longer funny to everybody - and that could take weeks. I could already see the fingers pointing; hear the cries of "sissy" jeering at me. If I ran, they would never let me live it down.

Cautiously, I got down on my hands and knees on the cold floor to peer under the doors to the toilets, thinking if anyone else was there, they could be standing on the seats. But they were empty and there was no place else in the bathroom to hide. On shaking legs I tiptoed over to the window, which had no screen and looked out. I took a long glance around; nothing.

The little voice that sent me in here was now urging me to get out of there, that it couldn't be a joke, but I ignored it, thinking - what else could it be? I guess I didn't run because I just didn't see anything to run from. I wasn't too young to feel the cloak of intuition stealing over me, but too naive to understand the price of disregarding it.

"We're not gonna wait all night." Victor's voice was beginning to walk on the edge of irritation.

I no longer believed a girl was back there with Victor. I couldn't swear to it, but I didn't hear him whisper hello or anything to her. I didn't hear her, either. I should have run but instead took hesitant steps toward the shower. I paused right before reaching its border trying to adjust my eyes to the blackness before going in, praying whatever was going on, the joke would end quickly. I was really spooked.

But no one jumped out and said, " Boo!" No one said, "Gotcha." I heard no rustling of bodies and no giggles. Somehow, this only made it worse.

Victor continued to urge me. "C'mon. I thought you said you wanted to see the white stuff?"

Suddenly, I didn't care about the white stuff, or sex, or babies, or anything anymore. I wanted to get out of there. More than anything, I just wanted to go back to the room.

The little voice was screaming in my head. This is no joke! Something is wrong. Then it hit me. I knew what was wrong; It couldn't be a joke because everyone else was sleeping. I had made sure of that, watching over everybody until my eyeballs hurt. But even if there was nobody else in here but Victor, he wouldn't hurt me, I told myself, because I hadn't done anything to him.

Then why was I afraid?

A gust of cold wind burst through the open window and the door in the last stall squealed on its hinges as it hit the wall with a loud thwack – and my imagination jumped with fear. The white towel hanging from the dispenser seemed to flutter and the fingerprints suddenly came alive and waved like curled talons.

Little stabs of panic swept across the hair on my head and trickled down my neck. Warning bells pealed in my brain. The tile under my toes went from cold to frigid, encasing my feet in its arctic grip. I sensed I was being trapped. Being ambushed.

Goosebumps rushed up and down my arms. My shoulders hunched instinctively while my muscles tightened, bracing for a force I couldn't see.

A web of saliva caught in my throat. Something was suffocating me, touching me, creeping up behind me. Frightened, I swung around and looked back toward the door, ready to plead with whomever or whatever, was lurking there.

Suddenly it was behind me, slowly crawling up my legs, paralyzing them inch-by-inch. Everything stopped. Words from an old ghost movie burst into my head, "slowly I come, step by step.

My eyes started to well up. Wide-eyed, choking back a sob, I slowly turned my head toward the shower, ready to scream out Victor's name for help - and froze.

The head of Victor's dick strained against the top of his white Fruit of the Looms. He was...smiling?

He exploded at me in a blur, slamming me to the floor; one hand on my neck, the other furiously pulling at my underwear. I started to scream, but his hand closed over my mouth and nose, smothering me.

Shut up!" he hissed. "You make any noise and I'll kill you! You understand? I'll kill you!"

I shut down to automatic pilot. Still-life. I stared at the pipes, the sinks, the little squares of tiles. I gazed into the showers and wished I had gone into the darkness. I didn't want to know his hands, his face, his sweat, his smell.

Afterward, he said, "Shit, you bled on me. You probably gonna have a blood baby."

I got up and reached for my underwear, confused over what he said about having a baby, but convinced that because of what I had done that I would have one. Victor grabbed me again and a new wave of terror wrapped around me as he bent down real close.

"If you tell anyone, I'll say you asked me to do it, you hear?" he said. "And then I'll hurt you real bad. You unnerstand?" I looked into his crazed eyes and believed.

Between sobs I told him I wouldn't say anything and the only thing I wanted was to go to sleep. He seemed satisfied.

"It wasn' so bad, was it?" He looked at me expectantly for an answer as he wiped himself off with toilet paper. Pulling up his underwear he said, "Nex' time won't be tha' bad now tha' I opened you up. You'll ge' use to it."

I gagged.

We froze as the crack of approaching footsteps sharply interrupted the quiet night. Victor grabbed me again by the neck and threatened me with a fist.

Then he was gone.

I picked up my underwear and ran into the last stall near the window and locked the door the best I could behind me. The lock was the type where a stem slides into a closure. But it was my luck to pick one where the closure was so badly mangled, the door really couldn't lock.

I sat down on the stool with my legs crossed and my hands clasped together, kicking my heels back and forth against the base of the toilet. My ass was stinging and slick with blood.

Nothing seemed real. I wanted to run and tell my mother what Victor did to me but she wasn't there and she was the only person I trusted. I wanted to cry, to really bawl out loud but I had to hold everything back because the counselor's footsteps had just entered the common area of where we slept.

The night counselor was normally a white woman neatly dressed in a severe skirt and tailored blouse. They always wore plain shoes with a little heel. Very seldom did a man make the rounds, though they also were on duty at night. The footsteps turned left and headed toward the sleeping area.

I peered up at the walls that surrounded me. Someone had scratched, "John was here" on one. Under his name was a series of lines.

I rocked back and forth trying to push away two thoughts, "I should have known" and "You asked to come," being molded together like two pieces of clay. You should have known! I screamed this over and over to myself. My parents had warned me about guys who liked to touch little boys, but Victor was nothing like the swishy guys they had pointed out to me. Nothing!

I tried to think about other things but I couldn't stop the images. I kept thinking, I'm a boy. Victor, I'm a boy.

Near a crushed cigarette butt on the floor was a roll of toilet paper and I got up to get some and froze. I had been lost in thought and hadn't heard the counselor come into the bathroom. I didn't realize I had been crying. She was standing outside the stall asking who was inside. Not getting an answer, she pushed at the door and it swung open.

She stared at my underwear and then my face. Maybe she saw the blood. Maybe she saw something behind the tears in my eyes. I don't know. Her expression changed as though an artist had just stroked it with a paintbrush. Her hand flew to her mouth as she gasped, her face turning a sickly pale as if everything ugly she'd ever heard was true.

Her eyes widened in alarm then stretched to disbelief before collapsing in compassion. Her lips quivered as she sought her voice.

"Is everything OK?" She finally asked, nervously running fingers through her blond hair.

I wiped my eyes and nodded.

"Do you need some help?"

I wanted to scream where the fuck are your eyes, you dumb stupid bitch?

But all I said was no -- that I just had to do "number two" real bad. Sensing my shame, she pushed the door closed.

"All right," she said, quietly. "You take your time. I won't rush you. I'll wait outside until you're finished and walk you back to your bed."

She left and I heard her footsteps head back toward the sleeping area. For one awful moment I thought she would confront Victor, but then realized she had no way of knowing who had been in there with me. And that was good. I didn't want her to know and make a fuss because then everyone would know what I had done.

I climbed back on the toilet and wiped the blood away. Its color was sinfully wicked against the purity of the white paper. I looked down into the bowl but didn't see anything resembling a bloody baby. Please God. Let that have been a lie, I prayed.

I didn't want to leave the bathroom. Didn't want her to look at me. Didn't want anyone to look at me. I sat there as long as I could hoping she'd forget and go back to her office. After a while, she came back in.

"Are you all right?" She asked, a little uncertain.

Reluctantly, I answered. "I'm almost finished."

I waited a few more minutes, got up and flushed the toilet, walked past her and got into bed.

She helped pull the covers around me, the coarse, woolen blanket hiding my shame. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she folded her hands in her lap. I wanted her to go. I knew Victor was watching and was petrified of what he would do if he saw me talking to her.

"What's your name?"

I told her.

Her voice was whispery soft as she groped for words, starting and stopping several times as if she had this big explanation all prepared, but was now unsure of how to say it.

But even I could sense her discomfort. She was wearing a cardigan sweater and pulled it tighter around her.

Maybe realizing things like this was way beyond her, a weak smile creased her lips and she reached out and tentatively stroked my head a couple of times. Impulsively, she leaned over and quickly kissed me on the cheek. "Everything will be alright," she promised. "You'll see." But her eyes never once met mine as she said it.

Then she was gone.

With the whisper of "I'm a boy. Victor, I'm a boy" in my ear like footsteps on my conscience, I fell instantly asleep.

Chapter 4

"All right, everybody," Fred shouted. "Up and at em!" The booming voice snapped me awake from a red, gruesome nightmare and my eyes locked into the white, bright overhead lights of the vast room.

The nightmare was awful. Why are dreams so bad?

Fred, a giant man with thick hands and a big face, was walking around the room making a racket by banging the ends of beds against the floor to groans and sleepy protests.

"Let's get washed up," he yelled. "Don't forget to make your beds and clean up the areas around 'em. You ain't got no maids here. Make sure all your clothes is picked up and shoes is stored neatly under beds. Breakfasts in half an hour. Let's go. Some of you older guys help out the lil' ones."

I struggled into a half sitting position, my head still cloudy from sleep. I shielded my eyes with one hand while they blinked and adjusted to the light. I looked for Victor.

He slept in the next to last bed in the far left corner against the wall but he wasn't there. I had to go to the bathroom but I was afraid Victor might be in there, so I decided to wait until everyone left for breakfast.

The room was showing signs of life. Some of the guys jumped right up, pulled on tee shirts and shoved their legs into pants and feet into shoes. They grabbed face cloths and headed off to the bathroom.

Others sat on the sides of beds yawning and stretching while others rubbed faces mumbling, "It just can't be morning yet."

One kid must have believed it because he turned over, covered his head with a pillow and went back to sleep.

I hastily got dressed. A thousand questions were running through my mind. Did I look the same? Would everybody know just by looking at me?

At any moment I expected everyone to turn, point, and start jeering, "James gave up the booty. James gave up the booty," but no one did. I sent a silent plea to the man upstairs; it didn't work last night, but maybe He had been busy.

Allan stopped by my bed, urging me to hurry up because he was hungry. I told him I wasn't, to go with everyone else. He looked at me as if I'd lost my mind; I was known to be a big eater.

After the room cleared, I ran into the bathroom, sat on the toilet and wiped my butt to see if there was any blood. There wasn't and I was surprised there was hardly any pain, just a sore reminder. I went back to the room and sat on my bed wondering what to do next. I couldn't avoid seeing Victor, or the others, and was trying to come up with some kind of story.

"James! How come you ain't at breakfast?"

Startled, I jumped up, my face flushed with guilt and turned to see Fred.

"I'm not hungry," I sputtered.

"Sure you is," he said. "All kids is hungry in the mornin'. By the time you walk over there you'll get an appetite. This is a special day. We having pancakes and bacon. You don't wanna miss out, do ya?"

Fred's big face beamed at me. He had a wide, easy-going smile and gentle eyes. He was dark as night and very lovable, unless you pissed him off. Then his size tends to become scary and you did what he demanded; even fellows Victor's age.

Shit! I groaned. Pancakes and bacon. Of all mornings. Bacon, sausage and ham was a rare treat for breakfast, which usually consisted of cold or hot cereal and boiled eggs. Still, I had no intention of going.

"I don't feel so good," I said, fixing my face and rubbing my stomach in exaggeration.

"What's wrong?" He asked conversationally, as he walked around adjusting pillows and straightening half-made beds in my section.

"My stomach hurts."

He walked over and felt my head and throat.

"Don' feel like ya running a fever or nothin'," he shrugged. "Maybe you comin' down with somethin'. We'll let the nurse take a look at ya."

"No!" I shouted. The word exploded from me, loud enough for the dead to hear. I didn't care what else happened but I couldn't let a nurse give me a check-up. I wasn't sure, but she might discover what happened and tell on me.

Fred cocked his head in surprise at my outburst and was about to say something, but changed his mind.

"Well I don' make the rules around here," he said impatiently. "You gotta go to the cafeteria even if you don' eat. C'mon, let's go."

He pushed me out the door ahead of him. We walked down the wide corridor past big, wooden doors toward the cafeteria.

I knew that behind one of the doors was where one of the women social workers worked that my parents always met with when they came to visit. Behind the other doors were first aid rooms, meeting rooms, and lounges for the staff.

The interior of the building was really ugly and dreary looking, like a courthouse. I don't know exactly how I remember what the inside of a courthouse looked like, but I did.

With the exception of the lavatory, there were two color combinations used throughout the building; dark brown and tan, or a kind of split pea soup green and dark green.

The color scheme was unimaginatively painted with the darker color covering the lower half of the room and the lighter color the upper half.

The hallway was dark brown and tan.

I could hear the shrill clanging of pots and pans and the scrapping of chairs and noisy kids as we approached the cafeteria at the end of the hallway.

Fred left and headed down another corridor. I continued walking and paused anxiously at the entrance.

Cracking the door cautiously, I peeked in. From an area I couldn't see there was a rush of voices that sent the first icy, silk fingers of paranoia prickling up my spine.

"... got a big ole butt."

"Not me."

"Then who?"

"It's June! June's got a big ole butt."

A girl named June shrieked, "Not me."

"Then who?"

June replied, "It's Bobby! Bobby's got a big..."

I didn't hear the names June or Bobby and didn't recognize the tease game everybody played, myself included; all I heard was laughter and "big ole butt."

In that second, when instalert (my word for “warning”) kicked in, I had what I came to call the sequence; alert, fear, recognition and drain.

The alert comes from key words (for me - ass, dick, fag, girl), the fear (they're talking about me), recognition (no, not me personally) and drain, when the flush of paranoia drained slowly away like cold hands heating up under warm running water.

"James!" I jumped (habit, not reflex). It was Fred's voice and he wasn't happy. "What are you doing?"

Fred was rushing up the hallway pointing toward the cafeteria. A huge frown had split across his face. "Get in there and eat and I'm not gonna tell you again!" Nobody argued with Fred when he used that tone.

Holding my breath I walked into the cafeteria, bracing myself for the taunting.

The place was bursting with activity. Chairs were packed under the tables and filled with mothers and fathers and children. I don't know where the parents slept but they lived at the shelter too.

Some of the female counselors, looking crisp in white blouses and dark skirts, sat at the tables helping to feed children while others walked around to keep order.

About twenty feet to the right of the entrance, trays were stacked on a table along with utensils and small cartons of milk. To the left of that was the serving line. Those who were old enough picked up a tray, silverware and milk and walked down the line where they picked up their own plate of food.

Otherwise, a counselor handed you a tray of food or took it to the table for you. I was handed mine.

Spotting Allan, Michelle and Jackie, I walked quickly toward them with a tray in my hands. I tried to tighten my ass and add a little butch to my walk, suddenly very conscious of the way I looked, walked and talked.

"I thought you weren't hungry," Allan said, wolfishly consuming the pancakes in front of him, the bacon long gone.

"I'm not, but they made me come."

"Well, I'm starved! Can I eat it?" He was greedily eyeing my plate.

"No." I replied.

"Why not?" He was indignant.

"Mommy and Daddy are coming today," Michelle interrupted, looking uneasily at me. She felt the same way about my father as I did, although we never talked about it.

We had been at the shelter for about three weeks and were hoping to go home soon.

But we didn't know where home was anymore. The courts had placed us here while our parents went through something called legal separation. I didn't understand any of it, but I knew I didn't want to go back and live with my father.

I was deathly afraid of him. I was more afraid of him than I was of the monsters I saw on TV. I never saw what became of the people they grabbed but it couldn't have hurt them any worse than my father hurt me.

He struck without motivation and showed no remorse. He was nothing like the daily image of fatherhood splashed across the face of America's new darling, television sets; a reality a lot of kids knew.

My two favorite TV shows were "The Donna Reed Show," and "Father Knows Best." I didn't watch these shows because they were funny, but because I envied Paul and Bud, the sons in the shows.

Unlike Allan and myself, they could talk to their fathers about anything.

They sat down with him and hashed out problems together and got advice. They actually waited for him to get home to seek an answer to a new problem they couldn't solve or find encouragement for a challenge they didn't seem up to.

And the fathers seem to be on their side, oftentimes pretending to scold them over something their mothers thought they had done wrong, but giving them a sly wink behind the mother's back while doing so.

Most of the time, the two fathers would secretly reveal, much to Paul and Bud's astonishment, they'd done the same thing as young boys. Neither ever got beat.

All I wanted was for my father to explain what I was doing wrong so I wouldn't do it.

I wanted him to wink at me and say he'd done the same thing or made the same mistake when he was a kid, too. I spent a lot of time thinking about what I could have done differently.

Anyway, I was more concerned about my mother. She was good, too, but he beat her a lot worse than any of us.

So while my mother looked for a place for us to live, we were staying at the shelter. At least, I think that's what she was doing.

It was Saturday and our parents would arrive sometime in the afternoon. We spent the rest of the morning outside; the four of us playing softball, and afterwards, gathered in a corner listening to the radio.

Whenever our parents came to visit, one of the workers would let us know so we could get cleaned up.

Under no circumstances did Egbert Randolph Walker allow his kids to be dirty - shelter or no shelter - and hell would be paid if we were caught that way. He allowed us to play, but not to get dirty. So we dutifully washed up and changed into fresh clothes.

It felt strange getting dressed up to see our own parents. It's normally something we did for guests or relatives we hadn't seen in a while, or the Woolworth's photographer. Doing it for your parents is like putting yourself on display, as though you're readying yourself for prospective adoptive parents who still hadn't quite made up their minds.

We waited anxiously in the visitor's room and they arrived right after lunch.

When my mother opened the door, she hurried toward us, the air around her scented with Joy perfume. Taller than the average woman, she was beautiful, dark and slim with large wide eyes, full lips and soft features. She always carried a bag and wore white gloves. She was smiling and looked anxious as she held open her arms.

My father strolled up casually behind her with his usual no nonsense demeanor.

I could smell his impenetrable musk of Old Spice. He acknowledged us with a half nod, the corners of his mouth turned slightly upward. I'm not positive, but I am sure he hugged Jackie.

Bert Walker was a commanding figure. He was extremely handsome, very light-skinned with hazel and green eyes that locked right on the person he was looking at.

Our being there didn't seem to faze him; worse, he seems to expect it not to bother us.

But he came alive when he saw Jackie. There was no doubt how he felt about her. She was obviously my father's favorite and he let everyone know it.

He had decreed that she was a fairy princess and told her constantly all she had to do was wave her magic wand and she could get anything she wanted. And she believed him. She walked around waving this imaginary wand commanding everyone to do her bidding.

My parent's visits never lasted long, maybe an hour or less, and I don't remember what we did while they were there, except sit in the visitor's room and talk.

When they left, there was always an emptiness that lingered. It was scary watching them drive off while you stood waving and smiling bravely and wondering if you would see them again. They were all you knew but all you hoped was that they wouldn't forget you were there.

I think the idea of putting us in a shelter was the legal system's way of giving them time to sort things out without the headache of having us around. What happened during this period between them, I don't know. I do know whatever happened, didn't work.

Later, after our parents left and we finished dinner, I had to think about what I was going to do about Victor. But I found out that night, Victor had answered the question for me by bringing along his cousin, Arthur. The night after that, their friend, Wayne, had his turn.

Over the next five weeks, they passed me around like second helpings.

They held the fear of discovery over my head like a pendulum. Whenever I tried to resist, the pendulum swung dangerously closer as they used exposure to my brother and sisters to bend me to their will.

It never dawned on me to tell somebody. I was more embarrassed by the thought of someone finding out than what they were doing to me. It didn't matter to me they could get into trouble for what they were doing. They were the fuckers, not the fuckee! I didn't know a lot about sex, but I did know they did what boys are supposed to do. Stick it in. Not get it stuck in!

A boy is supposed to stick it in!

And stick it in they did, during the morning, in the afternoon, at night. On the floor. Standing up, bent over. In the bathroom, in broom closets, on the stairs. It didn't matter. I got used to their spit-laden hands on my shoulders, spreading and fingering my butt, feeling my chest, rubbing my thighs. I got used to the smell of their breath.

I no longer fought them or cried, and neither was I afraid. When they asked if I liked it, I said yes. And I began to believe it. They no longer had to look for me. I sought them out as if they were somehow my salvation.

At night I lay wide-awake long after the others went to sleep. Then, I would quietly get up, go down on my knees and silently pray, asking Him to forgive me. I no longer did it out loud, as if someone hearing me say the Lord's name would somehow damn me forever.

But my prayers went unanswered.

One night, I decided even if they did tell, Victor, Arthur and Wayne would never touch me again. I was no fag; I didn't care what they said. I didn't like it. I hated them and I hated myself.

The next day when Victor approached me in the play area I told him I wouldn't do it.

Then Michelle walked in and spotted us.

"Maybe it's time your sister found out she has a fag for a brother," he growled.

"I don't care who you tell," I said. And I didn't. Nothing was worse than what they were doing to me. "I'm not doing it anymore. With you, Wayne, Arthur or anyone else."

It had been at the back of my mind that he couldn't afford to tell anyone anymore than I could because it would embarrass him, too.

I had never thought in terms of their own embarrassment. He called out to Michelle and I stood rooted to the spot, defiant, sure he would say nothing. I started sweating when she walked over and he didn't say never-mind.

"What do you want?" Michelle asked, glancing from me to Victor.

Victor hesitated and then looked at me, but my face was set. He smiled at me and turned to her.

"Your brother is a fag. I think it's disgusting and thought you should know."

My mouth went dry with shock and my knees almost gave out. I looked at my sister who only had to glance at my face to know it was true.

As long as I live I will never forget what happened next.

Michelle didn't bat a lash or move a facial muscle. Looking Victor dead in the eye she said in a voice that dripped with boredom. "So. Some boys like it that way." She then turned without looking at me and walked away.

Victor stared at her retreating figure, disbelief spreading over his face. She had done everything but yawn in his face. I was stunned too.

We had underestimated her. He expected her to call him a liar and allow him to go into excruciating detail until she had no other choice but to believe.

I expected her to look at me with disgust. But in the seconds it took her to answer she had sized up the situation. It wasn't that she didn't believe him; she just knew Victor was using her as a pawn to get to me and wasn't having any of it.

But I wasn't fooled. Michelle did things by the book. It was Saturday and my parents were coming that afternoon. I knew she would tell them.

But she didn't give Victor the satisfaction of embarrassing me. I watched her walk away, her armor glowing in the brilliant sunlight and murmured a silent thank you. I have never, nor will I probably ever, love her more than I did at that moment.

She told my parents what was going on that afternoon. Earlier, I had started getting my things ready because I knew they wouldn't let me stay knowing what was happening.

But I was wrong.

My father looked at me as if I was something hideous that had just crawled out from under a rock. I have never forgotten the revulsion spread across his face as he said, disgustedly, "You must have asked for it."

My mother hugged me and told me to hold on; we would be out of there in another week or two. Whatever I was prepared for, it wasn't this.

"No!" I begged her. "I want to go home now. Don't leave me here."

"It won't be long, Big Man," she said tearfully, using her special name for me. "I promise."

"No, Mommy, please! I can't stay here," I cried. "They'll hurt me some more." In desperation I looked at my father but he had his back to me, gazing out the window of the visitor's room as if he couldn't stand the sight of me.

"Now, you have to be brave, Jim," my mother said, kneeling down and stroking my back. "You're mommy's big man, aren't you? I swear to you that it won't be long. I'll get you out of here."

She hugged me tightly and then they left. They got into the family car we called, "Old Buggy Wuggy" and left.

My shame quickly turned to fear, then rage.

This was happening to me because of them. I was stuck in this horrible place with these horrible people and it was all their fault.

And they were willing to let it go on happening.

I didn't expect my father to help me; I wasn't sure why, but I knew he hated me. But the thought of my mother abandoning me, too, was a shock and more than I could bear.

I was six years old and didn't understand about love, abuse and courts.

I didn't understand my mother wanted to get away, too, but had no education, no job, and four kids to feed.

I didn't understand and I didn't care. What I did understand was things were being done to me that shouldn't be done to little boys. I was being hurt -- and my father was wrong; I didn't ask for it. No matter what he said, I didn't ask for it.

I hated them.

All of them.

I trusted Victor and he hurt me, and then brought in more hurt.

I trusted the counselor who told me everything would be OK. She was wrong. Nothing would ever be OK again.

I trusted God, the One everyone said you could turn to, but I had prayed and He still let them hurt me. I hated Him. Hated Him! Hated Him! Hated Him!

But who caused me the most misery and made my body tremble with a fury I didn't know was possible was my mother.

I worshiped her unreservedly. My faith in her went deep and was unquestioned and until that day, knew no boundaries. And she left me. Left me there so they could continue to hurt me.

I hated her.

I hated her most of all.

I went back to my room and furiously stared out the window. I felt cornered and wanted to run away. I knew no one was going to help me, but I didn't know why.

And I was afraid because I wasn't big enough yet, not strong enough yet, not smart enough yet, not man enough yet to help myself.

I looked outside and knew I wanted no part of the world. I wanted my own world where no one was allowed in without the password. A password I would never tell them.

I promised myself that day that no one would ever touch me again. No one would ever hurt me again. I would never love anyone again.

And most of all, I would never, no matter what, under any circumstance, ever trust another person. No matter how much they made me believe I could.

Somewhere deep inside me a door partially opened and I heard a little boy screaming.

"Come in here. It's all right, come on in, James! Hurry! Come in here! It's all right! Come on. Hurry up!"

But there was something in me strongly resisting. Another voice. Authoritative. Demanding. Powerful. It was pulling me away, telling me -- no! -- warning me not to go in there!

But the little boy's voice continued to call out to me.

"Come on, it's all right, come on, James. Hurry! It's all right."

I wavered, fighting between the two voices. Just then, I heard another voice that terrified me more. Victor! Singing as he came toward the room.

Suddenly, I didn't care where I went as long as it was away from where I was. I followed the little boy's voice. Inside, I recognized it as a place I'd been before.

The dream room.

The place I always ran into when I changed sides.

Sanctuary. I would always be safe in here.

I turned and slowly, but firmly, shut the door.

But I was too young to know the real enemy was in the dream room with me.

The year was 1960.

It would be the end of 1996 before I opened that door to come out.

But it was too late.

