

"I had been in 57 foster homes by age 15."

Tales from the Runaway Shelter

THE
*Amazing
Grace*

"Always the little black girl ."

A Bobby Blackie Banks Book



Greetings! Thank you for the honor of your visit. While attending college in the late seventies, my wife and I operated a runaway shelter close to the Canadian border. We had a large home next to a college campus with a gorgeous view. There I was lucky enough to meet a young woman named Grace. All of the runaway kids provided lessons but Grace, in particular, taught me much about life and not all of it was pleasant. In this book, I chronicle some of the memories of this exciting time as a young, idealistic adult preparing for a career. I hope you capture some moments of

pleasure from reading this. All rights are reserved
copyright ©2013. Some of it actually happened but it
is still a work of fiction. Resemblance to any person,
alive or deceased is coincidence and not intentional.

**Too soon old; too late smart. Share the
love; fight the hate and enjoy your life.**

BOBBY BLACKIE BANKS



**HAPPY READING! FROM
TUMBLEWEED**



Dedicated to all
the helpers

like June in the story

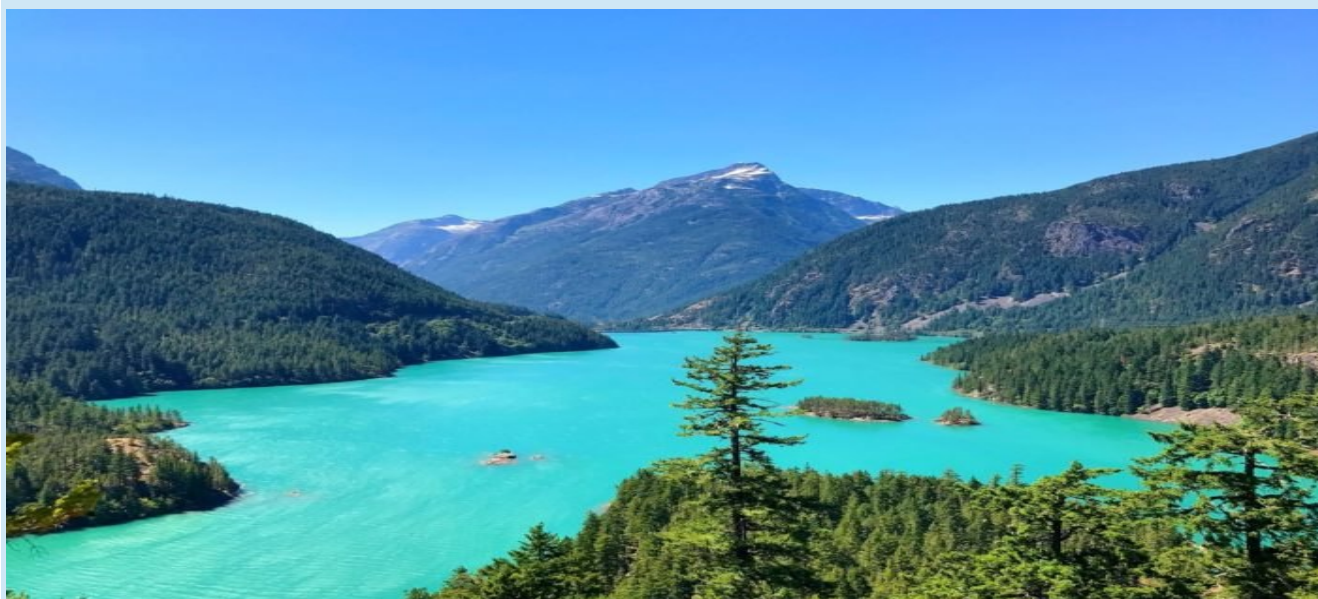
who work to make the world a better place.

Aerial Scene OF CAMPUS A BLOCK AWAY



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Campus scenes



Chapter One- Welcome to Grace's World



Remarkable fifteen-year-old Grace and I sat playing the word game Boggle one quiet evening at the runaway shelter when with no warning or eye contact she blurted out: “When I was four years old, I saw my father’s head explode.”

Now there’s a sentence you don’t hear every day. I dropped my score-keeping pencil.

“I’m listening.”

“Well, it started when my mom took me on a long

road trip. She woke me up in the middle of the night and we threw almost everything we owned from inside our farmhouse into plastic garbage bags and boxes. We lived in this dump outside of Spokane. Hated it there. Anyway, put it all in the back of her rusted Subaru wagon. The thing had no muffler, so mom turned up the radio and we zoomed off.

She made me a little bed in the back with a sleeping bag and some pillows. I slept most of the way. Took days, I think ... seemed like forever. Late at night, she carried me up some stairs and placed me on a couch. Remember, being so tired. Turned out to be my father's South Los Angeles house. Remember waking up, wandering around, calling for her. Gone again, the bitch.

The next thing I knew, I got slapped, ordered to shut-up, and shoved into the back seat of this big red Cadillac. Trying not to cry out too loud ... spotted a

little boy across from me. Remember thinking they had got him too.”

“Ray?” I asked.

Ray, her twin brother, visited frequently at the runaway shelter home.

“Yeah, never seen him in person before.”

“Never heard you mention much about your father. He was a big guy, right?”

“Jesus, yeah, a giant. Like 6’8” or something and weighed over 300 pounds. His hands were huge, and he always wore this same light brown leather coat. He was really black. His skin had this deep, almost shiny look to it, I remember that.”

The phone rang.

Irritated by the interruption, I vaulted up. Grace didn’t open up often, and she seemed about to share one hell of a story. She had told me many, but never any part of this one. I answered with fake friendliness

and listened.

“Well, fuck you, too, buddy, I’ll be here.”

I slammed the phone down.

“What was that?” Grace asked.

“Oh, some drunk asshole claiming he knew I had his daughter here and was going to come over and kick my ass.”

“What if he comes over tonight?” the suddenly worried Grace asked.

“Ain’t my problem now, is it?” I answered while pouring myself a cup of coffee.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“It’s going to be your problem after the bullshit you pulled at school today. I saved your ass again, so as payback, you’re answering the door. I’ll get you a frying pan.”

“Hey, asshole, you already punished me, and the frying pan thing ain’t funny. By the way, do you think

it proper parenting to say, ‘Fuck’, in front of your foster daughter?”

Her brown eyes were twinkling, as she loved this type of banter.

“Punished? Are you kidding me? I took you out to lunch, for Christ's sake. Plus, I warned you about my descriptive language the first day I met you.”

“You yelled at me and you call saying ‘Fuck’ all the time descriptive language?”

“Hey, I like the word and I didn’t yell at you. All I said was, ‘Consider yourself chewed out.’ Seems like getting off mighty cheap.”

“But you hurt my feelings,” she somehow said without laughing aloud.

I merely shook my head as she gave me one of her sweet, devious smiles.

“Hey, want a soda? Let’s go out on the deck. Want to hear about Big Ray’s demise.”

I got the cans of pop as we moved to the deck, which featured a gorgeous view overlooking Bellingham Bay on one side and Western Washington University's arboretum on the other. We each took a sip and leaned on the railing.

“You're four years old and in the back of a caddie, and then what?”

“Well, we walk into this crowded cafe and the place goes silent. It had these booths on one side and one of those counters with the twirler kind of chairs, you know, the kind, right?”

“Yeah stools, I get it.”

“People nod and some wave as we take our seats in one booth. My father doesn't say a thing or respond in any way until a waitress hustles over and greets him with a big smile, takes our order, and quizzes him about being with kids.”

“What did he say about being with you kids?”

“He mumbled something about we being his twins or something. Anyways, out comes the cook himself who delivers our pancakes and a platter of steak, eggs, and hash-browns that he puts down with great care.”

“Everybody knew him sounds like, huh?”

“Oh, yeah. He didn’t say much, just pointed at the pancakes and ordered us to eat as he attacked his platter. He was dragging a last bit of pancake through the syrup with his big old fingers when the door banged open. In strolled this tall dude, all dressed out in a bright blue suit with a pink tie. Seen no outfit like that before. The dude takes a seat at one of the twirlie things. Big Ray tosses down his napkin, gets up, and heads toward the coffee pots. He grabs one of them that’s filled with hot coffee and before anyone reacts, spins the guy around, and pours the entire pot down the guy’s throat. It spills all over his blue suit and he’s left on the ground screaming. My father just walks

back and finishes his last few bites, pulls out some bills, and tosses them on the table as three guys try to help the guy up from the floor. We walk around the screaming dude as somebody opens the door and are back in the car.”

She paused and took a large swallow.

“Holy shit, Grace. You saw all that?”

“Oh, that ain’t nothing. We drove about two blocks or so and were stopped at a red light when someone tapped on the window. He rolled it down and bam!”

“What?”

“It was so loud. Hurt my ears and brother Ray started bawling. Our father’s head just exploded. The windshield turned all red.”

“Does your brother remember?”

“He won’t ever talk about it. I tried a couple of times and he wants no part of even talking about it. The worst part is we ended up at the cop shop waiting

around for hours afterwards.”

“Jesus Christ, Grace. Someday I’ll going to write all about you.”

“Well, when you do forget about the frying pan shit. Wish I’d never told you that one.”

“Are you kidding me? Not tell the folks about how you used to knock out your mother’s abusive, drunk boyfriends with a frying pan? I will not promise that. In fact, whenever you’re pissed at me, I hide the pans just to be safe.”

Grace and I had become close over the last six months. June, an older, caring social worker friend, had begged us to give this girl a room temporarily at the runaway shelter until she could find her a permanent place. She explained how Grace had been picked up by the police in Vancouver, B.C. She had hooked up with an ex-con and they had been running a robbery scam.

Grace, a strikingly attractive young woman, over six-feet tall with exquisite, clear mocha skin, and deep brown eyes, wore her hair in an Afro which added three inches to her height. When she smiled, it would light up the entire neighborhood.

She received instructions from the ex-con on how to stroll down the streets in Gastown and smile. Men would follow her back to the cheap second-floor apartment where he would jump out with a knife and rob some poor sucker.

Take his wallet, his watch, jewelry, and sometimes even his shoes. This primitive ruse didn't last too long before both of them were arrested, deported, and ended up in Bellingham, the nearest town close to the border with social services.

He got sent back to prison and Grace slipped back into the system yet again. She had been in fifty-seven different foster homes and many caseworkers

remembered her.

Wife Wanda and I had lots of experience. We had worked together at a tough residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed boys in Northern Idaho. We got the full story—so we thought—and the next thing we knew, a Whitney Houston look-a-like, with a voice to match, became our new roommate.

They had called me out from my student teaching day to deal with a typical Grace problem at school. She had cussed out some teacher and was about to be suspended. I listened closely, respectfully, and assured the principal and offended teacher the situation would be attended to. Grace played her part perfectly.

Hands folded, eyes downcast, hunched up to look as small as possible—a performance I had seen many times before but still admired.

As we walked out, I said, “Saved your ass again,

bitch. Consider yourself chewed out.”

“I really am sorry you had to leave school again ...”
eyes downcast, hands folded, still in character.

“Knock it off. Besides, I was glad to leave; check this action out.”

I showed her my slacks split at the butt, exposing my red long underwear, the ones with the flap in the back.

“The fourth graders really enjoyed this.”

We broke up laughing and ended up eating lunch at the Cliff House Restaurant.

“Are you telling Wanda about the school thing?”

“Yep, I tell her everything, but I’ll cover your sorry ass again.”

“Please do. I hate getting lectured by her. She can be scary.”

“Scary? She’s only 5’2” for Christ’s sakes. You tower over her. Funny to watch from a distance.”

“I’m going to bed, asshole.”

“Just a second.”

I grabbed a couple of blankets and a pillow from the hall closet.

“Here you go.”

“What the fuck?” she involuntarily blurted out.

“You need to sleep out here close to the door in case that drunk on the phone wasn’t kidding. Here’s your frying pan. And don’t ever say nasty words in front of your foster daddy again either.”

The phone rang.

“Oh, fuck me, goddamn phone again. Shit.”

I heard her laughing and then singing. She had moved halfway up the stairs when she turned.

“Nightie, night asshole,” she called, and moved toward her bedroom at the far end of the hall.

“Sleep well, bitch ... Oh, shit. Not the damn phone again. I just got off the damn thing. I’m tempted to

throw the fucking thing through the window.”

Wife Wanda blinked into view at the top of the stairs in her bathrobe with arms folded and flashed me a look that would have panicked a serial killer. I mentally noted I needed to get a bell for her neck, as I didn't need such surprises.

“Hold down the noise before you wake up all the rest of the girls, you dipshit.”

Thus ended another day at the runaway shelter.

Chapter Two—More Tales from the Shelter



It was a tick past noon, and our large house sat quiet and deserted. Our five current runaway girl guests were at school, as was our one boy visitor. I had finished my six months of student teaching and had one class to complete in order to graduate. Wanda was on spring break at the college and free from her teaching requirements. We hadn't been alone in some time—too long.

I sneaked up behind her as she dried the dishes, lifted her off her feet, and into my arms. She started giggling and protesting, but I knew there was no time to waste. I hustled her off to our bedroom and kicked the door shut. We were making out like horny sophomores and the clothes magically flew off. I heard the chorus from the song, *Afternoon Delight*, play in my head. We fell into the bed as one and the fun began.

We rolled around feverishly, lost in deep, passionate kisses. The kind you feel from your lips clear down to your curled up toes. The ones with lots of tongue exploring. Our eyes locked and a special feeling of being totally connected emerged and captured us both. I resisted with all my power the animal part of me and ordered my hands to work.

This would not be any fast-food loving. No, no ... This was going to be a full gourmet love feast with

soup, salad, the main entrée, and flaming cherries jubilee for dessert.

I grabbed the lotion and started on her back, down her legs, with just a teasing touch or two in her magic zone. Her breathing became irregular, her eyes closed, and she whimpered as my hands kept working, moving. The fragrance of the melon lotion smelled like a warm summer night breeze. When she whispered and breathed the wonderful word, “Now.” into my ear,

I still resisted. We were both ready, our skins glistening, and the dance started.

About four beats later, the music got interrupted by a knock on the door.

I didn't care who or what was knocking. If they wanted to watch, so be it. I heard the phrase from the game show *The Price is Right*, “*Come on Down*” echo in my head. I didn't care if it be my dear old mom, my dead grandpa, or Marley's ghost. They could all watch.

Locked, loaded, and ready to get into some sexual gymnastics and nothing would stop us.

But Wanda froze.

“What was that?” Another knock ...

“What the fuck, is someone dense?” I roared.

Another knock, this time obnoxiously loud.

“Yes, who is it?” Wanda yelled out, covering herself with the sheets.

I ignored this, tore back the sheets, and dove after a breast. She threw off my head.

“Get up and see who it is,” she whispered. I heard Gordon Lightfoot singing:—♪ *And the feeling’s gone and I just can’t get it back* ♪.

“Fuck the world,” I said none too softly and received a withering look from the wife that would have made the devil himself scream for his mommy. A full Gettysburg Address of swear words came into my head. I found my pants, pulled them on, and with my

shirt still off, and a pounding heartbeat in my crotch flung open the door.

There stood Michelle, the social worker, a selfish wench.

“What?” I asked, which was shorthand for “*Get the fuck out of here, you incompetent stupid-ass daughter of a drab.*”

“Marvin had me come up to get you guys. We’re having a meeting downstairs in the office and he only has a few minutes, so he wants you to hurry down.” I slammed the door and took off my pants again when Wanda, in her best teacher’s voice, said, “Don’t even think about it.”

She had already gathered up her clothes and moved to the bathroom to put herself back together. My reptilian part of my mind announced: “Nice going, slow hands.”

“I know, I know, you’re right. Next time it will a

three-thrust boogie,” I mumbled as I jammed on my pants, taking special care with the zipper.

I trudged downstairs and Marvin, the director, actually said this, “You guys have been really busy lately and we were just talking about if you’re getting enough privacy and what we could do to help.”

I almost collapsed in a heap onto the floor and landed in a fetal position. I started muttering, which got me a stinging slap on the thigh. To top it off, the phone rang, and Michelle handed it to Wanda.

“Yes, we’ll make room.”

She turned to the group and announced, “Two 13-year-old girls are down at the police station. They’re from Coos Bay, Oregon, and need a place only for one night until their parents can drive up and get them. We’ll give them our room.”

She avoided eye contact with me. An excellent decision, as my lasers would have burned a hole

through her head.

A Bellingham cop and Grace, our social worker pal, brought the two girls in.

“You’ll love this story.”

She was right. These two junior high adventurers had run away from home and hitchhike to California. The problem? They started, got mixed up, and ended up heading north on the freeway until they got busted at the Canadian Border.

When quizzed, they said, “Well, it was no big deal when we crossed the Washington border. We didn’t know there was another country so close.”

Still don’t think there’s a crisis in American education?

We got them settled. I made a plan over the phone with their worried and pissed off parents to pick them up tomorrow afternoon.

I sat alone munching on a bowl of pistachios at the

round oak kitchen table, wondering if inhibiting sperm would be a cause for future prostate problems, when Marvin came up and sat down.

“We have a problem. Michelle called and said she had a big fight with her boyfriend and can’t make it down to court for Amanda’s hearing. Could you or Wanda go? It starts in twenty minutes.”

“Are you kidding me? This hearing’s been scheduled for two months. Be tough on Amanda. She needs someone to support her,” I answered.

“Where’s your wife?” Marvin asked.

“Oh, she took the world travelers to the store. Guess I’ll have to go. I have no car. Can you give me a lift?”

I walked into the courtroom and explained to scared 14-year-old Amanda why I had shown and not her caseworker. The hearing started, and I listened for a half an hour before I had to leave and have a smoke

outside. Grace appeared from nowhere.

“How’s it going in there?”

“Had to leave before I got arrested. It’s outrageous. They put Amanda up on the stand and started asking her all kinds of sexual questions, as if she had seduced her own father rather than the other way around. Sick man of God. Used to make her pose exactly like the Playboy centerfold of the month ... I’d enjoy beating the holy shit out of him.”

“Hey, I’d buy a ticket to watch ... Do you realize you just said, ‘Holy shit?’ Was it on purpose?” Grace asked with a wicked smile.

“Wow, Grace, I never knew you were a smartass. Cool.”

“Where is Michelle?” Grace asked.

“Grace, she had a fight with her boyfriend and couldn’t make it at the last minute,” I announced in my best sarcastic voice.

“What? She couldn’t make it down here for Amanda? God, she’s a worthless cunt.”

“Grace! You’re full of surprises. Would appreciate it though if you wouldn’t use such language around me. And I never, ever thought I would hear a feminist like yourself use the c-word,” I said.

“Sure, asshole, that what Grace calls you, isn’t it? I call ‘em as I see ‘em. She’s a cunt if there ever was one.”

We got back in time to hear the judge’s decision. He dropped all molestation charges against the minister and ordered Amanda into counseling. He also granted the parent’s request to have her move out of our place and into a Christian foster home immediately.

I will never forget the look of terror on Amanda’s face as they escorted her from the courtroom. It took every bit of control not to start a mini-riot. I still have

dreams about grabbing the flipping judge by the neck and squeezing his head like a pimple until it pops. (We found out a year later the fine minister had gotten her pregnant and sent her to a Christian place for unwed mothers called and I shit you not—Burden Bearers).

Grace talked me down and gave me a ride back to the shelter home.

“How do you do this every day, Grace?”

“Not all days are bad. The look on Amanda’s face. Almost too much for me to take today, however. Take care,” she said as I exited the car.

There goes a living angel, I thought as she drove off. A strange car had parked in the driveway. I climbed the stairs and entered the living room where our only boy, Jared, and three adults sat.

“These are my parents and older brother. We were waiting for you so I could say goodbye,” said Jared as soon as I got inside.

He grabbed me and gave me an enormous bear hug.

“Thanks, man. I was so close but yet so far away,” he whispered to me.

Hands were shaken and off they started on the long trip back to Arizona. I never figured out what the hell the kid meant.

We had gathered around the big oak table, eating from a jumbo pot of macaroni and cheese. There were the three short-term girls, Donna, Erica, and Jill, waiting for foster homes to open up, Grace, our permanent roomie, the two world travelers, Wanda and me. I caught a whiff of something foreign and totally foul. It smelled like a bean fart from an anchovy’s ass.

“What is that smell?” I demanded to know.

Everyone looked around and then averted their eyes. I noticed.

“Hey, what is that foul smell?”

Grace said, “What smell? We don’t smell nothing.”

I knew she was lying. I had learned to read her early on. I got up and rinsed my plate.

“Grace, come here, would you?”

We stepped out onto the deck.

“Okay, goddammit, what’s up? I know you’re lying. What is that awful stench?” I demanded.

“How come you always think I’m lying?” Grace said.

I glared at her.

“Okay ... I promised not to tell you, but you’ll bug me all night if I don’t,” she said.

“Out with it,” I said.

“Poor Donna had her period and didn’t have any ...”

“Stop right there. I don’t need to hear any more. I know it will make me gag. Jesus ... Shut up.”

“No, no way. You told me to tell you so, listen up. She didn’t have any... Well, you know... ah ... feminine products. She used some washcloths and threw them in the closet upstairs. A bunch of them—at least three months’ worth. She was really embarrassed and made us all promise not to tell you,” Grace continued.

“You’re making me gag,” I said.

I almost barfed over the railing. Seriously.

“How do you think I feel? I had to help pick up the whole pile. Man, the girl must have had some heavy days, I’ll tell you. Talk about gagging ... I really puked a little in my mouth. Boy, you should have smelled it. God, it was gross,” Grace spoke.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? You’re one little sick bitch, I’ll tell you. But I have one question. That was upstairs; how come I’m smelling it down here?”

“Oh, I may have forgotten to wash my hands,” she said, and then sniffed her palms.

“Yuck, they still stink. Here smell.” She started chasing me around the deck, laughing.

“Get away from me, dammit. You aren’t funny,” I said. I jumped off the deck and rolled onto the grass.

She yelled after me, “Nice landing, tubby. God, you’re a chicken. Can’t even handle a little dried, moldy, blood smell,” she cried out.

I went down a couple of blocks and had a beer. I tried to sneak into the house unnoticed. Grace caught me.

“I need some help with my homework. I have to write my autobiography.”

“Did you wash your hands yet?” I asked.

“No, I’ll get them when I take a shower here in a bit,” she smiled up at me.

“Yes, I washed them, you big baby,” she answered.

“Good. Okay, here’s what you do.”

I modeled how to make a personal timeline and

shared some of my own experiences. She caught on quickly and spent the rest of the evening working on it. I dozed on the couch. Wanda had gone upstairs to bed already.

Grace said, “Can you look this over in the morning and tell me what you think?”

“Sure ... sure ... goodnight,” I answered.

My mind raced. I kept seeing Amanda, designed a nasty speech to share with Michelle, wondered how I could get away with murdering the judge, pondered the possibilities of what Jared had meant and chuckled about our two Oregon traveling girls. I also kept having flashes of future prostate problems—straining to get out a trickle. I was driving myself nuts. I finally threw off the blanket and got up to read Grace’s timeline. Two things jumped out.

“I hitchhiked from Bellingham to Los Angeles by myself when I was ten. My brother Ray and I were

eight when mom wrote out two notes, pinned them on our coats, and left us both at the welfare office at around six am where we sat until the place opened at eight-thirty. I still remember her driving away. She didn't even bother to wave."

I crept up the stairs and silently opened her door. She was sleeping soundly. I slid off when a tear hit my cheek. Poor kid, such heavyhearted stories she carried with her.



Chapter Three-Grace's Nighttime Screams



I sat munching on grapes and drinking more coffee, even though the clock read 2:45. I had been reviewing Grace’s personal timeline at the round old oak kitchen table, serving as the runaway shelter’s work area and Grace’s nightly desk. The thing read like a fictional horror story.

I couldn’t get over that one sentence: “I hitchhiked from Bellingham to Los Angeles by myself when I was ten.” I got lost in visualizing what that could have been like for her when I heard a loud scream that made me

flinch.

I heard yet another, slapped the notebook down, and sprinted up the stairs two at a time. I tried to make it to Grace's room at the end of the dark hall by memory. I fumbled with the knob and slowly opened the door. She held her head in her hands, rocking, her normally neat Afro all mused up.

“Grace, you okay?” I whispered.

“Yeah, just had a nightmare. I'll be okay in a minute,” she answered.

“Sure you're okay? I'm still up so ...”

“What time is it anyways?” she asked.

“The word is anyway. It's really late. Going on three. I'm reading your timeline—staying up a bit. Want to come down? I'll make some hot chocolate or something,” I said.

“I want something to eat too,” she announced as she threw off the covers and bounded up.

“Who said anything about something to eat? Jesus Christ, I mentioned hot chocolate ‘cause it seemed like a fatherly thing and now you want a full meal?” I said.

“Oh, and tell me the macaroni mess we ate tonight filled you to the brim.” She patted my growing stomach, which had become a concern, and continued.

“You were skinny when I first met you; that thing is looking like a melon,” she said.

“Nightmare, huh? You keep talking shit to me and I’ll be a living nightmare every day for you,” I said.

“You already are,” was her near perfect answer.

“Come here, my child ... You’re getting really fantastic at this. I’m so proud. Remember my words of wisdom. A good smart ass is never bored.” I grabbed her in a big hug.

“Yuck... Get away from me,” she demanded.

“But Grace, you’re my first daughter ... Lord, I may have created a masterpiece,” I said and added a

dramatic, theatrical arm swing which caught wife Wanda directly in the right eye.

“Ouch, you dipshit. What are you guys doing? Keep it down or you’ll wake up the other girls,” Wanda said.

“Honey, I am so sorry,” I said in a false whisper, “come here. I’ll give you a hug.” I grabbed her and tried to give her a smooch, but she pushed me away.

“Damn it. Get off of me. You do know it’s nearly three o’clock, don’t you?” she asked, but it really hadn’t been a question.

“Shit, that does it. We’re having a family meeting tomorrow and I’m laying down the law. I try to hug and give out some tenderness, and what do I get? Get off me, get away. What’s wrong with you, womenfolk? Don’t you appreciate a sensitive man? And the language around here is fucking horrid. It has to stop. Remember, it says right in the Bible the man is the

head of ...”

“Yeah, you’re a head all right. A dickhead. Now go to bed—both of you,” Wanda demanded.

“But Wanda, our little queen bee here wants me to cook her something to eat. Aw, come here you two, group hug, group hug.”

I grabbed them both in headlocks and we bounced down the stairs as one unit. I even got in a little groping of Wanda in on the way down. Hey, a desperate man takes advantage of any opening, know what I mean?

“Wanda, I’m making bacon and eggs and French Toast, want some?” I asked.

“Sure, why not? We’re all up now. That macaroni stuff didn’t quite cut it for me. But pay attention ... don’t start screwing around and burn the shit,” she answered.

“Will be a quarter. Yep, after tomorrow’s meeting.

Learn the new rule. A quarter a swear word,” I announced.

“You’ll be broke in two days, dipshit,” my once-loving wife said to me.

“Bullshit. I am nearly a college-educated man with a sterling vocabulary. Did you hear, Grace? Use the word ‘sterling’ in your autobiography. Wanda, look at her timeline.”

I started breaking eggs and frying the bacon. The two women I loved most in the world were huddled up close in a deep discussion about the timeline. I felt a rush of thankfulness and genuine affection. I felt lucky to be alive and knew I would never forget the simple scene. It became one of those beautiful snapshots that stays with you and becomes the best part of your life.

For a moment, I looked at Grace saw a little girl instead of the tall, nearly fully mature young woman. I reminded myself I needed to be more aware of her age.

After all, she was only sixteen. I imagined her at age ten, scared on a lonely freeway trying to make it to L.A. hoping the act would finally make her mother proud of her—make her mother love her. I started to tear up, or maybe it was the pain from the bubbles of bacon grease suddenly hitting me all over my forearm.

“Shit.”

I grabbed the now smoking pan and moved it off the burner.

“Hey ... are you paying attention over there? Did you burn something already?” pointed out the ever vigilant wife.

“It ain’t burned. It’s crispy—just like you like it.”

I was tiring of her; should have left her upstairs. I finished the cooking, put the food on the plates, and set them down.

“Here you go. No, don’t thank me. No, it was nothing. My pleasure ... anything for my two queens.

Either of you want a foot rub?” I said.

“Where’s the hot chocolate?” Grace said on cue.

I got right on it and also got out a couple of grapefruits and cut them in half. I added them to each plate and sat down. We talked about Grace’s life. We joked around with each other, talking with our mouths full. It became a weird night, breakfast in the vast house at three o’clock, but a good one. We were finishing up when I started on the grapefruit, which turned out to be an error.

I stabbed the juicy fruit with the fork and a shot of citrus juice went flying exactly like a guided missile toward Wanda’s unsuspecting right eye and hit dead center.

She vaulted up and started screaming, “Fuck, Fuck, Jesus Christ, Fuck,” and ran one-eyed to the back bathroom.

Grace gave me a dirty look and said, “Did you do

that on purpose?”

“Yeah, she’s been giving me crap all day ... Thought I’d teach her a lesson. Jesus, do you think I attended trick grapefruit shooting school? Direct hit, can you believe it? Slightly funny, don’t you think?” I said.

“Yeah, it was something. By the way, she would owe a buck, I think, in your new system. She had three f-words and one Jesus Christ. Would that be one or two quarters?” she asked.

I snorted and could only manage to get out in between laughs. “Just one. It’s just one. You’re getting awfully funny.”

We stifled ourselves as Wanda came back to the table.

“That really hurt,” she announced.

She returned to eating her food. What happened next may not be believed, but I swear to the Lord and all that is holy that it is true. I stabbed the fruit again

and another stream of deadly juice zoomed off. It hit the left eye dead center this time, and the entire scene became a rerun. She ran back to the bathroom, leaving Grace and I falling on the floor howling with laughter. Wanda came storming out madder than a stomped on rattlesnake and possibly just as deadly.

“I’m going to bed.”

She stalked off and slammed the door. Lucky for me, she had given away our bedroom for the night to the two Oregon girls, or I’m certain I would have gotten the cold butt treatment for the rest of the night.

“Seriously. How did you do that?” Grace asked, fully convinced they had trained me as a trick grapefruit shooter.

“Honest to God ... It was an accident, I swear. Boy, never seen her so pissed off before.”

I started on the dishes and glanced at the clock—nearly four.

Grace said, “How do I start this?”

“Honey, it’s four o’clock. Why not get some sleep? I’ll help you after school,” I said.

“I need to do it now. Why does everyone think I’m black? My mother’s a white girl from Mississippi, but I’m always the little black girl. I don’t get it,” Grace asked.

“Hell, start right there. Write it down,” I said.

I measured out some coffee and started a pot.

She had her title: Always the Little Black Girl, My Life Story.

“Yeah, that will do. But if we’re staying up, I want to know about those screams.”

The only sounds were the coffee beginning to perk and the ticking coming from the antique clock in the corner.

“I think I hate my mother,” broke the silence.

“The screams were because she got into my

dreams again. I know ... I know she's close by and coming soon. She'll want to take me away from you and Wanda. I know she's coming. I always know."

She grabbed her head and started sobbing. I paced around and began wiping out the already clean sink. I wanted to scream for Wanda to come down; this was her forte. I acted as the house mascot. She was the real rock around here; I knew that. I poured some coffee, mostly for something to do, and moved over to the sobbing Grace. I touched this young girl's hand and listened without interrupting as the words gushed out of her like a spring waterfall in the high mountains.

She told me of how her mom would always show up whenever she had been in one place for too long and demand she run away with her. She would, and then her mom would abandon her. Not once, not twice, but dozens and dozens of times over the years. It's how she had burned through fifty-seven foster

homes.

She told me of the fear of going out on the highway after getting the phone call from her mom demanding she come and see her in Los Angeles. How cold she had been with just a skimpy sweater, holding her little thumb out, begging for a ride on the freeway.

She shared how she had run and hidden in the bushes at a truck rest stop from the trucker who had rubbed her legs, which she didn't really understand but knew might be dangerous. How the kids in L.A. had called her 'whitey' and spit on her. The words kept cascading from her telling me about things no little girl should have had to experience in a fair world. A ray of sunshine came peeking into the kitchen when she told me of the first rape.

I sat there begging for some words; some way to take it all away. All I could come up with was, "Write, write what you have just been telling me. You're

staying home from school and you and I are going to write all day. Get it out. Write.”

She scribbled with the pencil into the notebook, focused. I took the opportunity to go to the back bathroom and bawled like a little toddler while taking a piss.

“Shit, I don’t know what to say or do. I’m an emotional retardo, why me? Wanda should be doing this.” Grace gave me a quick glance but turned right back to the notebook. I ran upstairs and told Wanda my plans.

“I want to adopt this one,” I said.

I told her about the scene... about the last two hours. She threw her arms around me and gave me a deep kiss.

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

I returned to the kitchen.

“Grace, look at the colors in the sky,” I said.

“Wow, it looks like a painting. We stayed up all night, didn’t we?” she said.

“Looks that way. Fuck your mother; nobody’s taking you anywhere. Do you understand? You’re staying right here. Do you get it?”

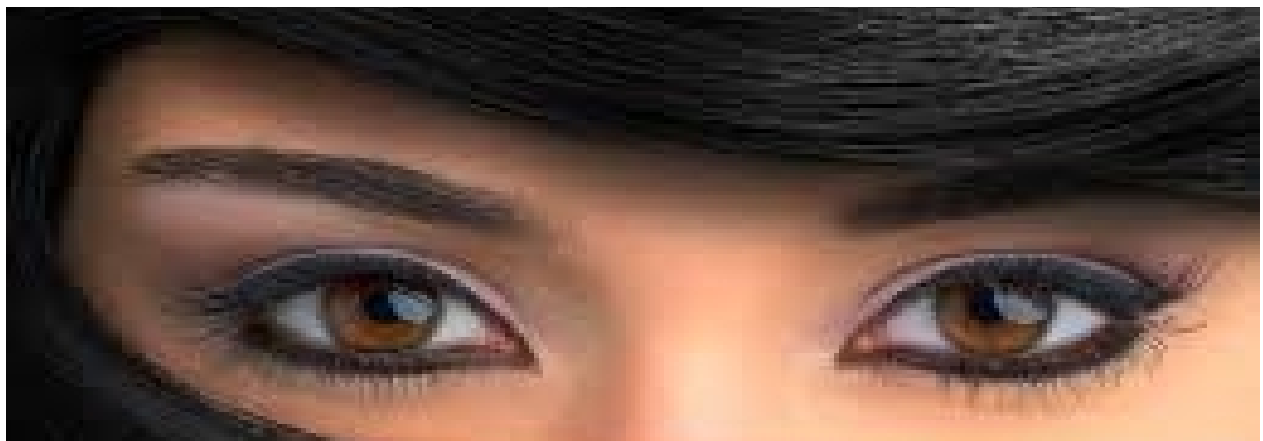
“Yes, I believe you.”

She jumped up and threw her arms around me. She released me, took a step back and held out her hand, “A quarter, sir.”

“What?” I said.

“You just said, ‘Fuck,’ and according to your new rules, that will be a quarter.”

Her deep brown eyes laughed at me.



Chapter Four- Her Mom Swiped Her New Coat



“I told you she was coming, now didn’t I?”

Grace said from her spot, sitting with legs crossed on the kitchen floor.

“Yes, you did. You certainly did,” I answered.

“What, no joke, no smart remarks?” Grace challenged as she wiped her hand through her still wet hair. Her vivid, intense brown eyes were usually twinkling pools that contrasted with the unusual mocha-colored skin. She looked like a Jamaican or

Polynesian girl but was really a combination of her Mississippi white mother and an L.A. handsome black man. Her eyes were not twinkling today. She was stressed.

“We’re worried, Grace, we don’t want you to leave and get messed up,” wife Wanda spoke.

“Hop up. We’re going shopping,” I announced with a clap of the hands. I jumped up, got the car keys, and flipped them in the air.

“What? I have to order two women to get in the car and go shopping? Jesus Christ—move it, ladies.”

“What the hell, dipshit—when did you decide this? I just got up, no makeup, no morning tea,” Wanda said in a begging tone.

“You look great, as always.”

I gave her a kiss, grabbed her, and spun her around.

“Oh, Christ, my life is going down the drain and

you two are all kissy facing around. Fuck me,” Grace spoke as she took a drink straight from the sink faucet.

“Grace ... How many times have I got to tell you to watch your damn shitty language? You should not talk to your foster daddy that way—and in front of your innocent foster mother? I am shocked. Shocked, I say.”

I gave Wanda a deep kiss on the lips that she cut short with a too hard of a push.

“Go warm up the car and give us girls a few minutes.”

She sprinted to the hall closet, got out a shopping bag, and tossed it to Grace.

“Early present, put it on. We’d better hurry—if our cheap bastard suggested shopping.”

She hustled up the stairs. Rodney Dangerfield would have received more respect than me around this beautiful, once proud Victorian house now serving as

the Bellingham, Washington runaway shelter. I lived for the banter.

“Holy shit, look at this.” Grace held up an obviously expensive pearl white sweater to her chest and rubbed it to make sure it was real, it seemed.

“Glad you like it ... spent a bunch of time picking it out for you,” I lied. I was just as impressed and surprised as Grace and tried to calculate how Wanda pulled this one off. Money was tight.

“Yeah, right, you liar. I’m gonna put it on,” she squealed and ran upstairs.

It was December 23, and we had the day free. The shelter home was empty for the first time in months. We usually had six kids, mostly girls, at a time.

Grace had been one of the girls a year ago and was now the house resident combo peer counselor and house mascot. The place revolved around her; she knew it, and we allowed it. Her mother had re-entered

the picture after a long absence and showed up three days ago with Grace—our favorite social worker and Grace’s long-time advocate—and demanded in no uncertain terms, she be allowed to take Grace up to Mt. Baker for the holidays. This unscheduled visit concerned all of us. Grace had dissolved into a cauldron of changing emotions.

The big problem being that the mother-of-the-year liked to show up just when Grace grew stable, semi-kidnap her for a few days or weeks, and then abandon her. This had happened multiple times and been the biggest factor in how Grace had burned through fifty-seven foster homes since age six.

Grace had been there for nearly every episode. There had been many sad, scary episodes in this girl’s young life. She had blossomed under Wanda’s care, settled down, stayed in school, and we never wanted her to leave.

She was ours now.

I moseyed out onto the porch and took out a Marlboro. I was worried about this trip, but proud of one thing, for I had weaseled an agreement to include Grace's twin brother, Ray Jr. on this trip. Ray had grown into a big young man, over 6'6" tall, athletic, sensible, and stable.

Grace had found him a wonderful home after Mom had dropped the two of them off at the welfare office one morning with a note pinned to Grace's skimpy sweater that said: *"I can't keep care of these kids."*

Mommie dearest left Ray alone, and his first set of foster parents had adopted him. He turned out to be a frequent visitor at the runaway shelter, and we were pals. I had cornered him two days ago.

"Ray, take this." I handed him a crisp \$50 bill.

"Jesus. Thanks a lot."

"It's part gift and part payment."

“Payment for what?”

“Keeping Grace safe on this trip. I’ll give you another one if she makes it back here in one piece.”

“You can count on it, man,” he answered, looking me directly in the eyes. He saluted and took off on his bike.

“Oh, Ray. One more thing.”

He stopped and looked up.

“Not one cent is to go to buying dope.”

“I don’t ...”

“Ray, I’m an old hippie. I can smell weed from miles away. Don’t bullshit me now.”

“Got ya, Captain.”

He had taken off.

The two women appeared, dressed, and made up. Wanda wore a skirt—a rarity—and a tight-fitting black sweater which showed off her near-perfect, petite body. She had on her high leather boots—had even

curled her hair. I felt funny all over, especially in special places. Grace looked like a young Whitney Houston. I had never seen her in makeup before. The white sweater looked amazing. I sat stunned. Luckily, it was winter or my mouth would have filled with flies.

“What—cat got your tongue, dipshit? Why didn’t you start the damn car?” Wanda spoke, ruining the mood.

She headed down the steps. Grace gave me a shy smile and followed.

“You two stop right there,” I bellowed in my best authoritarian voice. It worked. They both froze and looked back at me.

“What the hell is wrong with you two?”

“What’s your problem?” Wanda yelled with her hands on her hips. Grace looked puzzled.

“The problem is simple. Now, I’m going to have to walk around all day with my gut sucked in and act all

tough and protective—will be a nightmare.”

“Oh, brother. Shut up and get in the car.”

I smiled. I had gotten them good. We had the greatest time, especially after I took Wanda aside.

“Madame, could I ask you how we are pulling this off?”

“Well, Chuck gave me a little bonus.”

“What? I’ll kick his professor ass, that son-of-a-bitch.”

“Not that kind, you idiot. Cash—five hundred big ones.”

“I love you, Chuckie. You’re the man,” I yelled to the sky.

We went to three malls, listened to carolers, and roamed from store to store. We had lunch at the China Buffet and we bought a few gifts to send to our family members. I noticed Grace fingering a large winter coat in one of the mall stores as we prepared to leave.

I started the car and began backing up. I suddenly pulled back in and with no one noticing, pulled the trunk hatch.

“Shit—forgot my glasses again.”

I got out, ran to the store, grabbed the coat, paid quickly, and hustled back with it hidden under my coat. Without them noticing, I flipped it into the trunk. I drove to the other side of the mall and stopped.

“Grace, the trunk popped open. Get out and see what’s blocking it from closing. Hurry.”

She got out, opened the trunk, and let out a scream of delight, which made people look at us. She had it on and wrapped around her, rocking back and forth.

“I’ve always dreamed of having a coat like this.”

I got kisses from both beauties. We were headed for home when I had an idea. I turned off the freeway and took the Mt. Baker Highway exit. It seemed like a

perfect day for a forest drive. We took off on the country highway toward the active volcano, an area I knew well as I had been a back-to-earth hippie out here years earlier. We passed through a couple of country towns and farmland before we started gaining altitude. The rain turned to a light snow, which made the stunning scenery stand out even more. The drive had a purpose.

I had a plan since this was the exact road Grace's mother was going to be traveling on to the base of Mt. Baker and the lodge up there. I was spitting sunflower seeds into the ashtray, getting into the ride, and enjoying the memory of living up here.

“Hey, dipshit, would you mind telling us where we're heading?” the wife asked.

“I'll show you soon. Hang on and enjoy the scenery.”

It was magnificent country. The highway winded

through sixty-foot high stands of Douglas fir, red cedar, and huge broad-leaf maples. The snow added a contrast to all the various shades of green everywhere.

I steered into a pullout where three small cabins sat near the Nooksack River and stopped the car.

“Get out, girls.”

Grace hopped out and tried out the zipper for the first time. We walked about twenty yards and you could hear it.

The Nooksack River flowed up here in this mountain paradise, and its glacier-fed water was roaring this time of year. I hadn't been up here for a few years and the memories were flowing as quickly as the river. My old hippie commune had been located only minutes away. This had always been one of my favorite spots up here. I got excited as we got near the majestic falls.



Nooksack Falls

There was a large snowbank, several feet deep, directly to our right and below us. We stood there taking in the beautiful view for a few minutes and even ventured up to the fence surrounding the falls. We admired the falls for a few minutes and were heading back toward the car when Grace hooted. To our horror, she dove off the bank. I watched as she dropped out of her swan dive that turned into a belly flop.

She landed with a splat on the icy mound of snow, its crust as hard as granite. I heard the air gush out of her. It had to have been a hell of a blow.

“Jesus Christ.”

I zigzagged down the incline, slipping and sliding, and got to her.

“Don’t move.”

I touched her, and she started laughing.

“I thought it would be like cotton or something,”

she said, “never been around a lot of snow before.”

The new coat took most of the blow, it seemed, and we stayed there for a few minutes. I looked around. Luckily, we were several safe yards from the fence that prevented anyone from getting too close to the falls and the over hundred-foot drop to the river below. We got up the hill to a near-hysterical Wanda who was lost for words. She hugged Grace and sobbed.

I brushed Grace off and headed toward the three little cabins nearby with the two girls, steps behind, arm-in-arm, now laughing.

“Grace, the top of the mountain is less than ten miles away. If something happens up there, this is where you come. There’s a pay phone over by the store and you have my permission to break into this cabin here.” I pointed to the far one.

“It will be okay. I know the owner. You call us then hide in the cabin—got it? If anyone says anything, tell

them you're Outdoor Bailey's daughter."

"Outdoor Bailey? Where did that come from?"

Wanda questioned.

"Was my name at the commune we had a few miles from here."

"Oh, God—Grace, everything will always be okay, for I am Outdoor Bailey's wife," joked my once lovely wife.

The two started howling with laughter.

"Dipshit Bailey would have been a better name," the comedian wife added as we headed back to the car. We drove toward home and returned to near sea level. The snow, which was really coming down, turned back to the usual rain. We glided home, had some hot chocolate, and watched a movie in silence.

Christmas Eve morning came too soon. Ray showed up as I made French toast and sausage. Grace came down showing off in her new coat.

“Hey, Ray, do you like the food ...? You should. Outdoor Bailey cooked it,” were the first words out of Wanda’s smart mouth.

The two girls thought it quite funny. Ray seemed confused.

Mother-of-the-year showed up and honked loudly several times until the two kids reluctantly got into the car. They zoomed off and Wanda hugged me.

“I won’t be able to sleep at all until she gets back here.”

“Well, maybe we’ll have to find something to do if sleep isn’t possible.”

I had her in my arms. We rolled around on the couch and then the floor, which released some tension.

“Oh, Outdoor Bailey,” the smart-ass wife had to say.

Christmas Day came and went. Then another two days. I was dozing on the couch half—watching some college football bowl game—when I heard footsteps on the porch. Ray walked in seconds later.

“Where in the fuck is Grace?” I exploded off the couch, throwing blankets everywhere. Ray explained she was supposed to come home tomorrow and had agreed with him leaving.

“There was too much partying, drinking, and drugging up there. I had my parents come get me before I started throwing punches. Grace ordered me to go—told me she’d be okay.”

I couldn’t get on the kid, but I didn’t sleep the entire night. I was frantic when Grace didn’t show or call the following day.

We were both smoking, pacing around, and getting on each other’s nerves. We got pissy with each other. She huffed off to bed while I stayed down on the

couch.

The phone rang a few minutes later, and I got it on the second ring. It was Grace.

“I’m okay—at the falls. Can you come get me?”

“Yeah, be there in less than an hour. Get in the cabin; it will be okay, I promise.”

I pulled on my pants when Wanda appeared. She took one look at me, ran, and got our coats. We were on the road in two minutes flat. I have never driven like that before or since.

Wanda stayed silent and kept lighting me cigarettes as we zoomed up the dark, curvy road. It was not quite two o’clock when we got there. Grace came out and sprinted toward us. She still wore her new white sweater, which had become covered in dirt and pieces of bushes. She stood shivering.

“The bitch got my coat. She got my new coat,” she sobbed as Wanda helped her into the back seat.

“Yeah, but she didn’t get you, honey,” said Wanda as she got in the back and held Grace like a little child. I drove slowly and plotted how I would get away with murder if Mommy dearest ever showed her sorry ass again.

We got home, and Grace was ready to talk. We sat at the oak table near the kitchen and she told us the story.

“It started out okay for the first couple of days. We went skiing, which was fun... Some people brought a bunch of food and we had good meals a couple of nights. On the third night, Mom took my coat and put it on while parading around the party-people saying, ‘Look how much my daughter loves me. She bought me this coat.’

She paused and looked up at the ceiling, trying not to cry. I could tell she was near tears.

“I really wanted to kill her. There were some other

teenagers around, but by the third day, it was just Ray and me and a bunch of sleaze bags drinking and snorting coke. Mom became a total mess—talking shit about how much fun we were going to have when we moved back to L.A. and how grateful I should be for how much she had sacrificed for me. Couldn't believe that shit—sacrificed—what the fuck had she ever sacrificed? I never want to see that bitch again.”

She got up, opened the fridge, got out some juice, and took a swig.

“Ray finally couldn't take it no more. After nearly getting in a fight with some jerk who kept rubbing my face and telling me how pretty I looked, he just flipped out—threw Mom against the wall. Screamed at her to shut the fuck up.”

“Honey, I'm so sorry you kids had to go through that,” Wanda said.

“Yeah, me too—I ordered Ray to get out of there.

He got all bundled up and stormed out. Hope he made it home okay.”

“He did. We saw him after he got back,” I said, “go on, then what happened?”

“Oh, well ... I hid out upstairs, and people left me alone pretty much. I knew I had to get out of there, as Mom kept babbling about taking me to California regardless of what I wanted. I was thinking of how to get down to the cabins when this asshole found me.

He tried to kiss me but was too drunk to do much harm, especially after I kneed him squarely in the nuts—knew I had to get out then. Found a bike out behind a shed—just took off. It was icy and cold, especially with no coat.

I slipped a few times but slowed way down and inched down the road. It was really dark ... seemed like a long time until I saw the falls lit sign come in sight. I started pedaling really fast then, lost control,

and ended up wrecking. I got to the phone—time crawled until I saw you guys.”

She took a breath and looked up again. “I really loved my coat.” She smashed her fist on the table and ran upstairs.

June came by, per our request, the next day, New Year’s Eve. We told her the story. A week later, she reported back.

“I think I scared the bitch. Threatened her with child endangerment charges if she ever came back here again. Tried to get the coat back, but she claimed Grace gave it to her. Plus, she’s disappeared, for good, I hope. Sorry.”

I wish I could report we simply went and got another coat, but that wasn’t possible. We were both students, and the bonus had been a blessing. We were flat broke. About a week later, there was a knock on the door and a delivery man had us sign for a package.

They addressed it to Grace. She opened it and there was a nearly identical coat. We never found out who sent it.

“Bailey, can you believe what our girl has gone through in her life? When I think back on what I was like at her age, I am embarrassed. My biggest worries were my complexion, cheerleader tryouts, or if boys liked me. It all seems so petty when I compare my life with Grace’s.”

“Honey, I understand completely. Hitchhiking by yourself at age ten? An insane mother. A violent father. No little girl should have to go through such things. I am so proud of you. You’ve saved that wonderful girl.”

Chapter Five-Grace's Driving Lessons



I walked up the porch after finishing a two-mile jog which hadn't been the least bit fun but necessary. I had caught a side view of myself in a downtown window. I looked like I might be ready to give birth—to twins. My ego and vanity could not handle it ,for I had been a professional ballplayer a few years ago. Yeah, so what if it only lasted for two weeks. You try to hit a slider and then get back to me.

Anyway, I already felt irritated about being forced

to accept the reality of having a fat gut and was in a bit of a pissy mood when I spotted them. Wife Wanda, and Grace smiling too much at me as I entered the living room. My radar beeped.

“Hello, handsome. How was the jog?” spoke the wife.

“Jesus Christ, what do you two want?”

“Can I get you some iced-tea?” said a suspiciously polite Grace.”

“Yeah, sure, my angel ... then cook me a burger and get my slippers. Out with it dammit,” I said as I flopped down and turned on the TV.

“Here you go,” said Grace as she carefully placed the glass of tea on the coffee table in front of me. Her sudden sweetness reminded me of a classic hard rock tune being played by an orchestra through elevator speakers.

Wanda picked up the remote and shut off the TV.

“We want to ask you something.”

“Well, you can ask, but the answer is, N ... O ... No,” I said as I clicked the TV on again. An afternoon Mariner game had started with Gaylord Perry on the mound. I had looked forward to kicking back and watching with no interruptions.

“Why are you two even here?”

“Grace got out early and Chuck gave me the day off,” said Wanda. “We’re having a girls’ day.”

“Great—could you please go have it somewhere else? How about a long, long ... like a really long walk on the beach? Perhaps enjoy a romantic comedy ... a shopping trip to the mall. I want some peace before the darlings get home. And what do you mean, Grace got out early? Seems like code for she got suspended again?”

“My, my, you’re a little cranky today. We were planning Grace’s summer,” the overly patient wife

said.

“Okay, here we go ... Let me help. Grace, I hope you have a wonderful summer but don’t, as in, do not get me involved. Why not enroll her in an arts and crafts class? She could make things out of dried macaroni—I promise to hang them on the fridge.”

“Knock it, off.”

The wife had used up her patience quota.

“Grace has something to ask you. Could you swallow your snotty tongue and listen to her?”

Seemed more like an order than a question. I turned toward Grace.

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Well, you’re such an excellent teacher and I really would like it if you would teach me something this summer.”

“And what would that be, pray tell?”

“Well, could you teach me to drive?”

I saw my life pass before me. Teaching her to do anything was a nightmare. Forget having her behind the wheel of a vehicle. She wouldn't listen. I'd get pissed. She'd get pissed at me for being pissed and get nasty or start crying. Then, I would get shit from the wife for not being sensitive. They would then gang up on me and give me the woman's mafia silent treatment and there would be no Afternoon Delights or Night Delights or any Delights. I envisioned a summer of eating cold hot dogs, sipping warm beer, hiding on the deck, hungry, and sexually frustrated.

“Are you going to answer her?”

“Well, well ... really something to think about. Hmm, let me think. Yes, I will do it right after I go get a couple of root canals without Novocaine. Next question, please.”

“You taught me to write. Went okay, didn't it?” Grace said, which I had to admit was pretty damn

clever.

“Well, that was easy ‘cause writing is almost exactly like lying ... you were already a master at that.

Driving? You and me in the same car for long periods of time? You blasting the radio, looking at yourself in the rear-view mirror, freaking out, and screaming in an enclosed area? Then pouting when I correct you. It would be a nightmare for both of us. Not to mention the danger to the public.”

“Come on. I promise not to do any of those things. No radio, no arguing, I promise. I’ll listen to everything you say.”

“Why don’t you do it ,Wonder Woman?” I asked the wife, whose eyes were trying to burn holes in my skull.

“I’ve got to finish my thesis and teach all day this summer. I don’t have the time. Come on, it would be a fun bonding experience.”

“One important question before I even consider it.”

“What?” they both asked.

“What do I get out of the deal? Don’t bother answering, for words are merely words. Take part of your girls’ day and write it all down. I will consider it, but for right now ... the game is on and you two are still here. Let me tell you something though, Grace. A nice car wash and vacuum job would be a step in the right direction. I’ll read your proposal after dinner. Adios.”

“Come on, let’s go have lunch and get away from the jerk.”

“I need to change my shirt. Can we go to the Cliff House?”

“Sure, hurry,” answered Wanda.

The teenager ran upstairs. My wife glared at me.

“You aren’t very fucking bright, are you? If she had her license, we wouldn’t have to drive her all over the

place. We could send her shopping and have time for more privacy—if you get my drift.”

I did get her drift and started on my proposal as soon as they left. If I had to do this, I would have to win the initial negotiations.

After dinner, we got down to it and signed an agreement. I had it all in writing for protection when they turned against me, which I knew they would, eventually. I had no illusion. It would be a nightmare.

So peaceful, floating on an air mattress on a lake with blue-green water while admiring the slow-moving clouds. Suddenly, the water got choppy, and it felt like I was going to fall off.

“Are you gonna sleep all day?” said Grace as she pushed me awake.

“What the hell?” I sat up. “What time is it?”

“It’s 7:30 already. Come on. It’s my driving day.”

“Oh, perfect. Get out of here. Remember what you

do every time before you drive off?”

“Yeah—you start the car and walk around surveying everything. You look at the tires and see if the taillights, blinkers, and headlights are working.

“So go do it ... then come back and get me.”

“What? By myself?”

“Yeah, here are the keys.”

I reached down to my pants on the floor, got the keys, and tossed them to her. I turned over to do some more lake floating.

“Bailey—Wake up! There’s a problem.”

“Quit yelling,” I yelled. “What’s the problem?”

“I sorta forgot to get out the keys.”

“You locked the keys in the car? Oh, for shit sakes.”

I got up, pulled on my jeans, and hustled down the stairs. I heard the car running. I walked outside and viewed Grace frantically doing laps around the car.

“You locked the keys in there with the car running?”

Well, isn't that special?"

"What are we gonna do?" she was almost in tears.

"Don't know, honey ... Do you have any ideas?"

"I know ... you could go up to the college and get Wanda's keys," she said looking relieved.

"Well, I could, except she went to Seattle today for a seminar."

"Oh. Should we break a window?"

The look of panic became too much. I quit the torture.

"I've done the same thing. Don't panic. You need to crawl underneath and get the hide-a-key. It's in a little black box attached to the back bumper with a magnet. Be easy to find."

"But these are my clean driving clothes."

"Driving clothes? Who in hell has driving clothes? Get your ass under there before we run out of gas."
She did so and found the extra key.

We cruised over to the Mormon church parking lot and practiced the basics. The kid did surprisingly well, so I let her drive the ten blocks up to our curvy, narrow driveway. Her focused concentration seemed kind of cute, so I said nothing when she knocked over two of the three flower pots that lined the driveway.

A few mornings later, we were eating a breakfast I had cooked when Grace appeared excited and wearing her “driving clothes.” We finished up, and I excused myself.

“Where are you going?” asked the ever observant mate.

“To put on my driving clothes.”

“What?”

I came down with a duffle bag.

“Let’s go, Grace. I gonna let you take us out on the Mt. Baker Highway, which means we may have to stop at the liquor store first.”

We waved goodbye to the other teenage girl guests and Wanda, who gave me a suspicious look. Grace started the car and did her survey around as she had been instructed. I got in and she said, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, almost, but I need to get my driving clothes on.” I pulled a football helmet and a catcher’s mask out of the bag and put them on. “Now I’m ready.”

“Oh, stop it. You’re an idiot. Come on—I’m not so bad,” she said, laughing. There stood Wanda on the porch with her arms folded, shaking her head.

We took the back way, where there were normally few cars. Whenever one appeared, she would tense up and slow way down. I encouraged her, and we drove out thirty miles, sticking to isolated roads.

“Wow. How fun,” she said. “How did I do?”

“Pretty well. But you can’t freak out every time a car comes close. Just relax and focus on what you’re

doing. Keep the speed steady. Now, we're taking the main road all the way back."

"The main road ...? I don't know if I'm ready."

"Me either. Let's try it next summer. Fine with me. Pull over. I'll drive us home."

"Don't you ever tire of being a wise-ass?" she asked.

"You're right. I'm going to become a proper gentleman. I promise to fly straight and act right from this moment on. Stop at the mall so I can get a new suit, a top hat, and some shiny shoes and ... a cane. I think I need a cane. Just right ... keep the speed steady. I don't really want you to pass yet, but if we needed to, do you know what you should do?"

"You check the mirrors, put on the blinker, and pull out. Give it some gas. Then you go by the car and go back into the lane."

"Yep, correct, but when you give it gas, this car has

a special gear called a passing gear ... it will really take off. It's made that way so you can get around a car quickly."

"The guy behind me is driving really close to us. What should I do?"

"You're doing fine, Grace. How fast you going?"

"Forty-five—the speed limit."

"Then it's that person's problem, not yours. He can pass if he wants. Never get intimidated on the road. Being cautious is smart—wrecks happen really quickly—usually because of people speeding. In other words, fuck him. Keep steady. He'll probably go around you on this next straight stretch. Let him and don't look at him as he goes by. Keep your eyes focused ahead. Yep, here he comes."

"Oh, Jesus, I'm getting freaked out."

"Relax, honey, you're doing great. Now, listen to me. In about three miles, I'm going to have you turn

on the left blinker. When things are clear, you're going to turn left, got it?"

"Yes."

Less than five minutes later, I spoke softly.

"Okay, turn on the blinker. Wait for the traffic to go by. It's clear now, so take your turn. Now, push down the gas pedal slowly until I tell you to stop."

"You want me to stop?"

"No, stop pressing the gas pedal. Sorry, I should have been clearer. Ready? Push it down."

"Oh, my God. Are we heading onto the freeway? I'm not ready for this."

"Listen to me and keep your eyes ahead. You're doing just fine. Get it up to sixty and blend into the traffic. We're going down three exits is all. Just stay in this lane ... look ahead... right, hold your speed. Okay, ours is the next exit. Turn on your right blinker ... brake a bit. You need to drop to thirty-five. Just ease

off. Right, you did everything perfectly. Okay, turn right at the light down there—take us home.”

“Jesus, my heart is racing. What a trip.”

The gal pulled into the driveway a few minutes later, and we parked. She let out a big breath and said, “Wow, thanks.”

She stopped the car and jumped out.

“I drove on the freeway,” she yelled to Wanda, who looked at me like I had become the devil.

“You did? Really, the freeway?”

“Yeah, it was great,” she said and ran upstairs.

“Are you out of your mind? You took her on the freeway? You guys have only been out five or six times.”

“Hey, you can take over anytime you want ... I know what I’m doing. You twits are the ones who asked me to do this.”

“Why can’t you do anything the normal way?”

“Okay, Miss Know-it-All. See if this makes sense. She had been driving for over an hour at a steady forty-five, so she was used to the movement. I took her on the freeway because sixty doesn’t feel a lot different from forty-five. Why do you always doubt me? Do I really appear that stupid? Wait—don’t answer.”

Grace came bounding down the stairs, still excited. “Are we driving again tomorrow?” she asked.

“You bet. You have a lot to learn before my birthday, which is only ten days away.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re driving me to the Mariner’s game in Seattle—in exactly ten days. You better be ready.”

“Seriously? I’m driving us to Seattle ... on the freeway?”

“Well, yes. How you get there, isn’t it?” I said.

My wife grabbed her head in both hands and muttered her way into the kitchen.

Ten days later, we indeed headed for Seattle with Grace as my chauffeur. Think I was going to do this without some personal benefit? Free day in Seattle, Mariner game, big birthday, too—turning thirty.

Can you believe my wife? Questioning my every move as the driving teacher? Told you. It ended up being a great time, regardless of Miss Critical's unsolicited, unhelpful oversight, as you will see in the next chapter.

Chapter Six- The Seattle Trip



I woke up excited about my birthday morning. Wanda had tried to cook, which I appreciated—well, the try, not the actual food. Grace had been almost totally silent during breakfast, which wasn't usual. I put my dishes in the sink, gave my bride a kiss on the cheek, and clapped my hands.

“We’re heading to the Emerald City for a day game with Gaylord Perry pitching. This is my first day being thirty, so please try not to irritate me today. Are you ready, Grace?”

“Are we still going? It’s raining out,” had been her answer.

“You’re lucky, young lady, for if I were still in my 20s and immature, I would give you some deserved grief for such a statement. Honey, we live near Seattle and you don’t think we should drive in the rain?”

“Okay, I’m nervous—all right?”

“I know you are, but I have confidence in you. Let’s go over it again.”

“No... okay ... I remember everything you told me. Don’t make any sudden moves, stay in the right lane and ignore all the stuff happening on my left. Keep up a steady speed ... understand how you get—I forget the word—velocitized or something; when you forget how fast you’re going.”

“Perfect. Look, I will not tease you or be a smart mouth. Just listen to me. Ask questions if you feel confused. First, we’re going down Chuckanut Drive.

It's narrow, but there will be nobody out there today on the lonely road. It's a real peaceful drive—get you used to being on the road. There's the first thirty miles. We'll drop and catch the freeway. Listen, we can turn off if you are too stressed ... take some back roads into downtown Seattle if you want—Enjoy yourself. Despite what Wanda says, you're ready. I wouldn't let you do it if you weren't ready. You're not the poor little black girl any longer. You're a mature, sharp teenage woman. Show some confidence—you're not flying a plane. You're driving a well-maintained, safe automobile. And show some confidence in your teacher. I know exactly what I'm doing. Suck it up and drive the birthday boy to the big city.”

And that is precisely what Grace did.

We rolled into downtown and parked right across from the ferry dock and Ivar's Restaurant. She looked over at me after turning off the key and letting out a

big breath.

“I did it.”

“You certainly did. Perfect driving. You must have had a helluva a teacher. Ready for something good to eat? Wanda tried but ... well, you know.”

“Yeah, I get it. I’m hungry too. When’s the game start?”

“Oh, my driver got us down here earlier than expected. We got three hours to have some real fun. I’m getting some halibut and chips. You like halibut?”

We did my usual Seattle trip. We went through the Aquarium where we feed the seals, walked up the steep stairs to Pike Place Market where we hung around watching the mimes, and listened to the street musicians before hiking up and taking the monorail to the Seattle Center.

“Ready to go up there?” I asked the kid as I pointed up at the Space Needle.

“Man, look at that thing. We’re going all the way to the top?”

“Yeah, gonna take the stairs—hope you’re up to it. I gotta get stretched out.”

I went over to a bench and started faking stretching exercises. I looked over at her. She had a look of wonder on her face I will forever cherish. She finally looked up, shrugged, came over to the bench, and started mimicking my fake stretching moves. I couldn’t take it. I flopped on the bench and started laughing.

“I’m sorry, honey. We’re going on the elevator. Can you imagine how many stairs there would be to get to the top? Be scary as hell too, wouldn’t it?”

She let out a sigh of relief.

“I didn’t want to say anything, but I almost wet myself thinking of going up there ... but you seemed so excited and stuff ...”

“You’re really sweet sometimes, Grace. Come on, let’s head up there. It’s a cool ride.”

We spent an hour on the observation deck. We were leaning on the rail and looking over the city.

“Grace, I am going to share a secret. I give you shit for several reasons. The first one is that I knew you were a rough customer, so I started teasing and screwing around with you to keep you off balance until you could relax and accept some help.

Then, I got used to it—giving you shit—and found it to be a bunch of fun. Last, I have been teaching you about men; don’t let men mess with your mind. They do that to control you, so fight back with a variety of techniques like humor, mocking them, getting pissed—whatever you need to do to protect yourself. Too many women get into positions of being the second fiddle in a two-person band.”

We even had time later for the IMAX theater show

on the history of flight at the nearby Pacific Science Center, which turned out to be impressive and rode the monorail back. I hailed a cab that took us to the Kingdome.

We took our seats near the first base dugout. I tried to explain the secrets of baseball, but she seemed to enjoy the snacks and all the action of a sizable crowd, so I sat back and watched Gaylord dazzle the Cleveland Indians hitters with his collection of slow curves and spitballs. The Mariners won 10-2, and we ambled out, flowing with the cheerful crowd.

“Are we going home now?” she asked.

“Not quite. We have a couple more stops. Let’s head back to the car. Don’t want to get towed away.”

“Then we’re going? We got to get back before it gets dark. I’ve never driven in the dark before.”

“Don’t worry. One of our stops is up there.”



I pointed up the series of steep streets that led up from the water to the central downtown area.

“Shit, I have to drive up there?”

“Looks worse than it is. Seems like you would roll backward, doesn’t it? Well, our car has this feature that prevents you from going back. It’s no big deal, seriously.”

We got to the car, and I guided her up the hill. She cautiously took us up. I told her to park when we got close to Nordstroms. She did so totally focused on

getting it right. We started walking.

“Where we going?” she asked.

“Hell, if we don’t change our ways. Actually, right here. Gonna get your funky ass cleaned up for dinner, sister,” I said as I held open the heavy glass door. We walked into the high-class department store and hopped on the escalator.

“Wow, never been in a place like this before.”

“Cool old building, isn’t it? We’re going up to the fourth floor, the Women’s Department. I’d take you to the Foul-Mouthed Little Black Girls’ Department, but they closed it last season,” I said as I guided her up to the next escalator.

We glided off at the Women’s Department, where Grace got a surprise.

“Well, finally. You guys made it,” said Wanda as she put down her magazine and smiled.

My wife had on a black dress with a glittering

golden necklace hanging from the front. She had on way more makeup than usual, had pinned up her hair, and wore some new heels. She looked gorgeous and raced over and grabbed Grace by the hand.

“Come on, honey. You’re getting a makeover.”

“Wanda, you look fabulous. I’ll see you, girls, later. Meet you over at the Camlin, in what ... an hour or so?” I said.

“Yeah, will be perfect,” Wanda answered.

I got on the escalator and headed down to the men’s department. I walked out in a new charcoal three-piece suit. It was on sale, which was good enough for me. I headed toward the Paramount Theater and the Camlin across the street, carrying a bag containing my old clothes. I grabbed the tickets for the concert, strolled over to the Cloud Room at the Camlin Hotel, and I sat with a glass of wine in the piano bar across from the restaurant and waited. Had

to hand it to my old man. He had really come through for this birthday. Sent me a check for a cool grand and we were going to spend it. I heard the elevator ding and out stepped my two ladies.

Grace was wearing a fine-looking white dress, with a handsome black sweater over the top. This was the first time I had ever seen her in a dress. She had on a set of hoop earrings and a gold chain hanging down the front. She had on makeup, which had been applied by a pro that accented her beautiful mocha skin. The transformation was stunning. She smiled at me shyly.

“Oh, my god. Who the hell are you? You two women are out of this world. Damn, Grace. Who knew? You look fantastic.”

“Not too bad yourself, dipshit,” said my wife, who touched my new suit with admiration. “Ready to eat?”

The headwaiter seated us, and we ordered.

“We three simpletons cleaned up pretty well, huh?”

I said, as we ate our steaks.

“Are you ready for some music, Grace?”

“Music? I dunno what you mean.”

“We’re going to see Albert King and Etta James next door. Famous blues guitarist and a classic singer. You wait until you hear her sing, Grace.”

We locked arms as we cruised down the Seattle streets after the performance.

“What did you think of the concert, Grace?”

“Never knew people could do stuff so well. How did she hit some of those notes? And the guy played the guitar like it was a part of his body or something. Thanks you guys. I’ll never forget this day and night.”

“We won’t either, sweet girl.”

We made it back to the car, and Wanda took the wheel. It was raining pretty hard, and it took her some concentration to get us up the freeway, away from the confusion of Seattle traffic. The freeway turned to a

mellower two-lane with a big divide between north and south about a half hour later, and the rain stopped. I tapped Wanda on the shoulder and said, “Nice work, baby. Now take the next exit. I have to whiz like a racehorse.”

“Will do. We have to write your dad a thank you for this one,” she said as she turned on the blinker, took us off the freeway, and stopped at a gas station. We big city slickers went in and minutes later were loading up when I spoke.

“Okay, Grace. Take us home.”

“What? I never drove in the dark before. You can’t be serious.”

“Well, little sister, this car has headlights. Take the wheel and take us home. It’s only fifty miles. You can do it.”

“Wanda—do I have to?” Grace asked in desperation.

“Never argue with a birthday boy. I got our asses this far. ‘Take us home’, is what the man said ... so let’s get going before my makeup gets ruined. I’m taking my man out for some fun after we drop your fanny off.”

“We going out some more? Really?” I asked, totally surprised.

“Yep, Debbie is staying there for the night. Come on Grace, let’s roll ... Wait, see the little thing on the steering wheel? Yeah, that one ... Flick it toward and see what happens. Now, flick it back. Forward for bright, which you use for when there’s nobody around, back to make it dimmer ... got it?” said my beloved wife.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” Grace said with little enthusiasm.

She pulled out cautiously, got on the entrance ramp, and accelerated. An hour later, we pulled into

our driveway. We got out and congratulated our driver.

“You did it all, Grace. You are officially a driver. Way to go.”

We both hugged her. She waved and disappeared into the house. My loving wife and I took off for some dancing and excessive wine drinking.

Thus ended my experience as Grace’s driving teacher. Didn’t turn out awful after all. But two days later we got some unexpected bad news.

The head of the shelter home, Marvin, called a meeting, and Grace was present. He shared how the grant renewal for the home had not come through, which meant the home was going to have to close. The money would run out in two months.

The gathering ended with hugs, handshakes, and sad expressions. Two counselors were out of jobs, as was Debbie, our relief worker, and Marvin’s time as

the head of the agency was over. For Wanda and me, it was a mixed series of feelings. We were both going to graduate by the end of the summer and would look for teaching jobs for the next fall. Our concern was what to do with our Grace.

June came to the rescue.



Chapter Seven- June's Unreal Surprise



“Bailey and Wanda, I want to take you out to dinner at the Cliff House. I already paid Debbie to stay. We need to talk about Grace, and I have a plan I want to share with you. Meet you down there in an hour?”

We nodded in agreement and thanked Debbie, who smiled and said, “Well, glad to do it. Especially since June gave me two hundred bucks to stay. I didn’t want to take it but she shoved it in my hands

and told me not to argue. It's been great working with you two."

We went upstairs to get ready for dinner.

"Jesus, June must really want to talk with us. Two hundred bucks for a few hours of work for Deb?"

Wanda said.

"Yeah, the woman is something else. Wonder what her plan is? I'll wait on the porch. Try not to take too long, please. I desperately want a drink."

We walked into the Cliff House holding hands and June vaulted up when she spotted us. She waved us over, and we took a seat.

"Order what you want, kids. This night is my treat. Consider it a payback for what you two have done to save my Grace. I came into some money recently—my father passed away last weekend. I am no longer a poor social worker, it seems, which is one hell of a surprise to this old lady."

“Oh, sorry June. How you doing?” asked my wonderful wife.

“Okay, I guess. Still in shock and trying to adjust to being an orphan. Mom died two years ago, and Dad just withered away after losing her. But enough, let’s order because I have some good news.”

We ordered drinks and made our food selections while making small talk. The delicious-looking platters arrived. We dove in and ate in silence for a few minutes. June speared a perfectly cooked scallop and announced, “Okay, kids showtime. Here’s the plan for Grace I came up with. I’m curious at what you’ll think.”

She popped in the scallop and slowly chewed. The suspense was getting to me. She spoke.

“Mom and Dad had this vacation cabin on Lake Whatcom. It’s now mine and I want to move Grace and Ray into it. I want them to enroll in Western and

am going to pay their way. The fact that Grace is going to graduate on time from high school this next year is beyond my wildest dreams for her. She—well, both of those kids—grabbed my heart the day I found them sitting on the office steps with a note pinned on Grace one morning so long ago. I have the money and my parents would more than approve of spending some of it on those two wonderful kids. It’s a beautiful place right on the lake and only two miles from town. So, what do you think?”

“Adopt us, too, June. Is what we think. What a fabulous idea. Wanda and I were stressing about what to do with Grace. It would be so great, the twins making a life together after all they’ve been through. Bless you, June, and cheers to you.”

I held up my glass, and we all tapped together.

“Great. I’m happy you think it’s a good plan. As far as adopting you two, well I will not do that but I do

have some news for you.”

She reached down to her purse and pulled out a piece of paper. Her hands shook with excitement.

“Ever heard of Port Townsend? I grew up there before Dad got the professor's job at Western and we moved here. Beautiful place and it doesn't rain as much as it does around here. It just so happens my childhood friend, Alice, is the Superintendent of Schools there. On my recommendation, she wants to hire Wanda as a Special Education instructor, starting next fall. Here's the proof.”

She passed Wanda the letter.

“Bailey, she called around and thinks you should apply for a job in nearby Sequim. They have a sixth-grade opening. The Superintendent there is my friend's cousin.”

She stood up and stretched with a huge grin on her face as Wanda and I looked at each other with

complete and utter astonishment. Wanda put down the letter, raced to June, and gave her a long hug.

“Bailey was right,” Wanda said.

“Now, there’s something you rarely hear,” was the suddenly smarty June’s response.

“Hey. I was right, this rare time when I told Wanda you were like a living angel on this earth. You may not be an actual angel, June, but you do the work of one. We can’t thank you enough—for everything.”

“Thanks, Bailey. In my view, you two are miracle workers with troubled kids. You have treated every kid who came into your house like your own kids. Never seen two better workers in all my years. I’m glad and honored to recommend you for good jobs working with children. I want you both to stay in this kind of work. It has been a pleasure. Now, want to go see Grace and Ray’s new place? Bailey being all lovey-dovey is getting kind of weird. Hop in my rig.”

We pulled into a tall evergreen tree-lined narrow driveway ten minutes later in the middle of sunset time. We took a hard right turn, and the lake came into view. The vibrant blue water sat in calm silence as we parked in front of the cabin. I noticed as we walked inside that the water was only a simple rock throw from the deck. I would have never left the place if I had purchased it. It was a dream. The place was perfectly organized, including a fully stocked kitchen, food pantry, and fully furnished in once expensive furniture. Someone brilliantly decorated it with the help of June's mother's artist eye.

“Jesus, June, why don't you move into this cozy, sweet place? It screams peace and contentment.”

“Well, I have a new place that is better than okay, too. It's only a mile away from this one.”

“June, how about this for a good plan? Wanda and I will take the twins on a canoe ride. We'll paddle up

here with them. We'll dock and show them around. You come out of the cabin and surprise them."

"Oh, perfect! When?"

We set it up and agreed on Thursday afternoon, a mere two days from now. The timing became important after wise June warned us Grace might be unaware of her deep inner feeling of being abandoned. She might not be in control of her emotions and might act out or act withdrawn. She also added if Grace was being affected by feeling abandoned—a common fear to almost all of us—then that was a good sign, for it showed she had bonded. Bonding is a primary urge, too, just like abandonment, and both are easily explained, for they are protective measures the brain takes to ensure survival. If one can't bond then it's a bad sign as people who don't or can't bond with others live lonely and often troubled lives.

Wanda and I sat listening to Grace as she

explained things. I kept wishing I had a tape recorder or could take notes. This woman had a slideshow of knowledge about humans playing in her mind that all should view. And true to her warnings, Grace was nowhere to be seen when we returned home. Debbie reported how Grace had run in, dropped off her books, and raced off with a wave but no explanation of where she was heading.

She showed up at around ten and slipped in the door. We invited her to sit down with us, but she politely declined and hustled upstairs to her room. We decided to let it be, and she remained distance and had few words to say right up until the canoe day.

Ray showed up, and we drove down to the dock and rented two canoes. Wanda had us gather around and pulled out three chopsticks in her hand.

“Okay, Grace, make your pick.”

“Huh? Pick for what?” Grace answered.

“Short stick has to ride with Bailey.”

It ended up with Ray leading me—The Handsome Heroes boat against the girls’ ride—The Dizzy Dixie Cups; we took off. It was like a carnival ride. The canoes slid through the mirror-like blue water and off we cruised out of the city of Bellingham and down into the wild blue yonder of this enormous glacier- fed lake.

Each corner we turned offered new, more remote scenery to enjoy, the highlight being one immense cedar tree filled with bald eagles taking turns booming down to get some fish. I constantly had to fight my desire to dig through Ray’s jacket for some of his pot and even mentioned the thought to Ray.

“Ray, is this trip any good, man?”

“Golden, Bailey. It is absolutely golden.”

“Hey, if I dug through your coat, would you have any pot for me to use?”

“Hmm... serious question, Ace. Let me answer this way: “Are herbs good for you? And isn’t pot an herb?”

He smiled back at me. Grace had perked up and her laughter and bouts of singing reverberated across the water. We pulled into Grace’s cabin’s small dock and tied up the boats.

Wanda took over and ordered us out as she led the way up the steps toward the cabin.

“What is this place?” asked Grace.

“Wow, Bailey, this place is something, else,” said Ray.

Wanda faked outrage when I pretended to sneak into the cabin. I opened the door slowly and Grace popped out. Soon, two deserving kids were jumping around the deck with their arms around each other and releasing delightful howls into the cloudless sky. Grace invited them in and showed them about. She put me in charge of getting the barbecue going where I

grilled some yummy steaks. We ate and left the kids with Grace for the night. As we were heading down the steps to the dock, Ray yelled out, “Hey, Bailey. Inner coat pocket.”

I could tell you a dozen more tales featuring these two kids but you, dear reader, I hope have enjoyed the ones I picked out to share.

Wanda and I moved to Port Townsend after we both got the jobs June had lined up for us. We started the fall in an old Victorian home with a view of Mt. Baker right next to a huge city park in the scenic coastal berg. Grace set that up for us, too.

I will never forget our marvelous, loving woman friend who gave the twins and a young teaching couple such tremendous guidance. Ray became an environmental scientist and Grace got her degree in Elementary Education and took a job in Japan. The last time I heard from her she was teaching English in

Perth, Australia.



**THE VIEW FROM OUR KITCHEN.
OUR OLD FRIEND MT. BAKER**

Chapter Eight-Grace's Story in Her Own Words.



Hello, while visiting my brother Ray at his place south of Seattle, old angel June emailed me the link to a story I recognized as being about me. I remembered the night with the grapefruits, the jumping into what I thought was snow at the falls, and the wonderful Seattle drive, especially. Anyway, I promised to take over the storytelling, but please be kind. I have written little of anything since I moved to

Perth five years ago. But before I start on retyping my autobiography, (I still have the original), here is a story about Bailey and Wanda from when I knew them at the shelter home.

Wanda was a cute little woman, and I liked her instantly. I was a tough sell back then, but she got to me in just a few minutes.

I remember my social worker, Grace, who tried to help me for years and Wanda meeting with me at the round oak table in the old house. I could tell Wanda was a kind one. She immediately took me shopping and out to lunch.

She explained what the runaway shelter was all about and showed me the big room at the end of the hallway, which looked like a piece of heaven to me at the time. I was unpacking my clothes and the brand new outfit she had insisted I get when I walked this handsome little dude. It went something like this:

“How do you like your room?” he said, which startled me.

“Oh, it’s wonderful. Who are you?” was my answer.

“Me? Well, I am the king of this castle. I like to be called Mr. Your Highness if you don’t mind.”

His bright blue eyes stared right through me. I didn’t know what to say.

“Here’s what you need to know. You can have this room for as long as you wish. I only ask a couple of things of you.”

“Oh, boy, I thought, here comes the “rules” lecture, the kind I had heard dozens of times before in many other homes.”

“Try not to be too much of a bitch and I use the word ‘fuck’ a bunch,” were his first words. He stopped and stared at me without laughing and then continued.

“Welcome. Wanda is trying to cook something

downstairs, which is always an experience.” He turned on his heel and spun out of the room. He took a couple of strides down the hall and looked back at me with a big grin. I didn’t really know what to think. Just knew not to mess with him.

Wanda constantly called this guy, “*Dipshit*,” which amused me greatly. The couple were deeply in love, it seemed to me, and were always doing things outside. They loved to camp, go hiking, and took me on canoe rides around Lake Whatcom. They treated me like a good friend and always invited brother Ray over to eat with us, even though it was against the rules. Bailey also had a tough side that would come out.

Like the time he caught some high school kid sneaking around the house late at night, trying to hook up with one girl staying there temporarily. I saw him race out of the house with a scary, intense look on his face. I followed him outside and there he was on the

porch. He had the kid pinned up against the wall and was covering him with threats and cuss words. Bailey dropped him and spit at him as the kid scrambled up and sprinted off. He looked over at me, winked, and hummed the Rocky theme song. He was a funny guy.

Here we go. I don't really want to do this and it may be boring, but I promised. Here's my autobiography from years ago I wrote at the old oak table so many years ago now. I added a few things as I retyped it. But it is mostly the original with some updates.



My father, Ray, was a gigantic, athletic, black man born just outside of Biloxi, Mississippi. I have only three genuine memories of him. I remember the time he spoke to me in a small, clean East Los Angeles house.

“You’re a pretty one. I see your mom in you.”

He tossed his cereal bowl into the sink, grabbed his leather jacket off the chair, and left through the squeaky back door. The screen banged closed and I could hear the stairs groan and creak under his massive weight and power. He was a scary man.

I also remember him spanking me repeatedly with one of his giant paws for something. I didn’t know what I was being punished for—still don’t to this day. He rarely spoke or even acknowledged me. The last memory is when he took my brother Ray and me out and poured a hot pot of coffee down the throat of some poor guy.

Later, we both saw the windshield turn all red after an explosion from a running gunman at a stoplight where my father died on the spot. That's all I know about him.

My twin brother, Ray, Jr. I know well, even though we didn't really spend much time together during our childhoods. We reconnected at the shelter home. He's a born athlete but hates the usual sports.

He's into windsurfing, biking and likes to work on cars. We lived together in four different places that I remember over the years but had never been close until I moved in with Bailey and Wanda. They always included Ray in all our celebrations and invited him to dinner all the time. He liked to hang out with Bailey, my foster father.

When he was about six or seven, he got placed in a good foster home and still visits the family who took him in to this day. I have met none grandparents or

relatives from the south. Now, my mom is a real story.

My mother had us in the Biloxi General Hospital one summer day sixteen years ago this June. I was the first one out, so I guess I am officially the oldest. She was a beautiful woman from the pictures I have seen. Mom was only seventeen herself when she gave birth to us two half-breeds. She said that is what everyone down there in Mississippi used to call us and why she had to pack up and leave as being a white girl with two half-breed babies was too hard.

She took us on a bus, she said, to Spokane, Washington, where I became the *little black girl* in a mostly all-white community. Mom tried to care for us, I guess, but she drank a lot. One day at kindergarten, Ray and I were picked up in a police car. They took us to separate foster homes.

Mom broke us out one night with some guy I had never seen before who had a pickup. Ray and I tried to

sleep in the back of the canopied truck, across the mountain pass, and to Bellingham nearly four hundred miles away. It was winter and I will never forget how cold it was back there.

We got a house, and for about a year the three of us lived together. But it wasn't peaceful. Mom would bring guys home from the bar and the fights would start. Ray would sleep through it all. I would try to protect Mom and more than once smacked strange men over the head with all the force I could muster with a cast iron frying pan. I made the mistake of telling Bailey this, and he teased me about it all the time.

Mom started dating a rich guy and one day when we were six, she evidently had enough of trying to raise us.

She had this guy, Tom, drive us down in his fancy new car to the Bellingham welfare office. She pinned a

note on us and I will never forget the feeling and scene that day of the car driving off.

We sat huddled up on the steps of the building and there I first met Grace. She found us separate foster homes. Ray's was a good one. My first one was okay.

At least it was warm, clean, and had plenty of food. The family was a Christian one, and I had to go to church all the time. The foster mother always introduced me as her little black girl. There were three other foster kids there, and I didn't get along with them.

One night, about six months after I moved in, Mom showed up and took me away. I had to leave all my clothes, and she promised to get me new ones, but it never happened.

We lived in motels, and I didn't go to school for weeks. The cops located us and Grace found me another place. This time, they placed me with a young

couple. I liked this home and stayed with them for over a year before Mom called me on the phone and demanded I hitchhike to Los Angeles because she missed me.

I stole a few dollars and some change from my foster mother's purse. I got on I-5 and stuck out my thumb and immediately got a ride with two hippie-looking guys all the way to Grants Pass, Oregon. I think they called the cops on me at the truck stop where they bought me something to eat, but I hid from the cops, who looked around for a minute or two, shrugged, and took off.

A trucker gave me a ride almost all the way to San Francisco. But he was drinking something from a brown bottle, started making jokes, and rubbing my legs which I didn't really understand but knew was dangerous. I got scared and hid in the bushes for a long time until I was sure he was gone. I got several

short rides and then made up a story an elderly couple believed. They took me all the way to big Ray's old house. I was ten years old.

I stayed there for a few weeks, and they made me go to this awful school. I was too light-skinned for this area and they called me, '*Whitey*,' and would spit at me. One time they threw a pop bottle filled with urine at me as I was walking home from school.

This was very confusing as I had always been the little black girl, but down there I wasn't black enough. Mom and I took the bus back to Spokane and a few weeks later returned to Bellingham. She left me there again, and Grace found me several temporary foster homes until they found a permanent placement.

In most of these homes, I was always asked to sing and more often than not introduced as our '*new black girl*.' I got so I could size up the people and the situations quickly.

I would steal money and always knew the easiest escape route. It went on and on. I would get to a place, Mom would show up sometime later, and off we would go.

I can never remember being in a full year-long class in school. Finally, when I turned fourteen and had grown tall enough—I could get into bars and such—I found out men would pay me for attention.

I thought I was in love with this one ex-con guy who everyone called Deeter, a petty thief and con man, and we hooked up.

We ended up in Vancouver, B.C. where I would get guys to follow me to our upstairs apartment where he would jump out with a knife and take their wallets, money, cigarettes, and jewelry. One time, he even took one guy's shoes off him. We got busted and deported back to Bellingham. Deeter went back to jail and Grace got me hooked up with the runaway shelter as

no other place was available and I was getting too old for most foster homes.

Mom showed up at Christmas and told me she wanted me to leave with her. I refused. She took my new coat instead, but at least she didn't get me.

There is my story. Wanda and Bailey helped me get stable and encouraged me. I think the big Seattle trip when we went to dinner and the concert at the Paramount was an early goodbye. The shelter home lost its funding after our trip and closed. About the same time, Wanda got her Master's Degree and Bailey his teaching degree.

Grace gave Ray and me her parents' old vacation cabin to live in on Lake Whatcom, and we made it through high school. I barely skated by, but I blossomed when I tried college. Took me a few years longer than most, but I got a teaching degree. I really never wanted to leave that wonderful cabin. Grace and

I have kept in close contact. I don't know what is so interesting about my story; lots of people have had it tough.

I lost contact with Wanda and Bailey after they took jobs in another part of the state. Went and visited them twice, but it wasn't the same—seemed kind of awkward. It shocked me when Grace told me they got a divorce. I always wondered what happened to them. They were fun people and the perfect ones for me at during that time in my life. “



“She did well, didn't she? As Grace said, Wanda and I got teaching jobs and moved right after the

shelter home closed.

We lost contact with Grace, but I have fond memories of our time together. I learned many things from our delightful girl. I always think of her whenever I see a cast iron frying skillet.

Seriously, I often wonder about her and how she did in her life. I will never forget some scenes from that active, hopeful, wonderful time in my life and she was the center of it all. I really loved that girl. She made me a better teacher because I would look over every class I ever taught and try to pick out a Grace type to watch over. We had a lot of fun and gave each other much grief. I might have to make a trip to Perth, Australia, and surprise her before I kick off.

Thanks so much for giving me the honor of your time. If you enjoyed this story then come visit me as I have many others.



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