

Assata (Shakur),

An

Autobiography

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*for*

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## AFFIRMATION

I believe in living.  
I believe in the spectrum  
of Beta days and Gamma people.  
I believe in sunshine.  
In windmills and waterfalls,  
tricycles and rocking chairs.  
And i believe that seeds grow into sprouts.  
And sprouts grow into trees.  
I believe in the magic of the hands.  
And in the wisdom of the eyes.  
I believe in rain and tears.  
And in the blood of infinity.

I believe in life.  
And i have seen the death parade  
march through the torso of the earth,  
sculpting mud bodies in its path.  
I have seen the destruction of the daylight,  
and seen bloodthirsty maggots  
prayed to and saluted.

I have seen the kind become the blind  
and the blind become the blind  
in one easy lesson.  
I have walked on cut glass.  
I have eaten crow and blunder bread  
and breathed the stench of indifference.

I have been locked by the lawless.  
Handcuffed by the haters.  
Gagged by the greedy.  
And, if i know any thing at all,  
it's that a wall is just a wall  
and nothing more at all.  
It can be broken down.

I believe in living.  
I believe in birth.  
I believe in the sweat of love  
and in the fire of truth.  
  
And i believe that a lost ship,  
steered by tired, seasick sailors,  
can still be guided home  
to port.

T

here were lights and sirens. Zayd was dead. My mind knew that Zayd was dead. The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt. The car spun around me and then something like sleep overtook me. In the background i could hear what sounded like gunfire. But i was fading and dreaming.

Suddenly, the door flew open and i felt myself being dragged out onto the pavement. Pushed and punched, a foot upside my head, a kick in the stomach. Police were everywhere. One had a gun to my head.

“Which way did they go?” he was shouting. “Bitch, you’d better open your goddamn mouth or I’ll blow your goddamn head off!”

I nodded my head across the highway. I was sure that nobody had gone that way. A few of the cops were off and running.

One pig said, “We oughta finish her off.” But the others were all busy around the car, searching it. They were pulling and prodding.

“Ya find the gun?” they kept asking each other. Later, one of them asked another, “Should we put’er in the car?”

“Naw. Let’er lay in the gutter where she belongs. Just get’er out of the way.”

I felt myself being dragged by the feet across the pavement. My chest was on fire. My blouse was purple with blood. I was convinced that my arm had been shot off and was hanging inside my shirt by a few strips of flesh. I could not feel it.

Finally the ambulance came and they moved me into it. Being moved was agony, but the blankets were

worth it. I was so cold. The medics examined me. I tried to talk, but only bubbles came out. I was foaming at the mouth.

"Where's she hit?" they asked each other as if i wasn't there. They concluded their examination. I was relieved.

"Let's move it," one of them said.

"O.K., but wait a minute," said the driver and he got out. "Hit twice," i heard him say. "We gotta wait." The driver slammed the door.

He said something else but i didn't understand it. Time passed. I was floating off again. It felt so weird, like a dream, a nightmare. More time passed. It seemed like forever. I was in and out, in and out.

A rough voice asked, "Is she dead yet?" I floated off again. I heard another voice. "Is she dead yet?" I wondered how long the ambulance had been sitting there. The attendants looked nervous. The bubbles in my chest felt like they were growing bigger. When they burst, my whole chest shattered. I faded again and it was down South in the summertime. I thought about my grandmother. At last the ambulance was moving. "If i live," i remember thinking, "i'll only have one arm."

The hospital is glaring white. Everybody i see is white. Everyone seems to be waiting. All at once they are in motion. Blood pressure, pulse, needles, etc. Two detectives come in. I know they're detectives because they look like detectives. One of them has a face like a bulldog, with jowls hanging down the sides. They supervise the nurse as she cuts off my clothes. After a while, one of them dabs my fingertips with what look like Q-tips. Later i find out that this is the neutron activation test to determine whether or not i have fired a weapon. Another one then tries to fingerprint me, but he has trouble because my hand is dead.

"Gimme the dead man's kit." He puts my fingers into spoon-looking things used to fingerprint dead people. They begin to ask me questions, but a bunch of doctors come in. One of them, who appears to be the head doctor, examines me. He pokes and prods, throwing me around like a rag doll. then, like he is going to kill me, he jerks me around so that i'm on my stomach. The pain is like an electric shock. I moan.

"Don't cry now, girlie," he says. "Why'd you shoot the trooper? Why'd you shoot the trooper?"

I want to kick him in his face. I know he would kill me if he had the chance. I can see the scalpel slipping. One of the other doctors says something about calling the operating room. "Hell no!" is all i can think of. "Hell no!"

After a while, they all leave. Then a Black nurse comes into the room. I am glad as I could be to see her. She bends over me.

"What is your name?" she asks. "What is your name?"

I think about it and decide to say nothing. If i tell them my name they will know who i am and they will kill me for sure.

"What is your name?" she keeps asking, enunciating each syllable in the way that people talk to someone who has trouble hearing or understanding. "What is your name? What is your address? Where do you live?" Her voice is getting louder. "We need your signature, miss," she says, waving a piece of paper in front of me. "We need your permission for treatment, in case we have to operate." She repeats the same thing, over and over. "Who shall we contact in case of emergency?" (I think that's kind of funny.) "What is your name? Where do you live?" I close my eyes, wishing she would go away. She keeps right on talking.

I drift off, thinking about my arm. It is still there.

"Nerve damage. Paralyzed," i heard them say. It has never occurred to me. It isn't that bad, i remember thinking. I can live with that if i have to.

More voices, other voices, grating my ears and my consciousness.

"She can talk," one is saying. "The doctor says she can talk. Where were you going? What is your name? Where were you coming from? Who was in the car with you? How many of you were there? I know she can hear me."

I keep my eyes closed. One of them leans down real close to me. I feel his breath on my cheek. And smell it.

"I know you can hear me and I know you can talk, and if you don't hurry up and start talking, I'm gonna bash your face in for you."

My eyes fly open in spite of myself. Immediately they are all in my face, throwing question after question at me. I say nothing. After a while, i close my eyes again.

"Oh, she doesn't feel good," one of them says in a sweet, mocking voice. "Where does it hurt? Here? Here? HERE?"

With each *here* comes a crash. I look around wildly, but no one is there. More thumps and punches, but none of them hurts as bad as my chest is hurting. I try to scream but i know immediately that that's a mistake. My chest erupts and i think i am gonna die. They go on and on. Questions and bangs. I think they will never stop.

A woman's voice. "Telephone."

"Thank you," one of them says, giving me an ugly grin. They are gone.

Another pig comes in. A Black pig. In uniform. He comes closer and i see that he is not a cop but a hospital security guard. He stands not too far from where i am lying and i can see he is not at all hostile. His face breaks into a kind of reserved smile and, very discreetly, he clenches his fist and gives me the power sign. That man will never know how much better he made me feel at that moment.

The detectives come back with a nurse. They begin to move the stretcher. My mind races. Where are they taking me? The only place i can think of is the operating room. When we arrive at the X-ray room, i'm thankful. Because i have to move around, the X-rays are painful, but the technician is cool. X-rays are over and i am rolled down the hallway, determined to keep my eyes closed. All of a sudden, flashes of light. My eyes pop open. This time they are taking my picture.

The police photographer asks, "Don't you wanna give us a smile? Come on. Give us a smile."

I close my eyes again. We are moving. The stretcher stops. One of the pigs tells the nurse he has a headache. She volunteers to get him something.

The stretcher is moving again. Where the hell are they taking me? Again the light is changing and, although my eyes are closed, i can feel the difference. It feels like i'm in the dark. I can't take it any longer and i look. The room is dark, but there is some light. My eyes slowly adjust. There's something lying next to me. I can see an outline. Something in plastic. Something—my mind slowly realizes that it is a man in a plastic bag. And that the man is Zayd. My body stiffens. My mind spins.

One of the troopers says, "That's what's gonna happen to you before the night is over if you don't tell us what we want to know."

I say nothing, but inside i'm raging. "Dogs! Swine! Filthy pigs! Dirty slimy scum! Bastards! Sons of bitches!" I rage on and on. "I wouldn't tell you the right time of day," i remember thinking. "I wouldn't tell you that shit stinks!"

The night crawls along. Nurses, doctors, and troopers. I am still scared, but i am just as angry and evil as i am scared. The detectives are in and out and, when nobody is there except them, they get in their digs and bangs. But after a while i don't think about them too much. I am thinking about living, about surviving, thinking about what is going to happen next. They are gonna do what they are gonna do and there isn't much i can do about it. I just have to be myself, stay as strong as i can, and do my best. That's all. There is nowhere to run and i am in no shape to try. I realize

how isolated and vulnerable i am. What if i really do need an operation? I need help from the outside world. I have to try to get word out to someone. The Black nurse has been back and forth, asking me the same questions. Each time i have closed my eyes until she goes away. I decide to ask her to get in touch with my people the next time she comes by. Maybe she will be cool. She is my best shot; the guard is long gone.

I doze off for a little while. When i wake up, a nurse and a priest are standing over me. The priest is mumbling and seems to be rubbing something on my forehead. At first i don't understand what he is doing. Then it dawns on me. Last rites. Last rites are for the dying.

"Go away," i say out loud. I don't have the strength to say anything else. But i know i don't want anybody's last rites. I am not going to die, and even if i do die, i'm not going to die nobody's hypocrite.

The Black nurse comes back and starts her questions again. Before she can get started good, i beckon her to come closer. There is no one else around. I ask her to get in contact with my lawyer (who is also my aunt). I give her my name and ask her to make the call herself. She has a hard time understanding me and keeps asking me to repeat my name. I can barely talk, and each time she asks me to repeat myself, i feel like screaming. Then it occurs to me that Assata is foreign to her ears. She has probably never heard the name before. So i give her my slave name. Then i give her the number and she is off and running.

Two minutes later the detectives are on me like white on rice. They threaten and plead, reason and offer me the world. They hurl question after question at me, acting crazier than before. One plays the nice cop who is trying to save me from the bad cop, if only i will cooperate. I am tired and their act is even tireder. I can see exhaustion in their faces. The whole night is coming down on me. Their voices begin to sound far away. I can't take it anymore. They can go to hell. I am going to sleep. This time i am going out for real.

When i wake up the stretcher is moving. After a little while we arrive at the intensive care part of the hospital. The place is packed with nurses. I am elated. All i want to do is sleep. Soon i'm drifting off again.

I wake up and it's the next day. The doctors are making their rounds. One of them, an intern i think, is very kind to me. They examine me and spend the rest of the morning doing blood tests, X-rays, EKGs, etc., etc.

Soon i learn that they're going to move me again. I also find

out that i'm in middlesex county hospital. I hear the nurses talking. They are glad i am being moved because the police are driving them crazy.

When they come to move me it looks like a police parade. The rooms i am moved to are called the Johnson Suite. I can't believe it. I have never imagined that hospitals have rooms like this. There is a sitting room, a huge hospital-equipped room (where i am kept), a den, a kitchen, a full bathroom and another little room whose purpose i will never learn. They transfer me to the bed and handcuff one of my legs to the side rail.

I keep looking around. It is elegant and clearly for rich people. I am probably the first Black person who has ever been in this room. And the only reason i am there is for security. They have sealed off the doors and no one can enter except through the sitting room next door where three state troopers are stationed. Two regulars and one sergeant.

The police radio in the room cackles all day long. "A carload of suspicious-looking coloreds in a white Ford coupe." "A suspicious-looking Negro walking near the hospital in a blue jacket and sneakers." No suspicious-looking white people are reported. From listening to the police talk next door, and to the radio, i learn that the hospital is saturated with state troopers. They seem to be under the impression that somebody is going to try and break me out. I feel better. The Demerol has me flying a little and makes it easier for me to lie in the contorted position i am forced into because of the cuff on my leg.

Later that afternoon, it begins again. Detectives and more detectives. Questions and more questions. This time the questions are different. Now they want to know about the Black Liberation Army: how big is it; what cities is it in; who is in it, etc., etc. But the main focus of their questions centers around "the guy that got away." I am delighted! I figure that Sundiata is somewhere safe by now, cooling out.

They are more careful where and how they hit me now. I guess they don't want to leave any marks. One sticks his fingers in my eyes. I don't know what he has on his fingertips, but whatever it is burns like hell. I think I am gonna be blind forever. He says he will keep doing it until i am completely blind. I close my eyes and hold them as tight as i can. He strikes me a few more times. Some of the stuff gets into my eyes anyway. Burning tears pour down my face and my whole head is throbbing. I think he is going to keep on, but he begins to curse me, calling me all kind of nigger bitches. Finally, he and the others leave.



On one of those first days, a white doctor comes to examine me. He acts very nice, sweet as pie. He examines me slowly, the whole time making friendly conversation. I wonder what kind of specialist he is since i haven't seen him before and i know he isn't one of the regulars. He says he knows how terrible i must feel and makes a big deal of protesting that i am chained to the bed. He keeps on talking and, after a while, pulls a chair close to the bed. Then he starts to ask friendly little questions. The conversation goes something like this:

"Those guys on the turnpike are rough. They'll give you a ticket for anything. I take the turnpike every day. You live in jersey? I live in Newark. You ever been there? You must really be lonely up here. I'll bet you really need someone to talk to. I went to medical school in New York. You're from there, aren't you?"

I get suspicious and say nothing to him. I tell him i want to go to sleep and he leaves. I never saw him again, but to this day i'm convinced he was some kind of police or FBI agent.

On the third or fourth day, most of my troubles came to an end. Well, not really, but the punch, bang, poke, and prod part of my troubles ended. A nurse with a German accent came to my aid. She was one of the morning nurses, very professional and exacting, to the point that she could be a pain in the neck. But she was a lifesaver. It was she who had first protested the tightness of the handcuff on my leg. My leg had begun to swell and she had insisted they loosen it and that the cuff be covered with gauze. Of course, as soon as she was gone they tightened it again, but the gauze helped somewhat. I could tell by the little things she said and did that she knew what was going on. One morning she came in as usual and, after she had finished her normal routine, she reached behind the bed, pulled at something, and then handed me an electric call button on a cord.

"Anytime you need me or need anything from the nurses, just press this button," she said. "Don't be afraid to use it," she added, giving me a knowing look.

I could have kissed her. Later, when she returned to the room, after the troopers realized i had the call button, one came in behind her.

"Is there any way to disconnect that thing?" he asked. "She might hurt someone with it or hurt herself."

"No," she said, "there is no way to remove it. If you pull it out, it will just keep ringing in the nurses' station. She is having difficulty breathing and she needs it."

“Right on!” i thought. “Das ist richtig.”

After that, whenever the police came within two feet of my bed, i would push the button. Finally, they gave up the idea of beating on me and contented themselves with threats and other kinds of harassment. A favorite was to stand in the door and point their guns at me. Each day was my last day on earth. Each night was my last night. After a while, i became accustomed. Immune. Sometimes they would cock a gun i didn't know was empty, give a long, impassioned speech, and then pull the trigger. Other times i was invited to a game of Russian roulette. they all expressed a bitter hatred for me. They were state troopers and i was accused of killing one of them.

Every day there were three shifts of police. When they changed shifts, the two troopers would salute the sergeant. Some saluted an army salute, but others saluted like the nazis did in Germany. They held their hands in front of them and clicked their heels. I couldn't believe it. One day one of them came in and gave me a speech about how he fought in World War II on the wrong side. He went on and on and there was no question that he believed everything he said. He talked about how messed up the world is. How decent people couldn't walk the streets. He said that if Hitler had won, the world wouldn't be in the mess it is in today, that niggers like me, no-good niggers, wouldn't be going around shooting new jersey state troopers.

He went on to say that the white race had invented everything because they were smart and worked hard, that other races wanted to riot and use terrorism to take everything the white race had worked so hard to get. I had a hard time keeping my mouth shut. He talked about empires, the Roman, the Greek, the Spanish, the British. He told me white people created empires because they were more civilized than the rest of the world. White people created ballet and opera and symphonies. “Did you ever hear of a nigger writing a symphony?” he asked. Every day he gave me a speech about nazism. Sometimes other nazis would join in. I asked him if there were a lot of nazis in the state troopers, but he just laughed and kept on talking.

When i was in the Black Panther Party, we used to call the police “fascist pigs,” but i had called them fascists not because i believed they were nazis but because of the way they acted in our communities. As many times as i had referred to police as fascists, these shocked me by the truth of my own rhetoric. I later learned that the state troopers in new jersey was started by a German, that their uniforms were patterned after some type of German uniform

(very similar to the uniforms South African police wear), that they are notorious for stopping Black, Hispanic, and long-haired people on the turnpike and beating, harassing, and arresting them.

The nazis headed the harassment campaign against me. They spit in my food and turned down the thermostat in the room until it was freezing. For a while their campaign centered on keeping me from sleeping. They stamped their feet on the floor, sang songs all night, played with their guns, shouted, etc. I told the nurses about it, but it was no use.

I could deal with whatever they were putting out, but how long would this go on? I had heard nothing from the outside world, and i didn't even know if anybody knew where i was or whether i was dead or alive. My chest was feeling better, but i still could hardly breathe. I thought i was past the point of needing an operation, but i wasn't sure if it was because of the painkillers they had given me or because i was really getting better.

Every day i asked them to contact my lawyer, and every day they said they had tried but there was no answer. I knew that was a lie because Evelyn had an answering service. Every day i asked them to contact my family. The response to this was usually obscene.

"Oh, you got a family, do you? Is your mother a nigger whore like you? We don't allow no pickaninnies at this hospital."

They went on and on about my family until they found something else to go on and on about. Whoever said that no news is good news had to be out of his mind.

Well, there was news, but it wasn't good news. They told me they had arrested Sundiata. At first i didn't believe them, but they were too glib and arrogant. I knew something had happened.

"We got your friend," they said, "and he's singing like a bird. Yeah, he's singing like a bird, and he's giving you all the weight. It's a good thing for you he didn't know what color undies you had on or he would have told us that. We know where you were coming from. We know where you were going. We know that you stopped at a Howard Johnson. He even told us what you ordered and that you just love potato chips."

"What?" i thought. "How did they know that?" Then i remembered that we had bought potato chips at a Howard Johnson on the turnpike. Maybe someone had seen me and remembered.

"Yes, Clark Squire tells us that you took the trooper's gun and shot him in the head. Now, you wouldn't do a thing like that, would you? Well, JoAnne, you're in a hell of a fix. If I were you, I wouldn't let him get away with it. It's a low-down thing to do, giving all the weight to a woman. I'll make a deal with you. You tell

us everything that happened and I promise we'll go light on you. I just don't like to see you get a bad break, that's all. You know, you're facing a lot of time in prison, the way things stand, if he testifies against you. You could get life in prison or even the chair, but all you have to do is tell us what happened and we'll see to it that you do just a couple of years and go home. You're young. You don't want to rot away your whole life in prison, do you? Maybe you think you owe something to the cause. You think he's thinking about the cause now? No, he's singing his head off, trying to give you all the weight. They're all the same. They talk all this shit about Black people, equal rights, civil rights, but when it comes down to the wire, all they care about is their hide. He's thinking about his hide and you better think about yours. You think the cause gives a damn about you? Your own people don't give a damn about you. To them you're just a common criminal. Now I'm giving you this one chance to save yourself and come clean. If you don't take it, you're a fool."

They really did think Black people were stupid. Their line had to be the oldest in the book. He was sitting there like he just knew his corny little speech had done the trick. I said nothing. If you don't say anything to them, they have nothing to turn around and use against you. "Divide and conquer" has always been their motto.

When they realized i wasn't going to talk, they began to leave. Then one came back. "Oh," he said, "I almost forgot to read you your rights." He pulled out this little card and read from it. " 'You have the right to remain silent. . . . You have the right to . . . etc.' I wouldn't want you to say that we didn't read you your rights."

Thursday afternoon. They're letting me make a phone call. I don't believe it. I call my aunt. She's not in. The answering service answers. I don't know who else to call. The only lawyers whose names i know worked on the Panther 21 trial. I call them at random. No one is in, but secretaries promise to give them messages. I'm disappointed but i feel a lot better. Things are looking up.

It is Friday. From the activity in the room next door, i can tell something is up. Voices and whispers. They are back and forth, in and out, arranging this, moving that. The police radio is jumping. What is happening? Whatever it is, it can't be too bad, i think. They are leaving me alone. In a little while a policewoman comes in. She is in a brown uniform and her insignia says "Sheriff's Department."

She's Black or Hispanic. I can't tell exactly, except that she isn't white. Then some more police come in, dressed in uniforms similar to hers. Then more police. They are state troopers. One of them moves to the door and stands at attention. Then some men in suits come in. Then a man comes in with a stenographic machine.

"The Honorable Joseph F. Bradshaw, State of New Jersey, County of Middlesex. All rise."

Then this judge walks in with a black robe on. One of the men in a suit reads the charges against me:

We are here today to serve complaints upon you for the matters arising out of the shooting of May 2 of 1973. I will read you the complaints, leave copies with you of the charges that will be pending against you. The Judge will then advise you on the arraignment of such rights you may have. . . .

. . . you are charged under Complaint Number 119977, by Detective Taranto, New Jersey State Police, who says on the 2nd of May, 1973, within the confines of the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, that you unlawfully and illegally resisted a lawful arrest being made by New Jersey State Trooper James Harper by discharging a dangerous pistol and wounding the said James Harper and fleeing the scene of the incident, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:85-1. . . .

You are also charged, . . . under complaint Number S 119979, by Detective Sergeant Taranto of the New Jersey State Police, who says that on the 2nd of May, 1973, within the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, that you did commit an Atrocious Assault and Battery upon New Jersey State Trooper James Harper by shooting, wounding and maiming the said James Harper with a hand gun then and there discharged by the defendant, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:90-1.

In the Second Count you are charged by the said officer who says that defendant Joanne Deborah Chesimard did on the aforementioned date and place unlawfully and illegally assault the said James Harper with intent to kill, murder and slay him by use of a hand gun then and there held by the defendant, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:90-2.

It further charges in the Third Count that the aforementioned defendant did at the above mentioned time and place commit an unlawful and illegal assault and battery on a law enforcement officer, to wit, one James Harper, a duly sworn Trooper of the New Jersey State Police, by discharging a firearm and wounding the said James Harper, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:90-4. . . .

In S 119980 you are charged with illegally and unlawfully committing the crime of murder by willfully and with malice

aforethought shooting, killing and slaying New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:113-1 and N.J.S. 2A:85-14. . . .

You are further being charged under S 119981 with one count, wherein Detective Sergeant Taranto charges you on the 2nd day of May, 1973, within the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, that you did unlawfully, illegally and with malice aforethought cause or affect the murder of James Coston a/k/a Zayd Shakur, while resisting or avoiding a lawful arrest then and there being affected by New Jersey State Trooper James Harper, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:113-2. . . .

You are charged with S 119982 by State Police Sergeant Louis Taranto, that on the 2nd day of May, 1973, in the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, you unlawfully and illegally possessed on your person, under your custody and control, an illegal weapon, to wit, one Browning 9 milimeter automatic pistol, one Browning automatic .380 caliber, one .38 caliber Llama automatic pistol, serial number 24831, all without having obtained any necessary permit for the carrying of same, in violation of N.J.S. 2A:151-41 (a). . . .

You are further charged in Complaint S 119983, wherein Detective Sergeant Taranto says on the 2nd day of May, 1973, in the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, that you did unlawfully and illegally and forcibly take from the person of New Jersey State Trooper Werner Foerster a .38 caliber revolver by violence, to wit, by shooting, slaying and killing the same Werner Foerster, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:141-1.

The Second Count of that Complaint charges you with committing that act while being armed, in violation of N.J.S. 2A:151-5. . . .

. . . you are being charged by State Trooper Detective Sergeant Taranto, Complaint S 119984, who says on the 2nd day of May, 1973, in the Township of East Brunswick, County of Middlesex, that you did illegally, unlawfully conspire with James Coston, a/k/a Zayd Shakur and one John Doe to commit the crime of murder of the said Trooper Werner Foerster, and in the affectuation of said conspiracy did execute the following overt acts:

1. That the said defendant Joanne Deborah Chesimard did have in her possession a pistol with which to affectuate the ends of the conspiracy on the above-mentioned time and . . . at the above-mentioned place.

2. The above named defendant Joanne Deborah Chesimard in concert with and by common scheme and plan did assault Trooper James Harper and otherwise discharge her weapon at the said Trooper James Harper with the intent to affect the ends of the

conspiracy by otherwise wounding, maiming or killing him, all in violation of N.J.S. 2A:98-1 and N.J.S. 2A:113-1.

I think he will never stop. Half of the charges i don't even understand. I interrupt the proceedings. "I don't have a lawyer here," i protest. "I would like to have a lawyer present." They ignore me and keep on reading.

"How do you plead?" they ask me.

"I would like to have a lawyer present. Don't i have a right to a lawyer?"

"That will not be necessary," the judge says coldly. "Enter a plea of not guilty for the defendant."

And just as quickly as they entered, the procession departs.

Later the same policewoman comes back. She stands rigidly against the wall. Her face is a mask. "Oh, no!" i think. "Court again? What are they gonna do, railroad me here and now?" I imagine myself being tried right there in the bed with no lawyer.

The door opens. It is Evelyn—my lawyer and aunt. She is the most beautiful sight in the world. She embraces me and sits down next to me. As usual, she is business first.

"I only have five minutes," she tells me. "They told me that I couldn't see you. I had to go to court and get a court order to see you. The judge would give us only five minutes apiece. Your mother and sister are outside. So talk fast."

We look up. The police are practically standing in our mouths.

"I would like to talk with my client in private," Evelyn says. "Would you please move back. This is an outrage. This is an attorney-client visit and we have a constitutional right to privacy."

The police move back one inch. I tell Evelyn about the kangaroo court in the morning. My mouth moves so fast it's like one of those old-style movies, but a talkie. I can see from the expression on her face that i must look horrible.

"How are they treating you?" she asks.

I don't have time to tell her the whole story, but i have to let her know what is going on. I don't know what they will do next. I have to try to get someone to put pressure on them to stop. I tell her some of it, but i just can't tell her the worst things. Her face looks so pitiful and every time i tell her something else, her hands shake.

"Try to do what you can," i say.

"Time's up. Time's up, miss!"

Evelyn makes her futile protests. "I need to talk with my client. This is just not enough time."

"Sorry, miss. Time's up!" They move toward her like they are going to beat her up.

Then she is gone. I brace myself for my mother and my sister. It has been such a long time since i have seen them. I don't know what to expect.

My mother comes in. She looks worried but strong. She kisses me.

"I'm proud of you," she says.

The words spin around me, weaving a warm blanket of love. I am so happy. I can hardly contain myself. My mother is proud of me. She loves me and she is proud of me.

Too soon the time with my mother is up. My sister comes in. She has her hair wrapped in a turban and she looks so pale. As soon as she sees me, she breaks out crying. Tears stream down her already puffy face. I can tell she has been crying a lot.

"I love you," she says simply.

We don't do a lot of talking, but i feel so very close to her during those few minutes.

"Time's up." Again. And then she is gone.

I lie there full of emotion. All of this is so hard on my family. They look vulnerable and shaken. This is maybe harder on them than it is on me. I wish there was something i can do to make them happy.

Two Black nurses were very kind to me. When they were on duty, they would go out of their way to make sure i was all right. They made frequent trips to my room, for which i was especially grateful during those first days.

"If you need anything, just ring," they said knowingly.

One night one of the nurses came in and gave me three books. I hadn't even thought about reading. The books were a godsend. They had been carefully selected. One was a book of Black poetry, one was a book called *Black Women in White Amerika*, and the third was a novel, *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse. Whenever i tired of the verbal abuse of my captors, i would drown them out by reading the poetry out loud. "Invictus" and "If We Must Die" were the poems i usually read. I read them over and over, until i was sure the guards had heard every word. The poems were my message to them.

When i read the book about Black women, i felt the spirits of those sisters feeding me, making me stronger. Black women have been struggling and helping each other to survive the blows of life since the beginning of time. And when i read *Siddhartha*, a peace



came over me. I felt a unity with all things living. The world, in spite of oppression, is a beautiful place. I would say "Om" softly to myself, letting my lips vibrate. I felt the birds, the sun, and the trees. I was in communion with all the forces on the earth that truly love people, in communion with all the revolutionary forces on the earth.

I was definitely getting better. They were even unchaining me so that i could hobble to the bathroom every now and then, with the help of the nurse. I was still weak and, when i returned from the bathroom, i would flop on the bed as if i had just accomplished a great physical feat. But at least now i knew what was wrong with me. During those first days i could barely ask, and when i did, they acted as if my condition were some top secret information i was not privy to. I had three bullet holes. There was a bullet in my chest (it's still there); an injured lung with fluid in it, a broken clavicle, and a paralyzed arm with undetermined damage to the nerves. I kept asking if i would be able to use my hand again. One or two doctors said, flatly, no. The others said, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

Anyway, i was gonna live.

#### STORY

You died.

I cried.

And kept on getting up.

A little slower.

And a lot more deadly.

T

he FBI cannot find any evidence that i was born. On my FBI Wanted poster, they list my birth date as July 16, 1947, and, in parentheses, “not substantiated by birth records.”

Anyway, i was born. I am the older of two children. My sister, Beverly, was born five years later. The name my momma gave me was JoAnne Deborah Byron. I am told that i was a fat, happy baby and that i was talking in complete sentences when i was about nine months old. They say that i was lazy, though, that i talked way before i learned to walk. Everybody says that i had my days mixed up with my nights and kept everybody up all night. (I’m still pretty much a night owl.) The only other tale i remember hearing about my babyhood was that i would scream at the top of my lungs whenever anybody wearing furs or feathers came near me. (I’m still not too fond of furs and feathers.)

My mother and father were divorced shortly after i was born. I lived with my mother, my aunt (now Evelyn Williams), my grandmother (Lulu Hill), and my grandfather (Frank Hill) in a house in the Bricktown section of Jamaica, New York. The only thing i remember about that house is the backyard, which i loved, and the huge dog next door. I remember the dog well because he terrified me. To my young eyes he looked like a giant, a canine version of King Kong or Mighty Joe Young. (I’m still not too wild about dogs.) When i was three years old, my grandparents sold the house and moved down South. I moved with them.

We moved into a big wooden house on Seventh Street in Wilmington, North Carolina. It was the house my grandfather had grown up in. It had a wraparound porch with a big green swing and, of

course, rosebushes in the front yard and a pecan tree in the back. My grandfather originally thought that the house had belonged to my great-grandfather, Pappa Linc (short for Lincoln), but they found out he had only been given the use of the house for his lifetime. Pappa Linc had worked as a chauffeur for one of the most prominent white families in Wilmington and, the story goes, had been a prominent member of the Black community. He and my great-grandmother, Momma Jessie, had worked hard all their lives, had raised eleven children in that house, and had died under the impression that the house was theirs. Fine print and white lawyers have a way of robbing Black people of what is theirs. My grandparents were forced to buy the house again.

*"Who's better than you?"*

*"Nobody."*

*"Who?"*

*"Nobody."*

*"Get that head up."*

*"Yes."*

*"Yes, who?"*

*"Yes, Grandmommy."*

*"I want that head held up high, and i don't want you taking no mess from anybody, you understand?"*

*"Yes, Grandmommy."*

*"Don't you let me hear about anybody walking over my grandbaby."*

*"No, Grandmommy."*

*"I don't want nobody taking advantage of you, you hear me?"*

*"Yes, i hear you."*

*"Yes, who?"*

*"Yes, Grandmommy."*

All of my family tried to instill in me a sense of personal dignity, but my grandmother and my grandfather were really fanatic about it. Over and over they would tell me, "You're as good as anyone else. Don't let anybody tell you that they're better than you." My grandparents strictly forbade me to say "yes ma'am" and "yes sir" or to look down at my shoes or to make subservient gestures when talking to white people. "You look them in the eye when you talk to them," i was told. "And speak up like you've got some sense." I was told to speak in a loud, clear voice and to hold my head up high, or risk having my grandparents knock it off my shoulders.

My grandparents were big on respect. I was to be polite and respectful to adults, to say "good morning" or "good evening" as I passed the neighbors' houses. Any kind of back talk or sass was simply out of the question. My grandparents didn't even permit me to answer questions with a simple "yes" or "no." Instead I had to say "yes, Grandmother" or "no, Grandfather." But when it came to dealing with white people in the segregated South, my grandmother would tell me, menacingly, "Don't you respect nobody that don't respect you, you hear me?" "Yes, Grandmother," i would answer, my voice almost a whisper. "Speak up!" she would tell me repeatedly, something she seemed hell-bent on making me do. She would send me to the store with clear instructions on what to bring back. I was, under no circumstances, to come home with inferior goods, something which happened all too often to Black people in the South. "You tell them that you don't want any garbage, and you'd better not come back with any," she would warn me. If the store owner sold me something that my grandmother didn't like, i would have to return to the store and get the thing changed or get my money back. "You speak up loud and clear. Don't let me have to go down to that store." Scared to death of the fuss my grandmother would make if she had to go to the store herself, i would hurry back to the store, prepared to raise almighty hell.

Whenever my grandmother heard about somebody being mistreated, especially if it was a man mistreating a woman, she would glare at me and say, "Don't you let anybody mistreat you, you hear? We're not raising you up to be mistreated, you hear? I don't want you taking no mess off of nobody, you understand?" "Yes, Grandmother," i would answer, for what seemed like the millionth time, wondering why my grandmother liked to repeat herself so often. The tactics that my grandparents used were crude, and i hated it when they would repeat everything so often. But the lessons that they taught me, more than anything else i learned in life, helped me to deal with the things i would face growing up in amerika.

But a lot of times, for my grandparents, pride and dignity were hooked up to things like position and money. For them, being "just as good" as white people meant having what white people had. They would tell me to go to school and study so that i could have a nice house and nice clothes and a nice car. "White people don't want to see us with nothing," they would tell me. "That's why you've got to get your education so that you can be somebody and have something in life." Becoming "somebody" in life just didn't mean too much to me. I wanted to feel happy, to feel good. My awareness of class differences in the Black community came at an

early age. Although my grandmother taught me more about being proud and strong than anyone i know, she had a lot of Booker T. Washington, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, "talented tenth" ideas. She had worked hard and had made a decent living as a pieceworker in a factory, but she had other ideas for me. She was determined that i would become part of Wilmington's talented tenth—the privileged class—part of the so-called Black bourgeoisie.

One of her first steps was to sternly forbid me to play with "alley rats." It was impossible for me to obey her orders since i had absolutely no idea what an alley rat was. I often became the unwitting object of my grandmother's fury, charged with the crime of alley rat playing. My grandmother, writhing with annoyance, would threaten me with untold punishments if i continued my evil ways. I received strict orders to abandon my penchant for alley rats and play with "decent children." But we could never agree on who "decent children" were. Decent children, to my grandmother, were a whole 'nother story.

"Decent children" came from "decent families". How did you know what a decent family was? A decent family lived in a decent house. How did you know what a decent house was? A decent house was fixed up nice and had a sidewalk in front of it. Decent families didn't let their kids play in the street with no shoes on and didn't let their kids say "ain't." Little did my grandmother know that *ain't* was my favorite word once i got two feet out of her hearing range. My grandmother had a little alley rat right under her roof and she didn't even know it. Alley rats supposedly lived in alleys, in run-down shacks, but my grandmother would often call one of my friends an alley rat even if the kid didn't live in an alley.

Dutifully, to put some sense in my head, she would take me to visit "decent children." These decent little souls were invariably the offspring of Wilmington's Black doctors, lawyers, preachers, and undertakers. Schoolteachers, barbershop owners, and the editor of the "colored" newspaper were also decent. In most of these "decent" little play sessions, the other kids and I would stand around looking at each other awkwardly. Sometimes we would get it on and have some fun. But more often than not, it would be glare-at-each-other time or show-and-tell time (the kids showing me their toys and such while the grownups oohed and aahed). The worst times were eating at the preacher's house, where they would take an hour saying grace, or playing ball with the undertaker's daughter. She always wanted to play ball and i was scared to death that the ball was going to roll into the part where they kept the dead people

and end up in the mouth of some corpse. My grandmother would have caught a shitfit if she had known that one of her favorite little decent kids' favorite game was playing show and tell with his ding-a-ling and threatening to pee on everybody.

After these visits, my grandmother would chirp for a week about how nice my little decent friends were and about how nicely we had played together, while i would groan silently and keep the expression on my face one shade away from insolence. My grandmother and i waged a standoff battle damn near until i was grown. It wasn't that i wanted to defy her, it was that i just liked who i liked. I didn't care what kind of house my friends had or whether or not they lived in alleys. All that mattered was whether i liked them. I was convinced then, and i'm still convinced, that in some things kids have a lot more sense than adults.

But, to my young mind, life in Wilmington was exciting. There were always new places to go and new cousins, aunts, and uncles to meet. One of my favorite relatives was Aunt Lou. She was Momma Jessie's sister and she lived across town. She was my grandfather's only remaining relative in Wilmington, the rest having moved up North or out West. Aunt Lou had a magic house, full of all kinds of flavors, textures, smells, and things. There were whole worlds in her house to explore. She would always feed me something good to eat and then let me run wild.

I didn't know until i was grown that Aunt Lou had a son. His name was Uncle Willie and he died before i was born. Uncle Willie was something of a legend around Wilmington during the twenties, thirties, and forties. Whenever he came to town, they say, Aunt Lou would plead and moan and worry until he was in safer territory up North. They say that he would tear down the "colored" and "white only" signs and break the Jim Crow laws at whim. He would go around demanding his rights and denouncing the oppression of Black people, and it is logical that no one who loved him felt the least bit comfortable until he was long gone. They called him "Wild Willie" or "that crazy Indian" (he was supposedly Black and Cherokee), but people called him that because of his nature. They say he had a lot of friends and that he died of natural causes.

The rest of the relatives i met came from my grandmother's side. My grandmother's family lived in Seabreeze, outside of Wilmington, close to Carolina Beach. Their last name was Freeman, and they were famous for being high-strung, quick-tempered, and emotional. They seldom worked for anybody, choosing instead to live on the land their father had left them. They worked as farmers and fishermen, and they owned small stores. I have also

heard that they were in the bootleg business. My grandmother's father was a Cherokee Indian. He died when my grandmother was very young. Nobody knows too much about him, except that, somehow, he acquired a great deal of land and left it to his children. The land was very valuable because much of it bordered either on the river or on the ocean. Everybody had a different theory about what my great-grandfather had done to acquire it. But it was because of this land that my grandparents had moved down South.

In 1950, the year we moved to Wilmington, the South was completely segregated. Black people were forbidden to go many places, and that included the beach. Sometimes they would travel all the way to South Carolina just to see the ocean. My grandparents decided to open a business on their land. It consisted of a restaurant, lockers where people could change their clothes, and an area for dancing and hanging out.

The popular name for the beach was Bop City, although my grandparents insisted on calling it Freeman's Beach. Throughout my childhood, the name Freeman had no particular significance. It was a name just like any other name. It wasn't until i was grown and began to read Black history that i discovered the significance of the name. After slavery, many Black people refused to use the last names of their masters. They called themselves "Freeman" instead. The name was also used by Africans who were freed before slavery was "officially" abolished, but it was mainly after the abolition of chattel slavery that many Black people changed their names to Freeman. After learning this, i saw my ancestors in a new light.

For me, the beach was a wonderful place, and to this day there is no place on this earth that i love more. I have never seen a beach more beautiful than it was then, before they decided to build a canal right through the property of my grandparents. It is now just a pale shadow of what it used to be, most of it destroyed by erosion. But back then there were majestic sand dunes covered with tall sea grass where my cousins and i would build forts, houses, and, sometimes, cities. When time permitted, we spent hours hiding and making sneak attacks on one another. The sand was fine and clean and, in the beginning of summer, we could find just about every imaginable kind of sea shell. When the sun got too hot, we would sit in the old blue jeep my grandfather drove and play with frilly things like paper dolls and teacups. After i learned to read, i would sit in the sun, under the huge hats my grandmother always made me wear, and read one book after another.

Every other week my grandfather went to the "colored" library on Red Cross Street and the librarian would send ten or so books

for me to read. As soon as i finished reading them, my grandfather would go and get another batch. My imagination was vivid. With fragments of pirates and the Bobbsey Twins floating around, i would sit looking out at the ocean and think about everything. I imagined all the places i had read about on the other side of the ocean and wondered if i would ever see them. And, of course, i daydreamed about all kinds of stuff, most of it silly.

But my days were not spent simply daydreaming. My grandparents were firm believers in work. They had worked all of their lives and there was no way they were gonna tolerate any “lazy-good-for-nothin’s” around them. Every day there were chores to do and there was no playing until they were completed. I did things like putting the potato chips on the racks, putting sodas in the cooler, wiping the tables clean, etc. When customers were there, i would sell small stuff like potato chips, Nabs, pickles, and pickled pigs’ feet. I would also set the tables and bring customers things they needed. But my main job was collecting fifty cents for parking. Because there was no road to our beach (the paved road ended with the white section), my grandparents had to pay for a dirt road and parking lot to be laid over the sand. Truckloads of dirt were brought and a steamroller mashed it down so that it was hard enough to drive on. This was an expensive process, so my grandparents decided to charge fifty cents for parking. I could count and make change at a very early age, so it was my job to collect the fifty cents. During the week it wasn’t too time-consuming, but on the weekends, if the weather was nice, it was an all-day job.

Cars and buses of people came from all over North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. There were church groups, school groups, social clubs, women’s clubs, boy scouts, and girl scouts. All kinds of people would come to the beach, some with a little money and some that you could tell were real poor. In all the years i spent on that beach, only one or two people hassled me. Most of them treated me very kindly, just like i was their kid.

The people who came to the beach fascinated me. I loved to see them come and go. After a while, i would recognize the regulars and it didn’t take me too long to learn their names. Some of them gave me tips, which i usually spent on the piccolo (jukebox). There were lots of lovers and i spent some of my time spying on them in the parking lot, but they weren’t too interesting. All they did was squirm a lot. Checking license plates (i could recognize almost all of the states’ license plates on sight) and collecting bugs (i had a huge collection) were much more interesting. But watching families was better, on their picnics with their fried chicken, potato salads,



and watermelons. Some of them looked so happy you could tell they didn't get a chance to go to many picnics. And i was always on the watch for kids to play with when I wasn't busy.

Then there were the goodtimers. Their cars smelled like whiskey. They would dance a lot, eat a lot, spend a lot on the piccolo, and many times i would wonder if they had made it home all right.

A lot of poor people came to the beach. Sometimes the floors of their raggedy old cars or trucks were half rotted out. Usually a lot of little children were with them and they wouldn't have bathing suits. They went swimming in whatever clothes they had worn to the beach, and half the time the little kids wore nothing. Then there were those who came to put on airs, usually in the evening, all dressed up, to eat dinner.

Many would say, "I can't stand the sun," "I'm too Black already, I ain't goin' out in no sun." It was amazing the number of people who said they were too Black already. We looked at them like they were crazy because we loved the sun. But the umbrellas for rent went like hotcakes. Some people draped clothes and blankets around the umbrellas so that no light penetrated whatsoever. One lady always put a paper bag on her head and poked holes in it for her eyes. Some of the women refused to go near the water because they were afraid their hair would "go bad."

One of the moving things for me was when someone saw the ocean for the first time. It was amazing to watch. They would stand there, in awe, overpowered and overwhelmed, as if they had come face to face with God or with the vastness of the universe. I remember one time a preacher brought an old lady to the beach. She was the oldest-looking person i had ever seen. She said that she just wanted to see the ocean before she died. She stood there in one spot for so long she looked like she was in a trance. Then, with the help of the preacher, she hobbled around, picked up the mundane shells, and put them into her handkerchief as if they were the most precious things in the world.

I loved to eat (still do) and the beach was right up my alley. Right now, when i think of the fried chicken and fish dinners, my mouth starts to water. But what really sends me off is remembering those seafood platters with fish, shrimps, oysters, deviled crab, clam fritters, and french fries with lettuce and tomatoes on the side. If my memory is any good, i think they sold for \$1.50.

Next to food, music was my love. Fats Domino, Nat King Cole, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, the Platters, Brook Benton, Bobby "Blue" Bland, James Brown, Dinah Washington, Maxine Brown, Big Maybelle were some of the people I listened to during

those beach years. I loved to dance. They would play that music and i would dance my natural heart out. That was another way i collected tips. People would egg me on, "Go on, gal, go. Boy, looket that little girl dance." But i loved to see people dance, too. Many a time my grandmother or grandfather had to call me out of the trance i was in watching somebody dance instead of doing my chores.

At night, my cousins, who sometimes came over to work on the beach, told ghost stories. They loved to tell them to me because i would get scared out of my wits. They would tell me about people who came back from the dead, about snakes that could crawl a hundred miles an hour and beat you to death with their tails, and about red phantoms and haints and all kinds of other horrible things. My imagination was vivid, and before the night was over the sea grass turned to monsters and the wind made ghost howls.

Sometimes even my grandmother and grandfather would get into the ghost story sessions. My grandfather's favorite one goes like this: He was driving home in a terrible storm one night. It was lightning and thundering like crazy. He saw lightning hit a tree ahead of him and saw the tree fall across the road. He tried to stop, but it was too late. He braced himself to hit the tree, but nothing happened. The car went smoothly through it as if it weren't there. He turned around and, sure enough, the tree was still lying across the road. He swears that the story is true and i'm convinced that he thoroughly believes it is.

We were, however, visited by real, live ghosts. They were the phantoms of the parking lot. It seems that the white citizens of Wilmington and Carolina Beach were not at all happy that my grandparents had dared to build on the land and to start a "colored" business. We were too close for their comfort. So they would visit us from time to time to express their disapproval. I don't know for a fact that they were card-carrying members of the Klan, but, judging from their behavior, i think they were. But then, of course, they weren't wearing their sheets. They could've just been red-blooded amerikan boys out for some good clean fun. The parking lot was made of dirt, and cars spinning around on it at breakneck speed would ruin it in no time. Two or three of them would ride around the parking lot, spinning and skidding, while they shouted curses and racist insults. One time they fired guns in the air. I remember seeing them and hearing them out there and wondering what they were gonna do next. More than once i saw my grandfather go to where he kept his gun and carry it quietly to where he

had been sitting. Somehow this made me more afraid, because i knew that he, too, thought they were scary.

Finally my grandfather put a big fat chain, almost as big as the kind used to anchor ships, across the road at the entrance to the parking lot. This soon eliminated our nightly visitors.

One night, as my grandmother and i were fastening the chain in place and locking it, a white man drove up to the lot and, in an arrogant tone of voice, ordered my grandmother to open the gate so that he could turn his car around. My grandmother, looking very dignified, said, "No, I can't let you do that." Then, in a nicer voice, he asked my grandmother again to open the gate. "No," she said again. "Come on now, auntie, I got a mammy in my house. Now open the gate and lemme turn around." "Wha'd you say?" asked my grandmother. "I said I got a mammy in my house, now come on, open up." My grandmother leaned over in the man's face. "I don't care how many mammies you got in your house. I don't care if you've got a hundred mammies in your house, you're gonna back out of here tonight. And I want you off of my property now! Right now!"

That man turned as red as a redneck can turn and started to back his car up. The road was very narrow, barely wide enough for one car, and there was no way he could turn around without getting stuck in the sand. He backed up for more than a quarter of a mile. As we looked at him backing up, my grandmother and i laughed so hard the tears fell from our eyes.

Every day when we drove from the house on Seventh Street to the beach, we passed a beautiful park with a zoo. And every day i would beg, plead, whine, and nag my grandmother to take me to the zoo. It was almost an obsession. She would always say that "one day" she would take me, but "one day" never came. I would sit in the car pouting, thinking how mean she was. I thought that she had to be the meanest woman on the face of the earth. Finally, with the strangest look on her face, she told me that we were not allowed in the zoo. Because we were Black.

When we were on the beach we shopped at Carolina Beach. It had an amusement park, but of course Black people were not permitted to go in. Every time we passed it i looked at the merry-go-round and the Ferris wheel and the little cars and airplanes and my heart would just long to ride them. But my favorite forbidden ride had little boats in a pool of water, and every time i passed them i felt frustrated and deprived. Of course, peristent creature that i am, i always asked to be taken on the rides, knowing full well what the

answer would be. One summer my mother and sister and i were walking down the boardwalk. My mother was spending part of her summer helping my grandparents in the business. As soon as we neared the rides, i went into my usual act. I continued, ad nauseam, until my mother, grinning, said. "All right now, I'm gonna try to get us in. When we get over there, I don't want to hear one word out of either of you. Just let me do the talking. And if they ask you anything, don't answer. Okay? Okay!"

My mother went over to the ticket booth and began talking. I didn't understand a word she was saying. The lady at the ticket window kept telling my mother that she couldn't sell her any tickets. My mother kept talking, very fast, and waving her hands. The manager came over and told my mother she couldn't buy any tickets and that we couldn't go into the park. My mother kept talking and waving her hands and soon she was screaming this foreign language. I didn't know if she was speaking a play language or a real one. Several other men came over. They talked to my mother. She continued. After the men went to one side and had a conference, they returned and told the ticket seller to give my mother the tickets.

I couldn't believe it. All at once we were laughing and giggling and riding the rides. All the white people were staring at us, but we didn't care. We were busy having a ball. When i got into one of those little boats, my mother practically had to drag me out. I was in my glory. When we finished the rides we went to the Dairy Queen for ice cream. We sang and laughed all the way home.

When we got home my mother explained that she had been speaking Spanish and had told the managers that she was from a Spanish country and that if he didn't let us in she would call the embassy and the United Nations and i don't know who all else. We laughed and talked about it for days. But it was a lesson i never forgot. Anybody, no matter who they were, could come right off the boat and get more rights and respect than amerikan-born Blacks.

My first school experience was Mrs. Perkins's school in Wilmington. It was a little two-room school on Red Cross Street where i learned the fundamentals of reading, writing, and arithmetic. I was four years old. Mrs. Perkins's school was the closest thing to nursery school that Black people in Wilmington had, but she didn't play that baby play stuff. We were there to learn. I was prone to colds, however, and i guess the potbellied stove in the school didn't give off enough heat. I was out sick more than i was in

school. But i learned enough so that when i went to first grade, everything was easy. I could already read.

I spent most of first grade in New York with my mother, the rest of the first and all of the second down South with my grandparents. I went to Gregory Elementary School in Wilmington. My teachers knew my grandparents well and gave them daily reports of my progress. The teachers were strict and believed solemnly in the paddle, but we learned.

Of course, our school was segregated, but the teachers took more of an interest in our lives because they lived in our world, in the same neighborhoods. They knew what we were up against and what we would be facing as adults, and they tried to protect us as much as they could. More than once we were punished because some children had made fun of a student who was poor and badly dressed. I'm not saying that segregation was a good system. Our schools were inferior. The books were used and torn, handed down from white schools. We received only a fraction of the state money allotted to white schools, and the conditions under which many Black children received an education can only be described as horrible. But Black children encountered support and understanding and encouragement instead of the hostile indifference they often met in the "integrated" schools.

There was a big dirt yard next to the school where we would play and fight. We grew up fighting; it was really hard to get through school without a few fights, just to survive. But i always wondered what made people fight. Especially after we learned about wars. I used to look out on the remains of the sunken ship that tilted up in front of our beach and wonder how people had died in it. It was covered with green moss and i imagined skeletons floating around inside. The ship had been sunk during the Civil War and i always wondered if it carried Northerners or Southerners. Back in those days i used to think the Northerners were the good guys.

But I never could make much sense out of war. I remember being taught that World War I was the war to end all wars. Well, we know that was a lie because there was World War II. I remember a teacher telling us that World War I was started because Prince Ferdinand, somewhere in Austria, got killed. (When we learned history, we were never taught the real reasons for things. We were just taught useless trivia, simplistic facts, key phrases, and miscellaneous, meaningless dates.) I couldn't understand it. What were people all the way in amerika doing in a war because some prince

got killed in Austria? I could just imagine going home and telling my grandmother that i got in a fight because some dude in Europe got killed.

They made war sound so glorious in school, so heroic. But the wars we had on the way home from school and in the playground were anything but glorious. Besides the cuts and scratches we received on our battleground, we were likely to get spanked for fighting or for getting our clothes dirty. I was pretty lucky in that respect. When my grandmother would discover that i was all in one piece she wouldn't make too much of a fuss. I guess i looked pretty much the same after a fight as i did any other day when i came home from school. I was a natural tomboy and a natural slob. My blouse was always hanging out of my skirt, one of my socks always fell down in my shoe, and my hair always flew wild around my head. I always managed to get something torn and dirty and, because i was awkward and clumsy, i always looked like a victim of about fifty wars.

Most of our fights started over petty disputes like stepped-on shoes, flying spitballs, and the contested ownership of pens and pencils. But behind our fights, self-hatred was clearly visible.

"Nappy head, nappy head, I catch your ass, you goin' be dead."

"You think you Black and ugly now; I'm gonna beat you till you purple."

"You just another nigga to me. Ima show you what I do with niggas like you."

"You better shut your big blubber lips."

We would call each other "jungle bunnies" and "bush boogies." We would talk about each other's ugly, big lips and flat noses. We would call each other pickaninnies and nappy-haired so-and-so's.

"Act your age, not your color," we would tell each other.

"You gon thank me when I'm through with you, Ima beat you so bad, I'm gon beat the black offa you."

Black made any insult worse. When you called somebody a "bastard," that was bad. But when you called somebody a "Black bastard," now that was terrible. In fact, when i was growing up, being called "Black," period, was grounds for fighting.

"Who you callin' Black?" we would say. We had never heard the words "Black is beautiful" and the idea had never occurred to most of us.

I hated for my grandmother to comb my hair. And she hated to comb it. My hair has always been thick and long and nappy and

it would give my grandmother hell. She has straight hair, so she was impatient with mine. When she combed my hair she always remembered something i had done wrong the day before or earlier that day and popped me in the head with the comb. She would always tell me during these sessions, "Now, when you grow up, I want you to marry some man with 'good hair' so your children will have good hair. You hear me?" "Yes, Grandmother." I used to wonder why she hadn't followed her own advice since my grandfather's hair is far from straight, but i never dared ask. My grandmother just said what everybody knew was a common fact: good hair was better than bad hair, meaning that straight hair was better than nappy hair.

When my sister Beverly was little, i remember teasing her about her lips. She has big, beautiful lips, but back then we looked at them as something of a liability. I never thought of them as ugly—my sister has always seemed very pretty to me—but her lips were something good to tease her about. I once told her, "With those big lips, the only thing you've got going for you is your long hair; you better never cut it off." I will never know how much damage all my "teasing" did to my sister. But i was only saying what everybody knew: little, thin lips were better than big, thick lips. Everybody knew that.

There was one girl in our school whose mother made her wear a clothespin on her nose to make it thin. There were quite a few girls who tried to bleach their skin white with bleaching cream and who got pimples instead. And, of course, we went to the beauty parlor and got our hair straightened. I couldn't wait to go to the beauty parlor and get my hair all fried up. I wanted Shirley Temple curls just like Shirley Temple. I hated the smell of fried hair and having my ears burned, but we were taught that women had to make great sacrifices to be beautiful. And everybody knew you had to be crazy to walk the streets with nappy hair sticking out. And of course long hair was better than short hair. We all knew that.

We had been completely brainwashed and we didn't even know it. We accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty and, at times, we accepted the white man's view of ourselves. We had never been exposed to any other point of view or any other standard of beauty. From when i was a tot, i can remember Black people saying, "Niggas ain't shit." "You know how lazy niggas are." "Give a nigga an inch and he'll take a mile." Everybody knew what "niggas" like to do after they eat: sleep. Everybody knew that "niggas" couldn't be on time; that's why there was c.p.t. (colored people's time). "Niggas don't take care of nothin'." "Niggas don't

stick together." The list could go on and on. To varying degrees we accepted these statements as true. And, to varying degrees, we each made them true within ourselves because we believed them.

I entered third grade in P.S. 154 in Queens. The school was almost all white, and i was the only Black kid in my class. Everybody in my family was glad i was going to school in New York. "The schools are better," they said. "You'll get a better education up North than in that segregated school down South."

School up North was much different for me than school down South. For one thing, the teachers (they were all white—i don't remember having any Black teachers until i was in high school) were always grinning at me. And the older i got, the less i liked those grins. I didn't have a name for them then, but now i call them the "little nigga grins."

My third grade teacher was young, blond, very prissy, and middle class. Whenever i came into the room she would show me all thirty-two of her teeth, but there was nothing sincere about her smile. It never made me feel good. There was always something unnatural and exaggerated about her behavior with me. On my first or second day in class she was teaching us penmanship. "Does anyone know how to make a capital *L* in script?" she asked. Nobody raised a hand. Timidly, i did. "You know how to do it?" she asked incredulously. "Yes," i told her, "we had that last year down South." "Well, come and write it on the blackboard, then," she told me. I wrote my pitiful little second grade *L* on the blackboard. After looking at me and nodding, she made a big, fancy *L* next to mine.

"Is this what you're trying to make, JoAnne?" Her expression was smug. The whole class broke out laughing. I wanted to go somewhere and hide. After that, it seemed that every time i mentioned something i learned down South she got mad. She never saw my raised hand. When she couldn't ignore it, like when no one else raised theirs, she would say something like "Oh, do you know the answer, JoAnne?"

Every holiday a class was assigned to put on a play. There were plays for Columbus Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Our class had George Washington's birthday, and our play was about his cutting down this cherry tree when he was a little boy. I was selected to be in the play. I was tickled pink and so proud. I was cast as one of the cherry trees. The teacher put some green crepe paper over my head and told me to stand at the back of the stage where i was to stay until the end of the play. Then the cherry trees were supposed to sway from side to side and sing: "George Wash-



ington never told a lie, never told a lie, he never told a lie. George Washington never told a lie, and the truth goes marching on.”

I didn't know what a fool they had made out of me until i grew up and started to read real history. Not only was George Washington probably a big liar, but he had once sold a slave for a keg of rum. Here they had this old craka slavemaster, who didn't give a damn about Black people, and they had me, an unwitting little Black child, doing a play in his honor. When George Washington was fighting for freedom in the Revolutionary War, he was fighting for the freedom of “whites only.” Rich whites, at that. After the so-called Revolution, you couldn't vote unless you were a white man and you owned a plot of land. The Revolutionary War was led by some rich white boys who got tired of paying heavy taxes to the king. It didn't have anything at all to do with freedom, justice, and equality for all.

Again, in the fourth grade, i was the only Black kid in my class. My teacher, Mr. Trobawitz, was cool, though, and a very good teacher. He had modern ideas about teaching, and instead of making us read those old boring readers, he had us read real books and write reports about them. His class was always interesting. He told us all kinds of jokes and stories and he seemed to be sincerely concerned about us. That year we were learning about the Civil War and about Lincoln's freeing the slaves. Like all the other teachers, Mr. Trobawitz taught us “fairy-tale history,” but at least he made it interesting. That year i was crazy about Lincoln. I memorized the entire “O Captain! My Captain!” by Walt Whitman and recited it to the class.

Little did i know that Lincoln was an archracist who had openly expressed his disdain for Black people. He was of the opinion that Black people should be forcibly deported to Africa or anywhere else. We had been taught that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves, and it was not until i was in college that i learned that the Civil War was fought for economic reasons. The fact that “official” slavery was abolished was only incidental. Northern industrialists were fighting to control the economy. Before the Civil War, the northern industrial economy was largely dependent on southern cotton. The slave economy of the South was a threat to northern capitalism. What if the slaveholders of the South decided to set up factories and process the cotton themselves? Northern capitalists could not possibly compete with slave labor, and their capitalist economy would be destroyed. To ensure that this didn't happen, the North went to war.

When i was still in the fourth grade, i fell off a swing and broke my leg. Mr. Trobawitz came to my house and gave me lessons and

assignments. When i returned to school, Mr. Trobawitz had left to teach in college. Everybody in the class was sad. A bird-beaked, stick-to-the-book, teach-by-rote teacher replaced him. She made us go back to reading in the readers and changed the desks around so that once again we were sitting in rows. I didn't like her and she bored me to death.

One time our class had a dance. It was a big event for me since i loved to dance. The white kids couldn't dance for nothing. They looked like a bunch of drunken kangaroos, hopping all over the place, out of time with the music. I sat there with my hand over my mouth trying to suppress my laughter. I ached to get out there and show them how to do it. But nobody asked me to dance. I don't think it ever occurred to them, and, if it did, they knew better. Dancing with a "nigger" was surely good for a week or so of teasing. But these whites were not at all out in the open with their racism. It was undercover, like their parents' racism. Anyhow, i just sat there, looking at them flop around until this one kid (i'll never forget his name: Richard Kennedy; he was a poor Irish kid with red hair) came over to where i was sitting and said, "If you give me a dime, i'll dance with you." The sad part of the story is that i almost gave him the dime.

In the fifth grade, i was put into the class of the school's most notorious battle-ax, Mrs. Hoffler. I knew from the first day it was going to be a long, hot year. The only good thing was that there was another Black kid in the class. The teacher put us in the back, next to each other. His name was David something, but i called him David Peacan. The teacher was one of those military types and her classes resembled boot camp. We were told where to sit, how to sit, and what kind of notebooks, pens, pencils, etc., to use. She permitted no talking and gave tons of homework. Her punishment for everything was extra homework. Whenever somebody got caught talking or doing anything she disapproved of, she gave extra homework. When you didn't have your homework, she gave extra homework. And every time she gave you extra homework she wrote your name on the blackboard and refused to remove it until you had turned in the "punishment." By the time i left her class my name covered practically the entire blackboard.

David and i were her favorite targets. The whole class would be in an uproar, but we were the only ones she saw with our mouths open. The more she rode our backs, the more rebellious i became. I would sit in the back of the class and make jokes about her.

One day when we were talking and giggling, she came up and pulled David out of his seat by the ear, twisting it until the whole

side of his face was red and contorted with pain. I made up my mind right then and there that she wasn't going to do it to me. A few days later, she came after me. When she put her hands on me, i kicked her or hit her. I don't remember which. Anyway, the next thing i knew i was in the principal's office being sent home with a note. I was scared to death my mother would find out, so i signed the note myself and brought it to school the next day. My signature didn't fool anybody. To make a long story short, when my mother found out i confessed everything and i told her about Mrs. Hoffler. I think she had some idea about what was going on because she had seen a change in me. I had always been very quiet and obedient in school. My mother went to the school, talked to the teacher and the principal, and demanded i be moved to another class. It's a good thing she wasn't one of those parents who believe the teacher is always right because i don't know what would have happened. I guess the fact that she's a teacher and is acutely aware of the racism and hostility that Black children are exposed to from the time they enter school had something to do with it.

I don't remember the name of my other fifth grade teacher except that it was a mile long and began with a Z, but she was very nice and a very good teacher. She introduced us to art, literature, and philosophy. I remember studying the French Revolution in her class. She made names like Marie Antoinette, Charlotte Corday, and Robespierre come alive. She talked about philosophers like Rousseau who influenced the thinking of the period and about how the French Revolution was influenced by the amerikan Revolution. She even showed us pictures of the art and architecture of the period. She was the first teacher (one of a very few) who taught subjects as if they related to each other.

Before i was in her class, i would never have imagined that history was connected to art, that philosophy was connected to science, and so on. The usual way that people are taught to think in amerika is that each subject is in a little compartment and has no relation to any other subject. For the most part, we receive fragments of unrelated knowledge, and our education follows no logical format or pattern. It is exactly this kind of education that produces people who don't have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated.

As we grew older, the differences between the Black and white, the poor and rich students grew bigger and bigger. Once a new teacher told us to make mobiles as homework. Most of us brought in cardboard, wood, or paper mobiles. One kid brought in a mobile made out of metals—not just one kind of metal, but metals

of different colors. I was in awe of this kid who had the resources to cut all those different, perfectly formed geometric shapes. Calder would have taken notice.

The school was in a largely Jewish, middle-class neighborhood. There was a little island of Black people in the middle, and that was where i lived. It was almost completely segregated from the white section. The school was right in the middle. In most of the Black families the mother and father both worked, and many worked two or three jobs and weren't able to spend a lot of time in the school. But some of the white parents were there for every little thing from trips to cookie selling. And talk about pushy parents! To this day, i believe that some of them did most of their kids' homework. Black kids wrote a composition or a book report on plain lined paper and handed it in. Some of the white kids presented their reports bound in expensive binders, some were typed, and each page was covered with plastic. I could just imagine asking my mother to type my homework for me or to give me money to buy binders and plastic sheets. She would surely have thought i had gone crazy. The white kids came to school with all kinds of junk: expensive pen and pencil sets, compasses, and one kid even had a slide rule, which i doubt he had the faintest idea how to use.

The older they grew, the more snobbish the white kids became. They were always talking about what they had and what their parents had bought them. One girl, Marsha, horribly ugly to me, was always dressed like some kid in the movies or on TV. She was one of the super-snobs in the class. One day she came to school with weird-looking mittens on. She said they were made of chinchilla and that it was the most expensive fur in the world. I raced home to ask my mother. I just knew she had to be lying because i had never even heard of chinchilla and everybody i knew thought that mink was the most expensive fur on the market. I was really shocked when my mother told me she was telling the truth.

Every year when we came back to school, we would inevitably be told to write a composition entitled "My Summer Vacation." Usually we stood in front of the room and read our compositions aloud. I was always fascinated by some of the places these kids had been to during the summer: places like Spain, England, Brazil, and Bermuda. Some of them even brought slides and movies of their trips. After they finished talking, i wouldn't even want to read my composition about being down South with my grandparents.

One of the things that had been drilled into my head since birth was that we were just as good as white people. "You show those white people that you are just as good as they are," i was told.

This meant that i was to get good marks in school, that i was to always be neat and clean when i went to school, that i was to speak as “properly” as they did, and that i would show them whenever i could that Black people (we called ourselves Negroes then) could do whatever white people could do and that we could appreciate what white people appreciated.

I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or smelly or uncultured. I carried out this mission as best i could to show that i was as good as they were. I never questioned the things they thought were good. White people said classical music was the highest form of music; white people said that ballet was the highest form of dance; and i accepted those things as true. After all, wasn't i as cultured as they were? And everything that they wanted, i wanted. If they wanted poodle jackets, i wanted a poodle jacket. If they wanted a Star of David necklace, i wanted a Star of David necklace. If they wanted a Revlon doll, i wanted a Revlon doll. If they could act snobby, then i could act snobby. I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people. I remember how those kids would talk about gefilte fish and matzos. It would never have occurred to me to talk about black-eyed peas and rice or collard greens and ham hocks. I would never have given them an opportunity to ridicule me. Anyway, half the white people thought that all we ate was grits and watermelon. In many ways i was living a double existence.

I became interested in television in the fifth or sixth grade. Or, rather, i should say that that was about the time television started to corrode my brain. You name any stupid show that existed back in those days and it was probably one of my favorites. “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Leave It to Beaver,” “Donna Reed,” “Father Knows Best,” “Bachelor Father,” “Lassie,” etc. After a while i wanted to be just like those people on television. After all, they were what families were supposed to be like.

Why didn't my mother have freshly baked cookies ready when i came home from school? Why didn't we live in a house with a backyard and a front yard instead of an ole apartment? I remember looking at my mother as she cleaned the house in her old raggedy housecoat with her hair in curlers. “How disgusting,” i would think. Why didn't she clean the house in high heels and shirtwaist dresses like they did on television? I began to resent my chores. The kids on television never had any work to do. All they did was their homework and then they went out to play. They never went to the laundromat or did the shopping. They never had to do the dishes or

scrub the floor or empty the garbage. They didn't even have to make their own beds. And the kids on television got everything they wanted. Their parents never said, "I don't have the money, I can't afford it." I had very little sympathy for my mother. It never occurred to me that she worked all day, went to school at night, cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed, raised two children, and, in her "spare" time, graded tests and papers and wrote her thesis. I was furious with her because she wasn't like Donna Reed.

And, of course, the commercials took another toll. I wanted everything i saw. My mother always bought Brand X. I would be so exasperated when we went shopping. I wanted her to buy Hostess Twinkies and Silvercup white bread. Instead, she bought whole wheat bread and apples. She would never get good cereals like Sugar Crunchies and Coco Puffs. She always bought some stuff that was supposed to be good for us. I thought she was crazy. If Hostess Twinkies were good enough for the kids on TV, then why weren't they good enough for me? But my mother remained unmoved. And i remained disgusted. I was a puppet and i didn't even know who was pulling the strings.

One year everybody was wearing buttons on their coats. Some had writing on them and others had pictures of movie stars. I went somewhere with my mother and my aunt, and they asked me if i wanted a button. I picked out one with Elvis Presley on it. All the kids at school thought Elvis Presley was cool. I wore that button religiously, all winter, and that summer, when i went down South, i went to see one of Elvis Presley's movies.

In Wilmington, at that time, there was only one movie theater where Black people were allowed to go. It was called the Bailey Theater. Once you bought your ticket, you went up a long staircase on the side of the theater to the second balcony, the "colored" section. Shame on you if you were nearsighted. The movie was like all the rest of Elvis's movies—forgettable! When it was over, i went downstairs. All the white kids were leaving with pictures of Elvis Presley that they had bought. I started to walk to my grandparents' restaurant on Red Cross Street, but then i turned around and walked back. If the white kids could have a picture of Elvis, then so could i. At least i was gonna try. I knew it would be absolutely no use to go to the ticket booth and ask the woman anything. She would most assuredly say no. So i walked right on past her, straight into the white section of the theater. What a surprise it was! It was just like the movies in New York. They had soda machines, a butter popcorn machine, and all kinds of candy and potato chips and things. Upstairs in the "colored" section, they had some old, stale plain popcorn and a few candy bars and that was it.

The moment i walked in, all the action stopped. Everybody's eyes were on me. I walked over to the counter where they were selling the pictures. Before i could open my mouth, the salesgirl told me, "You're in the wrong section; just go outside and go up the stairs on the side."

"I want to buy a picture of Elvis Presley," i said.

"What'd you say, again?" she drawled.

"I want to buy a picture of Elvis Presley," i repeated. "They don't have any upstairs."

"Well, I don't know," she said. "I'll have to get the manager." She said something to the other woman behind the counter and then left. By this time a crowd had gathered around me.

"What's she doing in here?" they kept asking each other. "Now, she knows better," somebody was saying. "Look, Ma, a colored girl." "Ya get lost, honey?" "What's she want?" "Don't they have no pictures in the colored section?" "What's she need with a picture anyway?"

The crowd was all around me, gawking. It seemed like the manager would never come.

"Can't she read? Don't she know that we don't allow no colored in here?" "I don't know what it's about. Something about a picture." "Came walking right in here bold as day."

Finally the salesgirl came back. A man was with her. All eyes were fixed on the manager. He took one look at me and another at the crowd forming around me.

"Give her the picture and get'er out of here," he told the salesgirl. Hurriedly, she sold me the picture.

"All right, folks, it's all over now. Go on about your business."

I took my picture and went prancing out into the daylight. I was feeling good. It seemed funny when i thought about it. The looks on those crakas' faces, all puffed up like balloons. I had a good time, laughing all the way to my grandparents' restaurant. And of course the minute i got there, i told everybody what happened. I was just so proud. I took my picture and put it on the back counter right next to the funeral parlor calendar. The picture stayed there a few days until Johnnie from the cab stand across the street came and told me that Elvis had said the only thing a Black person could do for him was to buy his records and shine his shoes. Quietly, i slid the picture into obscurity, then oblivion. (Later i read that Elvis had given Spiro Agnew a gold-plated .357 Magnum and had volunteered to work for the FBI.)

Evelyn, my aunt, was the heroine of my childhood. She was always taking me places and "exposing me to things," as she called it. She took me to museums—i think we visited just about every

museum in the city of New York. She turned me into a real art lover. Before i was ten, i could recognize a Van Gogh on sight, and i knew what cubism, surrealism, and abstract expressionism were. Picasso, Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Modigliani were my favorite artists. I didn't know the name of one Black artist in those days. Very few, if any, museums exhibited the work of Black artists, so i just assumed that Black people weren't too good at painting. But i learned about African art from my mother. From the time i can remember, my mother always had African sculpture in the house. It was the only kind she had. I always loved those pieces and it really annoyed me when i took art history in school and the teacher referred to African art as primitive. In fact, if the art was by anyone else but a white person, it was called primitive art.

In addition to museums, Evelyn would take me to see plays and movies, and we would experiment with all kinds of restaurants. We would go to parks, go bicycle riding, and it was Evelyn who gave me my first rowboat lesson. She was very sophisticated and knew all kinds of things. She was right up my alley because i was forever asking all kinds of questions. I wanted to know everything. She would give me a book and say, "Read this," and i would eat up that book like it was ice cream.

It was Evelyn who took me to see my first show at the Apollo. We saw Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. I was walking on clouds. After that, as soon as i learned to ride the subway by myself, i went to the daytime shows. If my mother and my aunt had known, they would have had a fit. I guess people wondered what this little girl was doing in the Apollo all by herself, but nobody ever bothered me. I was always pretty lucky that way.

Barbara was a little girl who lived next door to us in Queens. She was my main friend and foe for quite a while. One day i saw her leaving her house wearing a white dress and a little white veil like a bride wears. Everything she had on was white, all the way down to her shoes. She even had a little white Bible in her hands. I thought she was gonna be in a Tom Thumb wedding like they have down South. So i went up to her and asked her who she was marrying. She said she was making her first communion, that she was Catholic.

Well, i became an instant convert. I wanted to wear a white dress and dress up like a bride, too. And Catholics even got out early from school on Wednesdays. I raced home to tell my mother. My mother was very permissive where religion was concerned. She gave us carte blanche to be Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, or whatever. So i started going to mass and to catechism classes on Wednesday.



The Catholic Church was like no other church i had ever been to. Down South i always went to church. But those services were rich with music and emotion. I would sit caught up in the music and watch those people who had “got happy” or “got the spirit” jumping around all over the place. I was never holy-holy, but i had liked going to church. In the Black churches that i had been in, the air was charged. The music rocked and the preacher preached and sang at the same time. People felt free to do what they needed to do. If they felt like dancing, they danced; if they felt like praying, they prayed; if they felt like screaming, they screamed; and if they felt like crying, they cried. The church was there to give them strength and to get them through the long week ahead of them. Where we lived in Queens, there was no Black church.

The Catholic Church was different. It was silent and cold. The music was terrible and you couldn't understand nine-tenths of the service. But what fascinated me was the spookiness of it. They had so much weird stuff attached to their religion. When you walked in the door, you had to cross yourself with holy water; then, before you could sit down, you had to genuflect. And throughout the mass, you were forever up and down, sitting, standing, and kneeling. And there was so much stuff to learn. The stations of the cross, rosary beads, lighting candles, going to confession. It was all so spooky i just knew that this had to be the real god. The nuns really tripped me out. They walked around with rings on their fingers saying they were married to God. That was really weird. And they could never have children or “do it,” and people said they had bald heads under their habits. I was simply overwhelmed.

The catechism class was nothing like Sunday school. They never told good stories about Jesus and we never sang “Yes, Jesus Loves Me.” In catechism class, we learned all about the saints—it seemed like they had a million of them. And then there was the Virgin Mary. They made a big deal out of her. They even had us praying to her. I would do it, but that story was always kind of hard for me to swallow. Nothing about the Catholics was simple; they even had different kinds of hell. They had a special one for babies and then they had one in between and then they had the sho nuff, sho nuff hell.

They even had two kinds of sin. I can still hear that nun, as if it were yesterday. Now, a venial sin is a sin that's not so bad; it's a white sin. But a mortal sin is terrible; it is a black sin.

The night before i was to make my first communion, i had to run to the church with my baptismal certificate. They needed it to prove i had been baptized. My mother had had a hell of a time finding it. I was tickled to be going because they told me to bring it

to the convent where the nuns lived. I had been dying to see what it looked like inside. It was just as cold and lifeless as the church. When i gave the nun my baptismal certificate, she looked at it and almost jumped out of her chair. "Oh, no, this won't do," she said. "This is not a Catholic baptismal certificate. You weren't really baptized."

"What?" i said. "I was too baptized."

"No, you weren't," she said. "It's not a Catholic baptism, so it doesn't count. You'll have to be baptized tonight or you can't make your first communion tomorrow."

I was not ready for that one. I caught an instant attitude. She was talking about my godparents like they were dirt under her feet. They called my mother and told her she had to come to the church. Then they got these total strangers from somewhere and told me they were supposed to be my godparents and they baptized me. I never saw those people again, and if you ask me their names i couldn't tell you. I had had a godmother all my life and here they were telling me she wasn't my godmother because she wasn't Catholic. They really made me mad that day, but i didn't say too much about it. I really wanted to make my first communion. I did and, later, my confirmation, but i never looked at them the same.

The sixth grade passed along rather uneventfully. There was another Black in my class, Gail. We became friendly, but my relationships with the white kids deteriorated even more. They made it pretty evident that they didn't care too much for me, and i made it clear right back that i didn't care for them. The thing i disliked most about them was their assumptions about me. For one thing, they automatically assumed that i was stupid, and they would really act surprised when i showed i had some brains. One of the biggest fights i had was when this kid in my class couldn't find some pen that his father had given him and accused me of stealing it. I waited for him outside the classroom and as soon as he came out the door, i jumped on him like a crazy person. Some teachers broke us up. "I'm surprised at you," they kept saying. "I never thought you'd act that way." I was usually very quiet and well behaved. They acted like i had jumped on that boy for nothing, and they couldn't understand why i was so angry. As a matter of fact, even i didn't understand. Then.

Outside of school was a whole 'nother matter. When i wasn't doing homework or chores, i would go "exploring." My bicycle was one of the great loves of my life. I would jump on it and ride all over Queens. Sometimes on Saturdays or Sundays i would ride all day long, leaving early in the morning and returning as late as i was

allowed to. And if i wasn't on my bicycle, i was somewhere playing with my friends. We played everything from house to handball. I played with the boys more than with the girls because the boys had better games. I loved punch ball and handball, anything that involved running. The playground was right across the street from my house and i took full advantage of everything that was there. I played hopscotch, marbles, and cowboys and Indians. I always wanted to be an Indian and would hide over or under something and leap out shrieking at the top of my lungs. I guess i was unusual in that respect, because most of the kids wanted to be cowboys.

I was always rough and clumsy and i played everything as if my life depended on it. Some of the girls didn't like to play with me because they said i was too rough. And i was always excluded from the rope-jumping sessions. I was too clumsy to jump double-Dutch and they didn't even like me to turn because they said i was "uneven-handed."

But i always had one best friend and she was always a girl. I had other friends to play with and hang out with, but i always had one special friend that i could really talk to. We would go to the candy store and the movies and places like that and we would sit and talk for hours about just anything. By the time i reached the sixth grade, i began to idolize and imitate the big kids who went to junior high school. I couldn't wait to grow up. The grownup world was so exciting, and when you were grown up you could do anything you wanted to. Besides, i was beginning to feel different. I was beginning to be interested in boys.

I coulda told you,  
in the old days,  
in the park,  
or skating down some hill  
what it was all about.

I coulda sat next to you  
on some stairway  
and gave you half my bubblegum,  
and, in between the bubbles  
and the giggles,  
I coulda told you.

But we are grown up now.  
And it is all so complicated  
when you dig somebody.

Now, when i open up my crackerjacks,  
I find no heart-shaped ring.  
Only a puzzle  
that i don't wanna solve.