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## Quiet Awakening: Spinning Yarns from Granny's Table in the New Rural South

Angela McNeal Haynes

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A QUIET AWAKENING: SPINNING YARNS FROM GRANNY'S TABLE IN  
THE NEW RURAL SOUTH

by

ANGELA HAYNES

(Under the Direction of Ming Fang He)

ABSTRACT

This is an inquiry into generational stories from my Granny's table. It is an exploration of my lived experience as a first generation doctoral student who negates the truths of a rural Southern upbringing steeped in issues of race, class and gender. . Building upon the works of Falk (2004), Freire (2002), He (2003, 2006, in-press), Weis (2006) and Weis and Fine (1998, 2003), I explored the arenas of place, class, and race, particularly the intermingling of multiple realities and contested in-between space and Southern female identities.

Family members who raised and nurtured me are the main characters in the stories collected. Using oral history, I documented the place and people that live as a single family entity and collected stories and memories to create a representation of an identity meshed within a place and time. Oral history allowed me to capture the stories in order to better understand the complex life stories that allow subjugation of and by these people who cling to family, land and their way of life. Each story became my own as I fictionalized the accounts, and I seek to explore possibilities for a new order through the flow of these words.

So much of the current literature on the South deals solely with race or sex or class. Few texts explore life in the South from the vantage point of a lower-class, white

female caught between reality of the place and the promise of education. Yarns spun from my Granny's table revealed and contested a way of life stifling in an ever-changing and new rural South. These stories pose questions to the contested notion of Southern legacy and heritage, one of the most complex, controversial, and significant issues lived by teachers, administrators, parents, and students in the new rural South. Education became the key to doors long locked, allowing my personal awakening. The players in this world order need to awake from their slumber and demand change. Possibilities for the future – my children, their children, a lost generation - destined to be locked in the stilted mind-set of this place need to be realized.

INDEX WORDS: Oral History, Place, Race, Class, Critical Theory, Narrative

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by

ANGELA MCNEAL HAYNES

B.S. Troy State University, 1996

M.Ed. Georgia Southern University, 2003

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ANGELA MCNEAL HAYNES

Major Professor: Ming Fang He

Committee: John Weaver  
William Reynolds  
William Ayers

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## DEDICATION

This journey happened only because each member of my family loved and shaped me.

This text is for my parents – Paul Douglas McNeal and Debra Gail McNeal - in appreciation for allowing me to capture their essence in order to better understand where I fit in this world. These words are for my children – Grace Caroline, Ethan William, and Maggie Katherine Haynes - so that they might find themselves unhampered by ties that would inhibit them from reaching their greatest potential. In appreciation for supporting me and making this trip possible, I dedicate this work to my husband – Corrie Brent Haynes.

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I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. John Weaver, Dr. William Reynolds, and Dr. William Ayers. Dr. Weaver, your insight into the complexities of place, space and class helped me find validation in my own experience and in the stories that I needed to tell. Dr. Reynolds, your encouragement to read the troubling texts and face the bitter truth helped me realize the need for critical theory. You always encouraged me to read myself into the texts. Dr. Ayers, you worked across a place and time to help an unknown student. I appreciate the encouragement and praise that instilled within me a sense of self-confidence which I sorely needed.

I would like to thank Carole Gilbert for her unceasing support and encouragement throughout this process. We made this journey together as two halves of one brain. When I thought I had nothing worthwhile to say, you helped me find my words.

To all the females who helped and guided me through this process – my mother, my sister, my mother-in-law, my sisters-in-law - I thank each one of you for every story, every laugh, every tear, every ounce of love.

Finally, I have to thank my husband, Brent. Without your dedication and love none of this would had made it from the planning stages. Your continuous support and defense of my education freed me to pursue this goal.

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## PROLOGUE

Walk into a room where everyone speaks the same language in words you can't understand. A sense of otherworldliness appears that crashes upon your senses like ocean waves. Where am I? Did I step into another world – a new dimension. Everything sounds familiar, but completely out of place. My reality steeped in a place that can't exist harmoniously with the new world I have stumbled into. My journey through higher education has been an assault upon what I know to be true and right. Reality's foundation became flexible and shifting, creating an uncertain terrain on which I must navigate. For me, the dissertation process must reconcile my reality of place with the limitations implicit through knowledge. "Personal, passionate, participatory" (He, 2007, in-press) dissertation writing provides me with an outlet to juxtapose my reality of place with the larger world of academia – both of which would tend to reject the other. My goal, my purpose, is to find a middle ground to demonstrate to both sides the inherent goodness of the other, while enlightening each to the inconsistencies between the two realities.

That I should find myself in a doctoral program is something of an anomaly. I come from parents and grandparents who progressed no further than high school - my father being the only one of the six (two parents and four grandparents) to complete high school. Academia was foreign to these people of the land, who thrived on hard, physical work that allowed one to fall into bed at night, exhausted, and sleep deeply until the alarm went off at an ungodly hour of the morning. The inherent love of reading that I have always possessed has been a curiosity to these people who read nothing more than the newspaper, or in the case of my grandmother, the weekly Bible lesson that she struggles through. Surely it is a fluke that I would determine to follow my love of

literature into the classroom and become a teacher myself. However, the work ethic that I inherited from my family manifested its presence in my life in the form of the constant desire to learn more, do more with my knowledge. This drive comes from my family, but has taken me on a path that creates a dichotomous nature in my reality, for there exist two worlds in which I operate – each imbued with its own values, truths, lexicons and ideologies.

When I maneuver through the hallowed halls and classrooms of academia, I have to tone-down the twang of my natural voice. The “ya’lls” and “ain’ts” fall silent, tensed beneath a desire to appear informed – sometimes making me feel like an imposter unworthy of articulating ideas and comments in my inferior tongue. My voice hidden, my interests sequestered to the realm of my inner knowledge, I learned to mime the right answers and mock the very monuments that demarcate my world. Mud-boggin’ and rodeos bring snickers of derision from this varied classroom of intellectuals who would never dare laugh at the honored traditions of foreign cultures, so how do I make them see that is entirely what they do. I understand the need to release the tension and anguish by blazing a trail through mud and muck where no tires normally go. It’s pointless, of course, but it is necessary. Blowing off steam keeps these hard-working people in touch with the reason that they get up each day and trudge off to work where they make just enough to get them by to the next pay check. There are no trips to foreign lands, no operas, no extravagant restaurants; there are only pursuits that are simple and homespun. My folks find ways to incorporate these “luxuries” of place into their lives – small monthly payments for several years on a used four-wheeler are a way of life here. You learn to budget in just enough to keep you tied to what you have, so that you’re not

tempted to run away screaming in anger and angst. You learn to love the land, because that is the legacy that you have been handed. You learn to embrace the simple pleasures, because they are the only ones that you can afford. In a sense, you learn to reject that which does not come from the land, from the salt of the earth or the toil of your hands. It becomes easy to deride that which you can never afford. You placate yourself with what you have, and plan for that afterlife in which you will reap some specifically earthly rewards. It is a simple life. It is a good life. It is a life that has become blind to many possibilities and has become the butt of jokes for its own shortsightedness.

Going to college allowed me to escape from the certainties that bind my family to their anger and distrust of all that is different. Knowledge allowed me an open mind and eased the guilt inherent of the harsh reality I lived. Learning, literature and language allowed me to view new possibilities, not negate the old ones. When I read Freire (2002), I recognize the depositing of education firmly entrenched in the “banking” system that permeated my upbringing. In recognition, there is the creation of understanding and the promise for a new conversation. When I read Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), I gain the sense of what it is to live a life akin and foreign all at once. I live vicariously through her words, through Tea Cake and Janie, through laughter and tears, through blatant disregard for the status quo. I learn, from her words, of realities that both negate and uphold my own. I learn to value those who are different, those who I have been taught to disdain. When I read Miller (2005), I too recognized that, “I did not fully understand, as I entered the teaching profession, some of the gendered history in US education that I was replicating” (p. 74). When I awoke, I felt empowered to do

something, say something for the first time in my life. I could no longer exist as a daughter, a wife, a mother, but as all of these things and none of these things.

When I watched my daughters mimic the lines and actions of their elders, I knew that for their sakes and the sake of my son, a new way of thinking must be determined. My first grade little girl was already convinced that she was not good in math because boys are good at math and girls are good at reading. If her teacher said so, it must be true. These traditional roles for boys and girls are bound in the homes, taught in the schools, manifested in the articulation of the curriculum. For my little girls and my son, I will practice “Personal, Passionate, Participatory” (He, 2007, in press) dissertation writing in hopes to ascertain a limitless future for them and their world.

## CHAPTER 1 – DIRT ROADS AND CORN STALKS

The end of the dirt road is where it all begins. There is no visible boundary, but turning off the paved road allows the dust to settle in behind you, obscuring where you have been. All that matters is what's up ahead. The houses are non-descript, no mansions or luxury villas, just simple homes that scream with normalcy. The road winds around and back again, apparently someone was chasing a 'coon when the trail was laid because there is no rhyme or reason to its meandering path. All roads come to the same point, a faded white-block house on a small hill, surrounded with dilapidated barns, farrowing (pronounced farrin') houses, and fields full of rusting trucks and pieces of tractors overrun with kudzu and poison ivy. Time here slows to the creeping day-to-day pace that enables those of us who live here to imagine that it has completely stopped. There is no longing for yesterday and no fear of tomorrow, just an eager acceptance of today.

Each Saturday we gravitate towards the center of our universe – my granny's dinner table. There is symmetry of purpose as we congregate and share our peaks and valleys from the past week. As soon as the door opens, the senses are assaulted with the comforting aroma of chicken-n-dumplings, and you can't help but grin because you know they were made fresh just a short while ago. Taste buds start to agonize over where to start because there are so many delicacies to sample. Two decades of Saturday dinners instill a sense of place within me. The table, packed with the six people it will hold, runs in shifts. Those who arrive first take the first round, and as they finish, empty seats for the later arrivals. People start coming in around 11:30, and the flow remains steady until well after 12:30. Granny expects everyone to show up; you almost need written permission to miss a meal. There are multiple reasons for these repasts. It allows Granny to maintain a

firm hold on her family; she keeps up with our comings and goings at this table where she rules from her post like a genteel queen of old. I have answered for more of my misdeeds in this room than anywhere else. There is an unwritten rule that you have to take whatever angst Granny dishes out without reciprocating. When I was a senior in high school, I went on a trip to see a college football game in Statesboro. Being young and fairly stupid, the four of us teens who went managed to find our way into the Reidsville jail for being under the influence and underage. Since it was around lunchtime on Saturday that we were busted, I had to make my call to my Grandmother's house. That is one conversation that I hope to never have to relive. My tee-totaler Grandmother went into a fit when I told her what had happened, but I found out much later that she tried to convince my uncle to pick me up so that my father would not have to find out. She's harsh, but she is good. New in-laws often leave in a huff repeatedly until they recognize her brutality masks a desire to keep everyone on the straight and narrow. All bark and no bite describes her, but for those who don't realize her good intentions she comes across harsh and over-bearing.

My granny does the majority of the preparation, leaving us younger girls to bring in a dessert or an occasional side dish. The table, heavy laden with corn, peas, home-made cornbread or biscuits, sweet potatoes, fried-chicken, and other comfort food, speaks of devotion and home. There are many labors of love and family that went into getting this meal to this table. There are a few items that came from the grocery store, but all of the vegetables were grown on our land, planted and harvested by family. Contributing to the community larder ensures that Granny will continue to cook for us – we have to earn our keep.

I remember the first time that I truly felt like my family regarded me as an adult occurred in the midst of a corn-gathering session. One of the staples of our life is the cycle of corn. It begins every summer when the heat is palpable with moisture and the heavy-headed essence of the honeysuckle lines our dusty dirt road. Summers colors are muted – greens and golds in the fields. The meager family gardens are a staple of the summer months for these will yield sustenance for several families throughout the following year. This particular summer marked the first time that Brent and I participated in the corn-picking. The tall stalks of corn line the plot in seemingly endless rows through which we - Brent, my aunt Sue and Uncle L.C., my Granny and myself - worked our way down, pulling and tearing the silken ears off of the stalks and bundling them into the waiting baskets. Each figure silently bears their burden as we reach, grab and toss the ear into the waiting bucket, move the bucket up a few more paces, and begin again. Such diversity and sameness exist dichotomously in this scene as we all work methodically to reach the end of our row. Brent strides far ahead of the rest of us – tall, strong, with fair features marked slightly reddish by his current exertion – he marches forward tirelessly. His buckets are filled three and four times faster than the others. He is young, only recently turned twenty-six, and carries himself like one in his prime who feels strength and soundness in his limbs. He pauses occasionally and winds his way back to where the rest of us are working. Emptying our buckets into the ones he is carrying, he paces back to the field and stops as he walks by to caresses my very pregnant belly. I am tired, but I feel the need to continue – to contribute. He tried to convince me to stay home today, but the corn and the weather are temperamental and must be had when they can by everyone available. Since the picking crew was slim today I could not stay home, even

though he promised to work enough for two. This way of life was new to him; he had only been in the family for a few years, but he was quickly learning to understand and even appreciate the fact that everyone pitched in because the need was there. So, he contented himself with checking on me often, ensuring that me and our first-born were managing. His constant attention was observed by my granny – a stout matriarch of eighty who possessed little patience with or for tenderness when there was work to be done. She admonished him to leave me alone so that they could finish catching the corn while the day was still young. Granny did not move as quickly as she once did, but she was as steadfast as ever. Her ears of corn were steadily dropped into her bucket as she worked her way up the row. She may not have had much patience for a pair of young lovers, but she could not resist smiling when Brent picks up her bucket and mine to empty. His work ethic won her over early on; he was “Grandson” to her, even though he was hers by marriage – not blood. In these fields and homes, the “in-law” part always seemed to drop away as new members acclimate to the demands of the family – if they contribute to the life and work hard to enough to erase the title. Family transcends blood and marriage. When I look at my aunt and uncle working side-by-side – both slowed by the passage of time – but still ahead of pregnancy and age, I see them as two parts of one whole – merged from the time they were teens – and still very much entwined over three decades later. “Aunt” and “Uncle” simply meant family; I did not know which one of the pair was my blood relative until I was a teenager. As we work our way through the field, I take a little bit of pride in being out here, very pregnant, and keeping up with the others – the importance of being able to earn your keep sinks in at an early age. By the time we finish pulling all the corn, the heat, intensified by the stifling closeness of the plants,

sends sweat rivulets skinning down our faces. We had started before the sun hit the sky, getting out of bed at such an early hour on a Saturday had hurt my feelings right to begin with, but when we did not work fast enough to outrun the mounting heat, I was doubly incensed. We managed to finish all of the rows that were ready to pick by around 11:00. I shuddered as I looked at the remaining rows; as happy as I was to stop for the moment, I knew that on the next weekend we would be right back here doing the same thing until every row had been robbed of its bounty. Everyone hopped on back of the tired and shuddering pick-up to ride up to Granny's; she would cook lunch while the rest of us tended to the corn. Others – family members who had to start the day at a job - were starting to trickle in. Everyone tries to finish work as soon as possible on corn days so that they can come round to help. The methodical nature of shucking and silking lulls me into a stupor, and I let the conversation waft over me. As we throw the shucks over the fence to the horses, they stamp and nicker at one another as they vie for the best position. Looking at the horses steers the conversation towards my granddaddy – a true horseman.

We have had horses for as long as I can remember. For many, horses are a sign of status or money, but for us, they are just a way of life. Our horses are grade horses - meaning that you can get one for a couple hundred dollars if you have a place to put it. However, horse sense runs in our family. My granddad was renowned for being able to make a horse do whatever he wanted it to do, like the time he made one hop onto the back of a flatbed truck because he didn't have a proper horse trailer to get it where it needed to go. Years after his death, he is still talked of for the unusual ability he had to calm the savage horse. He raised his horses much like he did his children, with tough love and an iron will. My dad was raised on horses, although for many years he neglected his

talents in training and handling them for a busy life of work. What I have of horses came from my granddad. Dad and Mom always had to work, so leisure activities came at us kids wherever we could find them. Granddaddy was a great source because he loved horses and tolerated us grandkids. We always went up a few notches in his esteem when we asked to ride, and always went down a few when we demonstrated our lack of knowledge about them or our inherent timidity in handling them. He was fairly patient with kids, but when we messed up his horses he would lose his temper. I was around eleven or twelve when I accidentally let his favorite horse – a beautiful dark buckskin with kind eyes and sweet nature - into the pen without taking the saddle off. The saddle hung up in a low-hanging hay-rack. The horse almost pulled the entire rack down before Granddaddy could get her calmed enough to untangle her. He was so mad at me that he couldn't even look at me, but his verbal torrent didn't cease for a good twenty minutes. After that, I gave up horses for years until I had children of my own – long after Granddaddy died. When Granddaddy died, there were only three old horses left on the place. His cancer had weakened him, prohibiting him from managing any more than that. Granny always teased that as soon as he died, she was selling the horses. She always feared that someone would get hurt on them. In part, it could have been that he paid more attention to the horses than he did to his family. However, after granddaddy actually died, she couldn't bear to part with his legacy to his children and grandchildren. Several days after his funeral, a truck with a horse trailer behind it pulled up into her yard. Granny went into hysterics, stating that she was only kidding about getting rid of the horses. They were so much a part of who Granddaddy had been and who he hoped the rest of us would become. It turned out that it was just a second cousin who had just arrived back in town

after a week at a big rodeo. He had heard about Granddaddy and wanted to come by and pay his respects. Life is funny that way. Granny hated the horses for the hold they had on Granddaddy, but they were too much a part of the place to let them go. Granddaddy was always a quiet man, but he enacted the same tough love on his horses that he did on his wife and children. His will was quiet and unconquerable. His benevolence with his grandchildren was an anomaly; he had raised his own children with an iron hand. His disciplinary tactics were the stuff of legends. When my uncle Glynn, always a mischievous child and his mother's favorite, was caught mistreating one of Granddaddy's favorite horses, Granddaddy grabbed the closest object around to punctuate his point – a 'baccar stick used to string up tobacco for hanging in the barn. The beating stuck with Glynn, who recounts the story with no animosity for his father. Brutality mixed with justice serves as a harsh warden, but it was by no means uncommon in this area. The beatings sustained by my father and his siblings at the hands of his father instilled within them a sense that violence was a necessary part of discipline, although they were never as extravagant in wielding their power. Whippins' with belts and bare hands were a common part of my own childhood, but we knew as children that they were repercussions flowing from our behavior – not random beatings. We learned to walk a chalk line. Respect, possibly stained a bit with fear, for authority was an unquestionable part of both my parents and my own upbringing. The younger generations – my own generation - have been accused of being much more permissive with our children, but I am glad to see that the violence so firmly etched in discipline has started to ebb away although I know that it is still present. Corporal punishment will never die out in this area, but time-outs have become the first line of defense. My parents and my grandmother often make

disparaging remarks about using alternative methods of punishment. (Each one blames the removal of paddling from schools as one reason they believe that the moral fiber of the world is deteriorating.) Ironically enough, they never attempt to spank their grandchildren. They lived with such punishment and still pay lip-service to it, but the hard anger that use to materialize in a grabbed belt or a swat on the behind has dissipated. When you are pulled six different ways by bills and screaming youngins' and a house to maintain, tempers run short. Grabbing a belt and exhausting those energies hurts the child and mars the parent. Growing older usually finds one in a little better situation – the kids have grown and gone, monetary woes are eased a bit by the empty nest. The new generation of parents has not forgotten the lessons learned, and the belt is a hard master to thwart. Living here marks each inhabitant with mental scars that we never knew we had, and then we pass them to our kids as unconsciously as we hand down genetic code from one generation to the next. The good merges with the bad in a mad-scientist's version of DNA that brands each member with knock-knees, a big smile, religion-induced guilt, quick temper and a heavy hand, and a blind love of the land, nature and horses.

Once my daddy had a few grandkids of his own, he brought up the first new horses that had arrived on the place in years. From there, everyone reconnected with a piece of our childhood that had almost been lost. Every few weeks, another horse would show up in the barn as another member of the family caught the horse bug. Watching the fun forced several family members to buy into the business, and we keep all of the horses in granddaddy's old barn.

Now, I realize the inherent privilege that comes from having these animals and the land it takes to support them. Sunday mornings have brought a new kind of religion to being as we saddle horses and prepare for our weekly ride. My father broke from my grandmother's steel-cased notion of religion to hold a much more flexible view of Christianity. Instead of church, we (my father, myself, my husband – Brent, my brother, my sister and her husband) ride the ridges and woods of our family farm. Before we leave, we eat a bite of breakfast with Granny; she cooks homemade pancakes, sausage and cheese toast on Sundays to lure everyone inside before the ride. This brief interlude provides her an opportunity to try to save our souls from the fiery abyss to which our absence from church commits them. Religion is very black-and-white for Granny, and she wields the weapon to her advantage. She takes comfort in the promise of a better life the next time around as she toils through the drudgery of hard work and little money. She rests assured in the notion that those who spend recklessly (like the big bosses in whose factory she does menial labor for a pittance) will have a reckoning in an afterlife. It is a harsh religion that pulls my grandmother through this life, taking a tenth of her meager portion each Sunday. My father, wary of anyone who wants a portion of his hard-earned cash, raised his own children to believe that we could find our own way to God without paying the required fees of the church. So, on Sunday mornings we find ourselves enduring the biting warnings of my Granny before we set off on backwoods trails and shaded paths. My mother stays home. Her fear of horses isn't tempered with the love of it that flows in her children's blood. So, she fixes lunch and tends to her grandkids while we ride. The Sunday morning ride is grown-ups only, but the kids get to ride on Saturday afternoons when we take them on a shorter ride around the farm. Our 190 acres is a

pittance compared to some and a world compared to many others. It provides my family the opportunity to have woods to ride through – shaded and wrought with magnolias, dogwoods, palmettos and kudzu – and fields to bear corn, potatoes, peas, onions, and watermelons.

On a corn shucking day, the assorted bays, buckskins and sorrels stand along the fence greedily devouring the discards of our labor. There have been countless horses that have trailed through this barn; each one carried a story. Daddy and his siblings seem to remember them all, and reminiscing is as natural as breathing.

Daddy begins. “Do ya’ll remember Sapphire? Man, that horse could outrun anything in the county.”

“According to Daddy, she was the fastest thing he had ever seen come around here,” adds my Aunt Sue.

Brent immediately becomes interested in where the topic is headed; he is new to horses, but found within him self a natural ability to connect with the animals. He soaks up any information offered whenever the conversation begins.

“What did she look like?” Brent’s insatiable curiosity makes every portion of interest.

Daddy’s dark eyes glint as the horse materializes in his mind. “She was a black mare, just about two years old when we got her. She had a white star on her forehead. Just a drop of white on a coat so black that it streaked blue when she took off running. She was a fancy thang, short and powerful.”

Boonie – short for Daniel Boone – my Uncle Daniel’s moniker since birth, joins their trip down memory lane. “Those boys from down the road use to get so mad that

they couldn't beat her. They even brought some thoroughbreds in from up country, but none of them could touch her. That killed 'em that a grade plug could smoke their high-dollar hosses."

Daddy's grin spoke of pride still evident, reliving every race in his mind, "Nothing could touch her to the quarter mile, but they finally found a way to best her. They'd want to race over a mile. She just didn't have the wind to last with them big horses for that amount of time."

"I saw her race this Standardbred one time that was three times her size. She took off like a shot. That big ole horse ate her dust. She loved to race."

Everyone soaks in the image before Daddy's brother Glynn ventures a comment. "Paul, was she the one that loved the barrels?"

"No, you're thinking about Lady Baby. That horse beat all I've ever seen when it came time to run those barrels. She'd back into the chute and rest her head on the back wall. Then, she'd start shaking. You just knew that horse was all keyed up, ready for business. All I ever had to do was touch the reins and hang on, cause she'd take off like a rocket. She was another small-built horse, but she was red as a firecracker. I think they called her Comet after she left here. Daddy sold that horse for a lot of money after I won a few events on her. She was an unusual horse because you could ride her on any given day and she'd move along slow as you please. If you ever got her in that starting chute, she would be all business. It's a rare horse that will run the barrels with any kinda speed and then walk like normal on a trail ride."

Horse talk can go on for a while, but we had finished silking. Everyone was ready for lunch which included fresh ears of corn, but because everyone had spent the morning

working, sandwiches comprised the largest portion of the meal. Normally, the men would grip and complain about such fare, but not on corn-gathering day. In fact, I can never remember them being served on any other occasions. Meals are pretty serious affairs to my grandmother, and a sandwich does not make a meal. After a quick bite, the men transported the corn to my Aunt Sue's house to be cooked outside while the women quickly cleaned the kitchen.

Somewhere there is an unwritten rule that men cook outside over an open flame while the women are confined to the kitchen. The assembly line placed the men outside cooking and cooling the corn, then transporting it inside for the women to cut and bag. This process had been refined and streamlined to the point where automation occurred naturally. By the end of the summer, several hundred quarts of corn would have been stored in various freezers throughout the neighborhood in preparation for the following year.

## CHAPTER 2 – FISHIN’ HOLES AND PREGNANT GIRLS

As I look over the table before me, to see the fruits of our labor makes me appreciate the work that put it there. Fresh corn needs no condiment to make it tasteworthy. Desserts – a necessary part of every meal - also come from the garden in the form of fresh watermelon and cantaloupe. I love watermelon as much for what it reminds me of as how it tastes. When I was little, around seven or eight, my granddaddy’s brother – Uncle Bill, who lived a short walk down the road from us, grew watermelon for us kids to snack on during the hot, sticky summer. We traversed the hundred steps to his small 40X60 trailer every day in the summer to break open the watermelon he’d store in the icebox for us – anticipating our arrival. We’d share our bounty with his Shetland pony and the large gray billy goat that would carry us around on his back – miniature pack animal that he was. There was a cart for the pony and a cart for the goat, and on any given afternoon Uncle Bill would have them both harnessed and ready to jaunt us around the neighborhood. There is an inherent privilege in growing up as part of a place. Everyone fits, pieces of a puzzle – some hammered in, but in place. We grow, interact, intertwine, become convoluted parts of a whole.

We work hard, but we play equally hard. Daddy mentions that the river is up, and that sets the tone for the conversation. The murky waters of the Altamaha are dark and beautiful, unaware and unconcerned with the fragile life forms that revel in her depths; yet, her secretive waters and banks teem with life – both seen and unseen. Underneath her rolling waves, six foot long appaloosas troll and large-than-life catfish lurk in the muddy depths. This river has been a constant for me and mine over the past few decades. When I was little, daddy and mama would take me and my sister and brother in our little fish-

and-ski that daddy had – a luxury we could hardly afford, but dad could generally excuse the cost if it was something that he wanted. Now, I wonder how he could justify the expense of a boat when we lived from paycheck to paycheck. Raising three children on salaries barely over the minimum wage was never an easy task. Such frivolities helped one remember why they got each morning to face the drudgery of another demanding of work.

Those days on the river are marked firmly in my mind – carefree and beautiful; they float through my memory as easily as we floated down that river on our backs, face to the sun, forgetful of everything and everyone else. When we were there, all of our troubles rolled right on with that water. At the river, mom and dad became teenagers-in-love again; with dad whistling at mom's trim figure. Mom became carefree again, a softening of her harsh lines and tired eyes. As kids, we basked in their love and affection, given freely here without the tempering of the day-to-day money woes that faced us at home. This river provided a much-needed respite from the real world that kept mom at a job long after the five o'clock hour working her fingers until they bled on machines that were cold and unforgiving of mistakes. Dad's evolution from job to job had temporarily landed him in one that suited his need to be outside; he had spent the last several years working as a deputy sheriff where he finally felt a sense of belonging and importance, but his hours were stiff and intense with uncertainty.

This day was monumental for me; it marked the beginning of the summer of my eighth year. Daddy had promised me at the end of the last summer that he would teach me how to ski, and I had not forgotten. This day I set poised in the water, a bob of dark hair and wide eyes. The skis were longer than me, but I felt certain that I could handle

them. Dad circled the boat around me and gave a couple of last minute instructions to keep the line tight and my skis straight. I complied, nervous of failure and determined to succeed. At the nod of my head, he sped up enough to pull me out of the water. Instead of popping up nice and neat like I envisioned, I slipped and struggled to hold myself out of the water. I refused to let go; I could not stomach the specter of failure. There were few things that made me feel as worthless as disappointing my dad. His expectations for me were limitless; he seemed to think that there was nothing that I could not do, and I usually did little wrong in his eyes. Later, this would come to be a point of contention between my mother and I as she found herself less and less able to find favor in his sight, while my star continued to rise.

So intent was I on succeeding that I would not let go of the ski rope, even after both of my skis had come off of my feet. I felt the water seep into my closed eyes and huffing nose as we cut through the water. The boat finally slowed to a stop, and then I could hear everyone yelling at me to let go of the rope. It was here that I first noticed how I hated, intensely hated, to fail at something, anything. I felt like everyone, especially my dad, saw the failure in place of me. My sense of self rested so precariously on how well I could accomplish things. I let the idea of things define who I was. This later translated into how well could I do in school or how well could I play an instrument. I had an innate need to do well at the things I attempted, and I would often not attempt anything that I felt I could not be successful at. If I could not master the skill within a few tries, I tried to indiscreetly act as if I was uninterested in it, or I might act as if it were unworthy of my time.

In this instance I was fortunate that I did learn to ski within a few tries because it became one of the few outdoor things that I learned to do. In fact, water skiing became a favorite past time of mine and actually lead to me meeting the man I would marry. Shortly after we were married, Brent made a dinner table comment during a Saturday lunch at Granny's that made me realize the connection between the future I had chosen and my past.

“Do ya’ll know that my first date with Angie was at the river?”

“You sure you wanna go there?” Everybody knows the story because I couldn’t resist.

There had never been a more perfect day to be out on the river. Summer was just beginning to ripen to its full intensity, but it had not yet hit the sweltering days that wait around the corner. The sun baked our warm bodies as we basked on the bow of the boat the glittered low in the water. My cousin Beth had talked me into coming with her, her boyfriend Carl and his brother Brent when what I really wanted to do was stay at home and sulk over the recent demise of my two-year relationship with my college sweetheart. Beth had called me early that morning and coerced me into coming with them under the guise that I would be doing her a favor by preventing Brent from feeling like a third wheel. Even though he had lived here all of his life, he had just recently returned from a four-year stint in the military and his re-acclimation to our home area was a little rocky. I agreed to go only at the urging of my parents, who were tired of seeing me mope around the house; however, once we got there and pulled out into the therapeutic waters, I felt my agony slowing slipping away with the current.

The boys were anxious to ski; they had both been river rats from a young age, but for some reason they had only recently learned how to ski. The endless summers they had

spent on these sheltered banks as children passed mostly with them casting and retrieving fishing lines as their dad and granddad imbibed to excess in the recess of the boats or on the shores of the golden sandbars that forced their way out of the underwater depths. This day, they decided to play gentlemen and let me ski first. In retrospect, I suspect that it was to let me embarrass myself so that they could show me how it was done, so I did not bother to tell them I had been adept at skiing since I was ten. I just handed them one of the two skis that handed me back and said that I would try to slalom. The look on their faces said volumes, either “Oh, shit” or “This should be a laugh.” For me, catharsis set in. Skiing allowed me to shuck my normally timid nature and fly free over the water full on. I popped out of the water as soon as Brent hit the throttle on the boat. Cutting and serving, I sliced through the water with ease, luxuriating in the awesome energy that leapt through my body. Finally, we came round the bend and I dropped the line, jumped out of my ski, and raced onto the sandbar without getting anything over my knees wet. The skiing ended there that day. I killed all of the joy in that afternoon. Later, I went back to the river with Beth and Brent on a day that Carl had to work. Brent was much more receptive to skiing now that no other male was there to watch him being bested by a female. Our river years started there and continued for summers to come.

I couldn't believe Brent brought that story up. I believed him to be still nursing the wound to his manhood. This dinner table had a way of bringing out stories you'd long since buried.

Today is no exception. It's particularly hot, and the thirty extra pounds I am carrying around in my sixth month of pregnancy make me bemoan every degree. My

lamentation is cut short by my mother, who clearly remembers how her own pregnancy with me was marked with heat and tension.

#### Summer 1974

*Summer in Georgia beats down on the body with a weight and oppression that is physical and mental, moving air conditioning from luxury status to necessity. In the morning, the temperature reads eighty degrees before eight o'clock. The humidity makes it feel ten degrees hotter. The animals seek shade early in the day and stay there until the late afternoon breeze made life bearable again while trees and plants draw-up as much as possible to escape the caress of the sun's seeking rays. Walking outside mimics the comfiture of an oven, making you swim in sweat as you dip in and out of various shades and stores. Even the depths of the local swimming hole offers no respite as the blood-warm water only heightens the awareness of the relentless and infernal heat. Gnats and flies buzz everywhere; the only creatures that seem unmindful of the heat, they relentlessly dive and swarm to pester and aggravate the last remnant of patience evaporated by the mid-day sun.*

*Temperatures run hot in the middle of summer; it's nigh impossible to not let the heat get to you. I think that is why we blow-off so much steam during the summer. There is nothing in this world like a Georgia summer to heighten your senses – making you aware of every nerve ending on the body, right down to the ends of your hair. This acute sensitivity makes emotions run like wildfire through the synapses, turning an argument into a fistfight and a sweet glance into a passionate embrace. Emotions run high in a hot Georgia summer, making it hard not let them push away rational thought and behavior, and perhaps this is why Southerners tend to have a reputation for being hot-headed.*

*Tempers flare, but in a twisted way contribute to passion. It seems like a natural progression to go from angry to enflamed in the summer. Sweat glistening on an already half-naked body serves as sweet temptation even in the middle of an argument.*

*Nestled at the end of the dirt road, hidden from the cars that pass by a few miles away on Highway 341, is where I reside. You have to leave the paved road behind, and travel for several miles on a dusty, washboard road. The trees grow tall and hide my world from prying eyes, just in case anyone might be interested enough to look. But, there is not much to see here. The houses are non-descript; you won't find any plantation mansions here. No gallant Southern gentlemen, either, for that matter. Everyone here is just different flavors of the same animal – just a little different presentation to mix things up. The first house you pass is a wood frame house, square and white, with a nice-sized yard carpeted in dried grass and weeds. Several old cars are in the yard, and dogs lie under the porch out of the sun. The dried branches of a wisteria bush form the centerpiece of the yard – a stricken, parched creature indicative of the time of year in this place. Come back in the Spring, if you want to see life and beauty – Summer here grants no reprieve. Farther on, the brick house that my new sister-in-law lives in with her husband sets in stark opposition to the natural world around it. The dull red brick creates the appearance of the building block of a giant. This place lacks finesse; there is only simplicity – a staple of the community. This farming community outlasted the farm. As each family seeks to scrape a living working in factories and mills, the fields lie fallow and unplowed – a testament to a time that has passed. Somehow, we can never leave the innate reverence for the land that comes of tending it for so long. This family – Paul's family – is third generation to tend this land. Unfortunate for him that it is his generation*

*that fails in the always fragile effort of earning a living from it. His daddy still tends his horses, but the days of living off the crops and cattle are over. There are reminders everywhere; feeble attempts to hang on to the life are unsuccessful, but not abandoned. This yard in front of my house buffers a small field where straggly corn stalks shelter rattlesnakes. The heat sucked the life out of the ears before they could fully develop, even the deer left them alone, failing to find any sustenance in them. More reminders litter the yard – a rusting tractor and an old farrin' house where the pigs were kept. I hated those pigs; they scared me. To look at them, they appear cute and harmless, but step in the pen with one and your liable to lose a leg – or worse. That last big sow that they brought up would kill anything that tried to get near her, even her babies. The never-ending squeals kept me up all hours; I never could get used to the noise, but Paul could sleep right through it. Growing up with it deadened his sensitivity to it. I never could get used to the idea of raising something, caring for it, just to send it off to be slaughtered. Paul and his daddy show affection and compassion for all their animals, but then in a turn can beat them for misbehaving or send them to the butcher. Sometimes I recognize that same dual nature when they deal with me. Perhaps if I could have convinced Paul to move into town, things might not be so lonely, but this life ties one to the land, and me to a 40X60 single-wide trailer - my reality. This box bakes the body, and here I sit, nine months pregnant, wondering if I have somehow stumbled into some level of hell reserved for those stupid enough to make a few wrong turns during their lifetime. I think that hell probably is going to be on Earth one day. Some days it seems more of a reality than a promise for the afterlife.*

*I hate the clock. It mocks me, reminding me that he said he would be home at five and now it's seven. This heat sears the senses. There is no wind, no air, no release from the pestilential heat that touches every once of flesh, reminding me that I have a lot more than normal with my heavy belly protruding out in front of me. A baby – I have hoped and planned for this day for so long. From the first time I saw Paul, I knew that I would be his wife and have his kids. I even told my sister Brenda that he was going to be mine. Shoot, I didn't have any other plans. Staying at home was so cramped. Sure, I was the oldest left at home since Peggy got married, but I hated sharing a room with two other girls. I guess I wanted to be married. I wanted to be a grown-up; it's just that at sixteen one doesn't really understand what being a grown-up is all about. It's just that I felt like I had no life – no privacy. Everything was about family as an entity – a being existed with so many heads and arms and legs – that dominated the psyche and stamped out any remnant of self and individuality that I possessed. I guess I thought being married would mean being independent. Instead, I am tied to a place with no company – now what I would give for a sister to giggle through the day with. I don't work because I don't have a car to get me back and forth to work. From this isolated place everything is a fifteen minute drive. I guess that I could probably find a way to get there, but Paul makes it clear that a good wife should stay home and keep house. I think it could be that my husband doesn't believe me capable of providing any worthwhile contribution to this household; I can work, but he won't let me. At least, I could have worked before, but with the baby due, I agree with him that I will need to stay home. Babies need their mamas to raise them right. I thought having a baby would keep him at home, make him feel more*

*like a family man. I'm due any day, and he still isn't here. If it was work keeping him occupied, then I could understand.*

*He may be working late. That has to be it. With a wife due at any minute, it just wouldn't make sense for him to be out gallivanting. The machine shop probably offered overtime, and he is not one to fear hard work. He hated giving up farming to start working at the machine shop, but there was just no way he could support our family. At least, when he was farming I could ride on the tractor with him or set and watch him in the field, but now I never know really where he is or when he will be home. Those occasional late nights at work unsettle me, but he tells me that I am just letting my emotions run away with me. This pregnancy has really heightened my sensitivity. Some days, I sit and cry all day for no good reason. These walls just seem to close in after staring at them for several hours. I'd go and sit with his mama when she gets home from work, but those dark eyes hold an anger that I still don't understand. Paul inherited his mama's eyes. I don't understand her, but I wish I knew what I had done to make her so hostile. His daddy, even though he doesn't really like me, at least tolerates me. Paul doesn't seem to care; in fact, he seems content with having his mother hostile towards his wife. So, instead of seeking companionship with the others that congregate on the porch steps at their house in the late afternoon, I sit here by myself.*

*Nighttime brings a symphonic release from the pressure of sunlight. The heat, still present but tempered by the release from the sun's persistent rays, becomes navigable. Doors open, folks move to their porches and swings. Cicadas and frogs compete in cacophonous harmony, creating a conversation of their own while human voices carry on*

*the slight wind. However, to a mammoth pregnant woman, this slight reprieve is not enough to temper the extra insulation carried.*

*I can't believe it is still this hot at 7:00 at night. Where is the breeze? I'd get up and move around, but I dread pulling my skin off this couch because I know that I'm gonna lose some when I stand up. I shouda put some cover on here before I set down so that I wouldn't lost any hide. Tomorrow's Saturday. I guess that'll give his momma another opportunity to ask him if he's seen any of his old girlfriends lately. I don't know why she hates me so much. Bein' pregnant when you get married is not that bigga shock these days. If only I hadn't miscarried, things would be so different now. Shoot, she might even like me if I had her grandchild here to wrap her around his or her little finger. Surely when this baby gets here, that'll make all tha' difference. We've been married for two years now, so it's not like I really trapped him into this one. He coulda left me after the miscarriage if he thought I tricked him into marriage. He wanted me all for himself; his mama should be able to understand that. One day I asked him why his mama disliked me so much, but he acted as if he had no idea what I was talking about. We both knew he was lying; it's just easier this way.*

*The road twists between oak trees and around fields, each turn a lazy meander into a world eerily the same for decades. When we were dating, these woods seemed so inviting. These woods were the only thing that separated his house from mine on the other side of the creek. Dark and quiet, they made a perfect place to sit and listen to him talk about his horses, his motorcycle and his friends. Stolen kisses under the trees marked a beginning of make-out sessions. The woods are dangerous, dark and deep. How dangerous I didn't realize until I ended up pregnant. No one has ever died of*

*embarrassment, but his mama sure came close. She almost skipped church that Sunday, instead she just asked everybody to pray for her family. Heal them is more likely – makes me feel like a plague. Those harsh pews of the church fill with the God-fearing ilk who love to condemn, but rarely forgive – and never forget. It's been two years since we've married, and every time we enter those doors those staring eyes become reproachful. They didn't even try to whisper their judgment after the miscarriage; "God's punishment" echoed through the sanctuary. Made me wonder if God hates me as much as these cold-eyed biddies.*

*The wrenching feeling in my gut has become a staple of everyday life – constant worry and wondering, but the ripping sensation that occurs now carries a more intense note of urgency. It takes me a few minutes before I realize the significance. My predicament would be humorous, except for the intense feeling of panic that builds inside my chest. I'm gonna have to call mama to take me to the hospital; this baby wants to come on whether or not daddy is there to see it. He can't miss the birth; it can't start this way.*

*The empty space in the yard where we park the car looks desolate, echoing the way I feel. I had hoped he would take his motorcycle to work, so that the car would be here in case anything happened. Of course, I would have had to convince him to let me keep the keys, instead of giving them to his mama. If I had a little more practice driving, I would be less-likely to dent it. That hand-me-down Charger puts a gleam in his eye every time that he looks at it. Well, unless I plan to ride the motorcycle to the hospital, I had better call somebody. Mama and daddy are the most likely choices, but the look in their eyes borders too much on pity.*

*The phone rings three times before Mama picks up. The nerves are apparent in my voice, but the pains are more urgent. I have to ask, even though I know there will be repercussions. My mama is a simple woman, good and strong. Dedicated to family and her husband, she recognizes a daughter in need, but sometimes there is no easy fix. Bitter medicine chokes the parent as much as the child. She knows not to ask why my husband can't carry me to the hospital. Instead, she agrees to get Daddy, and they will come take me to the hospital. Mama never learned to drive, at least I can drive when Paul will let me use the car. Daddy carried Mama to work everyday. When she cooks at the hospital, she wields her spatula with dignity and talent. The patients never complain about her meals. The home-cooked ones that she prepares are equally well-regarded. She takes pride in her skills and pains to pass them to each one of her seven daughters. That is one thing that my mother-in-law has never been able to complain about. I may not keep the cleanest house, but every meal I cook is fit to eat. That may be why I gained so much weight with this pregnancy. Fried chicken, collard greens, and rice and tomatoes are Paul's favorites - perfection on a plate.*

*"Where's your husband?" Daddy wastes no time in cutting to the chase. Mama knows without asking; Daddy will never have that finesse. The relationship between Paul and my parents certainly doesn't mimic the one I have with his folks. My parents respect that Paul works; he fulfills the marital responsibility that the husband brings to the marriage. Am I a failure in their eyes? What do I contribute to this marriage? Before now, I'd say nothing, but now this child. Everything will change. I leave Paul a note, surely he will rush to me as soon as he gets home. I don't even have a bag packed; the reality of this day was like a promise that I didn't expect to be kept.*

*The pain cuts through the silence as we ride to the hospital. The pains sears my abdomen, rigid with expectancy. This pregnancy, peaceful and uneventful, seems to want to end with enough hurt to settle the score. My teeth draw blood from my lip, panicking me when I see my reflection in the rear-view mirror. The visage staring back looks frayed and damaged – like my emotions. For my parents, this joyful event should be old hat. They have nine other grandchildren ranging in age from twenty-five to four months, so my miraculous event is tempered by the rote of the drill. Certainly my own mother is no stranger to these pains. Eleven natural childbirths, most of them at home, and she never complained. I have never heard her mention anything negative about a one of them. I don't think I am going to be quiet as successful at this process as she was.*

*The hospital, small and quaint in the manner of many small town hospitals, welcomes me with smiles and knowing looks. Since this is my first baby, no one expects me to complete this process any time soon. My doctor, a brusque old man with a handlebar mustache, waits for me at the desk. Apparently my child is not the only one that thought today would be a great day to be born as the doctor has two other patients already in delivery rooms. As I move from the wheelchair that I entered the building in to a stretcher, I am gripped by another cutting pain. As much as it embarrasses me, I ask about the pain medicine. Mama's body must have been inured with a natural resistance to pain that I do not share. Twilight sleep sounds heavenly. I'd like to wait until Paul gets here, but each wave of pain weakens my resolve. As the walls begin to close in, so does my throat. The airway constricts around the oxygen that I need, so the doctor insists on the medicine to help settle me down. I waited two hours. I cry as they start the medicine. It is close to nine when Paul shows up. He offers no excuses, and I am in no shape to*

*question. At twelve, when I am no further along than I was at nine, he goes home. This goes on for another thirty hours. Paul checks in before and after work, then goes home close to midnight. On the third day, the doctor's concern for my health causes him to prepare me for a C-section. Mama has been next to me the entire time. Her eyes are lined with worry, but her silent strength supports and comforts. Paul arrives just in time to see my mother bring his daughter into the waiting room. It's Saturday; I don't ask if he has worked today. I don't care. He's here now. The baby is here, and she is healthy – small, but beautiful. It is a new start for our marriage. I am a mother.*

At the dinner table, everything has a way of coming to the surface. Years can pass, but the memory is still there. The pain is numb, so it's okay to let it find the air.

“Good Lord, Granny, why were you so mean to Mama?”

“I don't remember it being like that.” Suddenly, my Granny's ever-sharp memory fails her. Daddy sits, bemused smile on his face, and attributes his behavior to youth and immaturity.

When Mom and Dad married, he was eighteen and she was sixteen. He graduated from high school on May 21 and they were married on May 29. Mom dropped out of school after that –her sophomore- year. She was three months pregnant when they married.

The baby never came. She miscarried at five months, marking this early union with complications and conflicts. Without the encumbrance of a child, he treated the marriage as little more than a blip on his radar. She stayed at home while he worked different jobs – usually as a mechanic. They shared a forty-by-seventy single-wide trailer; she luxuriated in the private space that she did not have in the family home that she had

shared with her parents and eleven siblings. Mama played house with so much pride; it was her house and he was her husband – a sense of property that she had never before possessed. The single car they shared – a 1969 Ford - was his prized possession. It was their only mode of transportation, and he guarded it jealously.

While mom stayed at home, daddy worked. He made the money, so he made the rules. He had to attend a training session shortly after she had given birth to my brother – their third child. He did not want her driving the car, so he left the keys with his mother. Things were of value, to be guarded and pampered – wife and children were not. If he wanted to go out with the boys, he went. Mom stayed home and handled the kids. She often spent weeks at a time with us at our house. We lived so far out in the country that it took ten or fifteen minutes to drive anywhere. We lived amongst my father's family, each house a four or five minute walk from the other, but there was no one there for her to vent to or socialize with. She was never good enough in my grandmother's eyes, so seeking society at her house was not an option. Now I can only imagine the loneliness she had to feel watching her husband leave her to fend for self and their children. When daddy got home from work, she had to have supper ready and a clean house awaiting him. After he ate, he might stay or he might go, depending on his mood.

My dad was a man with little patience for the family unit. His money was precious, and the wife and kids limited his ability to spend it the way he wanted to. He kept a tight budget, mostly because of necessity – what little there was had to be spread around. But he often managed to find money if it was for him. If mom needed something for the house or the kids, a demeaning process began. First, she had to beg, literally beg, for the money. She prostrated herself before this man who griped at her about the amount

of money she asked for. If she needed groceries, she had to ask. Clothes for the kids . . . ask. Money for diapers . . . ask. For every question there was an interrogation and verbal abuse.

“Where is the other money I gave you?”

“Why are you wasting my money?”

“Do you think that I am made of money?”

She hated to ask. Finally, she coerced us children into this battlefield by sending us to ask. We became unwitting pawns. From these years, I developed an innate sensitivity about money that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

She stayed trapped that way for eight years, until my brother started kindergarten. She got a job and a car, and she reveled in the little bit of freedom that she found. However, money would always be an issue as she would never make much over minimum wage. So, she begged and borrowed to get things. Hidden credit cards and shuffling debt from one card to the next became a shameful legacy. Money woes marked each one.

My father is a man of many talents – all of which were continuously employed in his many diverse careers. Men in our area can make a decent living, enough to support a family in a frugal manner, with nothing more than a high school diploma. There is a large demand for the kind of laborers that seem to be raised on this soil. For young boys, mechanical prowess seems to be established early on. If a boy can't rebuild a motor in his teens, then his manhood takes a severe blow. There is an unwritten code that men need to be mechanically inclined because these types of jobs will always be available, and these jobs pay well even without a piece of paper certifying one's worth. Dad worked many

mechanic jobs throughout the years. He entered another good ole boy club when he joined the police force. When he turned twenty-seven, he determined that his various employments were not going to provide the sort of benefits he needed to raise a family on. At the time, he was serving as a security guard at the local power plant. That job had unwittingly fallen into his lap, and he enjoyed it, but he was restless confined within the walls of the plant. He decided that he would go to the police academy so that he could start a career that would promise benefits and the promise of security. He had finagled our finances so that he could spend six weeks at the police academy. So, for six weeks, he left my mom to fend as best she could with three small kids who had to be carted to school while she worked a full-time job at a factory.

Mom though police work would be a saving grace for their marriage. Dad would make a decent salary, have medical benefits, and not have to work the ten and twelve hour shifts that kept him away from home for so long. Unfortunately, few things ever work out as one hopes. Dad loved his job. He advanced from city cop to deputy and eventually to Chief Investigator, but our home life was far from idyllic.

Not long after Daddy started working at the sheriff's office, the calls started coming. Late at night, mom would wake up to a woman's voice asking her if she knew where her husband had been that night. Mama already walked a fine line with her nerves. The added implication made her harder and harder to live with. When Dad started staying longer and longer at work, Mom started looking for other places to be besides home. Whereas before when she got home, she was so tired that she just wanted to lie down, now she wanted to go to line dancing classes or to other places with the ladies from work. As teens, we were too wrapped up in our own mini-dramas to notice what was going on.

The money dynamic was still there; Mom still had to ask Dad for money to help cover the bills, and Dad still made her account for every dollar spent, but there was an unrest that came from too many years of living from hand to mouth worrying about how they were going to meet the next bill. Mom found a new job that allowed her to assume more of a secretarial role. For the first time in her life, she felt like she had more to live for than just being someone's wife or someone's mother. The fact that she loved her job enabled her to become successful at it. That success had mixed results. She quickly became her boss's favored employee. Along with that status came the rumors of an affair. At this point, my parent's marriage almost ended.

Then, my Dad lost his job. He was fired by the Sheriff in a move that completely caught him off guard. Dad had loved his work, and he was good at it. Good enough to alienate those in town who had money to match their drug problems. He was stonewalled when the sheriff called him into the office to let him go. The dynamic in my parent's marriage shifted. For the first time in their lives, Dad began to cherish and respect mom for the loyalty she had shown to him throughout the years. She convinced him that the rumors of an affair were just that – rumors. They started to communicate for what might be possibly the first time in their lives, actively talking and listening to the wants and needs of the other. Years of pent-up aggression and resentment have to be knocked away by degrees. Daddy has started the process. For Mom, there was a deep-seated resentment that she did not know she possessed. It has been harder for her, but the process is there.

It has been seven years since Daddy lost his job. Thirty years into it, their marriage is still far from perfect, but it is still a work in progress. He found working odd jobs fixing big trucks and heavy machinery from his yard to be strangely therapeutic.

“So, Mama, why did you put up with it?” Am I the only one thinking this? No one seems too surprised or even upset. I have to ask the question, but it’s a way of life I should know.

“What else was I going to do?”

That loaded question defines the sentiment for so many young girls in this area. When you’re little, being grown-up seems like the greatest thing – no worries, no one bossing ya around – at least, so it seems to a knee-high tricycle motor perched on her Daddy’s knee. Being grown-up means being worldly, sophisticated. So, when little girls grow into older girls with blossoming curves and raging curiosity, it seems natural to start wanting to be grown-up. There are almost no grown-ups in this area who are not parents. Many were parents right out of high school, if they waited that long. Synonymous with being grown-up is having babies. Having babies happens early and often. My mama no different than the rest; her story twinged with the same tones – first hope, then sadness, then nothing.

Ironically enough, this segment of her story started in the guidance office.

#### An Incident in the Guidance Office

*Sixteen years old, fresh-faced, bright blue eyes and long brown hair – she fidgets in her chair while waiting for the guidance counselor. Her stomach, aflutter with the unrest of a hundred butterflies, moves in discontent.*

*Sixteen years old, facing the most important decision in her life.*

*Her academic career has been less-than-stellar, but her athletic prowess kept her involved enough to get her by. Now, however, thanks to the discreet little ring on her left*

*hand, she has found her excuse. School, boring at best, has manipulated her social time for far too long.*

*The grey block walls of the guidance office seem to close in around her as she waits. Her eyes move nervously around the interior of the room, and she determines from the plush leather chair and color-coordinated pictures that the occupant must be extremely chic. Her nerves frayed, she begins to get a bit impatient.*

*“Where is Mrs. Clark?” she wonders.*

*The office exudes a sense of sternness and sterility. Deb gets the impression that the inhabitant probably does not have a lot of traffic on her plush rug.*

*“Two years in this school and this is the first time I have been in the counselor’s office for anything.” The irony of her intended departure is not lost on her.*

*Sixteen years old, heart enraptured with love and the idea of being a grown-up. Mrs. Clark enters the room, hair meticulously coiffed, make-up and clothes in perfect array. Her demeanor of bored indifference belies her proffered, “How are you today?” Deb was infinitely aware of the great disparity in their appearances. Mrs. Clark’s designer suit, perfectly pressed and impeccably tailored, looked stylish and sophisticated against the threadbare T-shirt, ragged jeans and flip-flops that Deb had donned earlier that morning.*

*“Well, why are you here?” Formalities dispensed, Mrs. Clark was ready to deal with the particulars and move on to more productive matters. The obvious impatience of the guidance counselor sent the words tumbling out of Deb in nervous incoherence.*

*“I wanna quit school. I’m getting married.”*

*Could there have been just a note of indecision in her voice, or maybe a bit of hesitation perhaps? What about a possibility of fear etched into the features of her face? A child of sixteen, filled with grand ideas, rushing hormones, and impending pregnancy sets in front of the one person who could change the course of her life. There sets a future in the balance, held in the sights of the person who trades in children's futures.*

*"Well, okay. Let me get the forms."*

*Untold possibilities relegated to the trash. One more future predisposed to failure.*

What possibilities might have existed for a young girl with no high school diploma that it seemed easier to stay in a marriage where you were less than a person? I can't fathom it, but apparently I am the only one, so I let it drop.

Barefoot and pregnant flows down these roads, extended tummies nurturing life while bouncing a toddler on one hip and tugging a little dark-eyed imp from around your legs. It was my grandmother, my mother, my sister, me. Suddenly, it dawns on me that we might be more alike than I realized.

"You know, I might should be careful where I cast stones. Do you remember when Brent and I first started dating?"

"Whoa, why are you bringin' me into this?" Brent knows where this is heading, and the person that he is now feels shame for who he was.

"Hey, this reflects worse on me than it does on you; I was the one with the complete lack of self-respect." Somehow I doubt my assertions will help his guilt.

"Why should you feel guilty?" interjects Granny, "She chased you until you married her!"

I have to fight to get a story in edgewise, but there is a sense of satisfaction in being able to reminisce to show that I was wronged. However, this one, while I get to poke fun at Brent for the boy he once was, still stings me and the reminiscing is forced to show that it really didn't bother me.

1994

*When Brent and I first started dating, me sitting and waiting for the phone to ring was one of the sure-fired components of our date nights. This night started out like many others. I throw out what remaining pride I have and finally break down and call him.*

*The phone rings for the tenth time before I finally hang up. I hate it when he pulls this stunt. He is just vague enough when we make plans to leave me wondering if we actually had any plans at all. And here I sit by the phone, waiting for him to call. I hate myself for wanting, needing him to call, and I hate him for not calling.*

*“How many times have you called him?”*

*“I didn't call him, Mama, I was calling to see if Beth wanted to go out tonight.”*

*“I thought you called Beth a few minutes ago.”*

*What can I say? I'm embarrassed that she knows I am dogging him. So, I pick up my sandals and put them on. I can't stand to wear shoes from or most of the year around here; they suffocate my feet. One constant during those months is a slimy sense of humidity – of a sense of inhabiting within a skin slightly oily from perspiration; for me, shoes exacerbate that situation. Clothes are scant and few in these warm months that start before the end of spring and don't dissipate until long after the end of summer. True seasons are only creatures of legend – the molten heat of summer moves to the luxuriant radiance of fall. Winter's rain, laced with bone-numbing chill, chills the land – an irony*

*of a humidity that emphasizes the intensity of whatever weather might occur. Spring dries everything out – a precursor to the dreaded heat that wilts and fades. Fall provides a brief respite. For me, this time right before the start of Fall Semester breathes life back into a body dried out by the intense demands of a summer’s sun. I quit my job so that I would have a little break before I headed back to school. Time for family and friends.*

*“I’m going out. I’ll be back in a little while.”*

*“Didn’t he stand you up a few weeks ago?”*

*I hate it when she is right.*

*“He didn’t have his phone with him. He was at his Uncle Kenny’s house, so it wasn’t like he was out gallivanting around or something.” I try to sound convincing, but I’ve been wondering about that night myself. I had made myself miserable trying to find him, and I wouldn’t leave the house because I was scared I would miss his call. I hate being so needy, and for the life of me I can not figure out why I keep making excuses. Would it be so bad to try and find someone else? We’ve been dating for four weeks, surely I can spare that short amount of time out of my life without regret. In less than two weeks I will return to school – four hours away. I don’t kid myself that a relationship so wobbly when I am here dedicating every moment to it will withstand a four-hour commute. It’s another failure that I can’t handle. I just lost two years of my life on Michael. Heavens knows that I shoulda cut that short long ago, but things are so much easier when there is someone there to support you. I have to admit, in retrospect, there was little in the way of support from Michael. By the time I admitted to myself that all of the rumors of other girls were true, I had been living with him for months. Mama and Daddy seemed to like him, so that made it even harder. The way he took to them made me*

*feel like he must love me to care so much about my family. I guess he wanted to spread the love, but I finally had to draw the line when he kissed my sister. The entire incident still leaves me feeling sick, and when I am with Brent, I almost feel normal again. I don't want to go back to being by myself. I hate the thought of going back to school, seeing Michael, and not having someone of my own. With everyone here either married or practically married, I am starting to feel like an old maid. Even Erin has been dating the same boy for two years, and she is only sixteen. Boy, he would flip if he found out Michael tried to kiss her. Why do we protect him? After everything that has happened, why does it matter? If the cheating were the only thing, maybe it wouldn't matter, but eventually Daddy's going to figure out that he's hitting me. I know it's for the best that we're split, but it doesn't make it easy. Being by your self is so hard. It seems like every girl I know has a boyfriend; in fact, that was one of the first things learned in school – how to catch a boy. I felt like a failure because I was in high school before I had one. The girls who didn't have a boyfriend were always treated like dirt. Mama ought to understand, she has been with Daddy since she was sixteen. It's just easier to know that someone is there to take care of you, to care about you.*

*“Don't go chase 'em, baby.”*

*“I'm not mama. I'll be back soon.”*

*What does she know about dating? She married Daddy a couple of months after they started dating. She was sixteen and he was her first boyfriend; it was not like she had shopped around. She doesn't know how afraid I am that I won't find anyone. I thought I had with Michael; just look how disastrous that turned out. The crazy thing is that I would have never left his crazy, abusive ass if I hadn't met Brent. I keep looking for that*

*Southern hero to come riding over the horizon to take care of me. Somebody like Daddy. I don't think she knows how lucky she was to find someone like him without having to scour the countryside.*

*I go into my room one more time to look in the mirror. This time doesn't lend itself to too many clothes, so my short-shorts and tank top make me look like the typical Southern girl. God, I wish my boobs were bigger. I'm rail thin, but I have a nice tan. I love Georgia summers with marathon tanning sessions, even walking outdoors becomes a toasting opportunity, and the fall is even better because the heat isn't as intense.*

*Riding the strip is the one and only pastime in Hazlehurst on a Saturday night. Cars are lined up and down the road as teens pass each other, relentlessly on the prowl. Girls and boys alike take cruising very seriously. You can bet that the hour before sundown is spent primping and polishing. For the girls, curling irons and hair-spray tease and curl to create bouffant 'dos that defy gravity. These Southern belles shellacked appearance stems from multiple layerings of foundation, blush, eye-shadow and mascara. Few girls are brave enough to leave home without their game face on. The boys weren't exempt from vanity either, as they primped their hair and washed their rides to maximize their studliness.*

*The town council thought to curtail the one social opportunity offered to youth by one-wayin the two main city streets. What else were we going to do, though? There was no bowling alley or skating rink in town, and the one theater had only one screen, so if you saw the movie on Friday night, you were sunk for the weekend. Usually, if enough friends can get together, one can find out where everyone's hangin at that night or make a party if one is not to be found. When all else failed, cars would slowly wind their way to*

*the river for an open-air communion with nature and friends. I had circled the strip three times when I saw him in a parking lot in his best friend's truck. I swerved in even though I knew better. If I acted like I didn't see him, then I could pretend to believe whatever excuse he offered me tomorrow.*

*When I pulled up next to the car, I understood why he acted like he didn't see me. The two girls in the back were giggling (at me, at him?) I am a little surprised that he is coming to the car to talk to me. Right now, if I had any sense of self-respect, I would leave. Instead, I roll down the window.*

*His smile is confident, but his eyes tell the truth.*

*"What'cha doin'?" he asks.*

*Simply put, "Lookin' for you."*

*His story comes out long and convoluted story. Two boys on a river bank all day – drinkin and skiing. When the girls came up, he only stayed because Johnny was really interested in the blond. Did it matter that he had dated the brunette right before he started snaking on me? He's convincing.*

*"Look, there's a party out on the Alma highway at Joey's house, come on and meet me there. Johnny will have hooked up by then, and we can leave together."*

*It sounds convincing, and I don't want to admit to the embarrassment of him wanting someone else. It takes a little while to get over a hesitant burst of self-esteem. I ride around town a few minutes longer, telling myself that I don't have to follow him out there. There's a line of cars pulled in at Hardee's when I see my cousin, Matthew. Matthew is the consummate party guy. There's one from every generation – the guy who never stops going to the high school party ten years after he graduates. Everybody loves*

*Matt because Matt loves a good time. I wheel in to talk to him. After a few minutes of uncomfortably stilted conversation, I realize that I am never going to be comfortable with inviting myself into a conversation. I feel like an intruder, even among people that I have known for a lifetime. In mentioning the party to Matthew, I seek to coax him into going so that I will have a lifeline in a place where I really don't want to go. He doesn't take the bait as he decides to circle the block a few more times in search of a girl or a drink or both.*

*So, I go to the party, leaving my last shred of dignity under the glowing neon lights of town. When I pull in the driveway, there is a line of cars that I don't recognize. What if he's not here? What if he is here, but he is with her? What if I don't know anyone and have to stand by myself? The thoughts roll through my brain, and I tell myself to get out of my head. I am my own biggest enemy, and my intense insecurity has to be revolting to others as it is to me.*

*The party, hosted in the yard of a single-wide trailer that belongs to a guy who was thirty-going-on-eighteen, provides an arena for hook-ups and break-downs. Thirteen-year-old girls strut around in tube tops and enough make-up that one can't really tell that they are anywhere under twenty-one. Males in their twenties sniff around the girls for one young enough not to know any better. It is a typical party. Two sparse shelters ring the back yard, creating a dirt stage for transgressions and missteps. Country songs blare from a radio propped in the window of the trailer. There are a few on the inside of the trailer, but it's too stuffy inside; the heat of the day is gone, but heat and humidity linger in the night air. The air is dusty as cars come and go on the road*

*directly opposite of the house. Beer washes away the residue for most; I am not quite at ease enough to drink, so I tote one around for a while.*

*I see him at the same time he sees me. He crosses the yard with a careless swagger, full of confidence and bravado. My heart melts. When he looks at me like that, I feel like the most important woman in the world. His face is red, a remnant of his river-filled day; his eyes – bloodshot – tell me his day was filled in its typical manner.*

*“I hoped you would come. I’ve been looking for you.”*

*“I shouldn’t have. Katie looked like she wanted you for herself.”*

*”Come on, baby, you know if I was interested in her I could’a had her.”*

*His logic wins me over. His arm is warm, and I feel like a queen on his arm as we walk from one group to the next – his friends, not mine. The looks everyone gives him border on smirks, and I know the reason. He certainly must appear the Romeo to show up with one girl and walk around with another. God, I hate these people and this place. It is why I decided to go to a college four hours away. To find myself here in the midst of everything I tried to leave behind is infuriating. This is how it works - everyone knows you and your business, and if your business isn’t interesting enough, it can be embellished.*

*I am ready to go, and he agrees to leave with me. First, he has to go make sure that Johnny has a way to get home, so he tells me to stay outside while he goes inside to tell him. I watch him swagger into the trailer to find Johnny, and my heart sinks.*

*I wait.*

*After the first five minutes, I swear to myself that I am going to leave. Instead, I see Matthew and find refuge in his conversation. There are small groups here and there,*

*milling around. Just when I can stall no longer, he exits the trailer. I don't ask, and he doesn't make excuses.*

*As we walk to the car, his arm slides through mine. There's a possessiveness there that comforts. He kisses me, and I feel at home. It's never that simple, though. It's only now that the effect of the alcohol become readily apparent is; he's leaning on me as much as walking beside me, and his voice has that slurred noted that he hides really well, except for when he's intensely intoxicated. This may be the first time he has appeared quiet so intoxicated on a date. He must have had a wild day at the river; I don't even want to think about that. His weight causes me to side-step as we perform a drunken waltz towards my car. The heavy beat of Nirvana rolls from the trailer, its heady presence steaming the air with vibration. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like our departure is going to go as smoothly as I had hoped. Katie and her friend David are perched on the hood of my car. This can not end well. Her face, tears streaking her carefully made-up features, doesn't betray our acquaintance. I'm not sure if the twinge I feel is guilt or anger. She and I have known each other for years. We were friends for most of high school. But, I guess we're supposed to hate each other now because of this game of musical girlfriends. Maybe there aren't enough boys in this town.*

*"We're just gonna leave now, if ya'll hop off my hood."*

*David wants to have a word with Brent. In another context this would really be funny, but I know where this is headed. My Brent came back from the military a hot-head, and when he's drinking, he's convinced that he's Superman. The first date we ever went on ended up with him fighting a boy at the armory dance because the boy looked at his brother, Carl, wrong. The poor fella didn't know his eyes would get him in so much*

*trouble. The fighting doesn't really bother me; sometimes he wins, and sometimes not – like tonight. It would bother me a lot more if he directed it my way, but he is so gallant when it comes to watching over me to make sure that I don't get hurt. He is so adamantly against anyone hitting girls that I can't help but tolerate his impulsivity when it comes to a fair fight. Now, I am just left to try and figure out why Katie would do this? It's obvious that he doesn't want to leave with her. I'm so caught up in trying to get the car door open without causing Brent to fall – he's still leaning on me for support - that I don't notice what he is doing. When he takes a swing, I'm totally caught off guard. The moment flashes by and is over instantly. I try to stop the blood from Brent's lip as Katie leaves with her protector. I am embarrassed for Brent, but not surprised. Too drunk to walk usually means too drunk to fight, but that rarely stops these boys. At least he was here by the car so that I don't have far to lug him.*

*The ride to the trailer he shares with Carl is quiet, even peaceful. His slight snores provide an accompaniment for the click of the highway as we drive. When we turn off the dirt road that leads to Deerfield, the trailer park is dark. When I park the car, I just listen. It's so peaceful at this time of night. The slight buzz of mosquitoes faintly annoys, but the stars look close enough to catch. I can't deny the beauty of this place. Everything is backwoods, but can I live with the backwards? They seem to go hand-in-hand. I don't want to go back to school. I am afraid too. Brent is so supportive, claiming certainty that a long-distance relationship will be great. He really seems proud that I am going to college. Great. So great that he can see whoever he wants to during the week, and then he gets me on the weekends. This negativity gets to me, besides, I don't know that he has done anything that I should be mad about.*

The story lasted a lot longer than my audience cared to hear, and conversations had sprung up around the table.

“If I was so bad, then why did you marry me?”

“Your potential made you worth the wait.”

My story mirrors so many of the others, with little variation on the strain. Growin’ up here means sex. For girls, it’s a rite of passage that, more often than not, is glamorized until the actual event which leaves a bitter disappointment and a quick façade to show that you are alright and all woman. We twist and turn seeping deeper into our self-destructive behavior, grasping and reaching for saving grace in the form of a man, any man. It manifests itself so young; as grown women we look back at the twists and turns and wonder why we made such stupid decisions and wonder how our lives might have been different. The toll is steep – only our self-esteem.

Even now, fifteen years later, I can not quite fathom how it could have happened. It seems so wrong – how could I have fallen into such behavior – reckless, self-loathing behavior? It is the moment I am most ashamed of, and yet I can not determine how it happened. Memory is such a subjective thing, and it tends to waffle on me when I need it the most. What I do remember. . .

I was out of the house on false pretenses. There was so little to do for teenagers, and I sought temptation as readily as I sought acceptance. (How did I end up in the truck with him? Why did I?) The lights of the Flash Foods drew teens cruising for trouble like moths to a flame – each knowing no good can come of it. David and I had worked together in my uncle’s tobacco fields the summer before. I considered myself remarkably adept at playing the astute academic in during the school year and the down-home

Southern girl during the summer. He was charming in a coarse way; his rough, raw edges only made me find him more alluring. I am not sure what made him look twice at me; I should have been the last person he would have wanted to dally with since my father had arrested him several times. Maybe therein rests the secret. He represented all the things that I knew I was not supposed to want, and, for him, I would be the ultimate revenge on a man who had inflicted endless humiliation on him and his family.

My father had warned me in no uncertain terms to stay away from David. Rough family, rough reputation, going nowhere but jail – fast. Yet when he looked at me and smiled. . . Guys never looked at me like that. I was always the buddy, the one they shared secrets with, but never the passionate release that I had read about in novels or heard other girls giggling about in class. What was wrong with me? At seventeen, the only boyfriend I had ever had was a chaste fifth-grade hand-holding match with a boy who moved before our sixth grade year. Certainly my appearance was not so different from all the other girls who currently courted favor among the local boys. {Note – how does one complimentarily describe a younger version of self without seeming totally vain? I believe I was fair enough, I was the typical teen, obsessed with putting forth my best appearance. For a Southern girl, that states a lot because of the code – you never leave the house without being perfectly coiffed and curled. I suffered from what seemed to plague many young girls that age – blatant insecurity.} Having a boyfriend was a status symbol to a bunch of young girls whose idea of ultimate success was having the happy family. I was slender, with long dark hair – shiny and sleek. My large dark eyes expressed emotion – mostly insecurities with life itself. Boys were foreign creatures; my intense failure at dealing with boys instilled a sense of self-doubt that made me discount all my other

personal, mainly educational, accomplishments. My best friend – another misfit such as myself- sagely advised me that my intelligence intimidated my male comrades – straight A's in school, at the top of my class, highest SAT score – and apparently created a daunting persona. I always thought that boys never noticed me because I was too shy to carry on an intelligible conversation; for whatever reason, I found myself saddled with feelings of inadequacy resulting from the lack of a boyfriend.

So when this guy who was so very out of my normal circle of operations noticed me, I was flattered. We had met the summer before when we both worked in tobacco for my uncle. (Boy, that is one job my dad probably regrets pushing me into. He believed that if he kept me busy working menial jobs, then I would develop his work ethic and an appreciation for jobs that required a more intellectual approach – i.e. I would stay in school. He met my mom in a tobacco field.) The tobacco fields simmer with heat and expectation, a sensuous dance of motion and sweat; the monotonous repetition of lifting and twisting lulls the senses into a nicotine-laced euphoria that stems from tar-covered hands and arms. It was here, under the searing sun, that he would lift and carry the heavy racks of drying tobacco so that I wouldn't have to. His chivalric behavior - very out-of-character with his hoodlum reputation (my father had arrested him for various drug-related offenses) - left me starry-eyed. He was never anyone that my father would have allowed me to date, and he was the first boy to notice me as a girl. So, we started seeing each other on the sly.

I was not even supposed to be out that night. In retrospect, I really wish I had stayed home instead of coaxing my father into letting me go out for a little while. It took such an effort to convince him to let me go anywhere; certainly he was of the mold that

believed that children must be kept on a tight leash. But, there I sat under the glaring gaudiness of the convenience store sign, against my better judgment, crammed in the front seat of his friend Pres's truck with David, Pres, and Pres's girlfriend Becky. We decided to head to the river because there was supposed to be a party. Instead, there was just the dark.

What kind of insecurities lead me to open myself to a boy that I hardly knew in the front seat of a pick-up with his friends making out on the tailgate waiting for us to "finish"? My head, propped on the door at an odd angle, bumped an erratic rhythm against the leather and metal until it fell into the open air as Pres opened the door. A laughing, "Sorry" resulted in my head being slammed into the closing apparatus.

"Why am I doing this?" runs through my thoughts, but there is no answer. Instead, we simply stop and I apologize for my lack of skill. I have only done this once before is my excuse; hell – why do I lie about my first time?

When I got back to my car, my dad is waiting. He yanks me out of the truck and warns David not to come near me again.

When I get home, he tells my mom to check me. That is all. To check me. Then, there is no respite from the lash of his leather belt. My mother tries to stop him, but gets knocked down for her efforts. Mom tries to intervene, but she dares not defy him.

For Dad, there had to be disappointment that I would make such a bad choice. Anger that I would dare.

For Mom, maybe a sense of satisfaction that the perfect daughter got knocked down a peg or two? It must be hard to go to your daughter to ask them to ask your

husband for some money because she can get with a bat of her eyes what he would never release to you.

For me, a sense of worthlessness. Regret at the low price for my precious self. It's not an usual occurrence; girls around here stray into these murky waters all the time. Will my girls live this perception of the female self? Every particle of femininity draws from sexuality. My cousin just bought her daughter a boob job for graduation. What does that tell these little girls? My daughter postures with dress-up clothes and make-up; where does she learn it? It seems to come as natural to her as breath. Is she a lost cause. No, I will never accept it as I encourage her and her siblings to value thought and reason and human life and urge her to find the dignity in the very essence of humanity. Foremost, the children that I have will be encouraged to revel in their childishness. Education and growth will be dietary staples of their childhood menu.

I was determined enough to get to college. It made some difference, but there was always some deep-seated desire on my part to get married and start a family. Being grown-up just wasn't grown-up without that whole package. That I completed four years of college really seemed secondary to the idea of being married – a grown-up. Even being married wasn't enough without having babies to make it complete. The gals around here get a jump start on the baby-making if the guy seems a little hesitant to head towards the altar. It's conniving, and the girls mostly end-up regretting their rashness. The impetuosity of youth creates some lasting dilemmas. At least half of the marriages around here are shot-gun weddings. There's not a lot of stigma on the pregnancy before marriage thing if you can run the guy to the altar within a month or two of finding out you're pregnant – either that or no one around here is very good at math. My own mama

was pregnant when she and Daddy got married. My sister got married when she was two months pregnant. However, the best shot-gun wedding we ever had is a favorite story of my Granny's, since it deals with one of my maternal cousins. Granny can talk about it without having to down any of her own. And a good story it does make. See, when you live in a town where you know everybody and are related to about half of 'em, sometimes it seems like cousins can swap boyfriends back and forth. Usually, it makes for an interesting family dinner when the ole' boy shows up with one girl this week and her cousin or sister the next! The particular wedding in question was something of that sort.

The wedding was set on a beautiful day in April. Spring makes this place is beautiful, breaking forth early at the end of February with pink and white bursts of azaleas, purple clusters of wisteria, and the cottony blossoms of dogwood that lace through our woods and yards each merging into the next creating a vision of color and rampant beauty. The heat is not yet unbearable in these early months, and the air is rife with gentle fragrances and the clear crisp invitation to rest in the grass and contemplate nothing more than the shape of the clouds. It is in the spring that marriages most often occur, usually after being cooped up together seeking warmth during the winter. We revel in the warmth here, and some tend to seek it in inconvenient places. My first cousin was marrying the brother of the guy I was dating (and who I would later marry). The bride displayed the evidence of such endeavors in the four-month pooch that marred the front view of her bridal gown. Her belly only slightly expanded, but the promise of its impending girth on everyone's mind, especially her mother's – an uptight blue-haired society dame who sought to distance herself from the rif-raf she married into. Her daughter's societal faux pas had spurred the matriarch into a wedding planning frenzy to

allow that the baby be born as far away from the wedding date as possible. Again, it's just not unusual for a girl to start a marriage this way. However, the patrol car waiting in the grass parking-lot of the church provides the first indicator that something is amiss. The quiet church-yard surrounding the white clapboard building posits a picturesque setting against the stark modern vehicles that line the drive – like soldiers in a firing line. The beauty of the church can't be denied; its stained glass windows casting jeweled palettes over the guests, washing them in brilliant hues. The bride looks lovely, but anxious. The groom's flushed face and agitated stare belie a bitter attack of nerves. Rightfully so, the law car isn't there to prevent him from flight, but instead to keep out his pregnant girlfriend - whose due date was just days away from his bride's - and her insane mother from crashing the nuptials. The funny thing is, the girl probably would have received an invitation if she'd just kept quiet, she is one of our (mine and the bride's) cousins, after all. This situation had been an ongoing soap opera wrought with twists and turns as Carl bounced from one girl to the other, occasionally juggling both without either's knowledge. When it finally resulted in a marriage, things settled down for a little while. Unfortunately, as is common with these shot-gun weddings, this one didn't last long. After five years and two children, the two called it quits. Carl decided to give it a try with his other baby's mama and married her shortly after his divorce was finalized.

It is these stories that keep us connected. We'd kill each other, but who would we talk to? So, we end up co-existing in a small world that binds us to one another, and then brings us back to my Granny's table. Mistakes are many and hindsight is twenty-twenty. No one casts too many aspersions because they have been there and done that, too.

There is a mirror on the far wall of Granny's living room. Granny gets onto us if she catches us looking in this mirror too often – accusing us of vanity. This mirror holds scenes from decades of interaction and love. Years pass by and this mirror catches every sight. Our reflections age, our children grow, marriages multiply and divorce divides. I think Granny wants to avoid the mirror so that we don't have to see how we're caught. We change, but not really. We never really evolve.

I don't understand why we make the choices that trap us, constrain us, leave us without an identity unless it flows through the acknowledgement of someone else. Maybe it's not so much choice as it is absence of choice. There are no easy paths to follow that lead to becoming constructive partners in society. The paths that are well-trod here are the ones that lead you marrying the guy who knocked you up because you thought you wanted to be grown up. Staring at the image in the mirror provides more questions than answers. I can't help wondering which lines crept in with the laughs and which ones were marked with tears. Undoubtedly there have been enough of both. It is only as I look in the mirror and wonder at how these years have slipped through cracks and eddies, so quickly – before I could notice – that I realize how very little of it can be called my own. What am I now, as I sit here looking in this glass that catches and holds all of my strengths and weaknesses, faults and triumphs? Someone's mother. Someone's wife. Someone's daughter, sister, teacher. Which one defines me? All of them, and none of them. I can't negate that I love those roles, but there is a definite resentment within me that hates the inherent limitation that accompanies their delineation. Do I reside in those terms, or they in me?

To be family is to accept certain limits to reality in return for companionship and place. To be a female in this family and place demands strength and resilience, but somehow the value of womanness is shuffled to the lower rung of the hierarchy. Mom had three children. Not because three was the perfect number, but that number three was the boy. Once he arrived, her contribution was duly noted. The lineage follows the males. From earliest days, my brother was prepped for a role vastly different from his sisters. While Erin and I was responsible for ensuring that the house was clean, clothes were washed, and food was cooked, Anthony needed only to shadow Daddy as he worked and piddled around the house. Even though I was four years older than Anthony, it was never considered for me to learn things deemed “man’s work.” Daddy pushed Anthony to learn how to work on cars and machinery, stressing the importance of being capable and independent. We girls were expected to be dependent on men for these same needs. Anthony showed only mild interest and often snuck in to hide from Daddy when he was supposed to be helping. From earliest time, Anthony was exempt from household duties – they being deemed “women’s work.” I never really knew if it was because he was the boy or because he was the baby, but many allowances were made for Anthony. When it became obvious that he was not going to pass senior English without a term paper, Mama called me at college to write him one. Everything revolved around a sense that household duties were beneath him and my father and scholarly duties were unnecessary because he would work with his hands in the tradition of his father. Everyone believed in this way of life. The son carried on the family name. The progeny of the daughter, negated by the fact that she took her husband’s name, may as well have the maternal genes deleted from the DNA strand. Only the offspring from the male line were considered to carry on the

family lineage. My grandmother lamented that my uncle's line would end with him, since he had two girls. I questioned her about the offspring they would bear, but she quickly noted that they would carry different names – therefore carrying on someone else's line. The woman loses that part of her identity when she takes her husband's name. And there is never the consideration of not taking the husband's name. For a woman to refuse to take the husband's name places the man in a position of great contempt. These men of the land respect strong men who dominate their women, not men who recognize that a woman's identity extends beyond whose wife or mother she might be.

### CHAPTER 3 – RIGHTEOUS LIVING IN BLACK AND WHITE

The problems of the world, the white America as we know it, are solved around my Granny's table. It is the sounding board to determine the weakness of welfare policy – make'em all work, brainstorm war policy – nuke Iraq, and deal with immigration woes – send'em home. It's a clear-cut, black-and-white world in which we live. Ingrained racism is passed down from one generation to the next, but ultimately even the racism leads back to the issue of class. "Pass the tomatoes," may likely be followed by "I saw the most aggrivatin' thing today."

Here we go.

It is my mom who tells the story. Her anger spills over.

"Today, I took mama to the grocery store. Since her hip replacement she has been stuck in the house, so I thought a short trip would do her good. Well, we are in the check out line when the black lady in front of us pays for a ton of stuff in food stamps, then heads out to a new-looking car. My own mama can barely get enough food stamps to get food for a week and she worked for fifty years at the hospital. It's impossible to get help for those who need and deserve it. That woman sure looked like she was able to work."

Daddy has the answer. "Well, she's not the right color. The white tax dollars – our hard-earned money – has to go to pay for them niggers to have a better life than the one we have."

My father worked in law enforcement for several years as a deputy sheriff. He was firmly indoctrinated in the belief that the majority of black people were on welfare and sold drugs. When I first went off to college, the biggest fear that my father had was that I would end up with black friends or - God-forbid – a black boyfriend. I was warned

from the outset that I would not be allowed to come home if I did. Apparently, the unknown for my parents generated the immense fear that their years of preaching bigotry and intolerance would come undone in the short four-year span of my bachelor's degree.

I have never been able to negate the value of life in the way of my family. However, it is the thing I have never been able to articulate because it is the one unforgivable sin against my father.

I venture a wary comment, fearful to go here.

“You know, I have to say that I'd rather direct my anger at someone who sits in the comfortable CEO chair of a major company making millions a year who still finds a way to get out of their taxes, robs their blue-collar workers of their retirement, and barely lifts a finger in terms of doing any actual work.”

Playing the work ethic card works. It shifts the focus from race. Ironically enough, my father does not believe he is racist. In his mind, he believes that he truly respects anyone with a decent work ethic. For him, it boils down to the deep-rooted anger that he toils everyday for a pittance – pay-check to pay-check for the fifty-six years that he has walked the earth. It's complex and convoluted. He believes he respects anyone willing to work for a living – hard if necessary. Yet, I've seen his tolerance in action – it's not pretty.

A perfect example of my father's tolerance is Willie. He's a black guy that works for my brother-in-law Ryan. Ryan's farming operation demands a lot of time and manpower. Willie has proven himself invaluable to Ryan as he serves in a foreman capacity. Willie's the only worker who stays with Ryan year round, doing odd jobs for him during the off-season. Occasionally, my Daddy also helps Ryan. Daddy speaks highly of Willie

as a worker. However, there is always the acknowledgement that he is alright for a black fellow. Even the begrudging respect that Dad bestows on Willie flows conditionally – Willie must remember his place – and never assume that he is an equal.

On the weekends, Ryan and his dad play music in a local warehouse. Everyone goes to tap their foot to the old-time country twang of the guitar. Willie showed up there one night to listen, surprising everyone because it is common knowledge that black people don't like country music. Willie played up liking country music – touting his singing ability and his love for Hank, Jr. The white men all treat Willie like a pet who wants to display his tricks in front of a waiting audience. They snorted and guffawed at his paroxysms of countrified behavior. Willie sang old country songs in a blaringly off-key croon. The crowd loved his placating behavior. When he jumped down from the stage after completing his minstrel show, his wide-grin was forced and hardened – as if he was aware that the price for his inclusion was his dignity. When the regular musicians get back on stage, they sing a song in “honor” of Willie – a song that revolves around his blackness. For Willie, that is his defining characteristic. Not that he is a hard worker – usually showing up before any of the landowners whom he toils for at a fraction of the income that they will receive when the harvest comes in- the same harvest that he ensured was put in the ground correctly, watered, weeded, and gathered. His meager portion a small pittance compared to the big picture, but his only option. No healthcare, no benefits, only the reminder of who he is in relation to the system. As a black man, he can sit on the fringes, but never really fit in. Willie accepts it with little question. To buck the system would be to lose a steady job that allows him the illusion of place. He can say he is Ryan's right-hand man. Ryan will say it. My daddy will say it. Doesn't matter how

many times it is said. Willie's still going to be black. Daddy often tells Willie, "Willie, you're pretty good for a black boy." Willie's grinning answer is, "Mr. Paul, them niggers these days ain't good for nothin' - why, I wouldn't take one to shoot." Willie's got all the right answers.

While Willie can enter the Saturday evening festivities if he comports himself in an acceptable fashion, Ryan's migrant workers are on a lower rung on the social totem pole. Migrant workers are a very sore subject in this area – and one with no simple resolution. The workers come in to work jobs that no one else wants – field labor back-breaking and time-intensive. So, the workers are brought in from Mexico to work. Ryan jumps through all the governmental hoops to get workers legally. My father works with Ryan as needed, always in the position to give orders. He considers himself a benevolent master; in his mind respectful of the ones he oversees. He does not see the inherent racism present when he speaks to these men with a mocking Spanish accent. I asked Daddy one day if he realized that speaking English with a bad Spanish accent did not make it any easier for the men to understand. He just thinks he's being funny. His final word on the subject is that everyone who is in America ought to learn to speak English anyway, so it is their problem – not his. There are subversive components of unrest that underlie the situation. It's always a one-sided deal. Nobody has it as bad as the poor, working white man. That's the mentality. It's a tough one to grow up with – blaming everybody. With the Hispanics that come in from Mexico to work, it's the higher minimum wage and exemption from taxes that anger our men. Always the grievance so short-sighted that no one sees the irony of hating those with less than you while those with plenty sit on pedestals protected from our angst and contamination of any of our

presence. These workers come for a three-month period. During that time, they are housed in a dormitory-style building that fifteen men call home. They work five days a week, regardless of the heat – seemingly unaffected by it. They have the weekend to cut loose, but there is not a lot for them to do. Most places frown upon a crowd of Mexicans parting the doors. Over the years, more and more migrant workers have become more stationary, settling in the area so that now there are Spanish-speaking communities that have their own stores and bars. It is to these neighborhoods that the workers flock on their days off. Who says segregation is over? It works fine here in the new South.

My father's America is white America. There's no gray area. The deep-seated inner hatred constantly simmers beneath the surface. Let a black driver pull out in front of Mama or Daddy on the highway and there are muttered curses of, "Damn niggers think they own the road." It always boils down to color. These are the demarcation lines that are drawn so clearly that to cross them is to rewrite one's identity. The only thing that makes Daddy madder than believing that he has to support a black person on welfare is seeing a white person in a relationship with a black person. Even if the white person is a perfect stranger he becomes irate. Once, Daddy and I were sitting in the Chic King eatin' some of the best fried chicken in the South when a white girl walks in with a black boy. Daddy throws down his food and growls at me to get up, we're leaving. As we walk out, he could not resist a parting comment, "Damn white trash ain't got no self-respect but to be going around with some nigger. Ought to beat her ass and shoot him. Might as well shoot her too; she's ruined." He meant it too. It is not an unusual mindset in this neck of the woods.

When I was a first year teacher, a young white girl got in a fight with another white girl over a common black boyfriend. This situation was unusual for several reasons. One, it was extremely taboo for a white girl to date a black boy. One of the girls, Addie, was from a fairly unstable home life – her parents drank and fought heavily when they were around, so social status did not mean much to her as she sought whatever attention she could get from wherever she could get it. The other girl, Cass, had been bounced around from foster homes (both black and white) to children’s homes, so she was not steeped in the usual race relations that young people in this area receive. The verbal barbs escalated into full-scale warfare when Cass snuck a straight razor to school and sliced both sides of Addie’s face – two inch slashes on each cheek. When the news got out, the general consensus among students and community was that neither one of them were worth worrying over since they were both fighting over a “nigger” anyway. Cass’s sentencing to juvie and Addie’s marred face bothered few. Addie’s own grandfather, who had disowned her when she was seen around with a black boy, swelled with retribution when he heard what had happened – reveling in her comeuppance.

As my own understanding of race and the interconnectedness of race and class develops, my father’s seems to become more and more constricted. The years seem to further embitter my father instead of softening him. His anger at an empty retirement funds translates into hatred because of the money he has paid in to the government that he believes with steadfast uncertainty will go to the upkeep and maintenance of an inferior race, supplementing their extravagant drug income with food stamps and free healthcare. There is no winning in this situation. There is no conversation. There is only bigotry, hatred and intolerance.

Oddly enough there is no better place to learn intolerance and hatred than the local church – fundamental creatures that they are. You learn to stick with those who are like you and reject those who are not. The lines of race are clearly drawn as churches segregate themselves religiously. Religion is serious business, and it is manipulated carefully to maintain our precious way of life.

Religion's gossamer web enfolds its pray with the gentle assurance of forever and the steel-like grasp of guilt. Even through I grew up in a household that didn't attend church on a regular basis, religious precepts still lead the goings-on in our house. Church has become the biggest point of contention for me in my struggle to reconcile my place with my newfound educational enlightenment. Education killed the devil. Theoretically, that should have freed me from all the guilt inherent in the things we do that religion naturally discourages, but old wounds are slow to heal. There are so many teachings that are such a day-to-day part of our lives that the final reckoning that ended religion's mental stranglehold still could not completely erase all their subversive influence.

Religion breeds guilt. Guilt for actions that should seem as a natural part of life make the simplest pleasure feel wrong and dirty. For a long time, I stayed away from organized religion because I felt like there was a good chance the roof was going to collapse when ever I walked in the sanctuary. My guilty conscience would rear its ugly head, so I stayed home. For most of my early married life, that worked well because Brent suffered from the same guilty conscience.

After we had children, our religious dynamic started to change. For Brent, who was raised by a fervently religious single mom, religion seemed a birthright that we could not, must not deny our children. So, we started going to church. At this point, I was in the

midst of my doctoral classes, so I found these forays into religion a harsh reality check. Nowhere else have I felt two such distinctly opposite poles – surreal explorations into alternate realities. We started by going to the church that my family had frequented for generations – a bastion of Southern Baptist tradition. If we went to church when I was little, this was the place we'd go. My parents were married there, and several decades later I was married to Brent in the same sanctuary by the same preacher. My family was still so prevalent in the church that the yearly family reunion of my grandfather's family was still held there each year. Everyone was tickled to see us walk in with our kids. The church was pretty much the same as I remembered it. Then, we set in someone's seat. Those pews should have reserved signs on them, and for folks who attend on a regular basis they're there – just invisible. Well, that set things off to a bitter note. Then, one Sunday Brent was asked to fill in for the drummer, who had missed a couple of Sundays. Well, he did; halfway through the first number the drummer walked in. When he saw someone else sittin' at the drums, he walked out again. Brent and I got tired of worrying about whose toes we were stepping on, so we decided to try a new church.

We ended up at a nondenominational church where my brother played the bass guitar in the choir. They had asked Brent to play drums for the choir, so we thought it would be a good way to establish ourselves in the throng. Well, it worked. The members adored Brent for his contribution, and they doted on our children. We established our spot on the back pew – still entrenched in that good Southern Baptist tradition - and started attending regularly – Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. The hectic pace these frequent meetings set for our week soon started wearing on me. I was working full time, a full time graduate student who went once a week to class in a town an hour

away, and trying to keep up with all the demands of my family. I started sneaking a book into services, trying to keep up with all the demands on my time. However, I soon found it hard to pay attention to anything but the service as I noticed the strict delineations for behavior and expectations set forth by the preacher and other members of the congregation.

The first thing that shook me from my reverie came shortly after we started attending. During the midst of a sermon where the preacher was lamenting the state of the world, he threw out the *Harry Potter* series by Rowling as one of the reasons the world was sliding into decline, calling it the “spawn of Satan” (Daniels, 2006, personal communication). This comment caught my attention because, as an English teacher and lover of literature, I couldn’t stomach censorship. It was at this point when I began to understand exactly how fundamental this place really was; it couldn’t have occurred at a more opportune time as I was in the midst of unraveling my own feelings of guilt and my embedded understanding of religion in my graduate classes. At first, I didn’t say anything. I just listened. What I began to notice was unsettling; bigotry, intolerance, and self-censure extolled as virtues of a righteous man.

My children soaked up the rhetoric surprisingly quickly. I believed that their young age would allow them tune out a lot of what they heard, but I was very wrong. Instead, they became little mimics, questioning why I would drink alcohol (because it is evil) and whether or not they were going to hell. When they started extolling good behavior because “God’s watching,” I realized how quickly religion ensnares us in its trappings. I started pushing against attending church so often, but my dissidence started causing a rift between me and Brent. He had found solace from the trials the world had

placed before him. Since we were going through a particular hard time in our marriage financially, I couldn't bear to take away the balm that soothed his frazzled nerves.

So, we continued going. Brent started volunteering his time to clean up around the church on weekends, and I would occasionally take the kids up there to wait on him while he worked. For many in the church, this type of family interaction was considered quality family time because everyone was together; it didn't seem to matter that I wrangled three young kids while Brent worked on whatever project currently needed his attention. If this is what the church termed family togetherness – a big virtue – then it was no surprise to me why many of the women in the church sought attention elsewhere (oops, we're not supposed to talk about that) or why many of the children in the church went out and found trouble to keep them busy (I guess their parents were too busy keeping the sanctuary clean).

It was on one of these cleaning days that I entered into a conversation with the preacher who was standing there admiring the progress that my husband was making in the churchyard.

“So that husband of yours sure is a good man.”

“Yessir.”

“You know, the women's group meets on Monday nights. You should join them.”

Oh, I had been avoiding that group like the plague.

“Thank you for asking, but I have class on Monday night. I don't think I could fit one more thing in my schedule.”

“You're taking classes? That's wonderful. Are you taking them at the tech school? What're you working on, something like office technology?” His politely

disinterested demeanor buffered his words; women were second class citizens around here.

“Actually, I’m working on my doctorate degree in education.”

“Really. Well, I am not an educated man myself. I believe those professors can try to educate the love of God right out of you. There’s not much good that can come of being too educated. No good can come of encouraging people to question what God laid out for you in *The Bible*.”

“Occasionally, texts lose some things in translation. I worry more about the human interpretation of such divine intervention.”

“Well, that’s the problem.”

I should’ve just told him I was going to tech school.

“You know, it’s a good man that can support his wife in such an endeavor.”

I had already agreed that I was married to a saint, so I didn’t really have much to add; however, he was just getting started.

“Who takes care of the kids while you are at class?”

Apparently, anything that pertains to his “flock” becomes his concern.

“My mom or sister watched them until Brent gets home, and then he handles things. He’s their daddy, so it’s not much of a stretch for him.”

I can see that he’s pondering what tack to take, and my hackles are rising.

“Well, it’s a good man that will take on such a responsibility after he’s worked all day.”

Apparently, what I do all day is considered play.

“We both work full-time jobs, and we’re full-time parents. It’s a joint effort.”

“Hmm, I have to say that I am glad my wife could stay home with our girls. There’s nothing like making sure that your babies are raised right.”

What can ya say to that? I could argue that I make sure that I teach my children right and wrong, but he’d just say that I’d better leave that to the church, especially since my moral compass might be a little compromised with the effects of that liberal education I’ve been exposed to. It’s possible that I could argue that I want my children to recognize the female as an equal half of the family unit, but I’m sick of his condescending tolerance. So, instead I run to check on the kids, who are all playing happily on the playground. I seek their protection as I fulfill my motherly obligation. The preacher stands watching his minions in their various occupations in the churchyard, secure in his righteousness.

So, why I am surprised the next Sunday when the focus of the sermon centers around the woman’s role in the family? His words meet a chorus of “Amens” as he extols the virtue of those women who takes care of their families and don’t get distracted by the cares of the world. It’s a fitting end when he calls the deacons up to the front of the church to pray for those gentles females who aren’t strong enough (smart enough) to take care of them selves. I woulda’ left, but I was too interested in seeing where he was going to go with his message. I thought it a hoot that he took it so personally. Brent didn’t like it; he knows how much work both of us put into taking care of our children. Luckily for both of us, that was the beginning of the end of our religious experiment.

The church started leaning heavily towards fundamental views that neither of us could condone. There were so many things that started coming one after the other. First, there were the admonitions by the pulpit to denounce any lifestyle that deviated from the

“norm.” Homosexuality scared the hell out of these people. For Brent, the heavy focus on tithing really hit him hard. He tried so diligently to tithe ten percent of our weekly income, against my vehement protests that we were supporting those who had way more than we did and that God didn’t care if we couldn’t buy our way into heaven. When the preacher starting call for more tithes because the building fund was behind schedule, Brent started to see how those streets of heaven needed to be paved with gold to suit the earthly tastes of these church leaders.

One day, when the preacher started attacking the education system as a prime source of the breakdown of society, I walked out of the sanctuary and waited for Brent in the car with the kids. I never went back. Brent felt compelled to return for a few more Sundays, but eventually he also stopped going.

## CHAPTER 4 – PLAYIN’ HOUSE

Meals, family and conversation are such a big deal at Granny’s that we can’t fit everyone into her living room and dining room at the same time. We take turns at the table, and everyone knows the drill - you just know when to show up. First shift comes around 11:30, the older generation, my parents, aunts and uncles, sit at the table while the younger sits on the couch and in the recliners; the kids sprawl on the floor with their plates in front of the television. Once you finish eating, you head outside until the other shift arrives and eats, usually around 12:00. Afterwards, everyone knows their roles. The younger mothers stay outside to watch the kids. Even in the winter, most days are mild enough that the kids can play for a little while outside. The older mothers clean the kitchen. Meanwhile, the men either stand around outside and talk, take a nap in Granny’s living room, or leave. We tried one time to have the men watch the kids, but when we finished with the kitchen, we came outside to find the men long gone and the kids in the horse pen. The roles, clearly defined for decades, change their players as the generations grow – but boy or girl determines what part you play.

Washin’ dishes is my favorite task; instead of scurrying around dumping various leftovers into assorted bowls, I get to stand at the sink and look out the window while methodically cleaning and rinsing the dishes that the others continuously pile up for me. For years, this particular job belonged to Granny, but she lets the younger generations take over while she oversees and directs where each dish will go. Her kitchen is an organizational marvel – small and quaint, but filled with so many dishes and pans that one would never be able to fit them all in if it were not for her system of stacking plates, dishes and pots until veritable mountains reside in her cabinets. The only window, a small

square, sits over the sink, so whoever ends up washing the dishes can observe the happenings in the yard. This is my favorite perch because I can watch the kids playing the same games that I played with my siblings and cousins decades earlier.

Hide-and-seek was always a favorite. The assorted rusting cars and tractors create the perfect atmosphere for slinking around to find the best hiding places, but there's nowhere as perfect as the barn. If you're brave enough to venture into its shadowy depths, there are hiding places galore. The square bales of hay stacked six bales high create the sweetest smelling fortress one will ever find. I remember snuggling into its depths to outwit the seeker countless times. Courage was a requirement for entering the barn because you often shared your roost with various mice and snakes. Screaming at the sight of one of these critters was certain to give away your hiding place. As I watch my own children run in and out of the shadowy places, I can't help but feel anxiety. What if they step on a snake? What if they get trampled by a horse? Things were so much simpler when I was where they are now. Of course, things are rough all over. My four-year-old wails as her older sister runs further and faster than she, and their brother, fearless-at-five, out climbs them all on the hay castle rising into the air. When the game turns to Red Rover, someone is bound to get clothes-lined and come running in crying. However, when I was younger, the games seemed a lot less dangerous. I guess we were just shielded from the danger by those who watched over us as carefully as I now watch over my own.

Cleaning-up time is a time for the women to vent without being interrupted by the men, who are so often the ones we tend to vent about. Since the men are either outside or asleep, the women talk freely. The men will not comment on any of the conversation,

even if they happen to be awake enough to disagree; they understand the protocol; it is a woman's domain they have entered and must abide by the rules, for it is men that the women most often talk about – venting frustrations and garnering sympathy. It is from these conversations that I first learned of the underlying dissatisfaction that wells within the women of my family.

Outside my Granny's kitchen window where I am standing at washing dishes, I can hear my children playing in the yard. They are basking in the warmth of a spring-like January day. These anomalies occur with sporadic bursts of color and warmth that make a Georgia winter mild and forgiving. Since the birth of my oldest child, every second of my life has been devoted to being a mother. The power of my love for them scares me. They are the essence of innocence and joy; they are the source of my greatest fear and trepidation. Certainly not their fault; they didn't ask to be born. Every moment my subconscious fears for the health and well-being. Are they okay? What if something happens? What if I screw them up so badly that they end up miserable and alone - for alone is what scares me most. When I look at them, I see possibility, promise, hope and despair. In their eyes, I see only complete trust and acceptance. For that, a lifetime of dedication seems like a small price to pay. In the yard, they laugh and scream – pure, unadulterated joy. I can't remember ever giving up to such unabashed happiness – no fear of the price I would have to pay for the luxury of total bliss. I see them in and out of the window frame. Pixies scampering across the grass. Where did they get their impish ways? Certainly not from me; I have always been way too serious to act very mischievous. From their father? Possibly. There was once a spark of the scamp in him. I have not seen it in years, but I remember that it was there. Speculation on where it went would only

worsen the matter. But these children. These concrete examples that three times in my life things were a perfect pitch of agony and ecstasy – childbirth and its beautiful bounty.

It is only at this point in my life that I understand what my grandmother meant when she told me not to ever have children. I wanted children so badly when we first got married. Brent's reluctance to start a family immediately made me doubt his commitment. It seemed like everything he did made me doubt his commitment. I needed him with me, and he needed to feel like he still had a life. In retrospect, I see how needy I was at that point. I don't think I was necessarily wrong to make many of the demands on his time that I did, but now I realize how harmless every little thing I obsessed over really was. Everyone stayed so angry at me because I insisted that he spend so much time with me. Daddy didn't understand; my brother and sister didn't understand. Even Mama, who understood my reasons and motivation, still thought I should give him a break. Brent was so good to Mama, sending her flowers for Valentine's Day and her birthday; he made sure that she got attention because he knew that my dad wouldn't bother. Now, she won't put up with me being too hard on him. Brent understood, or tried to, but it didn't make it any easier on him. The rage that I felt when he'd come home a little late would send me into hysterics. He'd calmly talk me through them. I couldn't stay mad at him for long, even on the rare occasions when I should have. The bitter words I stung him with marked him, even though I couldn't see it. While I was over my angst in minutes, the scars of my words lingered deep within his psyche.

What I realize most now is that so many of us women who live here stake our happiness of the whims of our men. I hear it in my Mama's stories; I remember it from my early days of marriage; I see it in my brother's marriage and my sister's marriage.

We, us Southern women, find ourselves in our men and family. Granny warned me, but I thought she was just doing her usual barking.

Lord knows that my Granny is an unusual character. She'll scare you to death if you don't know how to take her. I don't doubt that she has been that way for years, decades. I think living with my granddaddy slowly strangled with young exuberance that her sister reminisces about from her childhood days. The words that come out of my Granny are sharp, razor-edged. How better to protect your self from the hurt and pain that loving others breeds. She learned that lesson young. According to stories, her mother was a mean old lady. Another tale in her own right. Abandoned by her common-law husband, left to fend for herself and her two young children, my Great-Granny Snow faced stiff odds without considering the fact that the Cherokee blood displayed prominently in her appearance would alienate her from many of the people in her community. The close-minded bigotry that surrounded my own Granny's upbringing left her yearning for acceptance, and it made her bitter enough not to give it when it was sought from her. My own mama found this out the hard way. When I was little, I remember Granny's harsh attitude towards my mama. I didn't understand it, but it didn't bother me because I saw Daddy treat Mama the same way. It hurts to acknowledge the fact that I often emulated the same behavior I saw Daddy perpetrate on Mama in the same way that he did. I thought it was okay because Daddy did it. Maybe Granny did so to because she knew Daddy wouldn't say anything, or maybe Daddy did it because Granny did it. For Mama, there was little help on either end, especially since her mama and daddy liked my Daddy so much; her support group sold out. I guess now I can understand how she felt; everyone seeming to gang up in support of your husband at your expense. That there might be

anger and angst at her own situation and stratification occurs to me only now and has probably never occurred to my Granny. Granny had problems of her own. How better to forget that your handsome husband had wandering eyes than to immerse yourself in the well-being and up-bringing of your children. When Granny was giving birth to my Daddy, she spent several hours in the hospital with Granny Snow as her companion while my Granddaddy took their other children – Sue, age 10 and Mike, age 9 – to the city pool where he commenced to flirting with a leggy red-head. When that tidbit came out at Granny's dinner table several years after Granddaddy died, everyone laughed. As I set there, I couldn't figure out why we were laughing. Sometimes you laugh because you don't know what else to do. It wasn't funny to me. I know it wasn't to Granny. She had never heard that story before that moment, and even though she was laughing, the look on her face spoke of angst that could not be tempered by his death. When you take your worth and your identity as part of a whole, it hurts to find your worth denied by his infidelity. Any slight indiscretion hurts, one so large as this negates the validity of self. The pain that registered on her face was fleeting, but real. For me, it explains why she might find fault in any interloper that would seek to weaken the bond she had forged with her children, for she really did not cotton to any of her children's spouses. So when Daddy sought to belittle Mama, Granny made a prime accomplice. Yet, it hurt her that my Daddy, or any of her children, would put a spouse ahead of her – a certain part of each of her children's marriages. Every worry she formed over them morphed into a mountain, and she has always been full of worries. For her, having children resulted in the most rewarding and most painful moments of her life. She could control them only to a point, and her control was, in her mind, only for their well-being. When they were little,

she worried for their safety. She tried to keep them off the horses and motorcycles that were staples of their country life, but she could not overrule the iron hand of her husband. When they married, she worried about their ability to support their family or the worthiness of their spouse, but she could not compete with their need for independence. When they had children, her worries were compounded. Every worry articulated itself through a gripe, bitter words to the listener's ears. Eventually, everyone believed she had a heart of stone and a barbed tongue. Instead, she had only a heart that continuously looked for blind acceptance and found only conditional concern. I can't help her now. She has to live with her ghosts. Her husband is dead, and he has left her heart barren to the possibilities that love has to offer. He became nothing more than another presence in the house by the time they had been married for a few years. Separate bedrooms lead to separate existences. Separate interests lead to her abandoning what she wanted to follow timidly behind his presence. Her beauty faded, and so did her sense of worth. His death offered her a chance to find herself, but instead, she grappled with a desire for isolation juxtaposed against her need for acceptance.

It's just like a Southern gal to wield her sexuality as a weapon. That's why you won't catch us out of the house without our hair just right and make-up adeptly applied. It's how you catch a husband and how you keep one happy. Men recognize the trap but love the game, and it often culminates in marriage. Our men talk about women in terms of their appearance. If the wife lets her looks go downhill after getting' married or havin' babies, then her husband's job is to make sure she recognizes that she's not the girl he married. Looks are everything. That double-edged sword will cut you every time, though; it's perfectly acceptable for the man to gain a few pounds. Ya end up with a diet-crazed

women fixated on her appearance tied up with a beer-bellied redneck. The crazy thing is that men don't get married for companionship. Marriage for men is about getting the wife that's gonna give ya your kids – thereby demonstrating your manliness. Nurturing said kids or wife does not a manly man make. These men in our lives follow pursuits that flouts their maleness- hunting, fishing, even working are pursuits that these men embrace as their diversions. In each activity, the focus enhances the male and females are denounced as distractions. My father repeatedly calls my house just about dark to see if Brent wants to ride in the field to see if they can scare up a deer. It is automatically assumed that if Brent wants to go, the kids and I will manage on our own without him. My father especially holds little consideration for the imposition that his request might put on his own flesh-and-blood because it is a girl's place to see about the kids and the house. Companionship does not flow in terms of marriage; companionship often translates to boys' time. The time that men get away from the ol' ball and chain and find something fun to do. The women learn quick to flock to one another for comfort and companionship - a segregated society with females congregating around the table discussin' babies and men while the men chase their interests in four-wheel drives and mud tires. Companionship becomes synonymous with same sex relationships. As children, you get to navigate between the two worlds, bearing witness and seeking adulation. With the women there exists the constant admontions, "Stay safe. Watch out for the little kids." The warnings flow from various lips, creating a community of mothers collectively responsible for the well-being of any youngster – biological or spiritual. This group presents the only female role model for a young girl, so maybe it provides the rationale for so many young girls rushing into marriage and motherhood.

My daddy always thought it was the strangest thing that Brent and I spent time together just loafin' around the neighborhood or riding to the river. That sort of comradeship never existed between my parents. Being married to these men is about being the boss, and not many bosses tend to hand out with the hired help at the end of the day. It is a great irony to me that men who are so openly homophobic spend their leisure time in almost exclusively male company. So, is the make-up and coiffed hair a way of getting attention? No doubt, the obsession with appearance comes from the constant desire to be noticed by husbands and boyfriends, and the men notice and appreciate sensuality. Sometimes this need to be noticed comes back to bite you on the ass. I found that out the hard way when I found myself pregnant at nineteen. Lord knows that I couldn't raise I child. I was in my second year of college; a baby would end any hope of finishing school. I could barely afford to go with a full scholarship covering my tuition, books and living expenses, adding a baby to the mix would have sunk the boat. Brent would marry me, however reluctant he might be about marriage. We had been dating a year, so it wouldn't be unheard of for us to get hitched. I just wanted more than to rush into a marriage that we were not ready for – either emotionally or financially. So I tell no one but Brent. He freaks out a little more than I expected which made it easier for me to ask the unthinkable. Abortion is an unforgivable sin in my family's eyes. So I saddle the guilt and take a little solace in his relief when I suggest it. This moment marks an momentous decision on my part to stop my world from spinning out of control with reckless and self-destructive behavior. When I walked across the picket line at the abortion clinic in Montgomery, I felt less-than-human. I loathed myself for ending up in this situation. I knew better. So, why did I let it happen? Brent couldn't come in the clinic

with me, so he dropped me off and picked me up afterwards. The empty stare in my eyes marked the death of more than just a fetus; my innocence and self-respect were also fatalities.

So, when my eighteen-year-old sister comes up pregnant a few months later, I squelch the guilt and mime all the appropriate words of encouragement. Of course things will be all right, even though you two have only been dating for three months. Of course you can make it work without a job or a place to live. Of course everything will be all right because you will have a baby and babies have a way of making everything okay. I have guilt and always will, but some times the harder decision lends to a realization. I understood sexuality in a new light. However, when time and child-bearing takes its toll on the body, whatever notice the men might have made of the female dissipates. This is why so many of the women I know diet fervently and dye their hair to buffer those tell-tale grays and keep those few pounds at bay as long as possible.

However, eventually age does catch up, as it has for my grandmother – now in her eighties. She is no longer the belle of the county as she was in her youth. So, she cooks and takes solace in religion. Big, bountiful meals grace her table at regular intervals. Eighty-two years have passed her by, and she slaves at the stove to feed her brood, grown from five children to twenty-plus including grandkids and great-grands. She works - first, at a factory job doing menial labor to get her out of the house. She sorts bolts and packages them at a snail's pace- slow, but steady. She finds a sense of self in the dedication that she puts into her work, vanity in every completed package and in keeping up with girls decades younger than she. She takes pride in a work ethic that pulls her out of bed at 4:30 a.m. to make homemade biscuits and fry bacon for anyone who wants to

stop by for breakfast. The smell of biscuits fresh out of the oven wafts around her, even later into the day, reminding one of their crumbly goodness. Tempering all of the hard work is her firm belief in God. She lets it carry her through hard times. Perhaps the greatest comfort she takes from her religion is the firm belief that those who commit transgressions in this lifetime will answer for it in another. All of those wrongs that have scarred her will be accounted for one day. It is a bitter religion that she needs, and she nurtures it so that she won't feel like she has been cheated in this life.

Living with a sense of guilt is part of our daily bread. Maybe it comes from the straightjacket of religious beliefs that we wear as protection. Protection from the unknown; protection from the different; protection from change – we use our religion to buffer ourselves from all of these in an effort to validate our existence, our way of life. Guilt is the largest by-product of our church-house reckoning, and the church is the funnel that feeds us our manna – nourishment of the mind that guides us on the straight-and-narrow. Southern Baptist to the core, my grandmother uses her religion to give her hope, but the thorny crown instills its own sense of suffering. Granny uses the hope of a new life built in paradise as her reward for the toils of this world. Her life is built upon toiling for the greater cause, working today for the reward of the afterlife. At eighty-two years old, she goes each day to labor in a factory, the meager income supplementing her the pittance her Social Security check allots each month. She is still strong and able to work, proud of what she does. However, a child of the depression, Granny has trouble hiding contempt for the men for whom she works. Their lifestyles - filled with blatant luxury of the cost of the sweat and toil of their workers - grieves her. Her faith gives her

peace; it is a faith built on the premise that she will rest in the next world while they will suffer.

Does she feel short-changed for all of the hurt and tears that have marked her life? She wouldn't spend the time that it would take to consider her lot in life. She just buries her anger and plows forward. She earns a check to supplement her meager pension so that she does not have to beg or borrow from her children. Her need for independence wrought from years of servitude to a husband who ruled the checkbook with an iron fist. Her earned pittance is not enough, never enough; it is to this factor that I most relate.

The sense of needing independence and never obtaining it – I thought I would avoid that trap. I sought so diligently to escape the tether-hold of financial dependence. It seems to be a requirement for girls of my ilk. From my perch in front of this mirror, I can hear my own girls playing outside with their brother. I hear them, and I hate what I already consign them to, inadvertently, of course. The trappings of this life I love are laced with ways to bind these little girls to men who will care for them or destroy them. It came to me too late to realize it, and though I seek to lead my girls out of it, it seeps into their being from their grandparents, their grandmothers, their aunts, uncles, and cousins, even their mother – no matter how hard I desire to avoid it. I first saw it in my mother. When I was younger, I remember the constant worry that money equated to my mother. For my Daddy it never seemed so terrible. He made the money, and he used it as he saw fit. For Mama, it was never that simple. She made a third of what he earned, and every bit of it went towards keeping her children in decent clothes and providing for their needs or wants. She never bought for herself. Daddy would bring up a boat or a truck, and she would simply look at it and go back inside. Why couldn't he see the sacrifices she made

to appease her children? I don't know why, but I know that he never saw the way she did without new clothes or a new car so that her – their- children did not do without. Every time she had to ask him for a dollar, whether it was to buy groceries or pay a bill, he stripped her of any sense of self-worth she might possess – grilling her as to her purpose and intentions. Every penny had to be accounted for and a receipt provided. Fiscal irresponsibility was the greatest of sins, and he intended to protect her from her self by limiting her financial independence. The wants of three children became too expensive for her to manage on her minimum wage salary. She would send the children to ask their father for the money they needed, or she would sneak a credit card here or a charge account there. Eventually, when the debt became too much, she would send the children to ask for money for her own expenses. She avoided the tirade that ensued by creating a middle man to buffer his reaction. If she could stay out his way, then she wouldn't have to hear his complaints. My brother and sister never seemed to notice, but I hated the lack of control she had over her own life. Despising the predicament she put herself in every time she bounced a check, I became determined to avoid the same situation. My loathing for her subservience leaked out in conversation. My bitter, "I will never be dependent on a man for money" cut her as more than all of the rants of my father. I hated her groveling and sneaking around, and I determined that education would be my ticket out – the panacea to the subjugation that started when my mother dropped out of the tenth grade to get married.

So, I went to college - A big deal for my family – a first.

Yet, when I look for answers in a mirror it holds nothing but lines of worry across my forehead and the fear written in my eyes. I am them. I listen to my children play

outside with their father, and I know that he will not come in this house because he does not want to look at the guilt I carry. Here I wallow in the same damnable hole that trapped my mother – the one I intended to avoid at all costs. Years in the making, this situation rests on the thread of my husband’s whim. Will he stay or go? The answer to this question is unclear to all – to me, to him. I hate the face that stares back at me in the mirror because it has dug this hole, and now I look for salvation in a kind word or a smile from a man who has no kindness in his heart for me. How did I get here?

Credit card bills pile up on top of credit card bills and car payments that I can’t make. If I can send the minimum payment to my house payment, then I can forestall a foreclosure for another month. Every option, exhausted multiple times, closed to me now, has mounted into a massive pile of debt that has no bottom – at least not one that I can find. It started small enough – a credit card to purchase those niceties that I couldn’t afford on my salary. That credit card morphed into three, then five. I became an expert juggler. From one account to another, I tried to borrow my way out of debt. Finally, a brainstorm. I talked my husband into adding a few rooms onto our house. Not a problem since Brent and Daddy built the house themselves, we had a lot of equity in it. So, we planned for the add-on. Brent, trusting and true, let me handle the financial side, since the house was in my name. I borrowed all right. Triple the amount that I told him so that I could pay off all of the bills. Sweet redemption!

So many things had piled up too quickly. First, it was just little stuff. We were young, just starting our marriage. I wanted to keep up with the Joneses, the Smiths – shoot – anyone else that might have something nice. I wanted a new car. I wanted a closet full of nice clothes. I wanted stuff. So much stuff. Spending became intoxicating. Three

hundred dollars for a pocketbook – the sublime deliciousness of the supple leather. I had never spent so extravagantly in my life. Reveling in the luxurious nothings, I looked with derision on the Wal-Mart existence I had endured. Picking up the tab became another source of pleasure. Not just for simple meals – no, we would go away for the weekend with family, and I would pay for the rooms. Unbeknownst to Brent, of course! First, I had to tell him that everyone paid for their own while telling Mama or Erin that I would be glad to pick up the tab so that everyone could go. Family was important. I didn't want Erin to feel less successful even though her husband wouldn't pay for her to go on a weekend getaway to the beach. For the first time, I was living the lifestyle I had only seen from afar. Those girls who used to sit in class with the perfect clothes and polished appearance didn't have a thing on me now. Now, my clothes were just as nice. It never really occurred to me to stop and think about how I hated the petty nature of the very girls who I secretly wished I could be. I had never judged anyone else because of what they had or did not have, but I was my own worst critic for the same reason. I related my importance to how much stuff I had.

I threw away so much money. Money I did not have. I spent hundreds of dollars on quilts and bedding for Mama just because she said she wanted it. Brent never found out. And finally, here was an opportunity to overcome the debt by refinancing the house. Of course, the mortgage would explode from fifteen years to thirty years. I could never let Brent know that; he was determined to pay off our house before we were forty. Since I make the house payments, he would never find out if I had to keep paying them a few years longer. The house payment will triple, but I figured that the money I made when I finished my master's degree will keep me balanced, especially when I get those credit

cards paid off! I don't despair because I have a plan. Brent will never have to find out; I can curb my spending, and no one will be the wiser!

If only. If only I had cut up the credit cards when I had the opportunity. One thing seemed to bleed to another. I needed the money from the credit cards to pay for things for the house, since I was supposed to have that money from the refinancing. Then, there were the kids. I never dreamed that kids would be so expensive. On top of the expense was the missed days from work. I had to stay on bed-rest for six weeks with Ethan and six weeks with Grace, so factor in maternity leave that I didn't have days for and you can figure that I missed a ton of work that cost me thousands of dollars. The fact that I only took two weeks when Maggie was born to try and balance the time doesn't really seem to factor in very much, and the time I missed with her I will never get back. Brent changed jobs during this time, too. He went from making a decent weekly salary to working on commission. His boss would fail to pay him two or three weeks in a row, leaving me to act like it was no problem for me to come up with the money for the bills. I didn't want to say anything that would worry him any more than he was already worried; he gets so intense when he worries about money. Never hateful, but dreadfully unhappy. I can't bear for him to be unhappy. I feel like it reflects on our relationship.

So I dig my hole again. Brent decides to change jobs again, much to our benefit. His stability leaves me free to balance and juggle without a lot of static from him. I cater to our children, three by now. Maggie's arrival completes our brood. The completion of my Master's degree provides enough wiggle room for me to comfortably hang myself. Clothes for the kids, hundreds and hundreds of dollars worth, are bought, worn and

discarded. With each dollar, I feel guilt. I hate the compulsion to spend, but I want to give so many things to my children.

Things.

Things.

Things have cost me trust and security. Things that were thrown away, give away, faded away a long time ago.

I had to go to Brent when I could not juggle any more debt. I was so close to overcoming everything. A secret consultation with a credit counseling agency helped me get a handle on the payments that were sucking over one thousand dollars a month. For two years, I scraped and sorted to get payments evened out. Finally, the light at the end of the tunnel – or maybe just the calm before the storm. The one account that I could not get situated loomed larger than life. Defaulting on it led me to the conversation that I had dreaded for months. So close. So close to having everything situated. Instead I have to ask, to beg, for the money to get the account taken care of. The thing I dreaded more than life, to have to demean myself to beg for financial help.

Will it cost me my marriage? I owe a lot to this man. The great travesty is that had I been honest a long time ago about my fiscal irresponsibility, then the problem would have been a lot less dire. I wouldn't have gambled out future and our security. Now, it all rests on his ability to overlook the fact that he was completely unaware of my habit. His speculation that I supported a drug habit or a boyfriend or a boyfriend with a drug habit hurt me, but he was seeking an explanation for how I could sink so much money in so little time. How many times I have sought that same explanation. Complete and total irresponsibility. I have to live with it. I have to live with the fact that a part of him will

never trust me again. All because I did not want to have to ask him for money. All because I wanted the “stuff” that I never had growing up. Was it worth it? Not even close. The stuff was simply that – stuff. It won’t comfort me when I cry, hold me when I’m lost, or love me. It’s just stuff. So, here I sit with a world of STUFF and the only thing that really matters is that I would trade it all for the trust that I have betrayed.

Will I see the same thing in my own girls? How can I not. These influences seep in through conversation and action. Where are the women when it is time to eat? In the kitchen preparing the meal. The children see it, and they will tell you that the woman’s job is to cook and clean. Even my own girls expect that it is my job. My own little boy, who looks at me with love and trust, at five years old will tell me that Daddy will be so proud of me for cleaning up the house after I have shirked the responsibility for a few days. How does one approach a child so young and demand that he believe it is everyone’s responsibility? Telling him will do no good if it is not lived. When my baby daughter postures and poses in dress-up clothes and make-up, what fantasy dances in her mind’s eye? After my mother mentions for the fiftieth time in one afternoon that she needs to lose twenty pounds, what image about beauty will my slightly overweight daughter develop as her personal drawing board?

Every gathering is laced with these bindings that will not let us move away from these roles that limit us. Our daughters see the women in the kitchen preparing the meals, delivering the food to the table, fixing their plates. They see the men take a nap after lunch while the women clean up. The men work. The women serve. It is a vicious cycle, but we won’t leave it behind. When I insist that I am not going to cook, I just put that much more work on my mother’s shoulders. When I insist that I am not going to clean, I

face the angst of trying to find clean clothes for the children when it is time for school. While I am lucky enough to have a husband who will contribute to our cooking and cleaning chores, I still recognize the defined limits of our relationship. I can accept it, because these things are as they must be in this place. To completely set my girls free would mean that I would have to leave. I am not prepared to do that.

There is a power in this place that ties you to the land. I know that my children will find beauty and safety here. The doors are left unlocked and the keys are left in the vehicles parked in the dirt yards because we are all one family here. Our haven is tucked away from the hustle and bustle of the outside world that passes us. We grow, but we don't change. Happiness is consistency, an ability to know that we belong here and will be here in this place – now, ten years from now, two decades from now. What I don't know is if I am willing to consign my children to a consistency that keeps them safe, but keeps them confined.

My Granny's voice breaks my reverie. "Angie, I stopped by your house this week, but ya'll weren't there."

Oh, God, I know where this is heading.

She continues. "The place was a wreck. I'd be ashamed to live like that."

"You musta stopped by on Thursday because you knew that's the day I have class in Statesboro. It's been a crazy week; I had two papers due and I gave a test at school that I had to grade and return. I haven't had time to blink, much less clean house."

Granny's unsympathetic stare leads me to believe that possibly my priorities are out of whack. Her dark eyes, lined with the cares of the world, are flat and dull. I wonder if there ever was a sparkle in them.

“It is your house, your responsibility. There is no excuse. It should be the first thing to accomplish on your list. If I was your husband I wouldn’t put up with it. Poor Brent ought not to have to live in that mess.”

Here we go again. This conversation occurs so regularly that I don’t even sweat it anymore. I look around the table, but suddenly everyone has become interested in their food, as if they had been famished for weeks.

“Granny,” my voice rises a notch with aggravation, “Poor Brent is perfectly capable of washing a few dishes and folding some laundry if it bothers him bad enough.”

The snort from my father at the head of the table tells me that this tact was probably not the right one to take. Apparently, it was the bone Granny was waiting for, and she grabs it like a starving dog.

“That boy works hard every day. He doesn’t want to come home to a messy house and have to worry about straightening up. If you can’t keep your house in order, maybe you ought to get rid of some of that other stuff that keeps you busy.” Education is only important for the additional money that it will bring into my household.

And there it is. The one-ton elephant in the room. My granny loves to stay on my case about the state of destruction that is my house. I blame it on the three mini-tornadoes that live there, but somehow I am the one that falls short because the clothes are piled on the couch instead of folded neatly and put away, or maybe the dishes found their way to the sink but never made it to the dishwasher. Each face at the table bears the same expression, not sympathy, not understanding. Is it agreement? As I look around, it strikes me that the woman in this room most revered, besides my grandmother, is my Aunt Shelly. She has no job and spends the majority of her time cleaning and organizing her

house. When she finishes, she goes to my grandmother's house to clean. Everything in Shelly's life revolves around the appearance that she is the happy homemaker. I can't compete with her. My full-time teaching job, two college degrees and the pursuit of a doctorate can not compete with the woman who spends all of her time labeling and sorting her material possessions in the quest for the perfect system.

"You know, Granny, I had to go to class this week on Tuesday, and I had to grade mid-terms for my juniors. Come on, I teach full-time, go to graduate school full-time, and somehow manage to raise three kids in the process; is it such a bad thing if my house is not neat and tidy?"

I know better than to ask that question. Everything else I accomplish is secondary to falling short on the one duty expected of me. Her interrogation undermines all that I have accomplished.

"How do you think your husband feels having to come home to a clean house each day?"

"Well, Granny, I imagine that if it bothers him enough he will clean it up."

"You're lucky that boy stays with you. Your Granddaddy sure wouldn't have put up with a messy house. I worked and still came home to cook and look after the kids; it sure wasn't like Ed helped me."

"Well, Brent understands. He helps a lot, and doesn't get mad if it is not done. He's even been known to help me clean up and it never caused him any major malfunction to his manhood, as far as I know."

“Granny, I don’t care if my house is clean. I don’t care. I don’t care. When I get home, I play with the kids, fix a bite of something, and after everyone else sleeps, I work on my own work; if I miss some housework here or there, so be it. ”

I may as well just slap her face, for the look she gives me is wrought with disdain. She gets over it, most of the time. I’ll get the house clean, and then I’ll call her so she can come look. I guess I’ll get started this afternoon; I’ve got another paper due, but it’ll have to wait. Some things have to be rectified before my guilty conscience can concentrate on schoolwork, besides Brent will be easier to get along with when the house is clean. Even though he never complains, it bothers him that I am not a better homemaker. I don’t let it bother me too much. I know if it bothers him bad enough, he’ll get up and clean it, or at least help. Somehow, this knowledge edges me with self-reproach.

This conversation repeats itself at least every few weeks as we congregate at Granny’s table. When Momma looks at me and shakes her head, I just drop the subject and let Granny ramble on until she finds another unwitting target. Today it is my sister, who has unwittingly opened herself up to scrutiny by showing up for lunch on the weekend when her kids were staying with her ex-husband.

“Erin, I don’t know how you stand to send your babies out to that man. There’s no telling how mean he is being to them.”

We’ve been down this road before also. Nothing good ever comes of it, but Granny relentless pursues this matter. Brent, who normally keeps a low profile to stay out of the firing range, decides to venture a peace offering.

“Now, Granny, you know that he is their daddy. He’s not going to mess them babies up.”

“Hmmp, he sure didn’t take any time with them when he was living with them full-time. What makes you think he’s gonna be any better? You know he’ll just let that crazy mother of his take them while he does his own thing. Babies need to be with their mamas.”

“Some days, I’d like a break from mine.”

Now, I knew better than to say that. You can see bodies tense in anticipation. I don’t care. Sometimes it is just enough to be the voice of dissidence, even if this is a battle that is never going to be won.

“That’s a fine thing for you to say. What if something happened to those babies while they were gone? How would you feel? And you not even in church and taking them babies to church! I pray every day that you get your heart right and see about them babies. How are they going to know what is right and wrong if you don’t have them brought up in church?”

“Granny, you don’t think I can teach my kids right from wrong? I think I have done a pretty good job without the influence of the church.”

This is a conversation that will quickly set me at odds with everyone, and I know it. Granny knows it too, and she won’t pursue it here. It would give the others too much ammunition against me. While it is fine from her to personally attack me, no one else is allowed. That is the way she works. She stays on the warpath to keep us on the straight and narrow, but we are not allowed to criticize one another without her coming to defend the beleaguered soul. Is it a fair tradeoff? Sure, I know underneath all of her quips and gripes that she admires the road I have taken. She will never tell me verbally, but I know.

She tells me when she asks me what kinda “doctoring” degree am I working on so that she can go back to work and tell the ladies at the factory. She tells me when she comments how glad she is that I work and contribute income to my family. Most importantly, she never tells me that she thinks I am wrong for not going to church; she just lets me know that she believes it is important for all of us to be there. Religion has been hard on her, but she still clings to her faith. It is what religion has done to the females in my family that forces me to turn my back on it. Neither my mother or my grandmother can completely come to terms with my break with the church. There are lots of days that I still feel guilty myself. It is not a break with faith, just a break with religion. That is a concept that my family will not understand. For them, church is faith – inseparable and unquestionable.

Church is the faith that insists that women take supporting roles behind their men. When I get angry with Brent, it is my mother who reminds me that the man is the head of the household.

“Why?”

She gives me the look that clearly demonstrates her refusal to accept my angst. “Young lady, the *Bible* clearly states that the man is the head of the household. The woman is supposed to care for the family and the husband will provide.”

“But, Mama, what about personal worth? How can I negate the fact that I have a brain and the ability to reason? Am I just supposed to allow myself to follow blindly without question?”

“What is there to question? It’s pretty black-and-white. Obey your husband. It really makes life a lot simpler. Besides, Brent is so easygoing and good that you ought to be happy you have him.”

“Did you ever think that he should be happy he has me?”

“You’re not the easiest girl in the world to live with.”

There is never any reason or logic to the blind faith that permeates this life. To question is to actively rebel. I have learned to keep my thoughts private, perhaps this intense repression is what leads me to feel such a dichotomous existence.

It is as it was.

The nuances fade from shade to shade, but it’s still country music on the airwaves. Skynard is Skynard whether it’s on an MP3 or an 8 track. Taste is passed down from one generation to the next; youthful dissidence creeps in, but never completely supersedes the lasting effects of family influence. We are so carefully crafted that we can’t separate ourselves from our place; an insistent guilt creeps in to remind us to tailor our behavior to that which we know to be true. How aggravating it becomes to persistently maintain second-class citizenship because it is as it always has been and always should be.

Who can we blame?

I get the idea it goes back awhile.

Watching the years go by in shades of degradation heightens the awareness inherent from my awakening. Yet, the strange dichotomy that springs from this life can’t be negated by the realization of new truths. Even the simple conversations with my

spouse, one whom listens and supports my newfound reality, remind me of where I am and who we are.

“So, yesterday at work I was helping Jeff set up an ActiveBoard in a teacher’s classroom. We needed to move a stand from another classroom, and he would not even let me help him tote it. Can you believe that? He acted like it would have been a blow to his manhood!”

His answer rather surprises me, “You don’t get it. I know that you are all women’s lib and all, and I just let you go with that, but a Southern man does not see things the way you do.”

His soft-spoken earnestness leads me to understand that I need to listen to the pleading note in his voice. He wants me to recognize the importance of what he says.

So, I take the bait, “Really. . . please, enlighten me.”

He fumbles delicately around the words, trying to say what he means without immediately setting my teeth on edge. “The Southern male sees females as delicate – something to be protected. It would have been an insult to you for him to let you help.”

“What if I don’t want to be frail or protected?”

The exasperation bursts through his exhale, “Look, it makes him less of a man to have your help. A man is supposed protect the female – not because she can’t, but just so that she will not have to. We know that ya’ll can do things for yourself – like open your car doors for instance (and I know you like it when I open your door), but we want to coddle you – protect you – keep you like the flower that you are.”

This is the problem, and he won’t see it for wanting it to be the way it is - one side needs recognition as capable and the other wants an incapacitated partner. How can you

condemn someone who just wants to take care of you? How can you have an identity when being took care of means letting someone else make the important decisions for you. All in the name of protecting the Southern feminine innocence. In the end, you end up being protected from yourself – from any real thought or decisive action that might allow you to forge a personal identity.

## CHAPTER 5 – ROCKIN’ CHAIRS AND REDNECK BOYS

“It is also true that the telling of the story can be empowering, validating the importance of the speaker’s life experience” (Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 2).

The first time I truly recognized the limitations of my place, I was twelve years old. The day, a warm explosion of honeysuckle and pink azaleas, found me perched on my grandparent’s front porch with my parents, uncle, grandmother and grandfather. I loved to listen to the grown-ups conversations, especially on days like this one when they were spinning yarns about growing up. Of course, I endured their observations on how great my childhood was compared to each one’s own upbringing [uphill to school (both there and back), ten miles, no shoes, in the dead of winter], but I took solace in my grandmother’s observation that my mother did not get along with her siblings as well as mom liked to claim she did when she was reprimanding my younger brother, sister and myself for our frequent scuffles. Since my parents subscribed to the maxim that children should be seen and not heard, I lurked silently on the outskirts of the conversation, relishing the stories passed on by my elders and commenting only when I was directly asked a question. It was one of these questions posed to me by my grandmother that directly opened my eyes to the natural entrapment of females in this society. My grandmother asked me about a book that I was reading. I no longer remember the name; it could have been any one of the countless books that I carried around with me during my childhood. At any given time, I might be found in a corner immersed in the fantastic reality of Nancy Drew or Frodo and Company. My presence at any conversation never failed to recognize what my relatives termed a strange affinity for print materials. The innocent query of my grandmother resulted in my uncle’s astute observation that I should

not waste my time reading. His rationale rested on the premise that females did not need to be able to read and write since their fundamental duty in life was to provide a happy home for their husband and children; his general observation was that reading, especially reading those trashy romance novels that he adamantly swore all women read, caused women to neglect their primary responsibilities. I looked to my parents to ascertain that I was destined for more than just a life of indentured servitude, but they seemed to acquiesce to my uncle's ideas. I felt betrayed. From my earliest memory, I had believed that I could achieve any goal through education. Now, I recognized the confining expectations of those I held so dear. In retrospect, I realize that I should not have been surprised at their reactions; in fact, their actions, reactions and ways of thinking in terms of traditional male/female roles were blatantly clear. I have found that the train of thought that Clark (in Brown, 1990) recognized in the black Southern male mentality also permeates white male thinking. Brown (1990) reminisces on what Clark felt, "I found all over the South that whatever the man said had to be right. They had the whole say. The woman couldn't say a thing. Whatever the men said would be right, and the wives would have to accept it" (p. 80). My own mother spent years in subservience to her husband and her children. Because she stayed home for many years and later worked low-wage jobs, she had to ask for the necessary funds to run a household with three kids. With my dad, it was never just a simple matter of asking for money. She had to explain her need, and then grovel for a while. Finally, he would begrudgingly hand her the money with the admonition that she better use it wisely. Every dollar cost her a bit of integrity. I promised myself that I would avoid the trap of being entirely dependent on anyone. This knowledge fueled my desire to never entrap myself to the expectations held by my family

and I determined early on that I would leave my family community and venture out into the larger world where I could find equality. When I turned eighteen, I left to go to college; however, four years later I felt compelled by an internal need to return to the place from which I flew to settle down into a mirror image of my parents and grandparents. I felt secure in my education and convinced myself that my life was different. It is probable that my awakening would never have occurred, except for two things. The first thing is my love of literature. Through literature I witnessed realities highly relieved from my own. They helped me envision different truths. A foray into the world of multicultural literature helped me envision a reality separate, different, and intrinsically valid. Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1982), Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1989), and Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) generated glimpses into realities that demonstrated the vastness of a world of which I had seen very little. The second thing that extended my horizons was the Curriculum Studies Ed.D. program at Georgia Southern. This program enlightened my thinking on ideas such as education, religion, and society. Using the realization provided by these two sources, I embraced the opportunity to explore the limiting effects of place.

My story is a story of a place and a people. This way of life I celebrate and abhor, dichotomized by my inability to reconcile these two emotions. Trapped in the confines of place, identities are created. Envision a mindset – a way of thinking, feeling and believing – and a sense of community that prohibits escape by continuously drawing one into the web of family. To be born here is to be inextricably linked, marked, and channeled into roles molded through decades and generations.

What in a place is so powerful that it creeps into one's soul? Every fiber of the place becomes home, and anywhere else fails to compare. For me, this place is a small community called Graham. It is located between two rural South Georgia towns – Hazlehurst and Baxley. These two towns, neither of which boasts much more than a Wal-Mart and a couple of fast food restaurants, are metropolitan areas compared to the stop-light that is downtown Graham. Our family community lies several miles from Graham, in the heart of corn and cotton fields and backwoods forests. Once the paved road ends, family begins. My paternal grandfather's parents provided the land that provided the roots for subsequent generations. Within minutes from the original home site of my great-grandfather resides several generations of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I live within walking distance of my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and my siblings. Each family domicile is protected by the buffering of trees and fields that separate one family from the next. There is a sense of privacy as I set in my yard and look out at the rustling trees and hear the calls of a whippoorwill. A sense of seclusion rests easy on my shoulders, until the phone rings and my grandmother inquires as to the identity of the people driving the white car that left my house around ten o'clock the previous evening. Then, I remember the watchful eyes and gossiping tongues of those who I have chosen to surround my self. In retrospect, I felt drawn back to this community when I exited college. I could not maintain my identity and sense of self in any other place. Yet, coming home and having a language to refute the ideology of repression and subjugation that currently exist in this place has made my existence fraught with tension.

At the crux of my perceived identity stands four generations of females who understand the limitations of their roles in a social structure that fails to recognize their

innate worth. There stands a juxtaposition of quiet strength - a hidden strength - and innate subservience created by the identity of female in this society. These women from whom I draw my identity run families, work, raise kids and husbands, yet their personal expectations are limited by a sense of self created by their place. They accept/choose a subservient role as the natural state of affairs. I find myself amazed by their stories. I am immersed in the reality of my South; the stereotypical South that so often portrayed is nowhere to be found. White, columned plantation houses are as foreign to me and mine as the ruins of ancient Greece; they are simply stories read in a fantasy. The stereotypical character in Southern literature seems anomalous to my story. And there is a story here in these backwoods frame homes that is worth telling. It is a story of women who work full-time jobs, care for their children, fix meals for their families (and often fix their husbands' plates and deliver it to the table), and still answer for every behavior to their master-husband – the God-given head of the house. I need to explore the foundations that create a sense of self that promotes subservient behavior stemming from the unique merging of familial expectations, commonly exposed fundamental religious doctrines, and cultural expectations. Using narrative inquiry, I want to capture the thoughts, feelings and motivations of three generations of females from my family in order to analyze the limiting effects of place.

#### Where I Always and Never Belong

“I can't explain the why, but I can tell you the how.”

*The Bluest Eye* - Toni Morrison

Life in Graham, Georgia has not changed much in the past several decades. Time passes slowly here; the most noticeable changes occur in the makes and models of the

vehicles, although even those changes occur at a far less noticeable rate than in the world outside the dirt road that marks the boundary of the community. This world occupies a time and space that operate of the fringes of reality – disconnected from the hustle and flow that has clearly left this forgotten place in a time reminiscent of days long gone. Assuredly, there exists inherent perks to the easy, simple life that exists on these country roads. Life unwinds in a lazy country day. Kids play in the winding road with little fear of the unknown. Childhood is a time of adventure and exploration on the winding paths that trail through the deep woods and along the overgrown creek banks. However, trapped in the shade of the stately oaks that shelter our domiciles rests a subversive danger that coils around each one with a deadly grip. In one form or other it manifests itself in every being that grows up on these dusty lanes, sparing neither male nor female. It insists upon the marginalization of one-half of every family unit – the female. There are preconceived notions in this place/community/family about what it is to be female and there are limitations placed on the daughters, sisters, wives by the males and by each other that constrains one's idea of what it is to be a woman. Female roles have changed little over the decades that have witnessed advances in female roles in society at large. I intend to explore through narrative inquiry the idea of what it is to be a woman according to three generations of females who grew up under the debilitating confines of this community and examine the juxtaposition of strength and subservience that exists in these women as they tackle their careers and their families with a determination to protect and serve.

While time has left this community relatively locked in the trappings of the 1950s, there are certain effects that could not be staved off. First, and probably the most

influential, stems from the changing demands of the work world. Taking root during the early nineteenth century, when women were needed to supplement the work force that had been vacated as men went to war, women began to infiltrate the ranks of the employed. My grandmother was one of these women who worked in Brunswick, Georgia as a welder in a shipyard. I look at photos of a dark-haired girl with laughing eyes in front of a large hanger where she hung off the sides of ships to insert rivets, and I imagine the inner steel that led this woman to grab up her rivet gun and go to work. While this trend of obtaining outside employment somewhat dissipated when the men returned, it resurged when a capitalistic desire to have things began to demand two incomes to support one's family, instead of just the traditional male-supplemented household. Women began contributing to the financial stability of the household, yet remained bereft of any of the decision-making power that innately belonged to the male head-of-the-house. My mother was one of these women. She spent the early part of my childhood at home with her three children, but as the demands of our household budget grew, she was forced to seek employment in the work force. Her contributions to the family income were meager, as she often worked for minimum wage, and her spending was monitored closely by my father's determination to keep her as dependent on him as possible. Weis (2004) describes similar unrest in traditional in *Class Reunion*. The same angst that she represents among the working class in the steel town exists as the stereotypical roles of male and female are strained and threatened. Certainly, working class creates a strong imprint on the identity that exists in this rural Georgia community. Money is a day-to-day, paycheck-to-paycheck concern. It is the issue of money that I have felt to be the dividing factor when I set in a classroom, determined to find success through education.

The higher my education advanced, the more I left behind individuals of similar background and experience. Suddenly, I was able to recognize what Falk (2004) describes that, “There is a dogmatism . . . that makes individuals (and groups) block out, or be unwilling to consider, the world in its full complexity.” That fear of the other permeated my family; they did not want to listen or accept ideas of change. I began to unravel the complex system of legitimacy – a righteousness of race, place, and sex - that I had held from infancy. Yet, as I sit in a doctoral program, I feel far removed from the others whose background and understandings can not reconcile with the ones I have experienced. I laugh along when redneck jokes are made, but I understand the simple thrills that mud-bogging, four-wheeler racing, and tractor-pulls inspire in hard-working people who seek a release from the harsh realities of their lower-class existence. Conversely, as I further my education, I find it harder to face the truths that I have lived as a member of my community. I become hesitant in both academia and at home. It is this implicit discomfort that leads me to this study. I intend to seek stories of the women in my family to determine how they were created/molded by place. I want to examine the preconceived notions of female and the South and juxtapose reality against stereotypical figures. Also, I want to examine the evolution of the females through the generations to determine how the idea of female has evolved to fit the needs of the changing world and what factors (such as religion and society) enabled or prohibited positive change in terms of accepting equality.

#### Where I Come From Ain't Where I'm Headed

Caught between two worlds – academia and the backwoods roots of my upbringing – I find myself angered by so much. I am angry at the fact that my mother's

defeated persona stems from years of marginalization under the rule of my father. I am angry that my grandmother, due to years of servitude to her husband and children, feels worthless without the unconditional attention of her children. I am angry that my feminineness limited my possibilities in the eyes of my parents, thereby limiting my view of my own capabilities. I am angry that I can't break with a world that directly victimizes women. I am angry that when I sit in a college classroom, I feel acute embarrassment about my background and all of its trappings, many of which I still hold dear. I am afraid that my own children will become ensnared in this environment and repeat the cycle. How can a place be so powerful as to inculcate itself as a part of one's identity? I must find a way to overcome the idea that to be feminine is to be subservient and unworthy.

#### Escape into Literature – Finding New Realities and Truths

Growing up in oblivion predisposed me for a harsh reality check when I hit the real world. The first chink in the armor of my childhood occurred when I was an undergraduate, and I first read Kate Chopin's novella *The Awakening*. The reading of that novel instilled in me an unrest that lingered with me over the next several years. I did not get it. The main character, Edna Pontellier, undergoes a series of experiences in which she challenges the societal norms for females during the Victorian times. She has an affair and ultimately decides to kill herself instead of living a life that could never be her own. I understood the logic behind her decision. But I never understood how she could betray her children (and her husband – I felt he was also a victim.) It took several years and many graduate courses for me to finally comprehend the magnitude of this story. In my mind, her value as a mother and wife still superseded her value as an individual. Finally, I understood that a life lived on any terms other than one's own is not a real life

at all. This realization helped illuminate the marginalization of females that was so prevalent around me, but that operates on such a systematic level that it remains unnoticed by both the oppressed members of society and the oppressive members of society.

There is a perception of the Southern female, passed down from generation to generation both through familial expectations, societal preparation, religious inculcation, and through the portrayal of Southern females in literature and television that denotes a limited perception of who Southern females can and should be. This perception stresses traditional gender behaviors that effectively manipulate women into roles subservient to the males in their lives. Critical Feminist Theory helped me realize the subjugation and imbedded racism and sexism inherent in the crux of my early existence. Critical Feminist Theory helped me explore the relevance of (1) class, (2) place (specifically the South), (3) race and (4) gender roles and gender identity development. With growing unrest and a sense of sadness at the warped sense of “virtues and morals” that I embraces, I analyzed the bonds that typical Southern society places on females that prohibit effective growth and development in relation to the South as a defining part of identity and in the quest for “traditional” values and behaviors.

Critical Feminist Theory dominates the driving force behind this issue. Studying the interplay of male/female roles and female subservience denotes an integral part of the study. Also, ideas from Critical Theorists were pivotal in forwarding my enlightenment about class and place. Using the ideas of authors such as Maxine Greene (1995), Nel Noddings (1992), bell hooks (2000), William Ayers (2004), Lois Weis (2004), Joan Wink (2005), William Pinar (2004) and Paulo Freire (2000), I explored the current avenues of

societal restraints for Southern females that lurk in the traditional patriarchal arrangement of the home, the fundamental religious values of the area, and the arrangement of the curriculum in schools.

*I Am this Place - Class and the Southern Female*

Personal experiences that relate so intensely to where I came from lead me to reflect on the words of Greene (1995), “We are more likely to uncover or be able to interpret what we are experiencing if we can at times recapture. . . some awareness of our own backgrounds” (p. 52). My educational experience looked similar to every other student that lived in my county during my school years. There was one school system in the county which consisted on one elementary school (grades K-2), one middle school (grades 3-5), one junior high school (grades 6-8), and one high school (grades 9-12). There were less than 1400 students within the entire school system. There were no other schools in the county (including private schools). When I graduated from high school, I was second in my class. I had operated efficiently and effectively in the traditional school setting, like Ayers (2004) describes, “The student in an authoritarian setting is not expected to think much or discuss much, to contradict or to contest – she listens and takes in, she receives a world predigested and interpreted, meted out in discrete bits from others who, she is assured, always know better” (p. 7). I was excited about entering college and leaving South Georgia. Because I had good grades and a decent SAT score, I was accepted to every college that I applied to (because there was a processing fee for applications, I only applied to three – the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, and Troy State University.) When I finally set down to decide what college I would attend, there seemed little question in my mind. More than anything, I wanted to be an architect. My

acceptance in the School of Architecture at Georgia Tech caused me much pleasure; I was so proud that I had been accepted. Yet, when I finally sent in my acceptance letter, there was little surprise that I would attend Troy State University. The other two schools were much too expensive for my family to afford, and the scholarships and financial aid offered by Troy State would pay for my tuition and living expenses. I never even considered the other two schools as realistic options; I just wanted to see if I could get in. The limitation of class was a reality that I had lived with for as long as I could remember. It took higher education to help me understand what McLaren (2005) so eloquently states, “A class involves, therefore, the alienated quality of the social life of individuals who function in a certain way within the system. The salient features of class – alienated social relation, place/function, and group- are all mutually dependent” (p. 127). There are so many factors that contribute to the identity that presents its face as class that work together so intricately that they are intricately entwined as seem on great entity. It seems strange to me to reflect upon the notion Gay (2000) recognizes as fallacious because it is one that I formerly held (and others still hold) that, “good teaching transcends place, people, time, and context. They content it has nothing to do with the class, race gender, ethnicity, or culture of students and teachers.” (p. 22). The creation of a class consciousness occurs, and this presence effects the day-to-day operations of an individual in countless situations. Now I am able to concede that I have been guilty of teaching a Eurocentric curriculum in methods pointedly geared towards a middle-class white audience. This recognition leaves me saddened, recognizing the tools and methods that I incorporated from the classroom stemmed from lived experience. Newfound knowledge allows for newfound guilt. Lucas (1999) quotes Jackman and Jackman’s description of

the complexity of class, “While socioeconomic distinctions provide the basis for class identification, it is also clear that class incorporates more than this. When asked what factors define class membership, most people name cultural factors, such as life-style and beliefs and feelings, as well as socioeconomic factors” (p. 119). As a first generation college student, my parents had warned me that there was no money for my education. My father was in the midst of a bankruptcy in an effort to save the family farm from a foreclosure caused by his brother’s gambling debts, so he offered no hope in terms of financial assistance. My parents and I had attended a financial aid workshop, but the terms and procedures thrown at us by the lady delivering the information sounded as foreign and confusing. Finally, my parents simply told me that getting through college, in terms of financial needs and paperwork technicalities, would be up to me. Certainly, “cultural capital” (Martin, 2002, p. 115), or the lack of it, played a part in my inability to navigate the waters of technical terms and bureaucratic documents [but I, like Martin (2002), wonder why we must “assume that the more cerebral has greater worth than the less cerebral” (p. 15)]. At seventeen, I was little prepared for the onslaught of decisions that had to be made in terms of financial aid, so I took the package that seemed least threatening. Troy State offered a full ride. I would exit with a degree that would not cost me anything. Since I lived in fear of debt because of my parents’ situation, I took this route. As I look back on this incident from my life, I realize how class helped shape my life in ways that seemed impossible to escape as I read Giroux and Giroux (2004), “Poor and minority youth who manage to survive the deplorable conditions of their K-12 education and still want to continue their schooling face skyrocketing college tuition

rates” (p. 203) that mirror the ones I faced in my decision to attend Troy State. However, Giroux continues to delineate the snowballing effect that the limited choices present,

Given such expenses, the same tiering in K-12 is visible at the post-secondary level, where a credential from a typical Ivy League university like Brown will open doors for its graduates in the Fortune 500 in the same way that a credential from a local community college will likely qualify one to join the ranks of overworked and underpaid laborers in the service sector” (P. 203).

Realistically, one can become a first generation college student and find that the job market one enters will never provide the means to anything more than a paycheck-to-paycheck reality as Aronowitz (2000) describes education as a “knowledge factory” that ensures, “Most postsecondary graduates enter the labor market as . . . subprofessionals in social work and nursing, elementary and secondary school teachers- ‘sub’ because their jobs do not ordinarily entail genuine autonomy in the performance of their work even if they require a formal license” (p. 9). Education for the sake of education fell by the wayside as education became the means to an end – seeking the elusive dream of a steady job and financial security. So I lived the view of education described by Weis (2004), “White working-class youth in high school at least verbally valued schooling for what they thought it could get them” (p. 98). The idea of valuing education because it can provide financial stability looms large in this time of economic upheaval; my educational experience centered around my search for financial stability, mirroring what Apple (2001) notes, “Any definition of freedom based on economic independence must by its very nature draw a line between those classes of people who have it (economic

independence) and those who do not” (p. 15). Education can simply become about training one’s way into an occupation.

In terms of class, education plays a large part in the marginalization of a large portion of American citizens who can’t afford private educations as Anyon (2006) notes that, “. . . subaltern groups in the United States (e.g., the working class, African-Americans, Latinos) rarely achieve equity without social power and that the surest way to such power is through public contestation and the social movements this activity can lead to” (p. 17) My personal awakening, inherent upon Critical Theory’s understanding that “education’s main purpose of the social integration of a class society could be achieved only by preparing most kids for an unequal future, and by insuring their personal underdevelopment” (Willis in Aronowitz and Giroux, 1993, p. 66), stirred within me a conscious passion for change. Certainly, if any group or individual intends to maintain the current status quo in society, then education must effectively promote the current system. Instead of promoting free-thinking and creative intelligences, the current regime in society seeks to shackle the minds of Americans by focusing on a standards-driven curriculum that ensures the manageability of students and negates the innate intelligence of these students. As I live with students who repeatedly face standardized tests full of material vastly removed from their lived experience, I remember the words of Macedo (1994), in an interview with Paulo Freire, denoting the drive to push students toward assimilation,

When curriculum designers ignore important variables such as social-class differences, when they ignore the incorporation of the subordinate cultures’ values in the curriculum, and when they refuse to accept and legitimize the

students' language, their actions point to the inflexibility, insensitivity, and rigidity of a curriculum that was designed to benefit those who wrote it. (p. 104)

Assuredly, this neglect of the students' realities and complexities plays out daily in the halls of many high schools in this country, much as Tyack (2003) contends that, "as school resources continue to reflect the gross inequalities of wealth and income in this country, major achievement gaps will persist between the prosperous and the poor, and too many students will continue to be . . . thoroughly trained in failure" (p. 126). In our small rural high schools, the students who demonstrate an inability to perform at the appropriate educational markers (the standardized tests that provide our statistical information) are minority students and students from the lower socio-economic class. Also, these students are the same ones that find themselves repeatedly in the principal's office for discipline infractions. These students are the students that have been targeted by the current administration at the school for remediation – help in reaching acceptable achievement levels on standardized tests. These students are pulled out of their elective classes (the only opportunity they have to take a class based solely on personal interest), and they are forced to sit in practice sessions where they answer standardized tests questions on the computer. Currently, this school doggedly pursues one main goal – passing the state standardized test. Students miss out of opportunities to experience what Patrick Finn [as quoted in Romano and Glascock (2002)] calls "Powerful literacy" (p. 10). Such literacy, described as perhaps the largest difference between the education provided in poor and working class schools and the education provided in middle and upper class schools, results when students take information and use the information to reflect and build upon. Instead of copying notes with the expectation of verbatim

regurgitation, students are allowed to imagine new possibilities and create new realities. The school that I attended (one that served a working class community) firmly adhered to the importance of pre-packed education. Drill and repetition were staples of the educational diet. I became so adept at this process that I almost lost the ability to think and create knowledge for myself. When I was working on my M.Ed., I would get aggravated when the teacher would assign group work. I firmly believed that I did not learn through group projects. I preferred to take notes from a lecture and then complete the test from the material. When I was required to complete projects that were open-ended, I often felt tense and anxious. I repeatedly would question the teacher to see if I was completing the assignment correctly. Now, I see how I was conditioned to need a “right” or “wrong” answer, recognized and lamented in *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations*(2003), by Weis and Fine. This pre-packaged education that students must endure succinctly pegged, “The distribution of knowledge is highly routinized. . .at no point is there any discussion, much less serious discussion, of the ideas or concepts embedded within the original materials” (p. 93). It is through this limited display of information that students’ minds and ideas are limited. From the first day in kindergarten, teachers prepare to shape children into the image of what a good student is perceived to be. With despair for the future, I recognize the four-year-old black student of whom Delpit (1995) writes, her intense descriptions of his repeated assertions of “I be’s fine” (p. 51) failing to adequately answer his teacher’s interrogation into his well-being for that day. Even at this early age, students are expected to drop mannerisms used at home to adopt unfamiliar behaviors in order to succeed at school, ultimately demonstrating that one way is better than the other. Students must obtain passing scores

to prove they retain an extensive knowledge of material appropriate for a high school graduate; they are accountable for their success. Inability to demonstrate acceptable levels of achievement often results in the idea that failure is deserved (Fine and Weis, 2003); after all, everyone had the same exposure to the material in their shared classrooms. The essence of contemporary schooling stems from the idea that students should be shaped using a mold whose dimensions are dictated through the use of curriculum standards and measured through standardized assessments. Everyone should be able to pass the same test because the school experience of each child is based on the same framework. Schooling becomes about assimilation, taking students from every walk of life and adapting them to the “American” way. On any given day during the school year, a tour down the halls of my school would present the typical picture of what most people expect a school to look like. The halls are quiet. The noise that emanates from the classrooms is also subdued, as if no one dares to disrespect the sanctity of the school. In fact, this may not be far from the truth as those who can not conform are banished to the throne of embarrassment outside the doors of the principal’s office. What I see in my small slice of reality, I realize to be elsewhere as Reynolds (2003) effectively notes the current tone and temperament of the educational system, “What once was an essence of being a child is now invalidated by the merciless march of mechanistic programs and the continual onslaught of prescribed pathways” (p. 46). The “hidden curriculum” (Wink, 2005, p.46) is effectively at work. My educational experience echoes with the stifling of possibilities mirrored as Wink (2005) describes the curriculum in elements that strongly resonates within the world,

The hidden curriculum can be seen in schools when little boys are called on more

than little girls, when only Eurocentric histories are taught, when teenage girls are socialized to believe that they are not good in math and sciences, when heroes but not heroines are taught, and when counselors track nonwhites to classes that prepare them to serve (p. 47).

In my case, I could add lower class to the nonwhites in terms of being tracked into a caste. My class being a constricting factor that created an inherent sense of inferiority, I rage against those practices currently in place that maintain the status quo, as Apple (2001) notes “Tracking returns in both overt and covert ways. And once again, black students and students in government-subsidized lunch programs are the ones most likely to be placed in those tracks or given academic and career advice that nearly guarantees that they will have limited or no mobility and will confirm their status as students who are “less worthy””(p. 92). One particular poignant memory from high school reminds me of how effectively lower class students can be relegated through another’s expectations. During my senior year, I was lurking in the hall outside of the guidance office when I was supposed to be in class when I heard two teachers conversing in the adjacent teacher’s lounge. They were discussing the senior honor graduates, and speculating on who would receive the Star Student Award (for highest SAT score) that year. Several names were mentioned, one of which was mine. My chances were offhandedly dismissed; in part (according to one teacher who had never taught me,) due to my connection with a family that had no financial portfolio of which to brag. In our little town, money was everything, and everyone knew those who had it and those who did not. Ironically, I already knew that I was the Star Student for that school year. Anger and embarrassment suffused throughout every fiber of my being about things that I could not control. I found myself

ashamed of who I was and where I came from. This juxtaposition of my home and the education occurred repeatedly throughout my formative years on both fronts. I remember repeated efforts on behalf of my eighth grade English teacher (a refined and genteel woman) to rid my vocabulary of “ain’t” and “ya’ll.” When her efforts were successful, I would hear derogatory comments from home about my educated (i.e. uppity) vocabulary. At an early age, I became adept at navigating the waters between the two worlds - home and academia. When I read *Out of Place* by Said (1999), I found the articulation of my dilemma:

All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate and even a language. There was always something wrong with how I was invented and meant to fit in with the world of my parents and four sisters.

Whether this was because I constantly misread my part or because of some deep flaw in my being I could not tell for most of my early life. Sometimes I was intransigent, and proud of it. At other times I seemed to myself to be nearly devoid of any character at all, timid, uncertain without will. Yet the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place. (p. 3)

In either company – at home or in the world of academia – I existed without a concrete persona; the ebb and flow of my being shifted as I drifted between the two worlds, often criticizing one reality while steeped in the other. Unable to reconcile the two realities created a schizophrenic existence that prohibited my from honoring and valuing anything. In retrospect, I reflect on my educational experience and realize how fortunate I am to achieve two degrees and be in the pursuit of a third.

Navigating the waters between two worlds can metaphorically describe the process advocated by critical theorists in an effort to bring social justice to an educational system sorely lacking in equality. When I sit at my family table and hear tales of bigotry, homophobia, and outdated sexist ideas touted as the moral code, I realize the need for change in this world. My education instills the desire for change. Conversely, I feel like a traitor when I try to use my education to rid my world of its deep-rooted hatred. So I try to save the drowning person who lashes out in confusion and fear, pulling me down in the surrounding wake. The idea of “border-crossing” (Giroux, 1992; Anzaldua quoted in Wright, 2000) demands the creation of a new narrative that throws away preconceived notions of place, class, and identity and allows one to negotiate through experience and self, and like Wright(2000) says, “Metaphoric spaces materialize into places” (p. 210), akin to the area that Reynolds and Webber (2004) call the “line of flight” (p. 3), a negating area for the need for any one discourse to be the ruling power. So I am rallied when Pinar (2004) explains the hope that can exist,

That is why we believe in education; we see how powerfully schooling crushes it, and yet, still, there is education, despite the schools. There is God despite the church, justice despite the government, and love despite the family. We educators must prepare for a future when the school is returned to us and we can teach, not manipulate for test scores (p. 127).

Hope exists. To find the language that has eluded me I turn to Freire (2002), who purports the essential dialogue that can be the impetus that will wreak social havoc and provide the necessary change. Through dialogue and critical thinking, the inherent worth of the oppressor and the oppressed becomes indisputable. When I think of my own

education, I understand what Freire (2002) outlines as the current method of depositing and withdrawing information into and from the student as the means to maintaining the status quo. His fervent demands to abolish this system stand as a calling point for all who understand that class (or any power issue) should not be able to create such division between people who are ultimately members of the human race, regardless of their differences. The success of the oppressed can come through the components of Critical Feminist Theory and Critical Theory. Seeking to implement the precepts of Critical Theory into my world, I turn to Martusewicz (2001) as she explores Fraser's presentation of Critical Theory's attention to "the tension between equality and difference, class politics and cultural politics, and. . . competing interests and identity differences" (p. 107). In uplifting one culture's values and beliefs over all other members of society, the current system short-changes every member through depriving each one of the "opportunity to discover their educational possibilities (Martin, 2002, p.19). By realizing and embracing the possibilities of multiple realities transcending the bonds of class, a great host of opportunities becomes obtainable for those individuals who dreamed of little more than life's necessities.

#### *Coming Home Again - The Importance of Place*

The mantra of my youth was, "I can not wait till I am old enough to leave this place!" And I did. When I turned eighteen, I left my small community and moved to Troy, Alabama – to my quaint notions it seemed a veritable metropolis. Ironically enough, it took only four years to determine that I needed to return to my childhood community to live out the rest of my days. I arrived home with the same intensity with which I left; however, I was heralding the opposite notion, "There is no place like home."

Experiencing the world in duo-realities leads me to Falk (2004)'s observation, "To experience the world as a social thing is to experience it through a set of lenses. These lenses are a composite of the social, historical, and cultural experiences of an individual – but always, always grounded in a place and a sense of it" (p. 17). My place had become an integral part of my identity to such an extent that I felt compelled to return to the structure that had created my existence/my persona for the first two decades of my life. However, I could not resign myself to assimilating into the culture of feminine subjugation. My lived situation embodies Hesch's (1995) expression of Giroux and Simon's (1989) definition of cultural reproduction, "Practices that are culturally reproductive are often reflections of ideas and attitudes inherited through the culture of the family, kin, or social group" (p. 104). In essence, the experience of the "living conversation" (Martin, 2002, p. 26) is what ascertains that one's surroundings become etched in the fiber of one's psyche and this innate dialogue lead me to seek out those who were responsible for my way of viewing the world. Life becomes a state of existence framed in passivity as Freire (1998) recognizes this mode of "being with" the world,

Our being is a *being with*. So, to be in the world without making history, without being made by it, without creating culture, without a sensibility towards one's own presence in the world, without a dream, without song, music, or painting, without caring for the earth or the water, without using one's hands, without sculpting or philosophizing, without any opinion about the world, without science or theology, without awe in the face of mystery, without learning, instruction, teaching, without ideas on education, without being political, is a total impossibility. (p. 58)

As members of our community we become entwined in where we are as much as what we are. Person becomes an extension of place. Through writing our place, we discover who and what we are, and as Robison (1997) states, “. . . writing ‘our side’ is . . . a hegemonic project that can tell us a great deal about how cultural difference was perceived and culturally deployed. . .” (p. 55). To be immersed in a situation often renders one incapable of recognizing the demarcations created by the situation. Through writing, reading, and exploration of new and different spaces, new understandings can be created. One learns to understand, recognize, and sometimes even manipulate the borders created by place and space, as I envisioned when I read Soja (1989),

There was a complex and problem-filled interaction between the production of human geographies and the constitution of social relations and practices which needed to be recognized and opened up to theoretical and political interpretation. This could not be done by continuing to see human geography only as a reflection of social processes. The created spatiality of social life had to be seen as simultaneously contingent and conditioning, as both an outcome and a medium for the making of history. (p. 58)

A new dialogue and new recognition leads to a demand for reorganization of the existing structure to allow the new identities to exist harmoniously in a pre-existing world. As I struggle against the current strictures of my world, I take encouragement as Provenzo (2005) articulates questions that would force the reworking of the structures that generate the stereotypical foundations of place:

Why have certain groups historically had privileges over others? How has this worked out in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity? How has this contributed to

structural inequality in our culture? What problems are evident in our culture as a result of inequality? How can inequality best be addressed? (p. 63)

These questions will not allow one to rest on the complacency of tradition. How can they when the traditions one has built upon are inherently flawed? To participants in a community, the ability to explicitly note the problematic customs and understandings of one's truths does not come automatically. Sometimes even the obvious is not so to one steeped in the truths of their place. Long I slumbered in my oblivion until awakened by authors like Wink (2005) who understands the complexities that pave our path, "Race, class, and gender are variables that determine your path: The superhighway or the dirt road" (p. 53). As teenagers, my sister and I were expected to maintain a clean household and prepare dinner daily. We did not think anything of our roles. We did not question why our brother (who, as the youngest child, was only a couple of years behind the two of us girls) had no domestic expectations required from him. We did not even have the realization to feel degraded at the menial tasks that we were deemed suited for while the only son was deemed too important for such tasks. The absence of a critical dialogue enables subjugation. This subjugation of the other by those who feel the inherent superiority of their Eurocentric culture permeates the Southern lived experience; for me, the importance of transcending the lines of race and class are noted as McLaren (1996) states,

The site of translation is always an arena of struggle. The translation of other cultures must resist the authoritative representation of the other through a decentering process that challenges dialogues which have become institutionalized through the semantic authority of state power. Neither the

practice of signification nor translation occurs in an ideological void, and for this reason educators need to interrogate the sign systems that are used to produce reading of experience. (p. 135)

Any dissension from the current status quo is met with distrust and hostility. ‘Why upset a system that has operated effectively for decades?’ is a question that I often hear in my struggle to create a dialogue for social justice. Another common comment, ‘That is how we operate in our corner of the world,’ speaks strongly of the sense of place that inhabits the constituents of the community. Change can only be for the worse in the eyes of those who view their way of life as threatened. A dated ideal of gender roles exists in the South: Pinar (2004) articulates the traditional male role that has cemented its existence post-Civil War, ‘He {the white Southern male} would uphold the ante-bellum promise of protection in return for the masculine presumption of superiority’ (p. 116). The South, especially the rural South, is quickly being outpaced by other areas of the country. Sexist and racist attitudes are as slow to change.

The juxtaposition of the entrenched traditional views of this rural culture plays against my stringent need for social justice. Through exploration of my experience in this place, I desire to uncover counteractive measures to the static nature of this existence. My personal journey pulls from the words of Pinar (1994) as he notes, ‘By focusing upon the individual, it is possible to reclaim the abstractions and begin to extricate oneself from capture by ideology. One’s voice becomes discernable. By working regressively, progressively, analytically, synthetically, one begins to reclaim oneself from intellectual and cultural conditioning’ (p. 108).

I felt compelled to make my own mark as Taylor (1989) describes, “there was an urgent need on the part of many women to write private documents to record their extraordinary experiences” (p. 11). Through exploration of my past through writing and thinking, I seek to create a dialogue for the realization of a future steeped in the ideals of social justice. This battle will not be quick or painless. As I grow through what Pinar (2004) articulates as the “study of relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35), I can not ignore the necessity of sharing this conversation with those who created me. My endeavor to instill a dialogue within my family and my extended family had met with angst and resistance for several reasons. The battle is an uphill endeavor, as Boler and Zembylas (2006) recognize, “The comfort zone reflects emotional investments that by and large remain unexamined because they have been woven into the everyday fabric of what is considered common sense” (p. 111). When I seek to question the entrenched subjugation of the wives and daughters of my community, I am not with disdain and amusement from the men and open hostility from the women. The men view my rants on equality with amusement. Since I am only a woman, my opinion inherently lacks value and validity. Let me rave to the highest mountain, in their eyes I will ever be “only” a female. Sadly, it is the women that I wish would heed my admonitions of their personal worth; yet, they are the ones that aggressively dismiss me. How can they validate my views without negating their own existence? Do they appear imbecilic for participating in an existence that I deem unworthy? I sincerely hope not. All I can wish to obtain for each member of the community is Freire’s (2002) “conscientization” to allow for the dissolution of the current bonds that enslave the minds and bodies of Southern females.

### *Trashin' Racism*

If you kick a dog often enough, it's going to cringe when you come near it. The actions become reflexive, ingrained, automatic. So it is with the ever-present reality that is racism in the South. Racism's subversive presence simmers continuously beneath the surface, a certainty in a world ever-changing. Racism influences where you work, where you eat, how you live; it twists into all facets of this life without ever an articulation of the word. The racists here will swear that they have pure hearts, that no bigotry fuels their actions – racism so ingrained that it cannot recognize itself. Wrought within the Southern way are the very precepts that Ben Jelloun (1999) explains as racism, “. . . people have what are called prejudices. They judge others without knowing them. They think they know in advance what other people are like and if they're worthwhile or not” (p. 20). These words ring true in my rural South. There are stereotypes for every race, creed and color. The slur words for race are learned earlier than the politically correct monikers for the “others” that threaten the white world. Fear drives this hatred. The inherent fear of those who are different provokes a flight or fight response in white people of the rural South. They (white people) either seek to avoid contact altogether (flight) or provoke an altercation for the sake of difference and intolerance. There is no happy medium. There are clearly marked neighborhoods for black and white people; each neighborhood marked by characteristics as defining as the skin color. Small pockets of African-American rural communities in South Georgia are marked by poverty and need as clearly as any housing project. As a child, riding through these areas scared and fascinated me. The trailers, for there were few actual houses, were dilapidated and care-worn. Often there were young children playing in or near the road and groups of various ages draped along porches and

car hoods in various positions of repose. Riding through the “quarters,” as my father referred to them, lead me to internally conceptualize the notion that black people had less. Align this with the notion muttered by my father about the inherent laziness of black people and a racist is born. I lived what Ben Jelloun (1999) recognizes, “...children aren’t born with racist ideas. Usually a child repeats what his parents or relatives say...if your parents put you on guard against children of color, you’d behave differently” (p. 53). Racist notions are ingrained from the crib. As soon as a budding redneck enters kindergarten, he or she is admonished by parents and other adults to segregate himself or herself from others who are different. If my father picked me up from school and saw me playing with children of other races, he would discourage the behavior – belittling both the children or color and myself for choosing to play with them. I became a nigger-lover by association, and to my father that was worse than being black. To avoid such harsh censure, I learned early on to avoid any contact with minorities. My own inheritance is articulated as Segrest (1994) captures my dilemma,

What therapist would tell us to read history, would help us see how this fetishized racism circulates within white families? We wash it down with gin and violence. It surfaces as anger or depression, passed down and down and down, refracted for generations to children who inherit sometimes houses and land but always jumbles of terror and anger. (p. 4)

A birthright of hate and degradation bears little chance for the youth growing up in the South. The South’s legacy of hate manifests its presence in the problematic proclamations of “heritage, not hate” that surrounds the flag furor of Georgia and South Carolina. These cries rallied the young and old alike to frenzied heights of racist angst.

Bumper stickers with the “Let us vote” slogan and car tags with the controversial Georgia flag, or sometimes simply the Confederate battle flag itself, denote in Southerners’ minds a pride in the heritage of Southern history. Emphatic arguments ascertain that no malice resides in the hearts of those who promote the flag, but instead there rests only an adulation for history. Even those so thoroughly steeped in racism do not acknowledge it. Vocalization would make it so, as long as the words are denied then the racist actions are negated. Even family members, who hold no qualms about being racist, ascertain that their feelings about the flag do not stem from racist roots. Ironically, the African-American culture is blamed for the brouhaha over the flag; the argument being that black people try to stir up trouble where there is none. A blind and brazen racism is embraced by the rural South in such a virulent manner that it guides a way of life without the participants’ realization of its subversive influence. The history of the South is steeped in plantation houses and genteel manners, as Cash understands, as articulated in Pinar (2004), “argued that southerners retreated from the facts of their history to fictions and fantasies” (p. 95). Pinar then posits, “This phenomenon of denial and flight from reality involves, unsurprisingly, distortions in several spheres, distortions that undermine the South’s efforts to develop culturally, even economically” (p. 95). A great misconception exists in the minds of many residents of the South, especially the rural South, that overlooks the debilitating effects of racism and prejudice that permeates their actions. As a child, it was hard to reconcile the deep-rooted anger my parents, especially my father, held towards black people with the dusty, forlorn images of those dilapidated trailer parks perched out in the middle of nowhere – a land where souls could be tucked away out of

sight, out of mind. Bu the heavy blanket of racism was not an easy one to throw off, especially because of its many manifestations.

Racism in the rural South blankets all colors. Non-white is the other. Since black skin is the most prevalent, it becomes the target, but other races are not exempt. The recent influx of migrant workers into the area from Mexico gives rise to another set of slurs and prejudices. The white population laments the arrival of “spics and wetbacks” that come in and take over American jobs. These jobs so bemoaned are laboring jobs that many of those who are griping consider beneath themselves. The root of the problem rests in the darker skin, midnight hair, and melodic language that flows off their tongues in a rapid succession – leaving those leaden English-speaking tongues locked in confusion and unease. The first time I heard someone speaking Spanish in a store, my mother muttered, “Anybody in America ought to speak English.” That phrase resounds repeatedly through the collective conscious of my community. Sometimes a more telling phrase is uttered, “Anybody in America ought to speak American.” Fear of losing the white identity drives these people to negate those who look or sound different. This deep-seated fear serves well its purpose, as Pinar (2004) notes, “Poor whites have allowed their racial prejudice to keep them politically complacent. No matter how poor whites are, their view is that there remains a class underneath them. . .” (p. 106). I understand how this culture has allowed for the postulating of the poor whites in a position of privilege over poor African-Americans, and more recently poor Hispanics. There resides within poor rural Southerners an anger towards people whose skin color is different because of a systematic reliance that many of these poor African-American families have on welfare and Medicare. The general consensus within the mindset of lower-class people in the

rural South is that the poverty of the African-American is of their own making, and that if they did not rely on the welfare system then they would overcome their station in life.

This frame of thinking lead me through many years of my life, and there were two things that allowed for alternate possibilities which enabled me to understand the fallacies behind this train of thought. First, the lure of fictional literature generated uncomfortable possibilities about the reality and humanity of minorities that conflicted with my lived experience. Also, it was only after I reached the doctorate level that I began to actively question the construction of my reality in terms of race and racism due to my encounters with authors such as Martusewicz (2001), who explains the impact of education,

Pedagogy enacts translation as leaving home. Our pedagogical relations, in whatever context we may find them, create the energy needed to embark on the journey. Our interpretations, our questions, and our meaning making push us out across the given boundaries. Leaving home is a way to recommence, to embark again, on the inevitable search for passage toward more ethical and just ways of being in the world. With embarking, we enact a new series of events, a series of places and attachments, traces displaced, carried along, gathered up, a bouquet of homes. (p. 37)

First, I had to leave my place – both physically and metaphorically through literature - to envision the potential for other realities.

Living with this limited rationale of whiteness created conflicts for me as I began to explore beyond the boundaries of my place. First, my exploration started with literature. It is easy to demonize those who are different from you as long as you do not let them become human. When I learned from my love of literature was that the words

and phrases that flowed off of the page, twisting and winding their way into my subconscious, created alternate conceptions of what could and might be true. People that I had learned to shun and disdain became real to me for the first time. (So perhaps it is not surprising the inherent distrust of reading and literature of those whom I loved. The radical ideas that such literature sparked in me – tolerance, acceptance, racial equality – were heralded as by-products of trying to be too book-smart. Being a know-it-all was another disparaging title wielded to stunt intellectual growth and curiosity. In spite of an incessant need to please my father and be the “perfect” little girl, I could not throw down the literature that confounded me, educated me, and enlightened me. Reading Shange (1977) lead me to the depths of despair when her words breathed the breath of life into the images of blackness for me for the first time,

*/cuz i had convinced*

*myself colored girls had no right to sorrow/ & i lived  
& loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb/ allegedly  
for you/ but i know i did it for myself/  
i cdnt stand it  
i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time  
it's so redundant in the modern world. (p. 43)*

The confusion rolled inside me. Shange’s (1977) characters recognized their plight as citizens in a world that automatically links “sorry & colored” without just cause or even second thought. The language was not like mine, but the cadence and rhythm echoed with the distinct cadence of a honeyed drawl that I know all too well; the bitterness dripped from her words in sounds and syllables distinctly foreign and home all at once. I

recognize the accent. I recognize the epidemic of living through the desire of a man. How could I relate to the humanity and negate its very worth? The bitter pill began to knead and push at my sense, demanding that I feel its presence. This experience with literature lead me to explore the reality of those who had been “othered” by my world for so long that no one bothered to consider the demarcations of a world we could never fully comprehend. The authors let me in their world. My heart broke as Morrison’s (1987) *Beloved* allowed a glimpse into the heart and soul that enabled a subjugated people to find the strength to continue on,

It was in front of *that* 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her check, and felt for the first time the wide arms of her mother-in-law, who had made it to Cincinnati. Who decided that, because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tomgue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart. (p. 87)

After all has been stripped away – health, wealth, dignity – to find the strength of heart to never give up speaks of strength and inner fortitude unlike any I have every experienced. My tortured mind begins agonizing over the juxtaposition of my real-world stereotypes against these larger-than-life characters who have worked their way into my psyche, against my will and better judgment. Can I experience the degradation of debasement due to skin color? No, but through powerful text I can hurt and heal under the hands of a master story-teller. Rivers of words burn my soul, and I find weeping for the hurts of those who never were and who still are. Literature became my window to imagined places and unimaginable situations. Examinations of diverse racist situations made me further aware of the great discrepancy between my family’s, my father’s characterization

of minorities and the lived experience of those who were deemed so worthless. Hungry for new views, I embraced Silko's (1993) *Yellow Woman* who placed the emphasis on another race, however the story seemed eerily familiar.

"Where did you get the fresh meat?" the white man asked.

"I've been hunting," Silva said, and when he shifted his weight in the saddle the leather creaked.

"The hell you have, Indian. You've been rustling cattle. We've been looking for the thief for a long time.

The rancher was fat, and the sweat began to soak through his white cowboy shirt and the wet cloth stuck to the thick rolls of belly fat. He almost seemed to be panting from the exertion of talking, and he smelled rancid, maybe because Silva scared him. (p. 41)

Fear of those who are different should be disdained by my family; after all, my own grandmother was not readily accepted by everyone because of her distinctly Native American appearance and illegitimate status inherited from her unmarried Cherokee mother. For my grandmother, my father and his siblings to be imbued with such racism strikes a dissident chord in my psyche. Do my grandmother's actions that belittle others provide a panacea to the feelings of inadequacy that stem from her own background? Questions like this one began to form with every new text that I read. The hypocrisy leads me to feel uncomfortable in my own skin, but I was still unable to articulate a solution or even postulate a theory as to why things existed in their current state. The more I read and studied – both fiction and non-fiction, the more a schematic formed in my mind that diagramed the particular workings of race subtly entwined with sex. Poor

white men's ability to lord it over their white women and the entire black race provides a relief from their feelings of inadequacy in terms of their monetary deficiency. Black men have only black women on which to take out the repercussions of their (black men) own humiliation. It is the literature of black women such as Morrison (1987), Shange (1977) and Cleage (1995) that helped me envision the starkness of their reality in an effort for me to come to terms with my station in the ladder of race and racism. Cleage (1995) examines the volatile relationships between black men and women,

Minnie: He scares me sometimes. He gets so angry.

Fannie: You know who else had a terrible temper?

Minnie: Who?

Fannie: Daddy. You were too young to remember it, but he did. And Daddy was a good man, but he had a temper and sometimes it would get the better of him. Just like your Frank. . . Sometimes we have to be stronger than they are Baby Sister. We have to understand and be patient. (p. 51)

The intense relationships between the black male and female as portrayed in various literature lead me to believe that the anger trickles down from one layer of society to the next, leaving no soul unwounded.

Experiencing literature for social justice in my doctoral classes helped me find a dialogue that articulated the confusion that I was experiencing in terms of race. The starting point in my awakening was Freire's (2002) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as it opened my eyes to the need for constant conversation and struggle against oppressive forces and people. I had to first put myself in the role of oppressor and newfound guilt

welled from reservoirs of memories long repressed. To recognize myself as both oppressed and oppressor provided the great epiphany that changed my thinking forever.

The first opportunity for me to incorporate my newfound theoretical understanding of race relations into the classroom came as a result of reading *Other People's Children* by Delpit (1995). Starting Delpit's both felt like a frontal attack. I had participated in the National Writing Project, whose precepts come under fire from Delpit's astute pen. In fact, the various techniques from Writing Project were components of my day-to-day classroom. Immediately off-put, I trudged on through the book, only because my grade depended on it. No one want to have to face that the tried-and-true reality they live rests shakily on a foundation of glass. So it was for me. What convinced me was the flip sides of the coin that Delpit (1995) fairly presented, first with an analysis of writing process teacher's (either white or black middle class teachers) concepts, "Maybe, just maybe, these writing process teachers are so adamant about developing fluency because they have not really had the opportunity to realize the fluency the kids already possess," (p. 17) and juxtaposed against the opposing view,

And maybe the black teachers are so adamant against what they understand to be the writing process approach because they hear their students' voices and see their fluency clearly. They are anxious to move up to the next step, the step vital to success in America – the appropriation of the oral and written forms demanded by the mainstream. (p. 18)

The careful examination of both sides defused the immediate defensiveness that welled up in me because of what I regarded as an attack against a process that I believed in. What Delpit (1995) is careful to articulate is the alignment of certain processes with

certain groups and Writing Project's unwitting targeting of already privileged groups and its certain, but unintentional disregard for already oppressed groups. Delpit (1995) hit me in the real world, with a process that I knew and believed in. My evaluation of my processes (both mental and physical) had to commence. Experiencing what Apple (2006) terms, "the act of repositioning. . . the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies, and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power" (p. 30) allowed me to recognize the fallacies residing in the rampantly racist discourse of my childhood. To have a verbal articulation of my lived dilemma provided a sense of justification that enabled me to find validation for the radical reconstruction of my psyche. I took encouragement from Apple (2006),

In order to build counterhegemonic alliances, we may have to think more creatively than before – and, in fact, may have to engage in some nearly heretical rethinking. Let me give an example. I would like us to engage in a thought-experiment. I believe that the right has been able to take certain elements that many people hold dear and connect them to other issues in ways that might not often occur 'naturally' if these issues were less politicized. Thus, for instance, one of the reasons populist religious groups are pulled into an alliance with the right is because such groups believe that the state is totally against the values that gives meaning to their lives... others also say that the state seeks to impose its will on White working-class parents by giving 'special treatment' to people of color and ignoring poor White people. These two elements do not necessarily have to combine. But they slowly begin to be seen as homologous. (pp. 36-37)

Yes. Yes. Yes. We let religion and our fear of the other merge and find justification in the proliferation of racism and intolerance. Recognition and articulation, so necessary for me to find catharsis, ascertained that I needed to continue to seek rationales, arguments and eloquent understandings of these newfound ideas so that I might open the eyes and minds of those closest to me. The anger must be diffused from those who feel slighted – a wake-up call is needed. So I ask my father, “Why do you blame a race that lives in abject poverty? Would you go to work at a job that demands back-breaking for a pittance that will not support your family until the next paycheck?” The words break against a stone barrier, but the constant wash of words can serve to erode the most steadfast rock. Can he understand what bell hooks (2001) does, “The heart of decolonization is the recognition of equality among humans, coupled with the understanding that racial categories which negatively stigmatize blackness were created as a political tool of imperialist white dominion (p. 73). Wearing down the insensitivity of those who would ignore the effective suppression of the “other” allows for new generations to create the possibility for a better and kinder world.

#### *In-between Identities – Cultural Confusion*

I speak with an accent that causes many people to deduct a few IQ points as soon as they hear the drawl roll off of my tongue. In college classes and at the school where I work, I hear aspects of my background ridiculed because people do not associate me with the trappings of the “redneck” mentality, but I can not disassociate my self from those who raised me. Tractor pulls, mud-bogging, rodeos, and fishing poles are part of the world that created me; can I exist without those parts, or do I even want to? I can gladly leave behind the prejudices that were daily portions of my upbringing, but how can I

enlighten those who sought to instill it in me? How can I prevent the same prejudices from being instilled in my children? There is no roadmap to help me navigate between the culture of academia and the culture of my home-life. As I constantly shift between two realities, I remember He (2003), who notes the interconnectedness of identity of and with place,

As our stories of teaching unfolded, Shiao, Wei and I will be seen constantly moving between Eastern and Western languages and cultures long before we came to Canada. It is impossible to understand our cross-cultural lives in Canada without thinking about , making meaning out of, our lives along the Yellow River and the Yangtze River. (p. 56)

Every decision and perception that guides who we are and where we go runs through the world around us that shapes our identities. Living in-between realities denotes not readily accepting either reality, thereby causing tensions that wears away at the conscience until one decides to simply accept things or change them. I seek to navigate both waters, but I feel empathy as I read *A River Forever Flowing* when He (2003) recounts, “Although Shaio, Wei and I might forever feel pushed and pulled between China and Canada, there is no longer a simple way to define who we are and how we became who we are” (p. 53). The understanding of multiple realities enables me to seek multiple definitions of who I am and how I fit in the world around me.

Existing in the in-between creates a sense of not-belonging in either place. My self becomes as fleeting as the boundaries of my world as I realize what He (2006) understands, “The issue, I think, essentially comes to a question of cross-cultural movement between landscapes that are themselves moving” (p. 69). Each day allows for

new opportunities to influence and be influenced by place, and realistically, these places change in sync with the world around them. My family space changes as the women seek jobs in the work force to help supplement the family income. My work space changes as I seek advanced degrees to better inform and equip myself for a changing world.

Surrounded by the contradictions I can not expel, I am as hooks (2000) states,

. . . I felt too much uncertainty about who I had become . . . I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact. Even so, I had planted my feet on the path leading in the direction of class privilege. There would always be contradictions to face. There would always be confrontations around the issue of class. I would always have to reexamine where I stand. (p. 37)

While I do have to continuously examine where I stand, who I am, and why I think the way I do, now I can envision the pulling, twisting and shaping influence of each place and time on me as an individual. The borders of my worlds overlap, blur, and shift. I want to be fluent in the conversation of both languages, as Anzaldua states in Ladson-Billings (2003), “

Because I, a mestiza,  
Continually walk out to one culture,  
and into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
(soul between two worlds)  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio*  
(I make fun of the contradictions in my head)

*estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan*

(I am confused by all the voices that speak to me)

*simultaneamente.*

(simultaneously). (p. 415)

With the realization comes the ability to seek what Reynolds and Webber term as “lines of flight” (p. 3) that enables me to seek opportunities to enlighten and empower those in both communities to see the value in the “other.” A clash of cultures occurs, and I am left to sort through the ashes to rebuild truths and structures that needed to be overhauled. Grappling for a reality steeped in fairness and equality, I find a power structure in place described by Kincheloe’s and McLaren’s (2003) use of Comaroff and Comaroff ,

hegemony refers to ‘that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies-drawn from a historically situated cultural field- that come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it’ (p. 23) These axiomatic and yet ineffable discourses and practices that are presumptively shared become ‘ideological’ precisely when their internal contradictions are revealed, uncovered, and viewed as arbitrary and negotiable ...The dominant ideology is the expression of the dominant social group. (p. 471)

I feel the tug of two opposing groups. The recognition of the interplay of power between the two only heightens my confusion. I understand now why race and religion play such a defining role in shaping the landscape of my home society. I recognize the fear of the unknown that rests within those whom I love, and I begin to understand why they taunt me for forgetting my roots and becoming too educated. Harris (2004) notes, “the history

of Christianity is principally a story of mankind's misery and ignorance rather than of its unrequited love of God" (p. 106). Yes, the fear and the distrust are staples of our religious diet – manna from heaven. Amen. Conversely, I exist in an academia that forgets that those of my ilk reside in a cocoon of oblivion that limits their choices and defines their world. I am buffeted between the two – tossed in a maelstrom that wears away at my identity until I feel the need to assimilate into whatever reality I happen to be wafting through at the time. My self becomes arbitrary and unknown only to me. I wield my "situated knowledge" (Gergen & Gergen, 2003, p. 587) as I need it.

What can happen to merge these two worlds in constant flux? Undoubtedly, the schools and place in which I exist are as Nieto (2000) recognizes,

The fact that power and inequality are rarely discussed in schools should come as no surprise. As institutions, schools are charged with maintaining the status quo, but they are also expected to wipe out inequality. Exposing the contradictions between democratic ideals and actual manifestations of inequality makes many people uncomfortable, and this includes educators. (p. 314)

For me, education was where I first experienced my "awakening." I could not deny the disparagement that either place held for the other. Finally, I became tired of dissembling. For so many generations of my family it is too late, but what about for those of the present and those yet to come? There is hope. As I seek to incorporate what Nieto (2000) states, "Teachers and students sometimes need to learn to respect even those viewpoints with which they may disagree, not to teach what is 'politically correct' but to have students develop a critical perspective to what they hear, read, or see" (p.317). Building

bridges between the two worlds necessitates a willingness to find it worthwhile. Carger (1996) displays the ease with which one world is negated by another,

Alejandro experienced incongruities between his home and school cultures...

Alejandro's ways of learning and familial values differed from those esteemed by traditional educators. Learning through observation, supportive gradual mastery of skills, cooperation in tasks, collaboration in negotiating life's everyday trials were emphasized by a large family accustomed to working together. Yet in school, tasks were assigned with little emphasis on modeling, individual achievement was prized, collaboration for support was seen negatively as cheating. (p. 141).

Should I just go with the flow, mimicking whatever rhetoric that I know the crowd wants to hear, or should I make waves and draw attention to the possibilities that already exist in a world negated by the iron will of another? I have been duly warned by my circle of family that education makes one too uppity; they have to understand that valuing one does not demean the other. To deny the inherent beauty of difference is to fall into the trap of subjugation, as Macedo (1994) understands,

Because subordinate groups, through discriminatory policies, were made invisible and absent from history (i.e., blocked from equal access to education and economic high echelon), their voices were either muffled or silent. This culture of silence served, by and large, to create the impression of a mythical common culture and to deny the existence of cultural difference. (p. 45)

The mythical culture created is the essence of Americana. The lure of the American way pulls those who are promised the pot of gold, but who never really have a chance of

making it over the rainbow. So pipe dreams become things of legend and imagined wrongs become sources of discontent as one group pits itself against another because they don't look, sound, or act the right way. Multicultural takes a new dimension in seeking to understand a different world from the world of the academic. It is the grass-roots world in which I live that I seek to broaden and find acceptance for me and for those who coexist in the world at large. Within me, I feel the desire to live s Greene (1988) realizes, "When we think of the diverse and pluralistic society...we need then to have in mind a range of individuals of groups confronting a field of possibilities in which varied ways of behaving and reacting may be realized" (p. 116). Learning to open our minds to new possibilities enables us to recognize the worth and potential of those who differ. Those who seek sameness discount the very flavor of life that makes it so divine.

*Gender Roles: Who Should I Be in this World?*

The locking mechanisms of prejudice and stereotyping are often so engrained that one can recognize their limitations and still fall victim to their ideology. I recognized this painful reality when I let my sister-in-law coerce me into entering my oldest daughter (then four) into a beauty pageant. Even as a young girl I was opposed to beauty pageants; I could never get past the image of placing a girl's value on her physical appearance. However, my sister-in-law was adamant about all of the girls being a part of a local beauty pageant. I am ashamed to admit that I acquiesced to her demands to maintain a harmonious existence with her. There was one major stipulation on which I would not budge – my child was to wear no make-up and have no styling products used on her hair. The effusive protests did nothing to sway me, probably because I already felt like I had sold my soul. When the day arrived, my daughter went on stage, smiled and waved with

unpracticed glee. She certainly appeared a novice against the other girls in her class (ages 3-4) who were polished and poised veterans of the pageant circuit. My little girl never noticed that she did not place because she was too interested in tearing the sequins off of her dress. I admonished myself for placing her in that situation and vowed that the mistake would never be repeated. This painful incident serves to remind me of the detrimental nature of gender relations. The pageant culture is alive and well in the rural South. One of the largest fund-raisers for the small elementary school (around 400 students) at which I work is the school's beauty pageant. The girls spend hundreds of dollars on dresses, make-up, hair-styles, spray-on tans, fake hair and fake teeth to make a competitive showing in this event. The one sacred institution that the parents almost unanimously support is this pageant. In fact, it is the parents in the audience taunting the girls to "Work it baby, work it... Right here baby" (as they gesture pointedly at the judges). Girls are to be pretty and silent; this idea is generated from early experience, as Giroux (2000) recognizes, "...the culture of beauty pageants functions as a site where young girls learn about pleasure, desire, and the roles they might assume in adult society" (p 46). Roles that validate the female on her appearance and submissiveness entwines with the rural Southern idea of what a perfect woman ought to be. The stereotype manifests in young girls at birth as they are dressed in pink bows, steered toward dolls and tiaras, and watch their mothers curl and coif their way into social present-ability. Where is the critical pedagogy for these girls? The situation is aptly summarized in Weis and Fine's (2003) exacting quote of McRobbie's views, "... it is the girls' own culture, even more than what the school expects of girls, that ensures their (our) position in an ongoing set of patriarchal structures" (p. 95). What I seek desperately to avoid is termed by Martin

(2000), “One disheartening result is that women in academia sometimes have to disqualify crucial parts of their own lived histories, and become estranged from their mothers, grandmothers. . .” (P. xiii). As I need to empower the women around me – the women I love and respect – I am met with angst as they believe that their lives embarrass me. How does one convince a woman that she can be the strength that holds a family together at the same time that she simpers and bows to the whims of her husband? Reflecting on my place and familial relationships, I understand it as Ladson-Billings (1998) states, “And do you believe it’s important for them [children] to develop a language of critique, so that we don’t keep reproducing what we have? A critical piece is understanding, number one, that the system is not fair. It is not meritocratic” (p. 197). Understanding that it is a systematic problem is necessary to convince the individual to invest time and effort in overthrowing the current perceptions so that we might find new routes to obtain what Apple (1999) articulates,

. . . we need to develop in greater detail than is possible here a vision of educational and social practices that foster cooperation, equality, participation, and social action to redress political injustices because these values represent key principles of democracy. For example, curriculum projects could explore and develop precisely those areas now excluded by formally sanctioned school knowledge. The history of women. . . (p. 67)

To seek to establish an identity based on one’s perception of the world is a strange idea for the women of my rural Southern community. To be identified as “[someone’s] mom” or “[someone’s] wife” is indicative of the relationship of these women with their families. Lacking room for the exploration of female as a person, these women exist in the realm

of female as an extension of her family. From mother to daughter these chains are passed on as little girls are encouraged to “find a rich husband to take care of [then]” while young boys are encouraged to be masters of their worlds. While eating lunch at my grandmother’s house, one of my aunts stated that her greatest wish for her daughters was that they would find rich husbands. These girls watched and listened to their mother and echo the sentiment in conversations. When did it become okay for girls to become ornaments and possessions? For many of the teens I see in my classroom, I acknowledge the reality posited by Shiner and Jones (2005) as they cite a study by the American Association of University Women (1991) that concludes, “Girls were most likely to prioritize the way they look – how closely they mirror the images that greet them on television, magazines, and in movies” (p. 63). Certainly in the rural South, the female appearance is susceptible to a stringent set of guidelines that girls learn at a very early age. One unwritten rule calls for the daily application of make-up, even if one expects to stay home. There is the application of a mask that allows one to “face” the day. So engrained is this understanding that there was anything unusual about putting on a full pallet of make-up daily that I was in college before I realized that many women (from other parts of the country) did not follow this routine. It was many years before I was comfortable enough to venture out without the safety of my painted features. I still feel a sense of being unkempt when I dash to the grocery store for a couple of items without taking the time to primp myself into a presentable appearance. Reading Lalik and Oliver (2005) made me pause and note the heavy focus on appearance, “. . .female bodies have been used to support unequal gender relations. . .all too frequently images of young girls are disseminated together with rhetoric that constructs the young female as

simultaneously manipulative seducer and innocent victim” (p .86). If I am to find a new reality for my daughters, then I must construct one for my own self.

For young girls in my rural South, a realization needs to occur. Images of Barbie dolls and debutantes can not allow for the realization of the potential possessed by these fragile flowers. In the endeavor of empowering young girls and older women, we must take note of Ayers (2004) when he states,

Committed and aware teachers . . . must endeavor to accomplish two crucial tasks.

One is to convince students, often against a background of having attended what we might call ‘obedience training school,’ that there is no such thing as receiving an education as a passive receptor or an inert vessel – in that direction lies nothing but subservience, indoctrination, and worse. .All real education is and must always be self-education. The second task is to demonstrate to students . . . that they are valued. (p. 33-34)

Through helping females find their personal worth with the understanding that their past does not stigmatize them, a conversation can begin. Creating new acceptable images of girlhood and femininity are required to pull the roles of the female out of the rigid traditions of subservience found in the rural South.

The women fall victims to the pre-determined roles, but the men fare no better. They are trapped in their own versions of identity, passed down from generation to next that defines the typical male with a “retention of a masculine behavioral code rooted in an older European tradition of ‘honor’ in which a man’s actions must be ‘ratified by community consensus” (Cobb, 2005, p.41). This honor, “a more ‘primal,’ communally

derived concept of honor” (Cobb, 2005, p. 41) demanded that, “the white male’s power, prestige, and reputation for manliness in the eyes of others were the crucial influences on his behavior” (Cobb, 2005, p. 41). It is as Freire (2002) understands, that the oppressor is as hoodwinked as the oppressed. To give up the right to control your woman or your children is to give up your manhood. Men are tied to these strict delineations for behavior. They are groomed from earliest childhood. My brother became my father, to the great horror of my mother.

#### Stories to Tell – Conversations and the Learning Curve

My journey seeks to uncover the hidden stays that bind identity formation for young females in the rural South. I have struggled with the concept of identity since my immersion into the Ed.D. program in Curriculum Studies. As I learned about theorists such as bell hooks (2000) and Paulo Freire (2002), I found myself shaken out of the complacency that I had built around me. Truths that I held as self-evident, such as the need for a standardized system of education, suddenly fell to the wayside. I had to evaluate my reality, and it was found to be lacking in recognition and respect for the realities of others who differed from me. This understanding allowed me to develop a recognition of the limitations of the reality that I held and a desire to broaden my sphere. In my quest to create a larger world for my reality, I realized that I had begun to alienate my friends and family. I found myself defending my views on politics, religion and education to people who thought that I should believe exactly as they did. (Truthfully, I had always believed the same things they did, so it was a shock to all when I became the voice of dissension.) As I needed to question and voice dissension, those of my place

sought to discredit my newfound knowledge. As my voice was belittled as the mimiecd rant derived from my liberal professors, I lived was Anderson and Jack (1991) described,

...the expression of women's unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women's interests and experiences are at variance with those of men. A woman's discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting, perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience. Where experience does not 'fit' dominant meanings, alternate concepts may not readily be available. (p. 11)

Resentment and unease, possibly even anger, simmer under the surface of my existence. Now I feel that I must seek to understand how place and class created the identity that I lived under for the majority of my life, until I reached the liberating branches of higher education. Meanwhile, my ultimate goal must manifest itself as the liberation of my thoughts and feelings from the guilt of femininity implicit in my upbringing and existence.

#### Arbitrary Truths – Breaking New Knowledge

During one of my first years as a literature teacher, I had students write a creative essay about their dream home. As I read the responses, I noticed how limited the descriptions seemed. One paper particular discouraged me as the little girl described the double-wide trailer that she believed to be her dream domicile. Her response has remained with me in the years since she passed through my classroom. I could not fathom the idea of one's dream home being a double-wide trailer. I grew up in various different

houses, among them a 40X60 single-wide trailer that was packed as full as a sardine can with my family of five. I grew up dreaming of something more. It struck me as sad that anyone could limit their dreams to such finite ideas. I believe that education as it currently exists in America has helped enforce the marginalization of many of its students so that they can not dream beyond the reality that stands in front of them. For me, conversation and acceptance derived from the influence of Critical Feminist Theory provides the key that can unlock the restricting bonds that education currently places on its students to allow a new educational experience to unfold. Through Freire's (2002) dialogue, Gay's (2000) culturally responsive teaching, and other critical assertions, education can be transformed to meet the needs of the diverse society that it serves. Sirotnik (1991) states, "To be *critical*, an inquiry must also challenge directly underlying human interests and ideologies" (p. 245).

#### Telling the Story- Hearing the Truth

In January of this 2006, my uncle (my mom's youngest brother) died. The family congregated at my grandmother's house. Out of the eleven children that my grandmother gave birth to, nine were present. Her oldest daughter had passed away two years prior. Now her youngest son had been placed in his grave. My grandmother's children and grandchildren gathered in various parts of her house and yard to reminisce through stories of childhood deeds and times gone by. It was through these conversations that I realized how much I have learned from a lifetime of eavesdropping at the knees and elbows of my elders. My family is fairly unusual because we congregate quite often. My parents, most of my aunts and uncles, and many of my cousins live within minutes of my grandmother's house. Family gatherings create a staple of my identity from my earliest

memories, and family stories are the textbook of my youth. It was during this time that I realized how much history unfolds during this time of story-telling. A running joke among my uncles is that none of them learned to talk until they were in their teens because the seven sisters in the family did not allow them time to get a word in edgewise. These garrulous ladies kept the conversation flowing at any gathering. My decision to study the concept of female and place lead me to believe that the stories of my family members could help me unravel what it meant to be female and grow up poor in rural South Georgia. After all, I have a plethora of aunts and cousins with stories to tell. Ironically enough, the breakdown of the American family is one thing that is lamented at family gatherings, mimicking what Weis and Fine (1998) noted, “it is clear in these narratives that the linchpin of the family is the man as breadwinner and protector of wife and children. The economy and popular culture have made it difficult for men to occupy this position since two people now need to work, and sex tempts both men and women away from family commitments. Thus, there is a moral component to the breakdown of the American family as well. But the male as provider must, they argue, be restored, if the family is to regain its strength” (p. 50). These roles may bend under the fire of necessity as the women enter the work world, but they do not break as each day brings the family home maintained solely at the expense of the female’s efforts. Children to be raised, clothes to be washed, meals to be prepared, are all interlocking components of identity that tend to overbalance any sense of identity that might be established through the work world or the personal existence. It is always the women as the extension of the family. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) state, I “seek to understand sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals’ lived

experiences” (p. 123). Indeed, I hope to seek out an “oral history” (Stake, 2003, p.144) that can witness to the construction and dismantling of identities of females in the new rural South. Oral history provided the prime outlet to forge a new path for identity construction, as Fontana and Frey (2003) quote Gluck, “refusing to be rendered historically voiceless any longer, women are creating a new history – using our own voices and experiences” (p. 79). I have an opportunity to hear a history that has not been told in an uncannily honest telling. This unique Southern feminine vantage point – not some white-washed story of some smiling Southern debutante twirling her parasol on the veranda of the plantation house – stemmed from the lived experience of me and my family. The great irony of the situation lies in the women themselves. A conversation with my mother about her life and inclusion in my study lead her to state that she did not have any stories worth telling. In her eyes, her identity stems from the stories and lives of her husband, children, and grandchildren. Yet, hidden beneath the quiet presence rests hidden steel that allowed her to single-handedly raise three children while her husband worked and played; this strength enabled her to scrimp and finagle to find funds to provide niceties for her children that my father deemed unnecessary. She never gave up or gave in; when the storm of my father’s temper raged, she weathered them – building a quiet reserve of determination to work to provide for her children. In her mind, she has done nothing. In my mind, she has triumphed over insurmountable odds. Her oral history can do much to unravel the hold that a male-dominated culture has placed over the lives of its females. This realization will establish, “an awareness that a person’s self-reflection is not just a private, subjective act. The categories and concepts we use for reflecting upon and evaluating ourselves come from a cultural context, one that has historically

demeaned and controlled women's activities" (Anderson and Jack, 1991, p18). Her story is not singular, but sadly typical of the women of this area. Themes of marginalization that have been handed down from generation to generation along with the family recipes emerged. Stein and Preuss (2006) notes that oral history, as a mechanism of historical inquiry, enables, "the process of documenting the past of groups that rarely leave written records of their lives" (p. 7). These women live lives steeped in silence; self-worth becomes mired in a sense of belonging to another, and now these women must find their own voices and value through their stories. "But as a person narrates a life story, and the account wends its way through the accumulated details of a life, social categories are exploded: the subject becomes an actor in simultaneous, multiple roles that do not conform to easy generalizations" (Olsen and Shopes, 1991, p. 193). Unrest with reality surpasses the easy complacency with which the feminine existence so graciously exists: Cast iron pans and laundry baskets with clothes waiting to be folded do not constitute an identity. Certainly my own identity reeks with the subservience that marks all feminine lives here. I can not cast off the burden of place without alienating myself. So, as Butler (2005) states, "I try to begin a story about myself, and I begin somewhere, marking a time, trying to begin a sequence, offering, perhaps, causal links or at least narrative structure" (p. 65). As the story progresses, I find myself entangled in the snare of memory and embrace the possibility for crafting a better future.

The South as a place is an enigma that has been portrayed in fictional literature (to the point of categorizing Southern literature and Southern authors), and studied in depth to examine the effects of place. In *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South* (1998), McLaurin examines his Southern roots to highlight the dynamic between

two distinctly Southern –yet drastically different – populations. His position was unique because he was provided with opportunities to navigate between the two worlds. This limited interaction possibly provided the impetus that allowed him to recognize the fallacies behind the accepted ways of thinking commonly accepted by his family and peers. He looked at the various members of society and saw people – not a skin color. This acknowledgment of their humanity helped him develop an understanding that the rationale behind the longstanding support for the prejudices in his society. This respect started as an inking in his subconscious and manifested into an exploration through the stories in his book. Another glimpse of the South is offered by Falk (2004), who also explores the trappings of Southern life in *Rooted in Place*. His perspective follows an African-American community in the rural South. Through his exploration, he delves into the role and relevance that community plays on identity in the rural South. Falk (2004) allows a first-hand glimpse into the being and belonging of a place. Oral history facilitates this slice of reality; Stein and Preuss (2006) notes that oral history can, “. . . show the breadth and depth of this important American history as told by the first person” (p. 8). Each study frames the place of the South to analyze the effects of existing as Southern. Race stands pivotal in both texts, and stereotypical views are race similar to the ones portrayed in the works are implicitly apparent in the South of my upbringing. Inherent in capturing these views and limitations rests the idea that some of the pent-up anger and angst can be directed in a more industrious fashion. Terkel (1986) catches a glimpse of this re-routing of angst in Peggy Terry’s story,

This may sound impossible, but if there’s one thing that started me thinking, it was President Roosevelt’s cuff links. I read in the paper how many pairs of cuff

links he had. It told that some of them were rubies and precious stones – these were his cuff links. And I'll never forget, I was sitting on an old tire out in the front yard and we were poor and hungry. And I was wondering why it is that one man could have all those cuff links when we couldn't even have enough to eat. When we lived on gravy and biscuits. That's the first time I remember ever wondering why (p. 50).

This place needs a moment to make its people stop and wonder, Why?" Let us question for the first time why it is the woman's purpose to keep the house, tend the children, provide the meals, wash the laundry, and ensure that everyone else has a calm and harmonious existence. Let us question why a woman exists as someone's wife or someone's mother, instead of as a person wrought with worth and dignity. These are the concepts that need to be addressed through self-reflection and self-realization.

#### Writing Reality – Can I Go Home Again?

Narratives for this study were collected in terms of two main categories – present and historical narratives. The bulk of this information will be collected in interviews with family members. The sessions started with prompts and inquires from me, but quickly morphed into conversations; the flow of stories, fact and memory manifested itself as memories of sisters, mothers, daughters, and family. The stories pulled from the dark and elusive recesses of memory, recall what Fontana and Frey (2003) notice,

Relevant to the study of oral history (and, in fact, to all interviewing) is the study of memory and its relation to recall. For instance, Barry Schwartz (1999) has examined the ages at which we recall critical episodes in our lives; he concludes that 'biographical memory...is better understood as a social process' and that 'as

we look back, we find ourselves remembering our lives in terms of our experience with others' (p. 15). (p. 80)

The group dynamic allows the interplay of memory. One story can build off of memories spurred by another and another. Also, we can corroborate one story with the juxtaposition of another. My memory is not my sister's or mother's or anyone other than my own. What we each remember allows a glimpse into the reality and psyche of each individual.

Being female and Southern were the key words I threw into the jumbled voices vying for an audience for their story. My participation occurred when I felt the need to include stories that from my own experience that tied me to the experiences of the other females in my family. Because I am closely involved with each participant, I had to stringently listen and observe during their story telling and let their words speak for themselves instead of trying to lead them where I wanted they should go. What started as simple group sessions over breakfast became all-day gab-fests.. The sisters tend to feed off of each other when they get together. Their combined memories provided the springboard for many stories that had long been forgotten. It took little prompting to have them include stories of their deceased sister to create as complete a picture as possible. Though I wanted to talk with the sisters in smaller groups of one, two or three to seek more in-depth stories, I found that they tended to reminisce in more depth when they had others to corroborate their memories. Originally, I intended to incorporate several generations in to the story-telling process, but when I found the sheer volume of stories so daunting, I determined to limit my stories to my generation with limited flashbacks to my mother's. I sought to verify the accuracy of the memories recounted by the individual sisters in my mother's generation and for my own generation by having others verify the

events; however, I realized that the presentation of the memory is also a clue to the perceived reality of the individual. “The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. We can know a thing only through its representations. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 8). I do not seek to present any information as the sole reality, but I seek to convey the ideas and understanding as presented by those who lived the experience. Capturing the historical is pivotal to understanding the present, but portraying the present is equally important in depicting how events helped create the existing realities. Also, I wrestle with the dilemma articulated by Fine, Weis, Weseen and Wong (2003),

...we continue to struggle with how best to represent the stories that may do more damage than good, depending on who consumes/exploits them—stories that reveal adult consequences of physical and sexual abuse in childhood; stories that suggest it is almost impossible to live exclusively on welfare payments, which encourages many to ‘lie’ about their incomes so that they self-define as ‘welfare cheats’; stories in which white respondents, in particular, portray people of color in gross and dehumanizing ways; data on the depth of violence in women’s lives, across race/ethnicity. To what extent are we responsible to add, ‘Warning! Misuse of data can be hazardous to our collective national health’? (p. 183)

There are things that I wish were not true about my life and my family. The skeletons that we wish could stay in the closet are the ones that we need most to face, fight and overcome. To ignore these stories would be to sell short those whom I seek to define and

defend. Sometimes there are no good reasons for the things that we do, but exploring these actions helps us to face them, name them, and decide whether or not to overcome them.

Also, like Meloy (2002) suggests, I found that keeping a journal to help me document my transient feelings and emotions that will evaporate soon after the conclusion of the interviews enabled me to create richer stories when I began writing. By capturing my reactions to the stories of the participants, I was able to censor my voice in the retelling of the anecdotes.

The fleeting nature of memory bends and sways the stories and realities. What I lived as true and good became twisted, corrupted and indicative of a life that marked me, scarred me. Now, as I sift through the memories of what is and what has been and what will be and what might be, I think of memory and know its worth. Ayers (2001, 2003) states,

Rather the past is always in translation – paraphrased, deciphered, dynamic- and memory makes its twisty way as best it can. Still memory is the stuff with which we create our identities, and it's a powerful force for almost everyone – what we remember as well as what we forget has consequences. (p. 295)

Can I trust my story to be accurate? I know that it is my lived experiences, certainly different from my mother's, my sister's, my grandmother's. No more right or wrong than theirs, it just is. The story becomes its own validation. It is just because it is – mere existence providing merit and value. There rests in each vignette a telling, retelling, writing and finally meaning-making that enabled me to determine the validity and

importance of each part. I know the interpretation of our lives builds on the foundation laid by my experience in the doctoral program, so of course my spin of the story will create tensions and unrest where my mother will tell you there exists none. Who's right? Neither, and both.

### Who We Are: Why We Are

These life stories create a picture of life for women in a particular place at a particular time. First, I started with transcriptions of the interviews and story-telling sessions. I endeavored to create a thematic coding (Glense, 2006) of the interviews to highlight the prevailing themes, then I decided to create fictional variations of their stories to demonstrate the significant aspects of growing up female and poor in the rural South. As I flowed from one story to the next, I found that our world centered around the sense of togetherness that we shared, and that this belonging centered around my Granny's table as the site of our life stories and conversations. I used the metaphor of my Granny's table to help me narrate the themes of importance from our world. I want to go home again. I need to be able to write about my place and my people without alienating those whom I love, so I mask the truth in the guise of fiction. The significance of an aspect will be determined by the number of times it appears in the various stories and the amount of influence it demonstrated on the path of an individual's life. In an attempt to avoid estranging any individual, I hid their stories through the merging of the stories into one woman's narrative, much like He's "composite autobiography" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 52). Every storyline includes contributions from one source blended into and with the story of another source. The stories are effectively cloaked so as to camouflage any tell-tale markers. John van Maanen (1988) states, "Ethnographies are

written with particular audiences in mind and reflect the presumptions carried by authors regarding the attitudes, expectations, and backgrounds of their intended readers” (p.25). In this case, I shaped this study to help illuminate why Southern females tend to limit their futures and identities in relation to their surroundings. To relate the importance of personal narrative as Lopate (1995) articulates the value of the personal essay as a, “vehicle to analyze how often we are ‘split at the root’ when it comes to our chosen and inherited identities” (p. li). My intended audience is the actual participants themselves and those who seek to find the hope for equality stifled in a repressive system of reality. In an effort to help throw off the bonds of servitude that have trapped these females in a place and identity that may not honestly belong to them, I wrote truths in words that I would have rather denied because as Butler (2005) states, “Exposure, like the operation of the norm, constitutes the conditions of my own emergence as a reflective being, one with memory, one who might be said to have a story to tell” (p. 19). Let these stories find the light and let the true beings emerge. For in our stories, we confront our reality and humanity. Martel (2001) in *Life of Pi*, recounts the main character’s assurance, “The world isn’t just the way it is. It is how we understand it, no? and in understanding something, we bring something to it, no? Doesn’t that make life a story?” The story I have spun greedily sucks from the experience of many members of my family. Pulling from faulty memory and biased views, I paint using a canvas marred with speculation and conjecture. Is that wrong? Clandinin and Connelly (2000) use Blaise (1993) to explain the answer, “Everyone’s fiction is almost completely autobiographical. What makes it fiction, usually, is its degree of disguise. So while most writers apportion or ascribe their own experiences to other characters, I somehow claim other people’s experiences as my

own” (p. 180). It was easier for me to paint myself in a light that I considered less-than-flattering. To put the stories out there in the clear-cut delineation of those who lived them seemed a betrayal of their trust in me to protect their stories. There were things I felt compelled to ascribe to other people, but those actions were also a compilation of family legends from various folks. I italicized parts that I sought to portray in flashback, hoping to find a greater emotional connection with the characters through a real-time portrayal. In the end, my truths boiled down to the need to show inter-generational conflict that prohibited growth and enlightenment, especially for the females of this place.

#### For a Better Future

Throughout my exploration into the stories of classism, sexism, racism, power issues, place, education, curriculum, and religion, one thing that I noticed was that I felt I could not relate to any of the stories presented through the assigned literature. I was white, so I was involuntarily guilty of white privilege. I was poor, so I missed a lot of the opportunities provided by the presence of a padded bank account. I lived in the rural South; so many advancements of the outside world just passed me by. Where was my story? I could not find it in all of the accounts that I had read. I determined that the story of the limitations of place and class for the Southern female is one that provides a unique look at the way society shapes (or warps) the identities of the individuals who are trapped into a place and class. Vehemently I agree with Falk’s (2004) assessment of the words of John Shelton Reed when he states, “I suspect sociology needs more Southerners, real ones or spiritual ones... to tell sociological stories about particular people, particular groups, particular societies. And interesting stories they could be” (p. 10).

I reflect on classes in Southern literature where I felt like the members of my family could fit inside one of William Faulkner's or Flannery O'Connor's stories. There are characters here that are worth writing about. Like Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, "Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore educational experience should be studied narratively" (p. 19). These stories will allow me the opportunity to fit my story in the venue with other stories who carry similar themes of seeking a true identity under the restrictions of repressive society.

There are inherent limitations of this study. First of all, for Southern females, appearance is everything. It is okay if you have a crappy life if you can hide it under some nice clothes, a flashy car, and a pretty home. In the South, the appearance of propriety is much more important than the actual presence of propriety itself. For instance, one can make a derogatory remark about another person as long as it is prefaced with "Bless his/her heart." When buffered by that comment, it becomes a conscientious observation, not biting gossip. To get to the true stories that wait underneath the appearance of propriety demanded an inordinate amount of truthfulness from the participants. Some were not willing to share their stories, even though denying their existence simply provided them more power. How does one sit down with another person and simply admit, "Yes, my husband beat me and mentally abused my child – his stepchild." To get that story, I tried to convince each participant of the urgency that implicitly rests in their stories. Sometime it worked; sometimes I coerced the story from other sources; sometimes I hit a dead end. They knew that ultimately I was there as a researcher. For me, there was also the underlying sense that I had to betray these women

through the very words that they shared with me. Ultimately, I looked at the stories as the chance for catharsis. I let the women help make meaning in their own stories by listening to their regrets. For the stories that I could not obtain, I tried to evoke a sense of finality for these women – that we do not become our mistakes. There is a sense of immediacy here that must be dealt with because these stories are continuously created. No one wants to look in the mirror and recognize that the daily machinations of our life make us miserable, and (even worse) that they are all of our own creation. We fail to recognize that we are, “free and fated, fated and free” (Ayers, 2001, 2003, p. 62). We are products of who we are, where we are, and what we are. We live racism and bigotry; to recognize the fallacy in our thoughts and beliefs can give us the keys to unlock new possibilities. We live in what Nieto (2000) states, “Although the primary victims of racism and discrimination are those who suffer its immediate consequences, racism and discrimination are destructive and demeaning to everyone” (p. 309). To belittle the importance of any segment of humanity eats away at the chance that each individual possesses to cherish life for all of its glory. Living with the hatred and fear of the other destroys the possibility for relishing the beauty of our world.

As I wrote, I found praxis, but at times felt lost, noting what Didion (1994) states, “It is easy to see the beginning of things, and harder to see the ends” (p. 681). For me, the picture blurs, becomes cloudy. There can be only hope. Let me be like Esperanza of *Mango Street*,

I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free...They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I

left behind. For the ones who cannot out. (Cisneros, 1989, p110)

The hope that I desire to instill in these women is that their lived experiences can be the stepping stone that leads their daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters out of a lifetime of servitude. It is time to return to my Grandmother's table - this time armed with a dialogue for change. I look upon the people and place that I love, but this vision is constantly bombarded by peripheral images of the strictures of repression and subjugation inherent in this place. I am befuddled by love and hate, but the person who returns is not the one that they raised. Caught in the complexity of in-betweenness, I may never feel completely comfortable again. A critical discussion must ensue. I reflect on the intellectual narratives and seek to live the words of liberation. As an educator, I have the moral obligation to continue this conversation on the behalf of women who have yet to hear their own voice. If I can create a spark of dissension with the current system, then I have struck a blow for a better world.

## EPILOGUE

The writing process that resulted in this paper flows from an identity acclimated to being, but not being seen. It requires a double-take, the quiet, unassuming persona flies just below the radar filled with a dichotomous agenda – fear of being noticed and anger at being ignored waffle in confused disharmony. Has this absence of voice transcended into absence of worth or even invisibility of presence? It is with these words that I vent my anger at a self-and-society imposed blandness-of-being. I reclaim the words that I never knew I had lost. I spill myself on the pages as identity flows from me in letters etched in ink and agony, and I betray to you the secrets I never wanted anyone to know. Uncap my pen and out flows in life in stark black-and-white and blatant multicolor. Let me use these words to find the person I knew I always wanted to become. So, I progress, regress, ebb and flow. As Ayers (2007, personal communication) states, I am “living, telling, writing and reliving” the reality that writes itself in pencil to be erased and rewrote in ceaseless progression.

So, what will I do next, when I am awake? I have traveled the in-between. The air here is sweeter, filled with recognition and redemption. Let me swallow my foolish fears of inadequacy and squelch my hesitant nature and assert my desire to be accepted as I am – intellectual, uncouth, socially fragmented – and still be just who I am and it be enough. The difference I make will be the mere washing of waves against rock. My voice carries the thoughts better left unsaid, so I will be the voice of dissidence. Speaking, dialogue, conversation will be my weapon of choice, allowing me to disarm those who vent their short-sighted fears through razor-edged phrases. I struggle for greater awareness for my past, my present and my future.

These stories are pivotal for the liberation of females stifled by their own inability to dream. My words will either beckon or repel, but they will hear them. The place remains mired in the repressive consistency of its time-honored traditions of racism, classism, and sexism; not to speak would be a travesty. These stories are old stories of a new rural South, and these stories will continue in the same traditions unless the players in this life-size drama realize the fallacious foundation of their thinking. Because I have awakened, I must constantly seek to enlighten and inform those still stuck in traditions better abandoned with the outdated notions of Southern identity.

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