

MARY BESS DUNN

What It Takes

From the vantage point of years—a decade’s worth—I imagine Marlene fanning the plump dark fingers of her hand across the textbook pages, studying the lightening bolts tattooed on her thumbs. Her nails are the color of the storm. A shout of thunder turns her head, but a bank of window shades hides the view. She ducks, thinking next time she will ask for stars.

The child is slumped across an open book, her chin snug against the War of 1812. “Marlene, get your things,” Mrs. Merrick, the principal says. I feel the girl cringe, but see her do what she is told. As a professor of teacher education—a teacher of teachers—I have spent the last decade avoiding schools, and now I remember why. Being in a school can break your heart.

The girl sits up, and the other fifth graders suddenly seem small. She jams the history book, then the paper wads and notebooks sprouting from beneath her desk, into a purple backpack water-stained a rusty blue. The class is watching; she smiles, close-mouthed, to no one but herself.

In the hall, Marlene and I follow Mrs. Merrick and yellow Greeley Tiger paws to two metal desks, which she motions towards while making introductions. “Now, I’ll just let you two get acquainted,” she chirps, patting my shoulder before rushing down the hall, leaving a faint sigh in her wake.

I fit myself into the desk like Alice in that land of hers. I am reluctant to begin, silenced by all I know about myself: my contradictory self, my posing self. I’ve been nominated for Teacher of the Year and know that, in spite of an abundance of excellent student evaluations, I need to fulfill a community service requirement. I hope my time tutoring here at Greeley School will do just that.

“Sorry to pull you out of class,” I say.

The girl bends her head and mumbles, “That’s okay,” before raising her eyes, “but it was my favorite class.”

“History is your favorite class?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“What are you studying?”

Marlene makes a circular motion with her right foot. She wears black high-topped basketball shoes; there is a dark bracelet of skin beneath her jeans, where socks should be. Her foot stops on its third rotation. She stares across the empty hall and clutches the front of her desk with both hands. Her fingernails are short and violet, with moon struck thumbs

“You know Waterloo?” she asks.

“Napoleon’s Waterloo?”

She shrugs. “My brother. He knows—we’re doing a report.”

“He’s helping?” I am leaning forward now, craning to catch her glance.

“He’s smart. He goes to State— his name is Thurman.”

“I teach at State.”

She turns, giving me a glimpse of her top tooth: shiny white but jutting beaver-like from its upper gum. Marlene speaks from behind an open palm. “He’s going to graduate and get us a car,” she says. “He works Burger King, and stuff, so it’s taking him a long time.”

Her candor disarms me. She's probably used to being poked and prodded with concern from school personnel, and I suspect she's learned her lines. When I fail to respond, she persists. "He's teaching me to dance," she says, and her cheeks rise, lifted by a hidden smile.

It strikes me that I never met her brother. My sense of him is drawn from polished steps to his upstairs room that leaks Puccini, *Southern Living* and *People* magazines he presented to his mother, and the potted plants he tended on the stoop. Once I arrive at their house just as he is coming out. A small and wiry man, his white shirt starched to perfection, he moves gracefully across the lawn with a rug, rolled and stacked across his shoulders. The trunk of the car in front of me pops open. He stuffs the rug atop a pile of clothes, shoots a glance through my windshield and salutes. I had not moved, but now, as I open my car door he manages to open his and by the time I climb out he is gone.

Halfway down the hall, on the left, past the girls' restroom, is a long narrow storage closet stacked floor to ceiling with discarded textbooks. On my second school visit we drag our desks into the closet and sit facing each other, desktops touching. The room smells of wilted paper products and moths left to fry in the milky shield of a fluorescent light blinking overhead.

"There, that's better." I stretch my legs and prop my foot on a low shelf of discarded spelling books.

"They did say find a space." Marlene's giggle spurts too large. She pulls a pair of glasses from the pocket of her backpack. Serious glasses, thick-lens and black. She holds them with both hands then pushes them on her nose

"I've brought some paper and pencils; let's do some writing," I say. There is no real plan here. No one has asked how I will proceed, so I do what I teach my students they must do when they are teachers—learn all they can about their kids, and writing is the best way to get started.

"Can I see the pencils?" she asks.

I hold out three pencils, blue with State University stamped on the side.

"Do the erasers work?"

"They're brand new, I would imagine they work."

She sits, slack-jawed, as I place pencils and paper on our desks. *Fragile* comes to mind; Mrs. Merrick's label for a child whose test scores fall erratically between learning disabled and normal— a range that lends itself to mere opinion. *You'll have no trouble with Marlene. A sweet child—in an off kind of way—very well behaved.*

"Tell me what you like most about yourself," I say.

"Which parts?"

"Any parts: the way you look, what you do well, your family, or your life." *We suspect fetal alcohol... her mother has been known to run drunk through the school screaming obscenities.*

"I live in a pink house."

"O.K, let's write that down." This pink house fib may be a sign of coping.

Marlene's print is careful. "Your turn," she says.

"I live in a brick house," writing what I say aloud.

"I fix hair." Marlene writes without my prompt.

"I like to garden," I write, though I don't garden; it is something I can add to keep things moving.

"I am half Indian. My granny was an Indian," Marlene says.

"I am French Irish. My great grandmother was a French Huguenot." And she was. We both write. The bell rings. Marlene stands and holds out her paper.

"Keep the pencil," I say.

Marlene slips it behind her ear. She removes her glasses and stuffs them in the pocket before she walks out the door, then vanishes into a hall alive with kids. Her rapid departure confounds me. I am disappointed. I want the girl to acknowledge the hour. I want her to say she enjoyed it, or at least ask if I am coming back. I want Marlene to say thank you.

Marlene's teachers are concerned. They watch for signs she's veered off course—her mother, after all, is crazy. Insisting I should know, the teachers' anecdotes pile inside my head like tabloid pages. I find myself envisioning a life drawn beyond my mere encounters—from all that I am told and what Marlene herself will choose to share, I find a story.

I imagine Marlene stepping into the hall where the thank you she'd been saving couldn't go. The crush of bodies, book bags and noise carry her around the corner and out of sight of the teacher who writes with her in the closet, Miss Bess. A hint of happy stirs her insides, making today's walk toward the cafeteria better than other days. She pulls her shoulders back and moves through the throng of kids as if this hall—with its repeated pattern of mascot paws painted on the floor, its stately lockers, its smell of warm skin and cheese pizza—is hers as much as theirs.

Approaching the double doors the happy wavers. She hasn't worn her glasses, and, when she enters, a haze of mass confusion looms.

"So what's up with you missing class?" Brittany from first period stands in Marlene's path. Marlene ducks her head and stifles a giggle. Brittany pokes a finger at her chest. "I'm here to tell you my mom is fed up. I'm warning your fat ass. She's calling your house to tell your folks how you all the time calling everybody. All the time with that crazy person laugh. My mom says you is HAR-RASI-NG us." This last is accompanied by three sharp jabs.

Marlene will not buckle. She juts out her chin and takes a deep breath, producing a chest this leprechaun might well envy. Without a word, she flicks around and blows through doors just entered. Even without her glasses she is able to follow the repeated tiger paws underfoot, and can easily imagine the surge of kids who move away to let her pass, their faces struck with awe at how courageously she carries herself. The thought is enough to bring tears to her eyes.

I do come back. Twice a week for an hour each visit. We have a routine, the same routine I often tell my students they should try. The first ten minutes of the session I read picture books by Lucille Clifton, or chapter books by Lois Lowry, or poems by Shel Silverstein. Next we write. Timed writings, I explain, involve writing anything that comes to mind for ten minutes without stopping. Anything, even if you only write your name, you can't stop. I bring more pencils, along with pens and lots of paper: lined and unlined, fancy stationary and postcards, legal pads and spiral notebooks. Marlene helps herself, and then we write.

September 20 Marlene Marlene Marlene Brooks MARLENE BUFORD BROOKS Marlene Buford Brooks MARLENE BUFORD BROOKS MMB mmb MARLENE BUFORD BROOKS Marlene Buford Brooks ...

September 20 Sitting in a storage closet at Greeley Middle School Marlene seems to have a lot of friends. She speaks of Ginny, Tomika, Brittany and others. My friends—she beams—are coming to my birthday party!

And I imagine Marlene slipping on her glasses to study the crow's pin-stiff legs and gnat covered glare. She uses her tennis shoe to nudge it off the stoop, then takes her place on the top step, knees hugged tight, and waits. A Chevrolet the color of wet dirt rumbles to a stop against the curb. The driver lays his arms against the steering wheel and rests his head. Marlene slips her glasses into her shirt pocket, preferring just the blur of knowing Thurman's home. In the time it takes for her to decide not to share her day, he climbs out of the car and strides across the yard.

"Too cool for you to be out here," he snaps.

"Yeah, well, I'm fixin to go in." She stands up and points at the dead crow. "Had to clean the mess."

"Damn that cat."

"Wisdom."

"Huh?"

"His tag says Wisdom. Want me to call the number on the tag? I got it." She pulls out a small spiral note pad from her jeans. "I'll need the phone."

Her brother climbs the three steps to stand beside her. He smells like new pennies. "No phone. No." It's been a week since he unplugged their phone and stashed it in his upstairs room. "Give me that." He grabs the pad, and flips through the pages. "Just what I thought. Where do you get all these numbers?"

The giggle that escapes her feels retarded. A jagged laugh that hurts inside her head. "My friends. All of them."

"Well, your friends are sick of you, and your infernal calling."

She jerks the pad out of his hand and winces as he throws open the screen and pushes through the front door. "Is that my boy?" If only her friends were standing here. She begged them to keep their mothers from calling the house complaining of Marlene's after school calls. If only Ginny and Heather and Tomika and Brittany were on this porch and could hear her mother's puny "Is that my boy?" they'd understand. Her mother wasn't well, and must not be disturbed. One wrong move, one look, could whip her off the couch and into a fury of screams so hard you'd scramble underneath your bed and press your ears.

October 1 Marlene hands me her work for safekeeping. I've promised not to look, and, so far, I haven't. It goes in a rose-covered folder I've had stashed in my desk for ages—maybe since I student taught.

"So why me?" she asks.

"Why not you?"

"How'd you figure me a writer?"

"Just lucky I guess."

"You too?"

"Lucky?"

"I was Granny Velma's lucky charm."

"Maybe you'll be mine—I'm trying to be Teacher of the Year."

"Ha!"

She draws a picture: me in my brown suit, cinched and scarfed; me in high-heel shoes and on my pixie-puffed brown hair I wear a crown. Giggling, she adds a title. OUR WINNER's mouth is gaping open and her eyes are closed.

The first time we eat lunch together, I am late. I fill my tray with fish sticks, applesauce and banana pudding, then stand aside until I see Marlene. The girl walks with the halting gait of one whose eyesight

has gone bad, or, as I've figured out, one too proud to wear her ugly glasses. I make my way across the room, watching as Marlene finds a table, empty at one end. I walk faster, but by the time I arrive the boys at the other end have started taunting.

"Hey fang, it's daylight, shouldn't you be underground?"

I slide onto the bench across from Marlene. "Sorry, kid," I say. "Today was the last day to submit my application, and I had to add you to my resume."

Marlene hesitates, and then gives a loud whoop before pulling her lunch out of her backpack. Squinting, she uses both hands to unfold the greasy Burger King bag.

"Hey girl, get OUTTA here with that stinky shit." One boy slams his hand down on the table.

I glare in his direction. Marlene doesn't flinch; she takes out a cold hamburger and a napkin full of fries.

"You get that from the trash?" a different boy joins in.

I stare harder, then look at Marlene and understand she doesn't want my help. She rips open three salt packets and empties them onto her meal. "That's good, Miss Bess, real good. Ha! I bet you win."

...she had a report due to me...it was to be on explorers...she turned in one on Jimmy Carter...go figure...I confronted her, she just smirked. I know people do that as a defense...they don't realize how irritating it is.

"What is it they're telling me about your work?" I ask, unlocking the storage room and waving her in. Our desks are waiting.

"I'm not doing it. Haven't put my mind to it."

She sits down and pulls her glasses onto the desk. Her stare feels blurred.

"Why not?"

"I'm doing a report on Columbus."

My mind scurries to follow her logic. "Why is your assignment late?"

"I did the wrong thing. I did it on Carter."

"What did you learn about Carter?"

"He has a wife named Rosalind. He was president a long time ago."

"Where did he live?"

"Somewhere in Virginia?"

"I thought it was Georgia."

She slides her glasses on and takes a pencil from my desk. "No," she says, sitting tall, "I know it wasn't Georgia." Her smile might be a smirk if you didn't see how well it hid her wayward tooth.

I intend to suggest she check her facts, but something in the way she's braced herself stops me. We read instead.

I've brought *Cousins* by Virginia Hamilton. Marlene and I read alternate pages of Chapter One aloud. Her voice is clear and expressive as she reads about Cammy visiting her Gram in the nursing home and how the grandmother begs Cammy not to leave because they have work to do on nonexistent curtains.

I read the line "she closed her heart down" and ask Marlene what it means to close your heart. She shrugs, and I start in about how when someone you love is hurting and you want to make it better but there is nothing you can do, so you close down your heart and go on as best you can.

"That's exactly how I felt when I left my grandmother in the nursing home." I am teary-eyed, remembering how Granny didn't know my name. "You're probably too young to know..."

"I know," she says, and reaches across our desks to pat my hand.

October 7 Buford Brooks MARLENE BUFORD BROOKS Marlene Buford Brooks MARLENE BUFORD BROOKS ...what to write what to write anything my name my I am a walker I am a slow walker I am slow we leave last after the bus and car riders I wear my glasses when I walk across the yard past Mrs. Goble Gobble at the crosswalk and on to home I am Marlene Buford Brooks...

I can see the puffy coat Marlene has pilfered from the lost and found; it grows warm as she sits at her desk and waits for car and bus riders to leave. When the PA calls for walkers, she shuffles down the hall, out the big glass doors and down the steps. The cold frame of her glasses is heavy on her nose, but she sees fine, walking over dirt packed lawn, standing by the curb and waiting for Ms. Gobble's signal.

Once across the street Marlene walks fast, but her mind is faster: she is drinking V-8 on the couch in her house down the corner from the church, having crossed the tracks after walking down two streets of houses holding porches with no men.

"Girl, wheres you goin in such a hurry? Come on now, how was school?" The gravelly voice pulls her mind back to where she is—walking quickly down the street, tracks still up ahead. She sharpens her gaze, focusing on the signal post and its winding stripe of red as she keeps moving. The voice calls after her with foolishness her brother warned her to ignore, and though she keeps walking, seeing just the twisting stripe of red—new paint red—she feels the old man's stare and knows his longing like she knows her own. It is the kind that stretches your insides with its hope and closes your heart with its awful fear. These thoughts carry her to the tracks where she clasps the post for luck then pushes her glasses firmly on her nose and leaps across.

At times, the wanting and the real get all mixed up, and she says stuff that leaves her wishing she had just shut up. She slips her hands under crossed arms and walks with her chin tucked against her chest. Her birthday party is tomorrow after school, and she has invited Brittany, Ginny, Tomika and Heather—all her friends. Miss Bess is coming too. Marlene reaches the main thoroughfare and lets its sidewalk carry her past the cleaners where Thurman played the numbers, and the market where her mother bought the beer. And there'll be cake... vanilla is her favorite, with chocolate frosting... M-A-R-L-E-N-E will be in blue.

She stops at the church. The message on the marquee invites all to "Find your faith and your doubts will starve." Miss Bess would like that. It makes a person think, and Miss Bess was always asking her to think. Or telling her she had. Good thinking, she said. Marlene turns on Georgia Street. Her street. Tucked deep inside a raggedy little neighborhood, this street is a treasure. She feels the bump of pride she always feels as she climbs the hill. She hopes Miss Bess will notice how the street rises, how down there is the mess you left behind, but up here you are with the quiet houses. The porch man comes to mind. Too late, she lets her stride slow and hips sway. Though the porch man's longing is as futile as her own, sometimes just a bit of what we want will do.

October 8 I tell my students not to get attached. Kids have families and friends, what they need are teachers. So be a teacher—not a mom or dad or friend-Mary Bess Dunn, Dr. Mary B. Dunn, MBD...

A block from public housing, the yards surprise me. Neat patches of grass, with shrubs sheared and shaped like trees. And—look at that—a view! I steer with one hand while I recheck Marlene's directions. 1607 Georgia, up the street from Hadley Church. No mistake. I park on the curb. The house *is* pink; it sits

like a lump of taffy on the tongue of a sloping lawn. My fingers tighten around the steering wheel. Like roots, they curl and clutch, and I watch them, waiting to let go.

On the front porch I stand between a ficus plant and a t-shirt hung to dry, trying to decide where on the flimsy-framed screen door to knock.

I tap lightly. “Who’s there?” Marlene’s voice is vibrant.

“It’s me. Miss Bess.” There is laughter, and the door opens, though no one appears. *Leave*. I pull the screen door towards me and step inside.

There are no rugs. The floor is dull but spotless, the air heavy with used smells; a shaft of sunlight carries dust motes from a recent cleaning. I see the doll before I see Marlene, though both are in the floor beside crumpled wrapping paper and a K-Mart bag.

“Looks like someone’s opening presents,” I say.

“It’s a Barbie with hair that I can comb and fix without a fuss,” Marlene says. I understand the comparison to her own thick hair; ‘the beast’ she calls it—hair she can’t comb without a pick. Your hair is as soft as dog hair, she said once, patting my curls. Now she holds the doll upside down, splintering the light with straight blonde strands.

My gift is wrapped in silver foil and tied with purple ribbon; I hand it to her.

“You have a seat now, Miss Bess.” A woman, sitting on a large cushioned couch across the room, pats the space beside her. From a hard brown face, her eyes shine.

“Mrs. Brooks?” I approach slowly, as if any sudden movement might upset the woman. “Thank you for inviting me to Marlene’s party.”

Mrs. Brooks wears cut-off jeans, flip-flops and a Titans football jersey. She is small and next to my large frame, seems even smaller.

“No problem, no problem. Make yourself at home,” she says, grabbing my outstretched hand with both of hers.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Marlene holds up the unwrapped *Who Is Carrie?* “A book?” she asks.

“A history book. Carrie is a young black girl living during the American Revolution.”

For the next hour, I do try to make myself at home. There are no other guests. There is no chocolate icing; but the caramel cake’s Happy Birthday is punctuated with a candy rose, and the grape cola is tasty. And there is a sort of conversation—about the weather and the pictures on the wall. An oversized black-and-white portrait of a woman’s face—full of flesh, but solemn—hangs next to the painting of a Spanish conquistador dressed for battle. No one knows his name, but hers is Velma.

I smile, the name is familiar. Velma Lorraine Clark, Marlene’s half African, half Native-American grandmother died a year ago. Granny Velma read me stories, the girl said; she also confessed that the portraits, floating life-like in the dark, sometimes made it hard for her to sleep.

“You know, there is an African-Indian museum in Florida,” I say, before drinking the last of my soda. I wipe the bottom of my cup with my hand and set it on the coffee table beside a *People* magazine.

“Why, that’s just fine. Babe, you hear that? A museum in Florida,” Mrs. Brooks says, slipping off her flip-flops and drawing her legs beneath her on the couch.

Is this the mother they warned me about? I try to imagine her running through the school howling obscenities, or spending time in jail for using drugs. I take a small breath.

Marlene collects the plates and stands facing us from the kitchen door. Today her hair is piled high and laced with dozens of tight brown braids that fall around her throat like jewels. She doesn’t speak; there is something regal about her.

I stand up, but as I begin to walk in her direction, she moves to block the view, and I pretend not to see the cockroaches crawling up the kitchen wall, slithering over the stove. I lay my arm across Marlene’s shoulder and pull the girl towards the front door.

“Happy Birthday, dear,” I say, hugging her quickly, but with both arms. Marlene keeps her own arms by her side and smiles her tight-lipped smile as I make my quick good-byes, then step outside.

In the car, I roll down the window enough to find fresh air. Marlene's house smelled of grease, and something antiseptic. Bug spray, I realize now.

When Mrs. Brook's face appears, filling up the half-opened window, I cry out. She shoves a photograph at me. "Here she is at five. Take it with you," she says.

I take the snapshot, still startled. "Thank you, Mrs. Brooks, but..." I do not want her creased and faded keepsake. Too late. She has turned and is skittering, bird-like, down the slope, back across the yard.

I drive along the street and stop at the church before looking closely at the picture of little girl Marlene: her brown eyes free of thick-lensed glasses, her mouth without its wayward tooth. The camera captured her smile at its onset, before she might have reined it in. I turn the picture over and read the back:

To Granny from her lucky charm

Marlene Buford Brooks Age 5

Each word seems painfully correct, printed in minuscule letters that float proud and unrepentant against the page. In the six weeks we've spent together, I managed to keep things in their proper place. Teacher. Student. Nothing more. I place the photograph face up on the seat beside me, start the car and drive on. The nothing more is for a reason, but by the time I arrive home, I can't, for the life of me, remember what it is.

I've lived in the same five-mile radius my entire life. Green Hills, a bedroom community of Nashville, oozes middle-class respectability. There's a kind of subtle preeminence in the idea of Green Hills as a safe, politically correct kind of place compared to the neighboring old money elitism of Belle Meade or new money tackiness of Brentwood. Green Hills emits an air of conscious living.

Still, my friends weren't being facetious thirty years ago when I told them I'd be teaching at State and they asked if I'd be safe. What they knew about this predominately black land grant college 'on the other side of town' was drawn from frequent newspaper reports of crimes occurring on the edge of State's north Nashville campus.

Many things have changed since I found my way those mere six miles from Green Hills to the Clay Hall College of Education. Under a court order to recruit more whites, millions of dollars were allocated to spruce up the campus and, after awhile, the shades of student faces grew more diverse.

What hasn't changed so much is news of drugs arrests, domestic violence, and an occasional murder in the neighborhood just outside our reach—where the money stops and poverty, like an old sore, is hard to hide.

Driving like an alert tourist mindful of her door locks, the three block ride from campus to 1607 Georgia Street takes me past the clash of marigolds and zinnias spilling over porches lined with vinyl chairs and green metallic gliders; past sharp shouldered women dodging men on bicycles, past boys on bus benches, and dogs who sniff the sidewalk cracks for crumbs.

I never lose the fear of Marlene's neighborhood or the dread of roaches, and, after awhile, I visit only long enough to figure out a reason we should leave. Marlene does not like crowds. What she likes is riding in my Civic, turning on the radio and pushing the button we set to Nashville's Voice-of-Soul. She likes drive-through restaurant chilidogs and soft-serve ice cream in a cup. She likes the park if we can find a table without people; otherwise, she'd rather stop and roll the windows down and watch. Sometimes Marlene brings a fist full of dollar bills—which I wonder about, but never ask. Can we go to the Dollar Store and buy a shirt, to Pic-n-Pay for shoes? Leary of cheap clothes that will not last, I drive to Dillard's. Marlene keeps her money; I will pay.

It is winter break, and I am having lunch with Jamie, a real estate agent and my good friend. “So that’s why I haven’t been able to catch up with you,” she whines, after I’ve filled her in on my community service. “Sixth grade, god what an awful year.”

“I’d forgotten how ugly schools can be—and chaotic. The hardest part is getting settled in, reminding Marlene what we’d plan to do each week. I’m never sure what she remembers. It’s like her week of living has wiped away our time the week before.”

“But you like the girl?”

“She interests me. She’s not especially attractive, but she has this haughty way about her—to tell you the truth, the child has captivated me,” I say, trying not to gush about feeling useful—feeling real. It has been a long time since Jamie accused me of being like a moth flying to the light of hopeless causes; there’s been no need.

“Is that wise?” Eyes lowered, Jamie leans back against the cushioned booth and unfurls her napkin.

“Ha!” I say and recognize I’m using Marlene’s signal for sudden insight. “It’s like I tell my students: there is a fine line between helping and rescuing. Maybe advocate is what I am.”

Jamie sips her wine. “That’s a loaded word.”

I venture further. “Hm...I’ve been thinking I’ll see what I can do about her glasses-and her tooth. Surely there’s a way...”

“Just don’t get sucked in, Mary Bess.” She looks at her watch then catches my gaze. “Now,” she says, “Brace yourself! Dr. Bradley’s agreed to the botox party.”

“Tell me,” I say, trying to be cheery, trying not to mind we’ve changed the subject.

“All we need are six willing women, and he’ll be there with all the party favors.” Jamie looks radiant. Dark straight hair, large face, eyes as big as saucers. She is a woman people notice. “I’ve decided to go all out. I’ll have him do both crows’ feet and my frown line. What about you? Have you thought about what you want?”

I rearrange the napkin on my lap. “Sure,” I manage to say, “I’ve thought of nothing else.”

That afternoon I find myself at Marlene’s house. The door has lost its screen, and the ficus tree has moved inside. My tap is firm.

“Miss Bess, Miss Bess, you come in,” Mrs. Brooks squints at the intruding light.

“I was on my way to the library and thought Marlene might like to join me.”

“She’s walked to the store. Can you wait a bit?” Mrs. Brooks lifts a thin blanket from the couch and wraps it around her shoulders. “I been sick you know. Sick today and sleeping.” On the floor beside the couch is a plastic tumbler; there is a faint smell of beer mingled with the smell of Raid. “You sit down now, and we can talk. I been meaning to.”

The cushion springs sink beneath me as I sit where Marlene usually does, in the over-stuffed chair facing Granny Velma’s portrait and the room across the hall with its flight of stairs.

“I get down in the back and have to take to bed,” Mrs. Brooks continues. “You know, there was a time, Miss Bess, when I used to work for some of the finest ladies in this town. Yes sirree. You know a Dr. Caldwell, Dr. Harry Caldwell, lives on that—what is the street? Where the governor lives?”

“Chickering?”

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s the last place I worked. Why, I went there twice a week, sometimes more if there was a party. Miss Elizabeth would say she couldn’t get along without her Nel.”

“I’m sorry you’re sick.”

“You know my boy? Thurman?”

“Marlene talks about him so much, I feel as though I do,” I say, trying not to sound annoyed that Thurman always manages to be gone when I am here.

“He’s the one that keeps us now. Working nights and weekends and going to school. Still, he covers our bills.”

“I’d love to meet him. He should stop by my office.”

“He should, but Miss Bess, he don’t like your kind.”

“The teacher kind?”

“The white kind.”

I slide my hands between the cushion and my thighs.

“Not that you’d know it,” Mrs. Brooks says. “He’s around you folks a lot. One thing he learned while I was working was how to wait tables and pass the liquor tray. He’s got himself a second part-time job with a caterer. Wears a uniform and looks important.”

I have stopped talking, but the woman doesn’t notice.

“The thing is, he’s all we got. Lives upstairs and plays his music. He don’t complain, but it ain’t fair.” Mrs. Brooks reaches for the empty tumbler, and then lights a cigarette instead. “What I wantta say is, you should let Marlene come clean your house.”

I watch a flurry of smoke escape from the woman’s nostrils. “Yes, well, I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, shifting my gaze to the portrait on the wall where thin threads of smoke disguise the set of Velma’s jaw but not her eyes. The photo of Marlene’s grandmother meets my gaze with a look that could hold the hope of ages or the treason of an afternoon.

“Hey!” I stand up as Marlene walks in the door.

“Look at her Miss Bess –don’t she look like she’s gaining weight? Turn around and let Miss Bess see how tight those jeans are.”

“Mama, how you feeling? I brought you a Clark bar and a Dr. Pepper from the store.”

“I was just telling Miss Bess what a fine job you’d do cleaning her house.”

“I stopped by to see if you might want to go to the library, but somehow the day’s caught up with me. Could we do it another time?” I am talking too fast.

The girl gives me a smile I read as grateful. She hurries across the room to kiss the top of her mother’s head before handing her the cola and candy. I move toward the door, then, resisting the impulse to retrieve Marlene, I say good-bye.

Marlene has a new friend. Herb used to go to school with her but dropped out to get his mouth fixed. I imagine how he described his upcoming surgery: how each tooth must be pulled, how it would hurt so bad they could only take out two at a time and then he’d have to return for more. It might take months, cause then he had to have a whole new set of teeth. All of this would start any day so he didn’t figure he should stay in school, which would just be interrupted anyway. Marlene was separating darks from whites on the laundromat floor when this boy she remembered from homeroom nodded across the aisle. By the time he’d come over to tell her about the surgery, she’d tossed the underwear in with the shirts and snapped the washing machine closed. He dropped two quarters in the slot and asked if she would like a root beer.

She likes the way his red hair looks cared for, the pink-skinned part precisely to the left of center, the edges razor-trimmed to graze his neck when he walks to get the drinks. She remembers how the smell of beer in homeroom drew her attention to the door where her mother stood, arms stretched and clinging to the doorframe, her thin body thinner in a cotton sundress and no shoes, her eyes with that trapped mouse bulge, and the gibberish falling from her mouth was very loud. She remembers how Herb had come up afterwards and laughed. If it makes you feel any better, my mom has been known to throw every pot she owns out our kitchen window onto the sidewalk five flights below—people have been almost killed! His shrug brought the world back in focus. She hadn’t seen him since.

He lives a bus transfer away Georgia Street, so some days he comes by. Marlene fixes him a mayonnaise and peanut butter sandwich, she drinks V-8, and, if her mother's home, they watch TV. Nel's favorite show is Jerry Springer.

But today, Nel is out. Herb has helped Marlene fix a window screen ripped open by a nigger trying to break in. Herb no longer winces when she says the word, as if he too understands, her need to separate herself from those who act the fool. They are sitting on the stoop playing with Wisdom. Herb is dangling a piece of twine between the cat's paws when Marlene snatches the string and jumps up, hiding it behind her back. Herb stands too and, reaching for the string with both hands, finds Marlene wrapped there in his arms. Ha! she warns, and laughs a real and sprightly laugh—a laugh he needs to quiet with a kiss.

The setting sun leaves behind the silhouette of neighbors' houses, though Marlene and Herb forget to watch.

At some point, I work with Marlene on getting organized. We practice making lists, allotting time for homework assignments, keeping class notes in different colored folders. For a while, her teachers assure me, it all seems to help. Still, there is no pattern to what Marlene will and will not remember. I tell myself a girl can only live with so much before something gives, and so I try not to impose my need for structure. I try to be flexible, see it from her perspective, until she starts forgetting her glasses. This, I tell her, is unacceptable.

“But I like for you to read to me,” she says.

“That is not the point. Not bringing your glasses is a sign of immaturity. It is a sign you just don't care.”

She sighs, then unzips her backpack and dumps the contents on the floor. My heart sinks. Crinkled sheets of notebook paper, random folders, half-done worksheets, a history book, a grammar book, a green comb and a brown pick, two balled up paper sacks, and yes, the remnants of her glasses.

I lift both pieces from the pile. She waits—for praise or punishment I'm not sure. I am in a sort of twilight zone, where everything that's come before is nothing I can count on now.

“When did this happen?”

She sits cross-legged on floor, surrounded by backpack debris. Her face takes on its boast. “Ha!” she cries, returning now to the day a single backslap—an upper classman telling her to move along—severs her glasses. I imagine the force of his large palm on her pack, smacking the only pocket still intact, the one she trusted with her eyes. At first she doesn't realize what has happened, then I see she does. I see her making her way to the girl's restroom. She slams her bag on top of the radiator and traces her finger over the pocket before reaching in and pulling out first one half then the other; the nose bridge is sliced clean, but the lenses are still intact. She holds two sides up to the light, and then rests them on her eyes.

Ha! No good. Any fool would tell you that— would understand why she went without. Ha! She drops each part of her glasses to the bottom of her pack and hitches it up on her shoulder. I see her stride out the door past a wad of girls just coming in. She is used to blurred edges, now she'll just get used to more.

She is agitated when I ask how much time goes by before the night she and her mother, each with different reasons, wait for Thurman. They watch a Cosby rerun and, to pass the time, Marlene fixes Nel's hair. Marlene is good with hair. She can do it with her eyes closed. Nel is stretched out on the couch, reaching down stirring the ashtray with her finger, looking for a butt that's not quite done.

They don't hear the car, but Thurman's key in the lock brings the room to attention. He steps through the door with the urgency of a passerby. Thurman's skin is the brown of a paper bag. His dark eyes reflect the twinkle of a small gold hoop attached to his left ear. He is dressed in black, except for tennis shoes that, with the dust of an afternoon, have lost their white.

Cliff Huxtable is teaching Denise how to dance. One two three, one two three. He demonstrates over and over, until his daughter gets it. Marlene half hopes for a reprieve, hopes Thurman will not stop, will not have time to listen. *An accident* Herb reminded her. *Not your fault--now tell him.* Marlene turns off the TV.

“My smokes?” Nel reaches up to catch the pack he pulls from a pocket and tosses.

“My Snickers?”

“Kid,” Thurman says, narrowing his eyes at Marlene and holding his hands apart, “you gettin way too wide in the hide.” He is headed toward the stairs, but she moves in front of him. She turns and bends over, shaking her backside and slapping her hands on her hips. “Here you go, brother. Here’s what I think!” She begins to laugh, but by the time she stands to jerk around and thrust her face in his, she is screaming. She screams to stop whatever is around her. To give her time to think what she should do. She screams, convinced it is the only way to make it to what happens next.

By the time Thurman grips her face to stuff her cheeks into her mouth like gauze, she’s ready. “My glasses,” she chokes, “are busted.”

Thurman squeezes harder then pushes her away. She rubs the side of her mouth and touches her tongue to her top lip. Her fang has left its mark. She flops into the chair under Granny.

“I TOLD you you couldn’t take care of nothin.” This from Nel, tugging on a long clean Camel, sitting up as if not to miss the show.

“Ah,” Thurman says, “You don’t wear them anyway—you too stubborn AND too full of yourself...like without them extra pair of eyes you some right on mama. I’ve seen you--don’t think I haven’t. Shakin’ your stuff. Inviting trouble, that’s what you been doin’. Why, in no time you be having boys sniffing around.”

“Go ahead sister, go ahead, now...tell him about that big ole white boy you been ENTERTAINING.” Nel waves the cigarette in the air.

“He ain’t sniffin’ nothing. He’s a boy from school.”

“Who ain’t really in school,” Nel says.

Thurman is pacing back and forth between the two, hands to his ears. He stops in front of Marlene, and brings his hands to her shoulders. “You start bringing boys here, the next thing you be telling us is you is pregnant. Knocked up silly. You be as no count as any whore on the street.”

“Ha! Or any mama on the couch.”

For a split second Marlene has her wish. No one speaks. Or moves. It is as if a mysterious pause button has been pushed—until her mother’s whimper creeps across the room bringing Thurman’s hand hard against his sister’s cheek.

Marlene laughs maniacally. “She just afraid the seed don’t drop too far from the tree. You both afraid.” She lifts out of the chair, pushes Thurman away, and stomps out. She walks to the room where she sleeps and turns on the light. There is nothing of beauty here, nothing worthy of bedroom: a single bed with the mattress showing out from under an unfitted rumbled yellow sheet, a pillow too long hugged, dresser with missing drawers, and walls pure of anything suggesting life.

Marlene kneels down at the side of the bed, presses her hands together, and bends her head. “Dear God, keep baby Tina safe. Kiss her for me. And God, take care of mama--an eye for an eye as Reverend says—so get to it. ‘Night Lord.”

Marlene asks me if I believe in God. When I hesitate she admits to sometimes doubting, but there are times she’s pretty sure.

Occasionally, while visiting Marlene, I felt like I was watching a theater production of life on Georgia Street. Now the curtain rises. The ficus tree, the magazines, the floor swept clean. I resisted the sense that

things were out of kilter, that the story here was false. The story meant to reel me in, distract me from some truth. It is the dark side of Georgia Street, bursting with assorted comings and goings. Many times I sensed a swarm of others had skittered from the room, while all along—or for the six weeks she was living—baby Tina had been stashed from view.

Marlene's performance in school has fluctuated. Diligent one week, scatter-brained the next two. Though we have continued our weekly sessions of reading and writing, there is no sign I've made a difference. Now the voice inside my head repeats its order: Leave.

Fight or flight. The dichotomy of a response is telling. The first wave of survival passes and I am left with an urgency containing everything I claim to believe. Marlene's fate becomes the fate of what is possible. Becomes the fate of meaningful change. Marlene may not know it—and certainly will never ask for it—but she still needs my help.

I decide, if nothing else, the least I can do is see about her glasses. And her tooth. With a missionary's fervor I make my way through the state's health care system for minors. Marlene's family is on the Medicaid roll. Someone's good intentions baffle me. Perhaps Thurman, managing to get them signed up, simply lost the will to persevere on his sister's behalf. I learn the names of agencies, as well as the importance of identification numbers, birth dates, and phone numbers. I sign the contact person line. Getting Marlene's vital information is as easy as asking. Nel supplies her daughter's social security number, her date of birth and her insurance card. Nel turns it all over to me as easily as she handed me the picture of Marlene at 5. I resisted then, and even now I fight the urge to hand it back.

I solicit the help of health care workers, as one mentor to another, and they respond. They teach me how to ask and answer the slew of questions I need to assist Marlene. A Vanderbilt ophthalmologist, admitting he does not know how Marlene manages—in his opinion she is legally blind—secures paper work for federal assistance, and introduces us to the optometrist who helps Marlene decide on not one but two different sets of frames that “suit” her.

This works fine, until it doesn't. The dentist examines Marlene's tooth and, with eyes that hold no wonder, tells me if paper work had just been done, the tooth could have been extracted years ago. But I have lessons yet to learn. My self-assigned role as mentor only goes so far. New paper work demands a legal guardian's signature and presence at the time of surgery. “Ha! My mom will do it,” Marlene says. I open my mouth to protest, but something stops me. Something in her voice, its tone—benevolent on my behalf. “Or Thurman. Thurman's off on Mondays.”

“Fine,” I say to the dentist, “we'll get back to you.”

With the flurry of the end of a semester, I spend less and less time with Marlene.

“Mrs. Merrick called me to her office,” Marlene says, handing me the latest timed writing. “Asked if I might work in the library after school. Says it was your idea, says you told her I'd do fine.”

“You will,” I say, placing her paper in the rose-covered folder, which, full as it is, has managed to retain its shape.

Two things come to mind waiting for the Dean to call my name. First, how easy it has been to distance myself from Marlene. Second, perhaps I should retire.

“Professor Mary Bess Dunn” brings me to my feet. I straighten my heavy robe and start down the aisle. Walking past clapping, even cheering, students to accept my award, the person I had hoped to be stays behind.

Summer brings its own catalog of excuses: I am on vacation, or the Brooks' phone stays unplugged for days, or it's too hot. I send postcards from my travels and she leaves "Hellos!" on my answering machine, but it is not until latter that fall, after she has entered high school, I get a call that draws me back.

"Miss Bess, I need your help."

She waits at the curb in front of Georgia Street, wearing short black boots and an off-white sweater dress that fits too well. She faces away from where she might expect to see me, and I have the sense she's ready to bolt. I drive up slowly, tap the horn, and feel her shudder as she turns around. I wave through the windshield to keep my spirits up. I've spied the tooth, still tangled in her almost smile.

At the Dairy Dip we eat our lunch outside. I realize I've been holding my breath when Marlene finally asks me if it's possible to get AIDS on your arm. I watch her pick the crust off her white bread bologna sandwich, discarding bits and pieces in a pile on the concrete picnic table. I used to do that, take the crust off white bread bologna sandwiches. Only I kept my crust intact, unwinding one long piece, which somehow never left the plate. I finish my cherry drink, then swirl the ice with my straw. Marlene pushes up her sleeve to uncover a patch of what looks like poison ivy. I laugh—out loud—and suggest we get some Benedrill. When she giggles I recognize there's more to come. She- and-this-boy-were-playing-around-and-he-squirted-his-stuff-on-her-arm. Right here, Miss Bess, she points as if I might not see. Right here.

Within days we make our way to St. Thomas Family Clinic. I called ahead, explaining, as I learned to do, my role as a tutor/mentor from State trying to help a local high school student. We meet Dr. Gwen. Surely older than she looks, with short hair, black slacks and a soft blue doctor's coat that matches the veins on the back of her hands, she asks to speak to Marlene alone.

Returning to the waiting room, I am grateful for the clean cool colors, the paintings of the sea, the cushioned chairs and couches. Around me women wait. There is an air of exhaustion in the room. Hands rest in large laps, chins dip, heads rest against the wall. No one reads, or talks, or watches CNN. We rest.

Marlene comes to get me, and I cannot tell from looking at her what to expect. In the examining room Dr. Gwen informs me Marlene agrees I should know her recent sexual relations have resulted in a full-blown case of herpes. Another curtain rises. I feel squeamish, like seeing roaches scatter on the stove. Only this time I can't escape.

Dr. Gwen's face is impassive, neither appalled nor sad, as she fills out the prescription pad. Marlene and I both listen to the regimen of applications needed to clear up this incident, for now. The virus will return of course, she will be susceptible all her life. Leaving, I corner Dr. Gwen for words of counsel. What now? Birth control? I ask, but Dr. Gwen has moved down the hall. She looks back at me and nods while knocking on another patient's door.

In the car driving to the drugstore, Marlene is sullen, but nonapologetic. I feel as if I'm reaching across a steep gorge, while from the other side, she skips along the edge. When she does talk it is to ask if Thurman has to know. I sigh with the first sign of emotion either of us has let slip, then I follow her lead, and answer matter-of-factly no.

If you're fifteen years old you must have your mother's permission to get the birth control patch. I do not want to talk of this with Nel. My instinct tells me it will not be pleasant, and it isn't, but not for the reasons I fear.

I start out with the fact that Marlene has been sexually active. A smirk appears before Nel drops her eyes. I realize the only news here is that I am wise to her daughter's situation. When she raises her eyes I catch a glimmer of delight before she starts bombarding me with tales of Marlene's interest in sex, how Nel dutifully related everything she knew about men's penises and what they want from women. She rambles on. To keep from covering my ears I stare at the empty TV screen. Needing her signature keeps

me still, until I realize she has started in on Marlene, describing her body with foul words that made me blush. This is ugly. This is more than I can take. I drop the papers on the table and I leave.

It is two weeks before we return to Dr. Gwen. Nel has lost the permission papers but hand-writes a note and gives it to Marlene. I can only hope. I am now accustomed to this weight of dread, the dread that I will forget a vital something and we won't be able to proceed. And it will be my fault.

There are delays. Marlene has Chlamydia, which Medicaid demands must be treated at the hospital. We begin to spend Tuesday and Thursday mornings before school at St. Thomas Hospital, where every hour prayers float from the PA system and no one seems to mind, including me.

Notations on my calendar show more than a dozen visits to either the hospital or clinic from October to November. A large OK fills a Friday in November block. I see us in the car, returning to school after Dr. Gwen has affixed the patch. To return Marlene by lunch, I take a shortcut down Post Road, past a gated community bursting with grand homes and immaculate landscaping. She is staring out the window. In all these weeks, with everything we've been through, I admit to the occasional blush and squeamish naiveté, but this morning it is the sight of Marlene in the shadow of such opulence that embarrasses me most.

"Those are some houses, huh?" She doesn't answer, and I cannot see her face. I push for a response, "How do you think those people got in those houses?"

She turns in her seat and looks straight ahead. "Hard work," she says.

"You think? So, if you don't live in a house that large it's because you haven't worked hard enough?"

"People get lazy."

"I don't live there. Does that mean I'm lazy?"

"No. It just means you teach."

We both smile. It's been a long morning, but here we are at school, and if she hurries she can still make lunch.

The intensity is more than I can bear. I back away. Like Cammy in the nursing home, my heart is closing down. Though not completely. It will be three months before I hear from Marlene again, before I find myself sitting under Granny Velma's portrait in a room without its props. Gray light streams through curtains closed to dusk, the conquistador is missing, but there is a new TV. Marlene is getting dressed. Herb is here. His new dentures shine from a face that cries for sun, and his voice is low. So low I ask him to repeat what he's just said. What he's said about Marlene losing the baby, not his baby, some old man's baby...some...

I can't hear. Marlene is screaming—no—laughing as she rushes across the room and throws herself on the couch beside Herb.

"Boy, you better hush your lies. Hush yourself. You damn fool, hush."

Stuck between knowing and not, my hand finds its way over my mouth.

Herb throws his arm around Marlene. She laughs, and this time he joins in. "Hey, thought I'd add some excitement to this dull afternoon."

His words are lame, but I admit I'm grateful. "Well, you sure had me going. Okay. So. How are you two?"

It is just that easy to move on.

Two weeks later I come home from class and play a message from Mrs. Brooks. Her voice moves like mud from the confines of a space I wish I'd not disturbed. "BITCH." "DIKE." The accusations come in slow, deep breaths. "WHITE." "PERVERT." A sharp pain twitches in my heart as I listen, over and over.

The woman is drunk, or high. She doesn't know what she is saying. Still I flush, afraid of how my time with Marlene might be misconstrued.

It is always just the two of us. My mind races with Marlene's aversion to crowds, riding in the Civic, the drive-through restaurants, stopping in the park. And the shopping. We've bought jeans and shirts, of course, but it is the new swimsuits, bras and panties I remember when the chilling claim of "PERVERT" strikes my ear.

I crouch on the carpet and cry. What comes to mind is what the Dean said as he handed me the award. Something about how teaching is an act of love and thus an act of courage. My face cools. I push the play. "WHITE...DIKE...BITCH...PERVERT." The taunts are real, true harbingers of harm no sane person would ignore.

I close my heart and listen as the air around me hums *here it is—your out* and I agree.

Dear Miss Bess,

My folder came today. Stuffed with writings from our time together. Thank you. I know how much you loved the roses.

You'd like this library too. Sometimes...like when I'm putting one of the very books we read together back on the shelf, I think of you. Ha! It doesn't seem so long ago that I took your pencil and left without a thank you or good-bye. But you kept coming back—with books and pens. With fancy papers. You were there with your gentle face and smile. You were there with hope.

So, my shift is over and I'm sitting in this nice cushy library chair waiting for Thurman to pick me up. He never understood my moping—what did you expect, he yelled, then pushed me against the wall—shoved some sense into me is how he put it.

Ten minutes. Times up.

Bye now. Marlene

PS I wonder if you kept your word, or if you read my writing. I hope you did.