

CHAPTER 1

Gayla

A RED AND BLUE, LONG-BED pickup truck came up behind and skidded into my bumper. I cut my motor, opened the door, and jumped from my seat to check for damage. I wasn't hurt, but my car was two months old, and I loved its newness. Dammit, the light was red. Why didn't that idiot see it?

I glanced at the tiny scrape on my bumper. The pickup was right-angled to my car, its hood pointed left, just scant inches between the two vehicles. It was drizzling. Down from the cab came a pair of scuffed, tan, work boots topped by hairy, muscular, white legs and starched khaki pants hardly creased behind the knees.

"Sorry ma'am. My foot kindly slipped off the brake. You hurt?" A round head, short-cropped red hair and mustache, freckles, a thick neck slopping into narrow, fleshy shoulders followed the pants and checkered shirt, sleeves rolled up.

That accent, that Carolina drawl, reached out to me like a barbecue flame sizzles when meat spatters grease. Displeasure tightened my stomach, crawled upward, and tingled my spine.

"No, I'm okay. You barely touched me." I saw concern in the young fellow's eyes, which stopped my fear. "You sure, lady? Lord, I hope so." The young man's face whitened, bringing his freckles to mole-like prominence. His hands shook when he pulled his driver's license from his rear pocket. I had swallowed my temper a zillion times before a face like his, a white face—especially a white male face—in a pickup truck.

“Well, let’s see. How are you? Is your truck damaged?” I asked.

“No’um, it’s pretty sturdy. It’s my daddy’s truck. I’m doing a delivery for him. He’s got insurance. Don’t you worry none.”

Billy Joe Taylor, age 20, and I, Gayla Tyner, age 47, exchanged insurance and telephone numbers.

“If you have a problem, just give me a call, you hear?” Young Mr. Taylor seemed unaware of the caution stirred by his Carolina twang.

“I will. Thank you.” I smiled over clenched teeth, my eyes not quite at ease. A Jane Austen quote squeezed into my head. ‘One does not love a place the less for having suffered in it.’ Maybe.

Back in the car I grabbed a handful of tissues, wiped the rain from my face, and completed my turn.

Yeah Gayla, I thought, here you are, back in the part of the world that you hate. Holding in my anger was a lesson I learned in Carolton, South Carolina. So, what in Hell’s Bells was I doing back here, “down-home,” “big-foot country,” after all the jokes I’d heard about the South—where I was born. I had felt split in two even after I left. But down here, even if I was right, I was wrong—black and wrong.

I didn’t grow up always happy in a town where I was, alternately, a precious child—because I was the daughter of Dr. J. C. Hughes—and teased or ignored—because I was “colored.” Billy Joe Taylor didn’t look or speak as if he were born into class privilege. I was. It was a dubious honor.

The last cloud moved beyond the sun. Two-storied old, red, gray, or buff buildings were faded Technicolor. Old white men in summer wash pants, pastel short-sleeved shirts, and suspenders walked hesitantly from under protective store entrances. I glimpsed young black men. I sensed something different. Young black men walked with their heads up, and some older ones who wore hats kept them on when they passed white women.

My decision to come “back home” to spend my sabbatical from teaching in Michigan brought on a growing malaise. I had not taken a sabbatical in more than seven years, so the

university extended the usual term for an extra month, if I wanted it. My youngest child, Pamela, was at Howard University, in D.C., her first year at college. My adult home needed me less, my childhood home, more.

It wasn't only a dislike of my Southern roots that made me carry a perpetual bottle of antacids. I needed to resolve a tension that plagued me. My father and I were like a pair of scissors, matching sides and cutting edges. Our separation began very early. Once, I was pedaling my tricycle with my little sister, Janis, standing on the back. I bumped the doorframe. Janis fell and started to cry. I fell and bumped my head. Our daddy came running and picked up Janis. He said to me, "You mustn't hurt your little sister." Daddy always worried about Janis.

He needed me now. Mother needed me. I wanted to help her. I needed to want to help him.

I drove back home from Ann Arbor two weeks ago, rented a small apartment, and furnished it with items scrounged from my parents. Mother insisted I use the twin bed, dressing table, and mirror that had been in my bedroom when I was a teen. I settled in to work on neglected and tangled tasks for my elderly parents.

A new courthouse stood in the same place where the first one burned the year I left Carolton for college. Its Doric columns had been salvaged, scraped, painted, and placed exactly as they were before the fire. Are burned, reconditioned, wooden columns and scared people alike in any way, I wondered?

I looked at my watch and pushed the accelerator. Damn this lingering feeling about being late, my fear of displeasing my father. I had silently vowed not to be drawn into our old games. Still, when I was with my father I had a nagging emptiness and censored myself, squelching words that surged upward. Just once I'd like to tell him, "I'm grown up Daddy. I have been a long time. And I'm not always wrong." I couldn't be having a mid-life crisis. Could I? I wanted—needed—a little space, time to be alone, to think.

George, my husband, had begun to appear in my dreams. After more than twenty years together and three children, we

ought to be ready to play together again. Returning to Carolton might help me get insight into my sense of ill ease, the men in my life—my father and my husband. I tugged my antacid tube from my purse and made a usual twenty-minute drive in fifteen.

A black, wrought-iron marker leaned a bit: “Dr. and Mrs. J. C. Hughes, Jr., 9119 Laney Drive.” Rain had not reached the distance from downtown Carolton. My car pulled heavily against the steep grade from the graveled, country road to the crest of the circular drive. My mother and father were bending, straightening, and walking slowly in their vegetable garden behind and west of their home.

A sand-colored, brick house crowned a grassy hill. Inside, the rooms were generous, high ceilinged, and cool in hot weather. Daddy insisted that we say “home,” not “house.” I never knew if saying “home” was Dad’s rule because it was Southern or middle-class.

Scruffy and Brownie sprawled in front of the open garage. Carolinians call dogs like Scruffy “a sooner,” because he’d as soon be one breed as another; he’s pretty much German Shepherd. Scruffy stared, wagged his tail twice, and ambled away. Brownie was Mother’s lazy, arrogant, pedigreed cocker spaniel. She barely moved to avoid being run over. Maneuvering around her cinnamon, silky, well-fed slowness, I stopped the car and started toward my parents.

Daddy turned when he heard my footsteps on the graveled driveway. Mother shaded her eyes to see who was coming up the hill. My father hated to admit that he didn’t hear as well as he once had. He was a short, well-proportioned man. His light-yellowish complexion and green eyes were striking, even at nearly eighty. Daddy carried himself with the poise of a man who was accustomed to being noticed.

He waved, “Morning, girl.” Daddy called most women younger than himself ‘girl.’ On occasion he’d say, young lady. “Got a nice mess of garden peas here,” he said.

Gardening warded off boredom for my parents who no longer needed to rush to their offices. Together, they’d picked less than a cupful of a late planting. Neither of them had a

green thumb. I decided I wouldn't mention the accident with Billy Joe Taylor.

My lips brushed the cheek my father offered. He and I had the same long chin and our smiles were the same. I coveted his eyes. My sister, Janis, had Dad's emerald-green eyes. Mine were an ordinary brown.

"Where were you yesterday, Gayla Marie Hughes Tyner? You didn't come. You didn't call," Dad said.

"Good glory, Daddy, I decided to run over to Charlotte . . ."

Behind his shoulder, Mother winked and wiggled her fingers at me, a familiar 'cool it' signal. "J. C., Gayla's good to come visit with us. Now, we don't want to scare her back to Ann Arbor, do we?"

"Mavis, I want to be sure she's safe. Females have to be careful running 'round by themselves." He pointed a bony finger at my face. "You're too damned independent, always have been. Your mother and I take our vacations together. You shouldn't be down here without your husband. I want to see George too."

Dad didn't see me wink in agreement with Mother's caution. Different color eyes notwithstanding, Mother and I have the same slanted eyes—Indian eyes Grandpa called them—and similar visions from within those eyes.

I took the pan with the little green balls rolling across the bottom, "Thanks, Dad. After all, I'm going to be here four months, except for Christmas break. George is deep in a new project for the university and the space program. It's secret, as usual. I don't know the details."

Mother reached for a speckled, black-and-white-enameled tin and her weeding spade and tucked them into her gardening pocket. Unlike Dad, whose baldhead was sunburned red because he forgot to wear his hat, her wide-brimmed, yellow straw hat rested squarely on curly white hair. Her Polynesian brown skin was soft, and at seventy-four, hardly wrinkled except around the eyes when she smiled. My sister, Janis, and I were fortunate to have brown skin, Mother told us. "It doesn't dry and crease like white skin."

Heading toward the house, Mother scanned upward. "Sun's getting high. I don't care to be burnt to a crisp."

We took off our shoes in the mudroom. “A bit Chinese are the Hughes; we honor our ancestors and take off our shoes.” Mother and I sing-songed familiar words. Daddy was silent. Laughing, Mother tapped my butt with her sun hat.

Alice, the latest in a long line of housekeepers—“the cook,” Dad said—called from the kitchen, “Y’all want a tall, cool drink?”

“Not yet, thank you, Alice.” Mother slipped her feet into pink, Daniel Green, house slippers. “We’ll catch our breaths first.”

In the pine-paneled den, Mother’s size-five feet rested on a maroon leather ottoman, a mate to Daddy’s dark green one. “Picking peas, watching you come up the hill made me think about when you told me, ‘if I ever go to the electric chair . . .’” she said.

I had heard the story a hundred times over, but as always, I went along.

Mother leaned into the worn, cool cushion. “Oh, yes, electrocution country all around. Newspapers, radio, criminals, kidnappings. People joked about ‘goin’ to the chair.” She sighed and closed her eyes. “You told me you wanted your last meal to be fried chicken, peas and carrots, corn soufflé (shoo-flay, she pronounced it), Jell-O, chocolate cake, and a glass of milk.”

“I don’t know if anyone jokes about ‘goin’ to the chair’ anymore,” I said. “My taste runs more to broiled fish and a salad, but I’ll take the peas and carrots. No butter, please.”

Dad strode across the den rug. He had stopped by the bathroom to wash the perspiration from his face and hands. The odor of Irish Spring soap spread behind him. He dropped into his green chair and opened his paper. Before lifting it to his face, he droned in his doctor’s voice, “You’re too thin now, girl. No butter?” His sunburned head was a distinct contrast to his bare, pink feet. He patted his waist. “Look at me. I eat what I want. I’m not fat. No butter . . .” He rattled his paper and dropped his head behind it.

“You look great, Dad.” I smiled with what I hoped was agreeable exuberance. Not wanting to prolong his critique of my

diet, or of myself, I turned to leave the room. “While you two catch your breath, I’ll check that broken window in the guest bedroom.” I hurried down the hall to measure a window I had seen when I was “borrowing” furniture. Hunters, in the nearby woods, had shattered it.

For the first time since George Tyner and I married, I was on my own, no children, no work, no routine. George reluctantly agreed for me to spend my sabbatical from the university with my parents. George didn’t think I could do anything without his advice and approval. My sabbatical would give him a chance to miss me.

I measured the window and headed back to my parents. Most of their friends were now dead or in nursing homes. Mother didn’t see as well as she had, and Dad was beginning to misplace and forget things.

“What did Pam have to say?” Mother said the moment I returned. “You heard from her, didn’t you?” Mother’s eyes were bright. News of her grandchildren cheered her.

“College is fun, not as hard as she feared.” I filled her in even though she knew every detail of Pamela’s first days away from home. “George Junior is getting used to working and I haven’t heard from Antony since getting here. He forgot to pack enough toothpaste and he doesn’t like the taste of the ones in Europe. They’re all fine,” I said.

“That Antony ought to have stayed in school.” Dad lowered his paper, frowned, and shook his head. “Only reason to go overseas is if we’re at war.”

Mother’s voice was quiet but firm. “Antony is a lot like Gayla. He likes adventure. That’s why she went all the way up to Pennsylvania to college.”

Daddy held his newspaper close to his eyes. He grunted. I grinned at Mother. “I have to run.” With a quick kiss on the top of Dad’s head and a hug for Mother, I retrieved my shoes.

Alice stood in the kitchen door. She was a tall, comfortable and comforting woman of about fifty. “Y’all ready for that long, cool, drink?”

“No thanks, Alice,” I said. “Mother and Dad may want something by now. See you later.”

Scruffy chased my car down the hill, barking and snapping at the tires, his head inches away. I stopped, got out, grabbed a handful of small rocks, and threw one near him. The dog stared, and after several more stops and stones, he left the chase. I'd be very happy if I could stop everything I didn't want as easily as I stopped Scruffy. I'd never throw rocks at George or my father. Maybe Daddy was right about Antony. My mind danced from one thing to another. George criticized me for "hopscotch thinking." He says I drive him crazy by bouncing from one topic to another.

Antony—our middle child, headstrong and independent as a firstborn or a baby in the family—was taking a year off. "Everyone does it," he insisted.

"Not us," George had said. "Especially not our people. We African American—used to be colored, used to be Negro—people have to stay on the case to make it in 'the man's world.'" He was only half joking with his litany of names our people had been called at different times in history. George and I were together on that point, to no effect.

"There's a whole other world out there, Pops. Don't be Neanderthal." Antony winked and hugged me. "That's not your style, Mom." He looked at his father. "I prefer to call us 'people of color,' Dad." Tony was trying, as usual, to turn a problem into a joke. Now, our Antony was bicycling around Europe, en route to Africa, sketching and taking pictures. "I'm going to be a planetary person," was the way he put it.

I came back to Carolton to sell our old family house on Lowell Avenue, where Janis and I grew up near the end of the Great Depression, which at the time we didn't know was going on. We weren't poor like most of the people we saw.

My first reason for taking a semester leave of absence was to help Mother and Dad. But unbidden, ignored, and buried questions were surfacing in my mind. What was happening between George and me? I was beginning to feel that we were living on different planets.

My family, the Hughes, was one of a few Negro families who did not owe our livelihood to the white-power world. Daddy's father had been a prominent minister in the county. To the

white world, he was a well-known “colored” minister. White people would call Grandfather “Reverend” or “Doctor,” but he would never be called “Mister.” Daddy was, luckily, a “real” doctor, or he’d have been plain “J. C.”

“Professor” Ellis, the school principal, drilled us in Friday assemblies, “Enunciate distinctly, say ‘nee-grow.’ That way white people can’t slip and say nigra. That’s too close to nigger,” he’d lecture from the stage of the auditorium of Deerpath School. Ellis wasn’t a professor either, but “Professor” wasn’t “Mr.”

We lived in a nine room, sprawling Victorian house. We had live-in housekeepers, two cars, and traveled somewhere away from the South every summer. These were prerogatives I took for granted in the world that Janis and I inhabited. When I moved out of our cocoon, I learned how small our world was. The total of our class was about four school principals, teachers, a couple of insurance agents, the undertaker, a handful of preachers, two dentists, our mother the pharmacist, and a few struggling entrepreneurs: barbers, a cobbler, tailor-pressers, grocers, and restaurant owners. That was our Negro middle and upper class—maybe a hundred, in a city of about twenty thousand, colored and white.

Grown-up and back in my womb of contention, I welcomed the opportunity to fathom who and what I was. When I looked at myself, my family, and my neighborhood, I knew I was privileged. My family, like nearly everyone we knew, was two, three, and four generations removed from the grinding degradation of slaves and sharecroppers. I should have been filled with a sense of belonging, even arrogance. I wasn’t.

Education, property, and prestige did not bring a sense of self-esteem. The schizophrenia—of segregation and enmity surrounded my world like a foggy morning on the banks of Lake Dillard.

By two o’clock, the sun was high and hot. I passed the oldest cemetery in the county on my way to the bank to meet Dad’s real-estate agent. Across the street from Restview Cemetery, a house, nearly obscured by giant trees and unkempt shrubbery, was barely visible behind years of neglect. I saw something or

someone move. The cemetery aroused childish fantasies. I looked straight ahead.

Myrtle Lee

Myrtle Lee Urmann was hidden on her sagging front porch by an overgrowth of shrubbery that had not been pruned or trimmed in twenty-five years. She took a slow swallow of bourbon from the cut-glass tumbler. She paid no attention to the gray film on the outside of the beautifully-carved glass in her hand. Myrtle Lee Urmann no longer cared if the glass was washed, or if the lovely furnishings in her house were dusted.

Myrtle Lee talked to herself a lot. She'd been alone so long there was no line between thought and the spoken word. "There she goes. Since she came back from up North, she spends lots of time riding around town. I've seen her looking all around a dozen times. She's going to write a book about us, I bet. Old lies never die. She's gonna spread the story of Henry Lee and me, a black man and a poor white trash, folks like to say. Miss fine colored lady wouldn't recognize me. If I told her that we used to play together she wouldn't remember. I do. McGuire Street for me. Lowell for her. I didn't know back then that Lowell was a name for the rich people's street and McGuire a name for the poor folk's street. Henry Lee, I sure do miss you." The last words were silent, inside her head, but Myrtle Lee didn't know or care.

"Damn Mama, anyway," she mumbled in the haze of her morning round of trying not to remember. She wanted me to marry Mr. Stuart Urmann because he was a big shot-banker."

Gayla

I found the documents the real estate agent wanted in my parents' safety deposit box. Mr. Crutchen was a thin, nervous, blond man, beginning to bald. His upper lip sweated and he said, "Yes ma'am" at least two dozen times during the hour we sorted and studied papers. I can't stand "ma'am," but I hid my amusement at the irony of being called "ma'am" in South

Carolina. It used to be taboo like “Mrs., Miss, and Mr.”

At a teller’s window my attention was caught by a stout, mahogany man calling, loudly, to a slim, gray-haired, beige-brown woman.

“Hey lady, ain’t you Maxine Lomax? What you doin’ here?”

The woman searched for the source of the voice, cocked her head to one side, threw back her shoulders, and smiled in recognition. “Dan Scott, you old scalawag. I didn’t know you right off.” She pursed her eyebrows and, focused on the man’s expanded stomach. “Looks like you been sopping a whole barrel of biscuits. Why, man, I came home to die, that’s what.”

Placing hands that could palm a basketball on his substantial waist, the man she called Dan Scott shrugged his upper body side-to-side and teased, “What you say?”

The woman lightly touched his colorful shirt. She smiled more broadly. “I hear the Sloans moved down from Philly, back out on their family farm near Plainland. Big Jon is back from California, and the Walkers retired from Chicago. Looks like everybody who left here in the old days is comin’ home to die. Ain’t that a caution?”

Together, laughing, the couple pushed open the heavy, bronze door to the street.

My head overflowed with images of people I had heard of or neighbors who went North and West or stayed in the military after World War II and Korea. They left Carolton to find jobs and better living than Negro people were allowed before Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and sit-ins. They were coming “back home.” It didn’t make sense to me why anyone would come back to old hurts that rested lightly beneath the surface, scars festering in every Southern drawl and Rebel license plate on the front of eighteen wheelers glimpsed through rearview mirrors. Were the painted signs that screamed “White” and “Colored” gone from the insides of people’s minds as well as from the storefronts and waiting room doors?

I left the bank. Rain-washed streets by now had dried in the hot, autumn sun. An old, slow speech cadence was beginning to seep into my ears.

Louise would be home by now. Louise Hendricks and I exchanged Christmas cards and once in a while, we mailed each other letters. When I called, the night before, Louise said, "I'll be home right about three, come on over." Carolton was not the cold Mid-west; if you wanted to see someone, you didn't have to wait for an invitation.

I stopped at my apartment, freshened, and caught myself frowning in the mirror. I was a year younger than Lou, even if she was prettier. I, reflexively, reached into my purse for an antacid and shrugged. I didn't need one.

On my way across town, I noticed that Carolton had once been cleaner. Running through the neighborhood in shorts and sandals, I had once passed houses where colored people planted flowers in their front yards, even if the house was rented. Without sidewalks, flower borders were lined to the very edge of the streets. Cars and people passing would stir the blossoms with a rippling breeze—yellow, blue, pink, and red like waves in a multicolored sea.

I turned onto Spring Street, where the most popular girls had lived thirty years earlier. The houses were still neat, and strangely smaller. Then, newer houses began. Sidewalks separated lawns from streets. Houses and yards were twice and three times as large as the ones at the beginning of Spring Street. Lots were uniformly shaped. I felt lost.

I parked in front of an attractive ranch house and followed a stone path to the door. It opened before I could ring the bell.

"Come in, come in," a breathy voice said. "I heard you were in town." Louise swung the door wide.

"This is one nosy place," I said. "I haven't seen three people to speak to since I've been here."

Louise May Hendricks was beautiful; luminous black hair curled around her ears and forehead. She had a slim figure, skin the color of butterscotch, and deep-set, hazel eyes that were, at once, sad and glistening with fun. She didn't walk; she floated, elegantly on the earth. People in Carolton said Louise looked like Lena Horne, only prettier. Louise married Lloyd Brown during her sophomore year in college. "He was," she said, "too much in Marine blues." Lloyd died before he was thirty.

We embraced, shoulders only, southern style.

"You don't look a day over thirty, and I know your age, you know," Louise said. "And nobody can come back to this burg without the word getting out as quick as a lightning flash."

I inhaled and, smacked my lips. "Smells delicious in here." Louise beckoned me to follow to her kitchen. "Just a few peaches my mother brought from down in the country. What are you doing here, lady? You said you'd never stop in this town for more than a hot minute."

"First, let me look around," I said. "Your house is as lovely as it smells. Show me."

Louise's house was tastefully decorated. An alcove off the living room was lined with photographs: Louise's parents; her husband, Lloyd, in his Marine dress uniform; her sister; and one of a baby, lying, as if asleep, on a white lace tablecloth. Straightening already perfect alignments, she touched each picture as if in introduction.

"This baby is my aunt. I'm named for her." Louise said. "She died before a live photograph could be made. The old custom was to take a 'laid-out' picture.

"These old-fashioned, wooden frames aren't in with today's style," Lou said, "but they've been in my family a long time."

"They give your home a special air," I said. "Besides, have you ever been inside a black home where family pictures aren't all over the house, even the bathroom? We've lost so much of our past, we hold onto what we can."

"I hadn't thought of it that way." Louise rubbed a nonexistent spot of dust.

I stopped before a picture of a little girl. "This is you, I know, but it reminds me of someone else. Do I know a relative of yours?"

Louise stroked her hand down her throat, her face not quite a frown. "Not a legal one anyway. Answer me, Lady Gay, what brings you back?"

"Sorry, I'm admiring, and envying. I'm on leave of absence, a well-deserved R and R and a little time with my parents. They're not as hardy as they used to be."

“Sounds good to me. Everybody needs a break once in awhile. How is your gorgeous George?”

“George is fine,” I said. I hoped my longtime buddy didn’t notice that I was looking at a portrait of an elderly gentleman with a Santa Claus beard instead of into her eyes.

“If you say so, girl.” Louise beckoned for me to follow her.

“Carolton seems so peaceful,” I said. “Are things as calm and friendly as they appear?” She motioned me to a seat. “I can’t get over Dad’s real estate man, ‘yes ma’aming’ me the entire time we were together.”

“You’ll get used to it,” she said. Louise and I sat in her sun-filled kitchen, the tantalizing odor floating up to the skylight. She served two bowls of warm peach cobbler.

“I’m sure everyone is relieved to get that segregation thing out of the way.” I licked my spoon. Lou had taken a smaller portion for herself. “My dad used to say the South would be the best place for our people when that legal segregation stuff was done away with. He said, because colored and white grew up close together down here we understood one another better than immigrants and colored in the North.”

“KKK feelings are lurking out there somewhere, I suppose.” Louise tasted her warm fruit and sugary syrup. “Tar and feathers are gone, but it will be a cold day in Hades when Carolton has an African-American mayor.” She reached for my bowl to give me another portion.

“No, no,” I covered my dish. “The waistline can’t take it. But let me know when the nightriders are on the way, will you? I hope there’re no more dark-of-night chases because black and white people fall in love.”

“Sure, like I have a direct line to headquarters. We haven’t a thing to worry about,” she said.

“Promise?” I asked.

“By the power of the creme de la creme.” Louise clasped my hand in the secret grip of our high school club.

She washed our bowls. We swore we’d get together soon. Louise’s phone rang just as she opened the door to let me leave. She blushed and quickly mumbled, “Bye.” Until then, our visit had been Southern slow.

I felt strangely rushed. I felt that I sometimes made hasty judgments. The phone had rung, and of course, she would hurry to answer it. Except, Janis once said, “I’ve known you all my life, Gay, and you’re usually pretty much on target. You’re psychic.” But maybe Louise was eager to answer the phone, that’s all. Besides, everyone is entitled to secrets.

Driving through streets I once walked, skated, and biked brought me to our old, vacant house. It was drab and dilapidated. The gutters overflowed with dry leaves and the windows gaped, empty of glass. An ugly factory hovered three blocks away. Its garish, hideous, green, water tank marred the view of trees on a hill that once beautifully framed the evening sun.

Every room in our old, rambling house had been large. With “catty-cornered” furniture leaving lots of room, I chased my sister, our voices reverberating off twelve-foot-high ceilings. Mother was exasperated when her bookworm daughters took King Arthur, the newest Bobbsey Twins, Langston Hughes, or Louisa Mae Alcott into an empty room. She’d call and call, but deep in our imagined worlds, we couldn’t hear her with the door closed.

I looked down the darkening street and checked my watch. I’d told George I would’ call him before ten. Hurrying by the old cemetery, I noticed it wasn’t as frightening as it once seemed. Hundreds of stories in there, for sure.