

First three chapters
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SETH'S PASTURE

by

S. Alexander

Dr. Leisure,
Kihei, Maui, Hawaii

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Jean Ashcraft. She is my agent, a fellow writer, but most of all, she is a friend and a kindred soul. Without her, Seth's Pasture would still be a wishful thought and an unrealized dream. Thank you Jean for your tireless commitment to this project. For the many sleepless nights and lengthy days of seemingly endless discussions and planing on how we, together, would do the impossible.

We've done it my friend!

Fame and fortune may fore ever elude us, but we'll always be the richest people in the world for the wealth of the soul is measured by the depth of love.

S. Alexander
Tupelo, Mississippi
February 2, 2001

Preface by the Publisher

Over the years I have read a variety of novels. Many deal with “coming of age” as young people mature and have to come to grips with those issues such as who we are and why we are here. Seth’s Pasture is such a novel.

We are there as Precious Huddelston passes through puberty in the presence of five boys who are also struggling with the same fundamental issues we all must deal with to some degree or another.

The setting is a rural southern one. A small town, Crowley to be specific. A place the interstate passed by. Seth’s pasture is exactly what the name implies. It was a pasture where cattle grazed when Seth Crowley became the focal point for a town.

Using the pasture as the focal point, author Shelly Alexander weaves a very compelling and believable story about a young girl becoming a young woman. As we experience the happiness and sorrow of Precious’ life’s journey we can not help but reflect on our own course of travel. All of us have had to deal with the same or similar issues regarding such things as self concept, who we are, and where are we going.

Dr. George R. Harker
Maui, Hawaii - January 2001

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Prelude to Seth's Pasture

Born and now living in New Orleans, a place of which I have no memories before two years ago. Between then and now is a place called home, that exists only in my memories. The story of my life, is a combination of the two. Wonderful thing about memories. They can be bent and stretched, fast forwarded, rewound and replayed at will. They can be edited, discriminatingly putting in and taking out people, places and events that made us euphorically happy or devastatingly depressed. I used to think only old people did that.

Every moment from this day forward begins a new chapter in the story of my life. In time, I will distort, rearrange and rewrite it all. For today's reality is tomorrow's memory. Real time is only a brief window between the two, that allows us to see how we've become who we are today. Memories are paradoxical truths, and the framework for every life story.

The story of my life is only a thin thread within a greater tapestry. A single thread unraveled, affects the integrity of the whole fabric. So our life stories are always about more lives than our own.

There are experiences and adventures in my life, that can only be told in the speech and perceptions of the child that I was when it happened. Others, reflectively revisited by the adult that I am today. In either state of retrospect, the remembrances are still vivid, retaining clarity in each word and action.

Real, imagined or unconsciously contrived, this is my story of how I remember home. After all, home is the best and worst of the memories we choose to keep of a given place and time. It is the validation of our very existence.

Precious Huddelston
New Orleans

Chapter 1 Back To The Beginning

Lying flat on his stomach, with his elbows dug into the soft moldy dirt, his suntanned naked back and faded brown shorts, blended him into the shadows and colors of the ground. Except for an occasional twitch brought on by an ant bite, he was motionless and almost invisible. Every now and then a hot wimpy breeze teased the tops of the high grasses covering his hiding place, promising, but never delivering a moments relief from the southern heat. He was so hot, and dirty sweat poured from his forehead, oozing like an oil slick down his fat face. Squinting and wiggling his nose, he tried to work the thick glasses back over his eyes. He clenched his teeth and tried to keep his mind on his mission, but the creepy sensation caused by whatever was crawling up the back of his leg was getting worse. His skin quivered like a horse's flank in a swarm of biting gnats, but he was determined to hold his ground.

A tickling-tingling, scratchy feeling sent shivers down his spine as the unseen invader continued to pull itself up his leg. He felt it thrust forward, boring underneath the edge of his shorts, getting closer and closer toward the most private parts of his body. Fear raised the hairs on the back of his neck, and his heart raced wildly. Terror gripped the very core of his soul, sending horrible images of slithering, saber fanged vipers to his brain. He knew there wasn't room enough between his shorts and his skin for something that big, but he couldn't reason away the fear. Maybe it was a black widow spider, or maybe a scorpion with its deadly stinger armed and ready to deliver the fatal plunge. Tossing the BB gun into the grass and scrambling to his feet, he ripped open the snap and the zipper with one yank, and shoved his pants to his ankles. A small fuzzy caterpillar rippled its way across his shorts and tumbled onto the ground. Doby raised his foot to squash his tormentor, but tripped in the tangle of his clothes. Falling backwards into the weeds, his glasses sailed off his face in the opposite direction. Sprawled on his back, naked, and looking up into the cloudless sky, he caught a foggy glimpse of his intended quarry as it took wing and soared silently toward the sun.

"Doby! You scared em' away man!" Tyler sprung up like a jack-in-the-

box from a clump of reeds about ten yards away. Red faced from the heat and the ruined hunt, he slung his gun over his shoulder, swearing several times at Doby and the birds before storming off.

“My glasses fell off! Don’t step on em’!” Doby spoke to the sound of approaching footsteps. On his hands and knees feeling through the grass, he accidentally grabbed Christian’s ankle.

“That’s my foot coke bottle man!” said Christian, a firey tempered twelve year old with a crew cut. Reaching across Doby and plucking the glasses from where they had caught on a bush, “Here!” he said, handing them to him and noticing that he was being mooned. “Whatcha’ doing with your pants down? Guess they fell off too, huh?”

“A lizard crawled up my britches leg. Big ol’ sucker!” Replied Doby, attempting to redeem himself from his cowardness. He stood up and wrapped the wire frames around his face, avoiding looking at Christian. “If I hadn’t lost my glasses, I could ‘a shot em’ man! He was big! Big ol’ horny lizard!” he said, pulling up his shorts.

“Weird stuff like that don’t happen to nobody but you Doby!” said Christian. “Come on. Let’s go to the creek. Ain’t no more birds coming back here today,” he said, walking away.

Doby picked up his gun and followed behind, surprised that he hadn’t called him an outright liar. Christian didn’t usually show concern about other people’s feelings.

“Bet them same birds ‘ll be back down here later on this evening, and that big ol’ lizard too. I bet there’s more’n one ov’ em’!” he said, catching up with Christian and brave enough to lie to his face.

Christian walked several steps ahead, turned around and looked at him. “If they come back Doby, just remember you’re suppose to shoot em’, not pee on em’!” he said without cracking a smile. “Get your bike and let’s go find Tyler and Poonie.”

“Where’d they go?” Doby asked, fastening his gun onto the handlebars with an old leather belt.

“Over there.” Christian answered, pointing across the pasture.

Doby could see two blurred figures within hollering distance near the fence that separated the pasture from the Brouard property to the south. The

fence zigzagged westward, ending a few yards from the creek. Even though no one repaired or claimed it anymore, a few strings of rusty barbed wire still clung to the rotten timber posts.

Late June, and a hot stillness filled the early morning air. Tyler, Poonie, Doby and Christian had met up earlier to go hunting in the pasture. We'd spent our summers together exploring the pasture as long as I could remember. There were close to five hundred acres of land in the pasture back then, and over time, we hiked or biked over most of it.

Known as the Crowly gang, there were six of us all together. Trey, the fifth boy and me, Precious Huddleston, the only girl in the gang.

Crowly was little more than a stop in the road back then. Outsiders only stopped when they were lost. The Country Store, Bee Bee's Beauty Bungalow (my mother's combination beauty parlor and clothing store), and the gas station made up downtown Crowly. It was big enough for the locals, although major business transactions or purchases required a trip to nearby Foley. Me and the rest of the gang went to school in Foley, and most of the grownups worked at the sulfur processing plant in Foley, the only industry within fifty miles. None of the common folk had ever gotten rich in Crowly, but no one had ever starved to death either.

The old folk used to tell tales of long ago when the town had money. That was back when a man called Seth Crowly ran a million dollar cattle business there. The county and the town were named after him, but no one remembered if the name or the money came first.

The Crowly mansion, a rambling antebellum fortress that once stood at the west end of town, burned to the ground during the civil war. They said old Seth's wife wouldn't let him rebuild on the same plot of land, thought it was cursed or something. The Lavender, as the plantation was called, was rebuilt in Foley. The cattle business remained in Crowly and kept the town on the map until the family died out. Lavender was restored and opened to the public as a historical museum in the fifties. Crowly got none of the money from the admission fees. It didn't even get credit for being Lavender's original building site.

"Long time ago," they'd say, "there was a bank, two diners, five and

dime, post office and a city hall.” No one under fifty remembered when that was. No one under seventy remembered when Crowley had it’s own school. In private conversations, away from the ears of children, the old folk talked about the days when the trains stopped in Crowley. The hub of the city was the Cattleman Hotel. People from all over spent money and time there. Some say the hotel was really a house of ill repute.

A quarter mile south of main street, was the slaughter house. It stayed in operation until about nineteen-forty-seven. Seth’s great grandson ran the place. He was a hard man, they say. Ran his workers like he ran the cattle. Killed in a stampede the year the slaughter house went out of business, he was smushed and scattered all over the pasture. Never did find all of his body parts, they say. A rough concrete slab that used to be the kill floor, is all that remained of the slaughter house. When I was a child, folks said the number of wild flowers growing in Seth’s Pasture were just a handful compared to the herds of cattle that once grazed there.

The younger grown-up citizens of Crowley, like my Moma, spent their time trying to make a living and didn’t have time to be nostalgic. The old folk entertained themselves, as best they could, with their memories and prepared to move to the east of town; the Crowley cemetery. Even the old white clapboard church had been abandoned for the fancy looking Greater Baptist Church of Foley.

“What’re you doing hanging around here this time of day?” My mother, Bertha Huddleston, asked, seeing me ease in the back door of the beauty shop.

“I’m bored Moma. Ain’t nothing to do!” I said, sitting down in the only vacant chair.

“Thought you were with the boys.”

“Naw. Didn’t wanna’ go shoot no birds!”

Moma smiled. “Stack those perm rollers for me. If you stay in here, I’ll keep you busy!”

I picked up a large red plastic box and begin stacking the rollers end to end. “Come here,” Moma commanded, wiping setting lotion off her hands onto her bibbed apron. She slicked my hair back into a thick curly ponytail and fastened it with a rubber band. “Now, you can see what you’re doing!”

Moma wasn't just the only hairdresser in Crowley back then. She was the best in the county. She'd go over to Beaver once a week to work at the salon on the Strip Mall. People who wouldn't have been seen dead in Crowley, flocked like geese to get her to do their hair at the mall.

Some people said she was soft spoken, but ironed willed. That describes Moma pretty well. Moma says the same about me, only she just calls it stubborn. Moma moved back to Crowley when I was six months old and took her place in the family business. Her mother and her mother's mother before had owned and operated the shop. It had passed on to her after my grandma Lillian died. I was six years old then.

Although, she didn't talk much about growing up in Crowley, I knew she'd left a year after highschool, seeking fame and fortune. She'd returned four years later broke, with a baby and no husband. Grandma Lillian said some folks came into the shop just to gawk at the product of her blatant immorality. Back home, in the privacy of their bedrooms and backyards, they speculated and guesstimated about who my father might've been. They couldn't say exactly what it was about me, but I was foreign looking to Crowley. I never knew what it all meant, back then. Moma never said, not even to me, and after a while it didn't seem to matter.

Delia South, a tall pretty black woman came in the shop around noon. She's Trey's mother and the closest thing to a best friend that my Moma had."Good morning all, and Bertha, please tell me you got that perm!" she said, all in one breath.

"Uhuh. Came in the mail this morning. You want to get it today?"

"Please! We've got a revival starting tonight. Don't want to embarrass my husband. My hair looks awful!" she said, taking the pins from her puffy twist of thick brown hair.

Moma laughed. "Got two ahead of you. You want to wait or come back later?"

"I'll wait. Don't have anything else to do for the next hour or two."

"Hello Mrs. South," I said softly. "You can sit over here."

"Hi, Precious. I didn't see you," she replied, taking my seat.

"Where's Trey?"

"Says he has a stomach ache. I think he just doesn't want to go to

church tonight. He's at home."

"Can I go over to your house?"

"Sure. If your mother doesn't mind. You all can finish off last night's meat loaf for lunch."

"Can I go Moma?"

"Go on, but be back here before supper! I don't expect Delia wants to feed you all day."

"Promise!" I said, setting my unfinished chore on the shampoo sink and hurried out the front door. I sat down on the porch to tie my shoe. I could hear and see Moma and Delia talking through the screened door.

"Bet she has him out of the house in less than five minutes," said Delia.

"Good! I don't want her moping around here underfoot all day."

Replied Moma, checking the time on one of the dryers. "Precious said you got some new furniture Delia."

"Finally! After all these years, I got rid of that dilapidated old dining room table. With any luck, I'll have furniture in every room of the house in about ten more years," she replied. Several women scrunched down in their chairs, getting their ears below the dryer hoods so they could hear the conversation between the two.

The South's had built a house just off main street. It was just a plain three bedroom brick house, but to the down to earth people of Crowley, it had the trappings of high class folk. Delia taught eighth grade math at Foley High and her husband Haley was the pastor of the First United Methodist Church in the next county. Crowley's black population almost disappeared back in the fifties, and only six black families were left in the whole town. Race was never a big issue, far as I knew. Everybody worked the same jobs. We were all bused to the same school, and by national standards, we were all dirt poor. Anybody lucky enough to rise above it was gossiped about and respected equally.

I had started to walk away from the porch when I caught wind of an interesting conversation between Moma and one of the old bitties. I stopped to listen."Bertha, don't you worry about Precious always playing with just boys?" Asked the woman sitting in the styling chair, middle aged with red dye soaking into her squirrel colored grey hair.

"Precious can hold her own with the boys. They've been friends

forever!”

“But they’re eleven and twelve. You know what happens when kids get a certain age Bertha.”

“I’m not worried about Precious!” Moma said firmly, slightly snapping the woman’s head backwards as she worked in the dye. Cutting her eyes toward Delia, she twitched her mouth into a quick smirk. Delia chuckled and hid her face behind a magazine.

Figuring that was about as exciting as it would get at the beautyshop, I jumped off the porch and straddled my hot pink dirt bike. Tugging at the rubber band until it snapped, I pulled it loose and shook my hair across my face. I liked my hair down. Kept the sun out of my eyes. Just as I was about to pedal away from in front of the shop, Trey called to me from the opposite end of main street. I turned and pedaled toward him.

“I was coming over to your house. Thought you wuz sick,” I said, stopping close to him.

“I’m alright. You seen Doby or Poonie?”

“Nope. They went bird huntin’ down in the pasture.”

“You wanna’ go find em’?”

“Yeah. I’ll race you!”

“You’ll lose!”

Trey sped by the gas station and turned left. I was right on his tail. The gravel road ended at the bottom of a hill. From there, the way was marked only by our bike trails. Around a grove of persimmon trees and across a shallow ravine lay Seth’s Pasture. We stopped, shielded our eyes with our hands and craned our necks to get a clearer view through the tall grass. No one was in sight. “Bet they went to the creek,” said Trey.

“Probably. Let’s go,” I said.

The creek edged along the western border of the pasture, separating it from the next county. The old folk said the creek used to run a straight course from east to west. Over the years, lots of crooks and bends had changed its sandy bed. Near the middle of the pasture, it snaked out to form an “S” shaped curve, our favorite swimming hole.

The four boys were skipping rocks across the water when Trey and I skidded our bikes to a stop at the waters edge. “How come you didn’t meet us

Trey?” Poonie asked without looking at us.

“Had a stomach ache. Whatcha’ll doing?”

“Trying to find something to do! You know, this is the first summer I’ve ever been bored,” said Poonie, turning away from the creek.

“Ya’ll wanna’ do something exciting?” Christian asked in an evil sounding voice.

“Not if you thought of it first Christian.” I spoke up for the first time since arriving at the creek.

“Well listen to Miss Hoity-toity! Not if you thought of it first Christian,” he mimicked in a whiny voice. “You have to do whatever we do or you can’t run with us anymore!” he threatened.

I shrugged my shoulders and blew him off. My place in the pack was tight as a sailor’s knot and Christian knew it. I could, and would stand toe to toe with the best of the five. I could outrun, outbike and if necessary out fight any of them. Saying it out loud seemed like a waste of time, so I didn’t.

Poonie harked and skeeted a stream of spit past Christian’s head. “I gotta’ feeling it’s something stupid Christian, but I’m so dadblame bored I’d probably try it!”

“It ain’t nothing stupid. It’s adventurous! Let’s go check out some new territory.”

“Like where? Ain’t no new territory in Crowley. We’ve been all over this place!” said Doby. hurling a rock clean across to the other side of the creek.

“No we haven’t,” Christian said, turning his large sea-blue eyes westward.

“No! No Christian! I know what you’re thinking and we ain’t gonna do it!” said Doby.

“Come on you chicken butts! Boy! Ya’ll ain’t nothing but a bunch of chickens!” Replied Christian, hoping to insult us into his way of thinking. It usually worked.

He crawled around on the ground clucking and pretending to squeeze out an egg until I pushed him down and sat on his back. “Call anybody else a name and I’m gonna mash your guts out!” I said, pressing my weight into the small of his back.

“He wants to go to aunt Callie’s, don’t cha’ Christian?” asked Doby. Christian didn’t answer.

“You can call me chicken butt all you want,” Doby continued, “ but I ain’t crazy and I ain’t going!”

Christian raised up and flipped me off his back. “Yeah, why not? Why’s everybody scared of her? She’s just a crazy old lady living in the woods!” he said, brushing sand from his short military cut blonde hair.

Tyler had been sitting silently on the creek bank. “She ain’t just crazy,” he said, “She’s the manifestation of evil!”

“Whatcha’ mean, evil? Like she’s a boggie man or something?”

“Worse! They say ain’t even no stray dogs or cats around her place, ‘cause she cuts their heads off, then says weird chants while she drains their blood and drinks it!”

“That’s a bunch of bull Tyler and you know it!” I said. I ‘d heard the tales before. We all had.

Christian laughed. “You wanna’ go Precious?”

“I don’t care. I’m not scared to go.”

“You are too! Come on, admit it Precious!”

“I am not! I just don’t believe there’s anything there worth seeing. People just say that stuff about her to keep us kids from going that far from town.”

“Well why don’t we just settle it for once and all by seeing for ourselves.” Christian continued to bully us. “I don’t know why you’re all so scared. We’re armed remember!” he picked up his pellet gun and waved it over his head. Going over to where Doby stood and whispering into his ear, he said, “If all else fails, pee on her.”

Doby let the comment slide, not wanting to give Christian a reason to let the cat out of the bag about the lizard incident.

Aware that we’d be in deep trouble if anybody ever found out we’d gone that far away from town, we went anyway. Boredom, curiosity and a desire to shut Christian’s mouth, outweighed the risk of getting a switching.

Far as we knew, nobody had ever seen Callie close up, or even seen her at all. No one knew how long she had lived over by the creek, on the far west end of the pasture. No one really knew if she still lived at all. She didn’t have

any family left, so they said. Some folks said she'd murdered them, made stew from their flesh, and fermented their blood into a potion that she'd drink every full moon. Some folks said she'd never had a family, excepting the devil, because she was demon spawn. By either account, she'd lived forever in the folklore of Crowley.

Where we were headed was a good thirty minute ride, at least, from where we were. We followed the course of the creek until the tangle of saplings and vines became too thick to pass through.

"Let's go back." Begged Doby, tearing away a vine that had wrapped around the spokes of his bike wheel. "We don't even know where the heck we're going anyway!"

"He's right you know," said Poonie, wiping sweat from his face with his forearm.

"How hard can it be to find the only house in this whole god forsaken place?" Christian asked. "If we see a house, then we know it's her's. She's the only person living down here ain't she?" he was getting agitated.

"I don't know if we oughta' go on or not," said Tyler, nervously looking back toward the direction of home.

"Look! We've already come all this way. It can't be far from here." Christian pleaded, thinking we were all about to head back home.

"How do you know it ain't far from here?" I asked.

"When me and my dad drive over to Beaver, on the Interstate, he always says to look over in that bottom below the bridge and you'll see Aunt Callie's house. I've seen it too! Well, I've seen the roof anyway."

Trey had gotten off his bike and sat down on the ground. "We've all seen that, but you don't know if that's really her house or not. Could be just a piece 'a tin thrown in the bushes."

Christian scanned the horizon. "Over there," he said, pointing to his left. "Over there is the bridge. See. You can see it. Now if that's the bridge over there, then her house has to be to the right."

It didn't make sense to come all that way for nothing. There had to be some kind of reward for being slapped in the face by tree branches, stabbed and cut by thorns and briars. Actually laying eyeball on Callie's house would be the only satisfaction.

“Ya’ll come on and let’s get this over with and get on back home,” said Poonie.

“I just hope we live to get back home,” said Doby.

We stayed close to the middle of the pasture, avoiding the brambles along the bank. As we rode slowly toward two tall rows of elm trees, a tin roof came into view and gleamed in the afternoon sun. Peering through the wild hedges and vines growing around the elm trees, we could see the outline of a house about two hundred yards ahead.

“God! Look at this place!” said Poonie. “Let’s get away from here before she sees us.”

“We ain’t close enough for her to see us. I wanna’ get closer.” Christian continued to ride, turning down hill in the direction of the creek. The elm rows separated to form a wide circle. He stopped suddenly, beckoned for the rest of us, and pointed toward a rusty iron gate between an opening in the hedges.

The trail Christian had followed through the elms, gave way to a brick walkway just inside the open gate. The walkway led up a steep hill. Creepers and roots had buckled the brick into a bumpy narrow path barely wide enough for us to ride in single file. It ended a short distance from the front of the house. We continued to ride with Christian leading the way.

Then, there it was, right there before our eyes, less than a stone throw away. No one even dared breathe. The front windows of the shack were darkened. The weathered wood shingles on the outside walls hung to the sagging frame like someone had just thrown them on there and they’d stuck wherever they landed. An old rocker with a red pillow cushion set midways the yard, a circle of grass worn away from around it. The sides and back of the house were hidden behind the tallest fence we’d ever seen, and it was completely covered with ivy. Ivy that ran from the fence to the tops of huge trees. Trees so big and tall that we could barely see the sky. It was if nature herself had conspired to hide the mysterious place. We figured the fence had been made from thousands of trees. Maybe from trees that once grew in the pasture land.

“Back there is where she does them rituals, I bet,” whispered Tyler.

“Shut up!” said Trey, “I think I see something moving.”

As we stared at the house, a shadowy figure silently appeared from the opposite side, somewhere from behind the fence, even though there was no opening as far as we could see. Paralyzed with fear, we watched the figure draw closer, and closer until we could make out some of its features. It was a woman. A very, very old woman. Her face looked like blackened leather. Her head was covered with a tight fitting white skull cap and her dress was black and long. We couldn't see her eyes. She walked to the edge of the yard toward us.

Doby's knees knocked against the frame of his bike as he tried to start the pedals. Poonie pushed off with one foot, gaining speed down the hill toward the creek. Christian and Tyler had past him by the time Doby wobbled up close behind. I was still frozen in my tracks. The old woman paused in front of the rocking chair, then sat down. I still couldn't see her eyes, but I knew she was looking at me. Trey came back, startling me into motion when he touched my back. "Co'mon! Get outta' here!" he yelled.

I followed Trey, looking over my shoulder, never taking my eyes off the mysterious woman until the frightful vision faded into the distance.

Midways the pasture, we all breathed a sigh of relief, but no one spoke. We rode silently but fast, back into town. When we'd made it to the center of main street, Christian, out of breath from pumping so hard said, "We can't tell nobody."

Everyone nodded.

"Where're we gonna meet up tomorrow?" asked Tyler.

"On the slab," replied Poonie.

Everyone agreed. It was four o'clock in the evening.

Chapter 2

Storm clouds hung heavy in the western sky and before the rooster crowed, rain overflowed the gullies. Workers on their thirty mile trip to Foley inched their way down the two laned highway. Windshield wipers slapping and scrapping at the sticky yellow water. Midway between Crowley and Foley, the land sloped on both sides of the road and little streams, yellow from the sulfur, boiled into overflowing ditches. After a good drenching rain, everything was clean and clear for a day or so, the clinging cloud of sulfur having been scrubbed from the sky.

A nagging worry had kept many folk awake nights for the past six months. Government inspectors tested the water, soil and air in the three counties surrounding Foley. The newspaper reported that they'd found high levels of sulfuric acid residue in all three counties. Levels way above acceptable safety standards. Threats had been made to close down the plant. It had been upsetting.

Stan Brouard, Christian's father, had been the only one in Crowley, back then, who believed overexposure to sulfur posed a health hazard. Folk medicine remedies for just about everything that could ail a person, included salves and tonics made from sulfur. No one was afraid to let children play outside in the grass because sulfur stench kept snakes away. No one had even seen a snake in Crowley for years. There weren't many rabbits or squirrels either, and they figured the creek has just simply been fished out over the years. In the hottest part of summer, a body could sit outside all hours of the night and not get one stinging mosquito bite.

Lem Suggs swerved his rusty sixty-eight chevy truck into the narrow rutted-out driveway in front of the small green shingled house. The defroster hadn't worked in years. His thick bifocals, thicker than his son Doby's, had fogged up. He took them off and swiped them with his shirt tail, raised up in

the seat and did the same to the windshield. Seconds later, a balding middle aged man, much younger than he looked, dashed out the front door of the house and ran to the truck. Lem reached across and opened the passenger door for him. The outside latch didn't work. "Whew! This is what I call a soaker!" said the passenger, adjusting himself on the seat.

"Yeah. Looks like we might be in for an all dayer," replied Lem.

"U-huh. I wanted to work on my old truck this evening. Don't look like I'll get to. Seems like you're just gonna hafta' keep hauling me around for a while longer!" The passenger was Tom Fields, Poonie's dad.

In the next house, a quarter mile down the road, Carolyn Harper was making breakfast for her four children before leaving for work. Her husband Keith, a farmer, had died eight years before, and just about everybody was sure she'd have to go on public relief. She had fooled them all, working her way up from common laborer to tow motor driver, one of the highest paying jobs at the processing plant. Tyler, oldest of the four, dreamed of one day starting up the family farm again, a seventy-five acre strip running from the edge of town parallel to Seth's pasture.

"Tyler, honey, when it stops raining, I want you to go to the store and get some hotdogs for lunch today. Let me see-", now talking to herself as she counted the change from the bottom of her purse. "You'd better get a loaf of bread too." She placed the money on the table, put on her rain slicker and walked toward the door. "See ya' this evening. Oh, and Tyler, make sure the kids get their clothes together and be ready to go as soon as I get home." Tyler scratched his head and nodded. He'd get all that done sometimes during the day. He waited until he heard the back door close, then went back to bed.

The three younger children were going to spend a week with their grandparents in Rogerspoint, a well to do community a few miles south of Foley. They were Tyler's dad's parents. They'd begged Carolyn to bring the kids and live with them after Keith's death, but she wouldn't hear of it. They helped out as much as she would let them and they were proud of how she had managed on her own, especially since she had been born and bred a city girl from New York and all.

Christian had awoken to the sound of rain splattering through the open

window onto the night stand beside his bed. The whole side of the bed and the floor were wet. He got up, closed the window and threw a pair of dirty jeans over the puddle on the floor. He could see light from the hallway through the crack under his bedroom door, a sure sign that his father was up and about his morning routine.

His parents divorced when he was seven and he spent his time split between the two of them. His mother, Tipper Brouard, had a house near Rogerspoint, and he lived with her during the school year. He didn't really think of it as living with her since she packed him off to a private school for most of the nine months of the year that he was in her custody. He spent summers with his father. Christian loved his mother, but he wanted to stay with his dad all the time. He called his mother a social climber, and that was alright for her, he said, but he had other things to do besides learning proper manners and how to kiss up to money. Trey was the only one of Christian's friends in Crowley that his mother didn't mind him hanging out with. Even so, she still didn't think of him or his parents as being her or Christian's social equals, but at least his parents were professionals. The rest of us were just poor trash.

His father Stan, "a handsome man of forty" is what the women looking for a husband called him, taught History at Foley High. The old folk in Crowley said they'd seen the downfall of his marriage to Tipper even before the wedding. Most of them weren't invited. They figured he was marrying out of his league, not that she was better than him. No sir! The Brouards had always been pillars of the community. Tipper had a slickness about her that just didn't set well with the good folk of Crowley.

Stan was born and raised in Crowley, and except for the years away in college, he'd always been right there. If Crowley had still been a big city, he would've been mayor or something, but still obedient to the old folk. Well, that's what some folks thought.

They said his parents had done well by him, seeing to his education and all. His father made a lot of money when the new interstate plowed smack-dab through the center of his farm. That was way back when Stan was in college. Some of the single women in the county were attracted to him because they thought he still had money. Christian said there was about two

hundred acres of Brouard land left, and the only reason his dad hung on to it, was because he believed Crowley would have its own industrial park one day.

Stan was the only person in Crowley, back then, who wished the sulfur plant would shut down. He'd felt a twinge of guilt now and then when he'd thought about it. After all, his mother's picture graced the entryway of the plant lobby. A salute to pioneering females of the county, brave enough to go where no woman had ever gone before; to the innermost parts of a male dominated industry. She was the first woman to work side by side with the men of Crowley county and demand to be paid for it. She died shortly after Christian was born. She'd gone all the way to Baltimore, Maryland for treatment. Prolonged exposure to sulfuric acid was what the doctors there said she'd died of. Stan talked about it to Christian sometimes, but he never aired his thoughts publically about the plant or his mother's death. There wasn't a soul in Crowley back then, ready and willing to listen. He knew the people had to somehow make a living and the processing plant was the only how.

The sun broke through around noon, spiking the temperatures near the hundred mark. Poonie sat on a kitchen chair in front of the small air conditioner in the livingroom. His mother Tammy, had called to him several times from back of the house, but he ignored her. "Paul Fields!" She yelled. Poonie replied quickly that time. "Yes ma'am!" She only called him by his name, Paul, when she was upset with him. Already in the doorway of the livingroom, she raised her voice angrily.

"You heard me calling you! You'd better be 'aminding me boy! You ain't never too big for me to take a switch to !" Poonie remained obediently quiet until she'd finished. She didn't issue idle threats. "Watch your brother while I hang out clothes," she said, "and don't make me hafta' come back in here and get you! You hear me?" Poonie didn't answer, but went about doing what he was told.

Tammy slammed the backdoor on her way to the clothesline. After a good rain, sunshine was a washday dream in Crowley. It was the only time white clothes could be air dried without turning yellow from the sulfur. Most folks had dingy yellow sheets and underwear, because most didn't have clothes dryers back then.

Poonie listened toward the bedroom door. He didn't hear any sound,

so he must have been asleep. His little brother Pete, seven years old then, couldn't walk, talk or feed himself and he wore diapers. With his thick brown hair and big hazel eyes, he would have grown up to look just like his tall, slender framed big brother, had he been born normal. The doctors in Rogerspoint said he was brain damaged. The old folk said Tammy had marked him by something she'd said or done while she was pregnant. She had worked at the processing plant up 'til the day he was born. She didn't work away from home anymore. Taking care of a brain damaged child was a twenty-four hour a day job. Moma said a county social worker wanted to send him to a special school, but the Fields wasn't about to let one of theirs be institutionalized. The Fields believed if they accepted medical aid from the county, they'd be obliged to listen to all sorts of crazy advice. Pete got whatever medical care Tom could afford from his paycheck and a lot of love and attention.

A muggy, miserable, muddy day outside, no one showed up at the meeting place. There was always tomorrow.

Chapter 3

I remember sitting on the concrete slab pulling stickyberry seed from my socks. A daily chore if you went anywhere near the bushy plants. With wide, deep green leaves, blood red blooms and big seed pods in the center, sticky berry plants were the scourge of the county. Brush against them, and the seed pods would explode, sending out a puff of black arrow shaped flat seed that stuck to everything. Plum sized berries ripened in clusters underneath the blooms in July, but you couldn't eat them. I 'd never even seen a bird pecking at one. Besides covering the hills and flat land with color throughout the summer, they seemed to serve no purpose at all. Even the old folk couldn't find a place for them in their memories or their medicines.

No one had said what they wanted to do that day. It didn't matter. It was always the same. No one had mentioned going back to Callie's place, not even Christian.

Christian, Doby and Trey were doing doughnuts on the opposite end of the slab. Doby skidded to a stop and let his bike fall from under him. "I'm hot!" he said, fanning himself with his shirt tail.

"Let's go swimming and cool off." Poonie suggested strongly. It sounded like a good idea and within minutes we were all on our bikes and ready to go, except Doby.

"Get the lead outta' your butt! I thought you wuz hot Doby!" Tyler yelled back as he wobbled toward the street. Doby muddled something under his breath and got on his bike.

Riding as fast as we could until we reached the slope of the ravine, we let go of the handlebars and pedals, free wheeling down to the bottom. On a breezy day, it would have been like riding into the face of a giant electric fan, but that day, it was like being inside an oven. The creek would be the coolest place in Crowly.

Midways the pasture, Doby was still lagging behind.

"Whatsa' matter with you man?" Poonie asked. Everybody slowed down

and waited for Doby's answer and for him to catch up.

"I ain't going swimming. I ain't got my swimming trunks on today," said Doby.

"You got on drawers don't you?" Poonie asked, annoyed and hot.

"Nope."

"Go in naked!" said Christian, riding up beside him and thumping off his baseball cap.

"I ain't dropping my pants!"

"He's afraid Precious will see his butt!" teased Trey.

I'd ridden a few yards ahead of the boys. Without stopping or turning around, I yelled, "Dogs walk around all the time without pants and they got better lookin' butts than Doby's. I don't know why he'd think I'd wanna' look at his fat butt!"

The boys laughed so hard they couldn't ride, while Doby sat red faced and shocked that I'd put him down like that. I'd always been his protector. Maybe the heat was getting to me. I couldn't believe I'd done that, and regretted saying it as soon as it came out of my mouth. I didn't have to be rude or crude to be equal with the boys and they knew that. I was best friends with all of them and Doby was extra special. He had enough strikes against him already. Eleven years old, fifty pounds overweight, almost blind, the poorest of the poor and had the stringiest hair of any human on earth. I had to love him and I did.

"Com'on Doby! You can swim in your jeans and if you wanna' take 'em off, I won't look. I promise." Even though I hadn't outright said it, Doby saw "I'm sorry" in my eyes.

He smiled and eased his bike closer to mine. "Let's go," he said.

Except for a skimpy thicket of cottonwood trees, the creek bank was slick clean for about fifty feet on the pasture side. Seth's cattle probably drank there so many years ago, and all the converts of the old Crowly Church were baptized in the creek. The saints and the sinners alike, had all fished there. With the demise of the cattle, the church, the fish, and a lot of the saints and the sinners, it became our private domain. Giant twisted muscadine vines looped from the trees and hung over the creek. We used the vines to swing ourselves out and drop into the water.

Laying our bikes in the shade of the trees, the boys stripped down to their underwear. I always swam in my shorts and top. After all, I might have been a tomboy, but Moma taught me to be a lady when it mattered most.

“Doby!” I said, “roll up your pants if you’re gonna swim in ‘em. You won’t get so much drag.”

“Do as mother tells you Doby dear,” Christian teased.

“Kiss a chicken Christian!” said Doby, rolling his pant legs up to his knees.

Christian laughed and leaped for the vine. “Jeronimo!” he yelled and plopped into the water.

Doby laid his glasses on the bank and grabbed the next vine. The rest of us swung out on the vines a few feet up stream.

The heavy rains had raised the water level of the creek. We’d never seen it so high. We struggled to keep our heads above water, with the strong undertow tugging at our knees, threatening to pull us down. Trey started swimming toward the bank. “I’m gettin’ outta’ here!” he yelled.

“Trey is a chicken booty! Trey is a chicken booty!” Doby chanted.

“I don’t care wha’cha’ say. I’m gone!” he was kicking as hard as he could, but getting nowhere against the fast moving water.

Realizing that he really was in trouble, Doby stopped teasing and yelled to him, “Stop kickin’ so hard Trey! Float down to where you can reach the vines and pull ya’self out!”

He kicked harder, slapping and fighting the water until he went under.

“Trey!” I called out, swimming toward him as fast as I could. Poonie, Christian and Tyler were right behind me.

“Trey! Trey!” Poonie gurgled out his name, fighting to keep himself afloat.

“Do you see ‘im?” Doby asked frantically.

“There ‘e is!” Screamed Christian!” Trey’s head popped up for a split second and then he was gone.

Poonie dove under and came up about thirty seconds later spurting water and gasping for air.

I went under. Tyler had seen my hair rising to the surface about twenty feet down stream, then he saw Trey’s red undershorts.

“She got ‘im!” he screamed, swimming toward me.

Doby followed the voices and the thrashing of the water as Christian and Poonie swam past him. Tyler went under and pushed Trey upwards until his head was high above the water. Together, we got him out of the creek and onto the bank.

“Trey! Trey! Trey!” I called, gently slapping his face.

Doby’s eyes were the size of moons. Christian stood bent over with his hands on his knees, staring at Trey’s limp body.

Trey’s legs begin to tremble, his chest heaved and a gush of water spewed out of his mouth, then he began to cough. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but he didn’t have the strength.

“Take it easy man. We gotta’ get some help!” said Poonie, pacing around in circles.

I sat down at the back of his head, slid my arms underneath his armpits and helped him to a sitting position. His eyes were glazed and he wasn’t breathing right. He moved his lips, but no words came out of his mouth, just a deep, rattly cough. He rolled out of my arms onto the ground and lay very still.

“Get him on my bike! I can pull ‘em! I can pull em’!” said Christian, wriggling himself into his pants.

Tyler and Poonie picked Trey up and put him on the seat of Christian’s bike. Christian straddled the bike in front of him. Trey’s limp body flopped against his back. “We gotta’ tie him on here some kinda way,” said Christian.

Poonie grabbed Trey’s jeans and tried to tie them around both boys, but the legs were too short.

“Use yours!” I said. Poonie and Trey were about the same size in width, but Poonie was at least six inches taller. His jeans fit around the boys with enough length left over to make a good hard knot.

“I’ll ride right behind you in case he starts to fall off and Tyler, you ride beside Christian. Doby, you and Precious ride ahead and get help!” Poonie commanded.

Doby couldn’t find his glasses. They must ‘ve gotten knocked into the water during the struggle to get Trey out of the creek,

“You go ahead Doby,” I said, “I’ll look for your glasses.”

“I can’t ride without my glasses!” he cried.

“Ya’ll go on! Soon as you top the hill by the service station, somebody’ll see you. Go!” I said.

The four headed up the trail.

If the glasses had fallen into the creek, I knew they’d be far down stream by then. I took Doby’s hand and we walked along the bank, close to the edge of the water. Tripping over roots and brambles while staring steadily at the fast moving water, I didn’t notice that we’d come to the bend of the creek. The creek made an almost perfect right angle, flowing north for a few yards, then crooked westward again. There, on the knoll just above the bend, was the giant fence that guarded the legendary house of horrors. I felt a presences behind me. With no where to run, I turned to face my fear. Before our very eyes stood the dreaded specter of Crowley. I could hear my heart beating, pounding like thunder in my chest. Doby dug his fingernails into my arm and whimpered. I could see her eyes. They were two black slits. The toothless mouth set low in the leathery face moved. “Who be you?” A sound from the face crackled into our ears. We were too scared to speak or move.

“Who be you I say!” The old woman asked louder.

“My-my, my-, I’m ah- Precious.” I answered. Doby continued to whimper.

“Don’t be afeared. I’s had my fill ov’ chilun fu’ today. Ain’t hongry no mo’! Won’t eat cha’ !” she said, widening the slits that were her eyes. “You be lookin’ fu sumptin’ I ‘magine.”

“Yes-, yes ma’m.” I stammered. “We, ah, he-he lost his glasses in the creek.”

“Who he?”

“Do-Doby.”

“Doby! Dat be yo’ name boy or is dat jest wha’ chew be call?”

“His name is Douglas.” I answered for him.

The old woman laughed. “I lak Doby betta’! Doby and Precious,” she repeated. “You talk Doby?” she asked.

I nudged Doby, scared of what would happen if he didn’t answer her.

“Yes ma’m,” he answered in a low raspy whisper.

“I ‘magine dese be yose Doby,” she said, reaching into the folds of her

dress, then extending her arm toward Doby, clutching his glasses in her bony fingers. "Take em'! Dey be yose."

His hand shook as he reached for them, and I had to help him put them on his face. The prism thick lens magnified the size of the fear in his eyes.

"Dey comes a floatin' to my bend. Strange thangs floats to my bend," she said, pointing to the garbage that had collected at the turn of the creek. "I be Callie," she said with a hint of a smile.

"We-we, we know," I said.

"Do ya' now? Folks thanks dey knows me!" She laughed, bobbing her head up and down. "Come set a spell wid' me and tell Callie what you knows 'bout 'er and 'bout yo'self."

We'd gotten what we'd come for and could've left, but fearing some fatal spell would come upon us if we did, we followed Callie up the hill to the edge of the yard. She walked over to the rocker and sat down. We walked closer.

"We can't stay long. Our friend Trey got hurt swimming in the creek. We need to get back to town and see if he got help," I said, with politeness. Moma always said you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. I didn't know if that applied right then or not, but as far as I could tell, we were the flies and we were already caught.

Callie tightened her mouth, widen one eye slit and looked at me, and then Doby. "Yo' friend be fine. He be jest fine. He be lookin' 'cross da' pasture fu' you now."

"How do you know that?" I asked, figuring we had nothing to loose, except maybe our blood.

"You done said dat you knows Callie. If you knows who I be, den you knows da' thangs I knows," she rocked forward and remained in that position for a few seconds and then relaxed. "You be wor'ed 'bout yo' friend?"

"Yes ma'm. He almost drown!" Doby found the courage to speak up.

"Go to yo' friend now. Dat be right, Doby and Precious," she made a shooing motion with her hand.

We both walked backwards to the edge of the yard. Doby turned and tugged hard on my arm. "Let's go!" he said in a loud whisper.

Feeling almost comfortable, I stopped and took two steps back toward the yard. "Miss Callie," I said. Callie looked up at me. "Why do people call you crazy and say that you're a witch?"

Callie laughed and leaned her head against the back of the rocker. "Eva'body wants to be da' same and dey wants eva'body to be jes' like 'dem. When you diffunt, peoples be sceered ov' ye'. Remember chile, diffunt ain't always bad. It jes' diffunt!"

Doby and I didn't say much on the way back. I thought about what Callie had said. She was certainly different from anybody that I'd ever met in my life, and even though it was scary at first, I liked her.

The boys, including Trey, were waiting for us on the slab. "Wow! Look Precious! He's okay just like Callie said he'd be!" Doby went on and on.

"What's he talking about and what took ya'll so long? Good thing he got alright or he'd a' been dead waiting for you two!" Christian questioned and smarted off at the same time.

"Tell you about it later," I said, "Trey, are you alright?"

"Sure. I started feeling fine by the time we made it up the hill to the pass. I don't ever wanna' go drowning again!"

"You ain't getting in more'n a teaspoon of water again until you learn how to swim!" Poonie said, adjusting the chain on Tyler's bike.

"I ain't got no argument with that," Trey replied, rubbing his forehead.

"Hey, that wudn't just his bad swimming that got him in trouble today. That water was too high and too fast! Wonder all of us hadn't drown. I 'll think about today every time I get in the bathtub from now on," Tyler said, stretching out on the slab to dry his clothes in the sun.

"Guess what?" Doby asked, with a "I've got a secret" look all over his face. His news was never exciting. No one looked at him.

"Me and Precious talked to Callie!" Everybody looked at him. "Yeah. She found my glasses and she told us that Trey was gonna be alright. Didn't she Precious?"

"That's the way it happened." I backed up his story.

"No kiddin'!" Shouted Christian. "Ya'll talked to the witch?"

"She ain't no witch!" I said defensively. "She's just different! A lonely

old woman who helped us and I'm going back to see her."

"You go on Missy! We'll tell your Moma where to find your body with all the blood sucked out of it!" said Poonie, putting his thumbs in his ears and making a monster face.

I ignored him.

"Trey. Are you gonna tell your mother what happened?" I asked.

"No way! She wouldn't let me outta' the house again until I was fifty!"

"Who got some money?" Poonie asked.

"I got two dollars," said Christian. "Why?"

"So we can get something to drink at the store. Man, I'm thirsty!"

"Me too!" said Trey.

"You already tried to drink the creek!" Tyler joked. "How much quenching does your thirst need?"

"Leave me alone man!"

"I had some change in my pocket, but it fell in the creek," said Doby.

"Then what can we get for two dollars?" Asked Tyler.

"I can get a coke and some potato chips with my two dollars. Ya'll can't get squat!" Bragged Christian.

"That's wrong man! You are wrong! We wouldn't do you like that," said Tyler.

"Okay! Okay. This is my day to do good deeds. I can buy four thirty-two ounce gully washers with two dollars. Now two people still don't get nothing to drink and that ain't my fault!"

"I don't want nothing to drink. I'm going home anyway. See ya'll tomorrow I guess-, I don't know," I said, heading my bike toward main street.

"Precious!" Christian called after me.

"Yeah!"

"Don't forget that my dad's still taking us to the movies in Foley tomorrow night. You still going?"

"Sure! See ya'!" I rode away, leaving Doby to answer their questions about Callie.

It wasn't something I wanted to talk about. I was too busy thinking about it.

I was sitting on the stoop, waiting for Moma to come out, when I saw the boys riding slowly up the street toward my house. Moma had to go into Rogerspoint and I'd decided to hang out with her for the rest of the day. I'd spent the better part of an hour getting dressed. Spritzed my hair and slicked it under control with a tortoise shell headband. Put on my favorite mint green Sunday skirt with a matching lace blouse and white dress shoes. I don't know what got into me, but seeing me in a dress made Moma happy.

"Whatcha' all dressed up for?" Doby asked, as they paused briefly in the middle of the street in front of the house.

"Going to town with Moma."

"You got all duded up to go to town? Are you keeping a secret from us girly?" Christian started teasing.

I stuck out my tongue, got up and went inside without another word. Trey told me later what they'd said about me after I left. I made him tell me word for word. He told me because he thought I was mad at him. I'd gotten mad after he told me, but just for a minute. After all, I'd thought to myself, they were just dumb boys and it was kinda nice to know they worried about me in a mushy sort of way.

Trey said he'd asked if they knew what was bugging me.

"I think she's getting the curse." Was Poonie's answer.

"Precious?" Trey said he was shocked.

"Ya'll think Callie put a curse on her? Curse? What curse? What're ya'll talking about?"

Doby had been in his usual state of total confusion.

"Grow up Doby! Christian snipped.

"How am I 'spose to grow up if ya'll don't tell me stuff?"

Everyone had ignored him. "Naw! Not Precious." Trey couldn't believe it. "She's too young to be getting the curse."

"No, she's not!" informed Poonie. "She's twelve and that's when my cousin Yevonne got it."

"Poonie's right," Christian had said. "I learned all about that girl stuff at school, besides, ain't ya'll seen how she's growing boobs?"

"Take it back Christian or I'll kick your tail! You ain't suppose to be talking about Precious like that!"

Trey said Doby had thrown his bike to the ground and posed for combat.

“Aw heck Doby! Freeze man! What I’m saying ain’t nothing bad. It’s just a fact. Precious is growing up. Pretty soon she won’t even want to hang around with us. She’ll have a boyfriend and stuff.”

“I don’t want her to have a boyfriend!” Trey had said.

“Hey, it’s gonna happen! You jealous man?” Christian asked.

“Naw man! She’s like a sister! Ain’t that how ya’ll feel about her?”

Trey said they’d all agreed that I was like a sister and therefore had to be protected from the dangers of growing up. They parked their bikes and went behind an abandoned building on the edge of town. Poonie, the eldest member of the Crowley gang, thirteen already, spoke the words. “Precious can’t be allowed to go swimming in the creek if there’s other boys around and we ain’t ever gonna let her ride or walk anywhere in town alone. Now let us swear a sacred oath.”

They all spat on their palms and stacked them one on top of the other. “We the boys of the Crowley gang, do this day and forever more, till our teeth fall out and our hair turn grey, swear to protect our sister Precious Huddleston from all harm.”

“We swear!” Ceremony over, the boys went about the business of being boys in a town where the only excitement was our friendship.

End of first three chapters
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