

The Puppies Are Crying:by Beverly T. Daniel (Copyright 2012)
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The puppies are crying ...
We hurt
Through day's dawning
'Til the curtain call
Sunset...
Tailed by the silence of night

He cries
E'er the silent anguish
She cries
soft almost inaudible whimpers muffled in her pillow
Could you hold her until the pain
fades

Could you hold *him*
Until the blossom of the lotus
Until the oven with mama's bread taunts and haunt aromas of his childhoods past
When bliss was his play
And ...
Could you still keep holding *her*
long enough
until the disillusion of her womanhood come to
cease
Until the puppies stop crying

Could you *hold* her
Until *the puppies* stop crying

Could *you* hold him
Could you hold him
Until the puppies stop crying
Until the puppies stop crying...

Chapter 1

"Momma?" Called Kristy. No answer. "Momma, I'm ready to go!" Still no answer. "MOM-MAA!" cried Kristy. Impatience mixed with concern in her voice. Hazel and Catherine had already left for school twenty minutes ago, followed by Mark and Richard, her two younger brothers. She was late. She had just finished her lunch of two slices of what Momma called "sweet bake" pasted with butter. This was carried down with a cup of pineapple flavored, Kool Aid. Of course, only Momma knew that "sweet bake" got its name when she accidentally spilled the sugar cup with its half-filled contents into the dough she was kneading to make coconut bake. The result was a cross between sweet bread and coconut bake. Momma always smiled to herself about her secret recipe.

Kristy mused to herself about her siblings' skill in eating quickly. Hazel and Catherine, now pre-teens, developed the art, so that they could have time to get back to school early to join their other girlfriends, to talk to boys. Yuck! She cringed every time she thought about boys. What did they see in that anyway! Mark and Richard had a marble pitching tournament to win on the grounds behind the boy's toilets. They had teamed up because Mark had a special "thor" that was a spinner. Altogether they had won four pocket- full of marbles. The final round now was between Mark and Piggy. Winner take all. And Piggy had two draw stringed sachets filled. His mother had hand-sewn them herself from an old pair of denim trousers that his father stopped wearing.

MOMMA!!! Still no answer. Walking down the two feet wide corridor, past the open doorway to the family bedroom to the right and nearing the kitchenette also on the same hand; quick scans proved empty..

An uneasy fear came over Kristy. Something was wrong. Her pace became slower and unsure. Momma wasn't in the apartment. The back door was wide open. She paused long at the beckoning doorway. Half of her wanting to "pell mell" back through the corridor, out the glass front door, and hightail it back to school. The other half needed to find her mother. All her movements now became automatic and trance-like. She headed for the out-house. Somehow she knew Momma was in there. Time slowed, and Kristy felt herself floating.

All she was aware of now was an eerie stillness and the little wooden out-house, tauntingly compelling her. This sorry structure, crafted with amateur hands, seemed to be set apart from the rest of the world.

Silently, she opened the door.

Chapter 2

What Kristy witnessed that dreadful February day, left a 10 year old girl sickened with a pain that sunk deep into an innocent mind and soul. A pain she will learn to nurse for a long time.

There, was this woman looking just like her mother, robust in her worn out flowered patterned house-dress, her ample arms supporting her weight on the door post ... tears rolling down her full cheeks.

Kristy didn't recognize her mother. She stood petrified and perplexed. Surely this couldn't be her! Mommas were meant to laugh, even be stern sometimes. They were meant to be busy with making the home right and so warm with love. But this woman who held such a striking resemblance to her mother was... crying.

Everything went dark. She felt as though she was suddenly transported on to a huge stage. And as if rehearsed, her ten year old mind told herself that she was in a play. Because Mommas don't cry.

The floodlights aimed at the woman's anguished face. She was sobbing now. Kristy was both in the play and in the audience, watching, waiting. Waiting for the scene to change. 'Anytime time now...' she heard herself whisper. Her eyes still fixed on this strange woman's face. She started telling herself that she really wasn't there, but actually in school. Nothing here was real. It wasn't happening. She would soon forget it. Bury it.

"Momma...?" She heard herself say, in an almost sobering voice. The roles suddenly changed. Now she felt like the mother and Momma looked like - a child. How extremely odd, she thought to herself.

It could have been the tone in Kristy's voice, and Kristy could have sworn there was a sudden "click". But in less than a second, the Momma- lady jerked her head up. And with eyes piercing, face contorting into fury and the shrill of a voice echoing like a banshee, the Momma-creature screamed, "Go ooooooo...!" This time Kristy high-tailed it back to school.

Chapter 3

-“Twenty-five squared Kristy!” Mrs. Benton’s voice shocked Kristy into reality.

-“..uuhmm ... 475!” shouted Kristy.

Almost immediately Kristy regretted her answer. Being the only standard 5 class, two weeks away from the Common Entrance Examination, NO ONE was ALLOWED a mistake. Up until now, Kristy was always on top of her game. “Come young lady”. Mrs. Benton stood at the front of the class. She had this way of leaning on her left leg, with the right foot lifted at a 45 degree angle, balancing on two inched high heeled shoes, with her peeled guava whip tapping at her cedar-brown stockinged right leg menacingly, when you got an answer wrong. Especially on Fridays when the last two hours after lunch was spent doing Quiz Competition, you didn’t want to get anything wrong. And one thing’s for sure, no one ever did on a Friday. Today was Friday.

Kristy stood up from the back of the class visibly shaking. Mrs. Benton’s dropped-curls were also shaking with the tapping motion of the whip. Her two school mates Darlene Blackman and Rosalind Beharry, sitting at her bench also stood up and made their way to the aisle to allow Kristy to pass. Kristy looked at their straight but smug faces. Did she even hear Darlene with her towering five foot nine, bony self say, “Fool.” She barely glimpsed Rosalind taking the opportunity to gingerly iron her pleated skirt with her both hands.

Getting to the front of the class never took so long. Mrs. Benton seemed so far away. She could still make out every detail in her pink and grey pin-striped skirt suit. She found herself wondering if Mrs. Benson wore a size 20 or maybe ‘double X’ like Momma. Oh God Momma! The event at lunch-time started flooding back into her memory. She vaguely remembered that she was running, running so hard and feeling the pressure in her lungs until it hurt so bad. How she made the 600 yards to school and got into class was a complete blank. Now she shook violently. Someone started snickering. Kristy got to the front of the class face to face with Mrs. Benton, palms and arm-pits cold with sweat. She was still shaking. Yet no sympathy was forthcoming from Mrs. Benton. It was Friday and Kristy had committed a sacrilegious crime.

-“Twenty-five squared!”

-“Six hundred and twenty-five” almost inaudible

-“Twenty-five squared! Speak up!”

Kristy's eyes welled up with tears. They were tumbling down her cheeks and making a puddle on the tattered concrete floor, traces of green paint speckled here and there.

- "625, miss."

- "Put out your hand! Why didn't you say the right answer!" Kristy could only manage to shake her head, while extending a trembling right hand.

Whack!

The sting was unbearable. Mrs. Benton's whip made even the boys whimper like babies.

- "Kristy Antoine, Hazel Antoine, Catherine Antoine, Mark and Richard Antoine; please come to the principal's office!"

Mr. Reiler's voice resonated through the P.A. system. The Principal's baritone had the command three times.

Kristy fainted.

When she came to, she was surrounded by faces. Aunt Miranda took charge as was her true nature. She hurled instructions, even to Mr. Reiler. Kneeling at the side of the moss green, canvassed cot, she cradled Kristy's head into her left arm.

- "Leave the child, she will get up! Come Reiler, bring the glass with water, she get up! Mrs. Benton, take off her shoes and socks, let the blood flow!"
- "Alright Reiler, give me the water! Kris... take... THREE... SIPS, ONE..., TWO..., THREEE..."

With each 'sip', Aunt Miranda poured a mouthful of water into Kristy's mouth and nostrils. Half-way between choking, gasping and coughing, Kristy shot up.

"Alright let's go!" That was Aunt Miranda's final remark. And Kristy was body-lifted into a waiting car in the courtyard, where her other siblings were already piled in the back seat, with what looked like all their clothes in one huge garbage bag. It seemed the whole school came out for the show. The yard was filled with bubbling red and white uniforms. Some even dared to get close to the car. Still coughing and crying now, she sought the face of her big sister for help out of her confusion. Hazel always took the time to explain everything. This time she

offered nothing but a blank look. No use trying to talk to Catherine, indifference was her main theme. Mark and Richard held their heads down. She dare not ask Aunt Miranda where they were going.

"Drive!" Was the command to the chauffeur. "Meadow Road!" So they were going to Aunt Miranda's house. She closed her eyes, wondering if Mrs. Benton saw the holes at the toes of her socks, and how she would get her sneakers to go the school on Monday. No need alerting Aunty right now. Her hand still hurt from the whipping earlier, and she was most comfortable with Aunty Miranda taking responsibility for the blunder all on her own, rather than risk another whipping.

Meadow Road didn't offer its cheery warmth and promise of excitement, as it held during the summer vacations. They were shuffled unceremoniously out of the car and into the two-bedroomed house on the hill. Aunt Miranda closed the front door behind her and turned the key. This was all crazy. The five children stood at the door acclimatizing to the uneasy air of silence.

The three-piece Morris chair set was in the usual place in a semi circle facing the front door. Two miniature palm plants added to the decor, in between the chairs. A glass-topped wooden centre table supported a water filled vase with fresh, red anthuriums. The wooden floor, seem to take on an extra sheen as though recently polished. History dictated that you were not allowed to sit on the 'chairs' unless invited. So the quintet remained standing, until further instructions. Aunt Miranda disappeared into the second bedroom to the right. Voices could be heard in whispers coming from the bedroom. And then they heard Momma groaning. Richard started crying.

"Oh be quiet!" Mark blurted, unable to contain any longer. Needless to say, Richard couldn't stop, but wept mercifully. Aunt Miranda emerged wiping tear filled eyes. Upon seeing the children, she sobered quickly, cleared her throat, preparing for her doxology.

She removed her white apron, and placed it on the antique cabinet layered with miniature porcelain. Kristy stared at Aunt Miranda. Using this rare opportunity, she made a bold study of this very

unusual 'creature'. She couldn't say her aunt was a stunner. Plain, wasn't exactly the description either. She had nostrils for a nose, which seemed to have a permanent flare. Kristy could actually see furry black hair, lining the inside. Yuk! Small beady, black eyes, were chiseled in sockets under both sides of her forehead. These fit snugly into a round face and protruding chin. As a matter of fact, Aunt Miranda may very well be ugly, but, because she was always so arrogant, one could surmise... nothing. She was, however a curvy woman.

Aunt Miranda spoke in statements, cared little for dialogue, and had this way of looking above your head, whenever she addressed anyone. She began in her usual strong voice:

"Children, your mother is sick. Richard, hush! How she got sick, I will raise hell to find out who hurt my sister! I will be taking care of her and you all, until she gets better. And she WILL get better, by God's grace. You all must be VERY quiet or else she will get WORSE. When she falls asleep, you all will go in, one by one, very quickly to see her, AND COME RIGHT BACK OUT. You all will bathe, ONE BY ONE, and then eat. When you are finished you will spread 'beddings' in the living room and go to sleep. Tomorrow, no school!" That was all. They all understood that the script must be obeyed.

After about fifteen minutes, the groaning ceased. Kristy pondered on the madness taking place. She wanted to tell Hazel everything she saw when she remained after they left to go back to school, to have her lunch, but she couldn't quite find the words, neither the courage to speak out. She couldn't even fathom what actually occurred. Hazel went first. Catherine was hungry and had no reservations letting Aunt Miranda know about her suffering for lack of food. She now adopted a permanent pout.

Hazel came out covering her face with both hands. She threw herself prostrate on the love seat in a fit of convulsions, sobbing. Catherine went in and came out ... disgusted, still demanding to be fed.

Kristy went in.

Chapter 4

That creepy old feeling. Déjà vu. She was floating again. Towards the doorway of the bedroom, white lace curtains moved in gentle puffs to the soft breeze oscillating from an electric fan she heard whirring somewhere in the formidable bedroom.

She stood peering through the curtains, unwilling to make another step. The scent of Limocol permeated through the air. The room was empty, save for the old six-drawer dresser under the louver window and the 4x6 'small bed' Catherine and Kristy usually slept in during the summer vacations.

Kristy made out the silhouette of a human figure lying face to the wall in fetal position. Parting the curtains, she recognized the familiar form of her mother. She was asleep, but her breathing was raspy. Involuntarily, Momma's body shuddered from time to time.

Kristy wanted to hold her mother. She secretly held the expectation that Momma would just turn around and laugh that bellowing laugh of hers, and open her arms wide for Kristy to be enveloped in a huge, warm hug. Momma's body shuddered again. Kristy neared the bed.

The flood-lights came on again. This time the focus was on the person lying on the bed, curled up in a ball. She was changed into one of Aunt Miranda's polyester cotton nightie. Kristy was sure it came from the pink cellophane bag Aunt Miranda stashed in the last drawer of the dresser, together with undergarments and toiletries. These were put away in the event of sickness.

Leaning over her mother, Kristy drew back in a gasp. Momma's eyes were wide awake and ...empty. Drool ran down the left side of her mouth. Her eyes didn't even blink once. What on earth was going on! She scurried out the room and allowed her body to droop to the floor. Her limbs felt weak. Catherine, watching from the living room, let out a long "Steupppps." Hazel was now sitting in the single rocking-chair, rocking Richard to sleep, while chanting some made-up song.

Mark was next, his side pockets showing beneath his short khaki school pants, full of marbles. He went past Kristy, showing his back pockets also bursting with marbles. He had won the tournament. Kristy saw him visibly inhale and hold his breath, while straightening his back, and squaring his shoulders. He entered the room. Both Hazel and Richard slept.

-“Hazel, where’s Daddy?!” demanded Catherine. In fact, she deliberately and ungenerously shocked Hazel awake. Indeed. Where WAS Daddy?

-“Catherine, I don’t know. I was wondering that myself. Why did you wake me up?” Hazel was annoyed but patient.

-“I want to go home and meet Daddy” Catherine whined.

-“Daddy went to work” Kristy offered.

-“You just hush Kristy! You never know anything!”

-“Why you always have to be so mean Catherine?!” retorted Kristy.

-“Everybody’s so stupid” Catherine summed up in nonchalance.

They didn’t notice that Mark had come out of the bedroom, and was now sitting on the floor next to the kitchen counting his marbles. Aunty Miranda’s footsteps were heard coming up the stairs at the back of the house. They straightened in silence.

-“Alright! Hazel, go and bathe your brothers and sisters. Let them change in their home-clothes and put all the school clothes in a bag to wash. There’s bread and fried fish on the stove. Open the fridge and take the mug of orange juice for them. When you’re finished, put the wares in the sink. Don’t worry, I’ll wash them in the morning.”

By the time they all settled down to sleep on the floor, it was close to 8:00pm. ‘Bedding’ came from under the mattress in Aunty Miranda’s bedroom, and layered thick on the floor. Yet the floor was hard and cold like stone. The five children huddled together for warmth and in no time were fast asleep.

Chapter 5

Kristy came out of a deep sleep by the sound of a deep male voice. Daddy! She got up.

-“Lie down, Foolish!” Catherine whispered, yanking the hem of Kristy’s nightie. Kristy dropped back to the floor.

- “Listen”, Catherine’s rile whisper.

Daddy sounded as though he was arguing with someone outside. Then she heard Uncle Ben, Aunty Miranda’s husband trying to calm her father down.

- “This is My Wife! And My Children! You can’t keep them from me!”

- “Edmund be reasonable. It’s late ...”

- “ Reasonable?! Look man ...”

- “Edmund, you are the cause of all of this!” That was Aunty Miranda.

Kristy put her index fingers in both ears. She couldn’t take any more. She kept them there for at least a half hour. When she unplugged them, everything was quiet. She turned around to look at Catherine, who lay next to her. Catherine was crying.

- “Why all of this had to happen to us Kristy? Everything just changed. I want to go home. I want Momma and Daddy to carry us home. This floor is too hard. I want to sleep in my own bed.” She sobbed inconsolably. Kristy reached out and held her sister’s hand. Catherine grasped it as though it was the last life line. She slowly stopped crying, and half smiled at Kristy. Kristy smiled back. They fell off to sleep.

She awoke with the strange feeling that someone was watching her. Kristy opened her eyes to meet Catherine’s stare.

- “I hate Miranda” was Catherine’s mere statement.

There was a pause, and then they both broke out in giggles. Something about that was so funny. Kristy wasn’t sure if it had to do with Catherine’s blatant confession or that she actually called their fearsome aunt by her first name. Hazel was astir, and turned her body to her left. The girls covered their mouths with their hands, trying to muffle their mirth. In the background a single early bird was chirping, heralding the dawn. It was still too early to get up.

Catherine suddenly stopped laughing. 'Oh boy,' thought Kristy. 'There she goes again'. This was typical Catherine style. She had these sudden mood swings. Catherine's smile turned to steel.

- "Miranda doesn't really like us Kristy. I bet the thought never occurred to her that children have feelings. She thinks duty is love, but that is only one part of it. I hate any big person who doesn't understand what children need. And I know a fake when I see one! I know Momma loves us because when she talks to us she always says: 'Ok princess' or 'Alright son.' Bad parents and bad people don't say those nice things to children. This is just a JOB for Miranda!"

Kristy pondered on the irony of Catherine's judgment of Aunt Miranda, and wondered whether Catherine could manage being 'nice' for one whole day. She dared not express her thoughts.

- "Daddy and some other lady called Judy, did something really bad to Momma. That is why Momma is... kinda sick. I've decided this morning that I would hate Daddy and Momma for causing this wickedness on all of us. Daddy and Momma are supposed to be strong for us! I will not speak to them! And I won't speak to Hazel either because she knew everything all the time!"

- "You must be out of your mind now Catherine. How could you hate so many people all at once? That can't be good for anybody."

- "How could YOU be so stupid Kristy?! Can't you seeeee?"

- "See what Catherine?" Kristy glared at Catherine, wincing on that word 'stupid' . "That you're more awful than Aunt Miranda?!"

Catherine crumbled and Hazel woke up.

- "That's enough both of you." Hazel never needed to shout. "Time to get up. Aunt Miranda shouldn't come out and find us still lying down. C'mon Kristy, wake-up Mark and Richard. Catherine you gather the 'beddings'. Fold them and put them behind the love seat. I'll get the broom and start sweeping. Oh... and Catherine...? For an eleven year old, that is too much disrespect."

The children were all squatted on the corner of the floor, to the right of the front door. Hazel was strategic about that arrangement. Not too close to the kitchen and away from anyone's free way of passage. The living-room was spotless.

Aunt Miranda came out of her bedroom in a rush, followed by Uncle Ben, who held a black book in his hand. 'Holy Bible' it read. Both were dressed in church clothes. The children's gaze followed her. She disappeared into the second bedroom without even a glance in their direction. Uncle Ben stood in front of the hat rack putting on his 'summers'. Turning, he made slow, deliberate strides to the front door.

- "Miranda, I'll be out front." He opened the door, and stepped outside, leaving the door slightly ajar. The sound of a vehicle idling, came through the crack of the door.

A series of instructions followed, when Aunt Miranda eventually came out of the room Momma was in. They were NOT to go in 'that' bedroom.

They were NOT to go outside.

They were NOT to make ANY noise.

Hazel will scramble eggs for breakfast.

After breakfast, the television will be turned on, very low, and they will watch cartoons until Uncle Ben and herself returned.

Aunt Miranda and Uncle Ben left. The children complied. Not a sound came from the bedroom.

Half-way into 'Batman', and two hours after their aunt and uncle left, a car door slammed outside. They were back. Catherine rolled her eyeballs letting out the longest 'stueppppppppppppppps' Kristy ever heard. Hazel automatically switched off the television, and had the children assume their original position at the corner of the front door.

Chapter 6

A tall thin man dressed all in black, from the tunic on his head to the flowing gown, down to the army boots on his feet, loomed in the front doorway. Kristy was petrified. His complexion was so dark, she couldn't even make out his features. Even his eyes were black. He held what looked like a sword in his right hand, and a staff in the other. A neat yellow chord around his waist completed the most bizarre kit. Kneeling down, the black man scrawled some strange symbols on the floor with a white piece of chalk. His body started convulsing. Suddenly he erected to his feet.

- "Beelzebub!!! We meet again!!!" The black man's baritone resonated.

Somewhere in the bedroom, a weak, wailing, yet shrill voice answered.

- "Leave me allllllonnnnnne Ezekiel!"

Mark and Richard started bawling. Catherine giggled and then was laughing, uncontrollably. Hysterics, thought Kristy. Hazel let out a sigh.

- "Go outside!" was the single command Aunt Miranda made to the children. Her voice rang behind the 'Ezekiel' character.

Not missing a beat, the children gathered themselves and lunged toward the front door. 'Ezekiel' made one skillful back-step to his right, making way for them to pass. They all but tumbled down the five steps from the house to the yard, almost knocking down Aunt Miranda.

Uncle Ben was standing by the chain-linked gate, facing the house. Kristy ran to him. The others followed. Trying his best to put his arms around them all, he gave them what he thought was a desperately needed hug.

- "Alright, alright... everything will be alright. Come let's go to the shop. Who wants snacks?"

They couldn't answer, but eagerly left for the 300 yard walk to the little parlor further up the hill.

Chapter 7

- "Hazel, Hazelll." Pleaded Kristy. "Hazel, I want to talk."

Hazel knew Kristy needed to clear her muddled mind. She also knew how much Kristy looked up to her and depended heavily on her to interpret the world.

Uncle Ben had taken them to the 'new lands'. This was the title given to about 200 acres of land that used to be woods, about 60 yards to the north of the shop on the hill. Land Developer and Engineer, Mr. Smith, a new-comer in the community, purchased the property five years ago. The roadways were an interesting creation of undulating design. Most of the community came out in the cool of the evenings to take 'little therapeutic walks', especially during the summer vacation. Aunt Miranda would allow the children to frolic only on Sundays, after lunch. These were exhilarating experiences that brought the children to a natural high. They would allow their imaginations freedom of expression, and slay dragons to save princesses, meet their true love or become experts in secret intelligence and espionage. There was so much to explore.

Mark and Richard were chasing dragons (lizards), while Catherine was picking an armful of flowers. Uncle Ben strode on, at a reasonable distance behind the children. In his hands, he carried a cellophane bag half filled with chocolates and sweets. The first half, the children hungrily consumed in the shop, before the trek. Hazel slowed her pace, so that Uncle Ben could overtake Kristy and herself. Once Uncle Ben was out of earshot, Hazel began.

- "Kristy, everything is going to be alright." She stopped and looked into Kristy's eyes reassuringly. "Momma's having a nervous breakdown." The term was alien to Kristy.

- "Nirvus Break...?"

- "Yes Kristy. Most times it happens when someone very dear to you betrays you, and breaks your heart and your trust. Daddy betrayed Momma. He loves someone else."

Kristy couldn't believe her heart could sink any lower, but it did. How on earth could that be something possible between her

parents? They were always telling each other jokes. Even when they argued, it was always a battle of the wits that ended up in bursts of laughter. The children were referee and audience. Momma always won the 'fights' by overwhelming crowd support. She just had this brilliant sense of humor that made the children weak with laughter. Even Daddy couldn't help but laugh at her delivery skills.

- "What do you mean he loves someone else Hazel? How could that be? But they're happy. We're happy."

- "Well, he does." Her tone was final on the statement.

- "Hazel?"

- "I saw Momma crying yesterday. It was awful! This nervous ... er...?"

- "Nervous Breakdown."

- " Yes, that. Does it make you very, very sad?"

Hazel sighed.

- "It does." They walked in silence for a while.

- "Does it make you angry too?"

- "Uh huh."

- "Ok. In the bedroom, yesterday, it looked as though her body was there, but she wasn't. How come Hazel? The nervous..."

- "Breakdown."

- "Yeah that. Does it steal your inside? Can't Daddy take her to the doctor?"

Hazel had this quizzical expression on her face.

- "The black man... Do you know him? How does Momma know him?"

- "I ... don't... think... she ... knows... him..." Hazel was in deep thought. "I'll have to talk to Roland."

Roland was her secret boyfriend. He was 23 and paying his own way through a first degree at the local university to be a Mechanical Engineer. His studies were part-time. Construction-Carpentry was his full-time job. Hazel told Momma and Daddy that she loved him since last year when she was 12. It turned out to be quite a scandal, when one Sunday, Roland visited their parents, to ask permission to date Hazel. He was willing to wait until she turned 15. Daddy was furious by the audacity of a young man his age, making such a request. He was convinced Roland was trying to 'spoil' his little daughter. Hell broke loose when Roland attempted to explain how mature Hazel was for her age and that she was very much ahead of her years.

Daddy threw him out. Hazel was forbidden to see him and Daddy further saw to it that he was evicted from the room he was renting in the 'commune.' But that didn't stop the relationship. They saw each other secretly.

- "Well if Momma doesn't know him, how come she called his name?"
- "I can't say Kristy."
- "Hazel, Daddy came to see us last night. He HAS to love Momma. Why did Aunty Miranda say it was Daddy's faulty Momma was sick?"
- "They think it's witchcraft, Kristy."
- "What? I don't understand."
- "They think Momma has a spell on her."

This was getting more and more complicated, Kristy thought. She was completely perplexed.

- "Hazel, I thought you said Momma has a Nervous... ?"
- "Breakdown."
- "Yeah, that. Witchcraft, is it the same thing?"
- "I don't think so Kristy."
- "So which one IS it Hazel?!" Hazel wasn't helping very much this time.
- "Kristy... I honestly don't know. I'll need to talk to Roland."
- "Roland! Roland! Roland! What do you see in HIM anyway! He's too old for you. Everybody says so! Catherine said he spoiled you! What does she mean?! Why did you let him?!?"
- "You're too loud Kristy."

Hazel took in a deep breath.

- "She means we had sex Kristy."

Silence. This was too much information.

- "Whadcha go and do that for?" Kristy felt beaten.
- "I love him Kristy. I want to marry him."
- "But... that BIG man Hazel? You're only 13. That is a bad thing. I feel sick."

Kristy actually felt like throwing up, but she kept walking. She didn't think she liked Hazel anymore. Yet, she was curious.

Hazel waited.

- "What was it like? Was it... nice?"
- "Well... you see... everything is supposed to be alright... for it to be."
- "What do you mean?"
- "For it to be, Ok, it's supposed to be right. That is why I want to marry him. But I'm trying to like it. When we get married, I know I would start to like it."

- "So why are you doing it then, if you don't like it? I would NEVER do it. You should stop doing it Hazel."

Kristy didn't want to have anything to do with those 'big people' things. She realized now that somehow, something had changed between herself and Hazel. She felt ashamed of her big sister. She felt as though Hazel was 'dirty.' Maybe that was what Daddy meant, when he said Roland would 'spoil' Hazel. She didn't think marrying Roland would 'unspoil' Hazel. She hoped Daddy would do everything to protect her from anything like that happening.

They continued walking in silence. The intensity of their conversation must have caused them to lag behind longer than they realized. Now, no one was in sight. Hazel felt they should remain where they were and wait for the others to come back. They sat in the middle of the road since there was no traffic anyway. The 'new lands,' was private land still in the development phase. It was rumoured that Mr. Smith was very successful in real estate, and that this was one of many projects he owned.

Uncle Ben returned with three tired looking children. They all decided to join Kristy and Hazel, squatting on road. It was midday sun, but it was cool and breezy in the 'new lands'. The roads were strategically designed to capture the authentic, rustic ambiance, filled with gigantic trees and a range of flowers in full bloom. They had the last of the snacks.

"Benjamin! Benjamin!" Aunt Miranda's voice rang through from a distance. And there she was, almost running towards them, arms flailing in the air. Uncle Ben stood up and started walking towards her. Hazel nodded to the rest of the children to stay put.

"Benjamin! This is 'sea work'. We're going by the sea! Manzanilla!"

Uncle Ben, escorted Aunt Miranda by her elbow, at a distance away from the children. After about five minutes of dialogue, Uncle Ben and Aunt Miranda parted ways. He rejoined the group where they sat, and explained that their mother would not be at the house for the rest of the day, and more than likely the night as well. He would stay with them. Tomorrow, they would return home.

The children took the news in silence. Uncle Ben looked at his brood and pitied all five of them. Beyond where they sat, tiny orange stars were twinkling through the trees. It was sunset, and he never saw a more sorry bunch. No words of comfort, was forthcoming. He didn't think anything he said to the children now could lift their spirits; and to be honest, there wasn't. There being nothing left to say... he prayed.

Chapter 8

Kristy couldn't feel anymore. It didn't matter that she didn't understand. It didn't matter that they were going home. It didn't matter that she didn't know what would happen to them. She was numb... and helpless.

It was getting late, and Uncle Ben took the children back to the house. The front gate and door were left wide open. They walked in, while Uncle Ben secured the premises. A single white candle was lighting in place of the centre-piece on the coffee table. No one spoke. No one was hungry.

Hazel started busying, getting the beddings out from behind the love seat. After spreading them, she had the children bathe and change for sleep-time. Once they were lying down, she took her bath. She switched the lights out then settled next to Richard, who cuddled in her arms. The candle was still burning. Facing one direction, to the wall, they huddled together again in fetal position. Hazel was humming Richard to sleep. At six years old, he still found comfort in his big sister singing to him at nights.

Hazel was humming. Then she began chanting her made-up lullaby:

"Rockin to Richie, Rockin
Rockin into, My soul
Rock into, my parlour
send my Carasima home

She sang another round:

Hazel -	"Rockin to Richie"
(the children in refrain)-	"Rockin"
Hazel-	"Rockin into my"
Children-	"Soul"
Hazel-	"Rock into my"
Children-	"Parlour"
Hazel-	"Send my Carasima"
Children-	"Home"

And there they chanted, at least twelve rounds, until Uncle Ben heard only Hazel's voice in a whisper. In the dark, in his room, his tears flowed freely.

When Uncle Ben came out of his bedroom the next morning, the children were already in their assumed position, their belongings in a garbage bag next to the front door. The living room was clean as a whistle. "This Hazel", he thought, "too old for her years."

The children still didn't have appetite. They were too anxious.

The ride home was seemingly long.

The 'commune' was still asleep and quiet. It was 6:30am Sunday morning. Uncle Ben guided them to a little track they called the 'short cut'. Through Ms. Mara's yard they trekked, until they made a sharp bend at the back of her wooden house. The stench of a latrine filled the air. They moved swiftly and stealthily.

As they broke out in the open to face their apartment, the children gasped in unison at the unexpected scene.

'Ezekiel' was all in WHITE, facing the opened front door of their apartment. As a matter of fact, you could have seen right through the 'empty' apartment, because the back door and windows were also wide open.

Momma was sitting on a long wooden bench in front of the apartment, dressed in a long, lacy, white dress down to her ankles. Aunt Miranda was standing facing Momma in a green cotton dress, with a white apron tied in front of her. She held something like an enamel cup in her hand. As they drew closer, Kristy hastened her pace until she was ahead of everyone. She came to a sudden stop.

Momma's head was wrapped with white fabric until it covered her eyes. She held a white lit candle in her right hand. As Kristy's eyes scanned further, she noticed her mother wore no shoes. She was barefooted.

Three huge silver basins were laid out in a row, on the ground in front of her, filled with three different coloured, liquid substances. The first was green with shredded pieces of bushes in it. The second's content was crimson red and translucent. The third was yellow with marigold flowers floating at the top.

- "Take that one first!" was Ezekiel's instruction. Fear gripped Kristy, her glances flitted from Ezekiel, to Momma, the basins, and Aunt Miranda.

- "Uncle Bennnn!"
- "It's alright, Princess. It's alright."

Uncle Ben's voice was soothing from where he stood. Catherine face was buried in his torso, while Mark and Richard gripped Hazel's skirt.

- "Take off all your clothes, and leave on your vest and panties!" Aunt Miranda ordered.
- "Tttttttake off my clothes Aunty..?"
- "Hurry up, girl!"
- "I ccccccann't do that Aunty." Kristy's voice was pleading. How on earth could she bare herself in the open, much less in front of Ezekiel, Uncle Ben and her brothers!

As though thought and action were one, Aunt Miranda barged over to Kristy, pulled her in front of the first basin and stripped her down to her underwear.

- "Stoop down!"

Before Kristy could even begin to feel embarrassed, Aunt Miranda pushed her down by her shoulder and started pouring the green stuff from the first basin on her head. She poured five times before carting her to the next basin.

On the first pour of the second substance, Kristy let out a scream. It felt like raw fire.

- 'Yowwww! Owwww! Owwww! Aunty Mir...!'
- "HUSH!" Aunt Miranda swiftly poured four more cups.

Kristy could not contain. It was EATING her body all over. She closed her eyes before any of the fire water got in. Aunt Miranda again carted her to the next basin and poured five times. It started to soothe only a little bit.

- "Stand up! Take off the wet underwear! And open your eyes girl!"

Kristy obeyed. Aunt Miranda was holding up a large white towel as a barrier.

- "Put the wet clothes in that garbage bag! Dry yourself with this towel, and then take the plastic bag with your name. Put on the clothes in it. "

White dress, white vest. White cotton panties ... white with pain. Kristy donned herself whimpering. Her head especially was on fire.

Whoossh! The Ezekiel man was washing down the floors in the apartment with some kind of liquid in a plastic bucket. He moved with speed, precision and a bass broom. The 'water' was washed out the back door.

- "She ready?! Send her!" Ezekiel summoned her.

Kristy went to the front doorway.

- "Come!"

Holding Kristy's right hand in the air, he spun her clockwise three times, then anti-clockwise another three times. Her head reeled.

- "Stand up! Turn around, and walk in the house backwards!"
Ezekiel gave the solemn command

- "Huh...?"

- "TURN... AND... WALK... IN... BACKWARDS!"

- "Llll..llll..llll...lllllike ssssssooooo?"

Kristy made a grand effort, in carrying out the weird exercise. About four steps inside the living-room, she felt herself falling. Ezekiel quickly swooped her up and put her to sit along the corridor in the apartment. Her head was woozy and her scalp itched. Walking to the front doorway, Ezekiel summoned Hazel.

- "Send the eldest one!"

- "Leave her alone! You leave us alone!" Catherine was screaming. "All of you ... too wicked! How you could do this to children. Momma! Why're you not doing anything! Momma! Answer! Nobody touch my sister! What you all doing?! Momma you just sitting there like you only care about yourself! Miranda, you Witch! You devil agent! You beast without feelings! You taking ADVANTAGE on us! Uncle Ben! Why?! Tell me why?! Where you get this Black Man! WHAT... YOU... ALL... DOING!"

- "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures..." Momma was praying.

Catherine's fury aroused the neighbours, lights came on here and there. Curtains opened to cracks. The neighbours were peeping.

- "Bring that one," was the simple request Ezekiel made.
- "Noooooo! Nooooo! Noooooo!" Catherine bawled. "I hate all of you! Uncle Ben!"

She turned glaring at Uncle Ben, who was just shaking his head. At the blink of an eye, the Ezekiel character reached Catherine. Making strange gestures over her head, he skillfully grasped her right hand. He spun her clockwise eight times, then anti-clockwise, another eight times. Catherine collapsed, and as though choreographed, she fell into Ezekiel's waiting arms. He transported her to the basins, placing her in a sitting position on the ground.

- "Don't remove her clothes, bathe her! Quick!"

Aunt Miranda worked, while Ezekiel held Catherine in place. There was no time for Catherine to fuss. In less than ten minutes, Catherine was undressed, dried, dressed again and put to join Kristy on the floor, along the wall in the corridor. Both girls were scratching their scalp ferociously.

In less than half an hour, the five children were seated in a row along the corridor... scratching.

What now? Thought Kristy.

- "Esmeralda, come inside and receive your family."

Chapter 9

She woke up.

They must have all fallen asleep. Kristy lay in the middle of her siblings on the floor. She barely remembered Momma coming into the apartment 'backwards', and walking past them towards the kitchen and out the backdoor. Ezekiel, Momma, and Aunt Miranda had spoken in whispers for a long while.

Now, everything was... still, except for a faint fluttering sound. The laundry, left on the line? ...flapping as the wind blew?

No.

Birds? Landing on... the roof?

No.

Butterflies. Yes, butterflies.

Maybe.

She thought for a while. Wings! Yes, wings.

Getting to her feet, she decided she would investigate. She looked back at her sisters and brothers slumped in a pile, dead to the world.

There it was again. That, fluttering sound. She walked towards the front door. White curtains were up. Aunt Miranda's doing, she supposed. Pulling the drapes aside, just a crack, she peered through. It was pitch black outside. They must have slept for the entire day. Funny, she thought. Kristy couldn't remember ever having slept that much during the daytime before. It must have been that whole ordeal earlier today. There was nothing astir outside.

That sound.

What was it? It was like...feathers... ruffling. She hurried to the louvred window on the left, also draped with white curtains. She peered again. Nothing. This was certainly odd. She decided to take one last look through the front door, before going back to wake the others. She wasn't convinced that there was absolutely

nothing outside. Yet... that strange, rustling sound. Standing, facing the door, she contemplated opening it, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Nope", she whispered aloud. "What's outside will have to come and meet me inside. I'm not opening any door."

Kristy turned around and almost shrieked. There, was this woman dressed in a mournful blue gown with matching head-tie, standing in front of her.

- "Don't be afraid." She held out her right arm to Kristy, signaling her to stay calm. Kristy was silenced.
- "It was me outside. You didn't open the door, you said I could come in, so I came in."

The woman turned and started walking towards the corridor. Kristy knew she meant for her to follow. She followed. She glanced at her sister and brothers as they walked past.

- "Not to worry. They are safe." The lady answered her thoughts.

Kristy followed the lady. Somehow she was calm. The lady went into the empty family bedroom, and sat on the floor, at the left corner. She appeared ever so mournful, as though she bore all the troubles of the world. It seemed she mirrored exactly how Kristy felt about her confused world.

The woman then spread both legs apart, her flowing gown covered her down to her ankles. She began groaning, placing both hands on her tummy. Was she... pregnant? Yes she was. "Oh my God", thought Kristy. "She was in Labour!"

- "Ask me." The lady said.

Kristy understood.

- "Why? Why is this world so unkind? Why must children suffer?"

At that moment Kristy ceased to hide the agony of her life; The betrayal of her parents, the cold crudeness of her aunt, the weakness in Uncle Ben, the disappointment she felt in her big sister, the cruelty she faced by some of the children at school; the indifference of teachers, when she knew, that they knew, that she and other children were hurting. All she ever wanted was to confide in somebody, for someone to ... hold her while she cried... and keep holding her until she stopped crying. Momma couldn't do it. Daddy couldn't do it.

She couldn't remember receiving ONE hug from them. If only someone could lovingly help her to understand life, to explain everything, and teach her how to prepare and deal with things. She was bewildered by her existence.

Kristy wept.

And wept... and wept... and wept... until there was nothing left inside her.

The lady moaned... and moaned... and groaned. It seemed as though she was about to deliver the baby.

- "Ask me." The lady said again.
- "What do you carry... in your belly?"

Looking deep into Kristy's eyes she answered:

- "Your heart."
- "Mmmmy heart...?"
- "I bear all the pain of your heart in the spirit world. All the love you have always needed... and all the love you couldn't give.
- "I do not understand."
- "You will... in time. You already know."
- "But I don't know. Really Miss, I honestly don't understand anything! Please, please My Lady, I do not know!"
- "Yet you do know. You must seek until you find your own answer to your pain and understanding of existence. Therein lies the key to your meaning and your happiness. The truth is inside you."

The lady slowly vanished.

Kristy stood staring at the empty spot where the lady sat. That fluttering sound again... Then it stopped. In a trancelike state, she went back and took her place between her siblings and immediately fell asleep.

She awoke. It was still night-time. Voices. Momma and... Daddy! They were in the kitchen... talking - talking about going to the grocery the next morning and about the furniture they have to save-up for, to buy in time for Christmas and about buying Momma some nice clothes and trying their best. Then she heard Daddy take in a deep breath and exhale. He began:

-“Essie, I want you to look nice when I come home from work. I want you to do your hair and smell nice. I want you to learn to read Essie, so you could be better for yourself, so we could talk about many things. I want us to go to church and learn about God’s love. I want us to get baptized together, renew our vows, and be Christians together. I want to change. I don’t want to hurt you no more.

There was a long silence. Then Momma spoke:

-“Edmund..., you have hurt me, yes. Many people have hurt me and I know, you too have been hurt. But, then... I remember... that I too have hurt people. Sometimes I may not even know I hurt them. So we must bear and always talk to God to forgive those that hurt us... and forgive us too for hurting them.”

-“That is why we have to go to church and be born again and become good Christians!” Daddy was adamant.

-“Edmund... Do you think people who go to church is Christians? Or... they try to be Christians?”

Another long silence.

-“Not ‘IS Christians’ Essie, ‘ARE Christians.’ And I understand what you mean Essie...” There was another long pause. “I am willing to try Essie, and yes, I will be patient.”

Kristy smiled. Hazel and the others still slept soundly. A thought suddenly came to her. Could she be dreaming everything? The lady in blue, Momma and Daddy... this must all be a dream.

She closed her eyes.