The Beginning: Home and Family

MY LIFE began in a farmhouse on the back roads of a community called Iron Mine, located eight miles west of Wallace, a small rural town in southeastern North Carolina. Ours was a farming community with mostly tobacco and strawberries. Wallace had no industry and the business district consisted of Front Street (Main Street) and Back Street. The White-owned businesses were located on Front Street and consisted primarily of the clothing stores, the drug store, the grocery store, and the doctors' offices. There was also a post office, and just off Front Street was a hotel.

The Black-owned businesses were located on Back Street, which ran parallel to Front Street. The Bass Family Cafe was known for its good home cooking. Across the street was another cafe. The two shoe repair businesses were owned by the Pearsall family and by Mr. Powers. One of the grocery stores was owned by our cousin, Eugene Bennett, and the other was owned by Mr. Robinson. Back Street officially became Boney Street sometime during the 1960s, but is still known to most locals as Back Street. The Whites who lived in town worked in the stores, the bank, and maybe a few other businesses. The Blacks who lived near
town either worked on Back Street or did house or yard work for the Whites. Very few, if any, worked in other towns because not very many people had cars or other means of transportation.

Iron Mine was a mixed neighborhood of Black and White families. Although most families were related to each other, the kinship of the Blacks and Whites wasn’t discussed in public. Most everyone farmed or worked for someone who did. Several Black families owned large farms and nice homes. Everyone seemed to get along as far as race relations were concerned.

Outside of the city limits, neither Blacks nor Whites had electricity. We also used outdoor toilets. Usually, they were well-built little outhouses with two covered seats. A broom was kept in a corner to sweep and keep them neat. The only phone in Iron Mine was at the Smith farm. This belonged to Mr. Tom Smith; his wife was Martha, and their three boys were Colwell, Ted, and William. They had a country store in the yard. Papa farmed with them at times and all of Iron Mine received and sent messages at the Smith farm.

Now for my family: Papa; Mama; my beloved, one-and-only sister, Eunice; and four brothers, Bennie, Frank, Willie, and James Lloyd (we always called him Sam). Bennie was the first born, then Frank and Eunice. Another boy, named Clarence (also known as Bud), was next but he died at four years of age, before I was born—due to pneumonia I believe. Mama was watching someone playing cards and sent one of the children to the bedroom to see how he was. The child came back saying Bud was lying there “great long” (stretched out). Mama went to see. He was dead. She never liked cards after that. Willie came after Clarence and I was the next to arrive.

There’s supposed to be a certain age when people begin to record memories. One of the first things I can recall is crawling across a plank on our porch. It led from the doorstep to the door
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while floorboards were being put down. I definitely remember
crawling along it, hearing Mama screech and pick me up. How-
ever, I've never been able to convince any of my family of this.
They insist I was far too young, I hadn't even started walking. As
a child, the things I said were mostly ignored, hooted down, or
taken with a grain of salt at best. This didn't faze me in the least.
I always knew what I felt, heard, and saw.

I guess my brain really began registering things on a warm
August morning in 1926 when I was going on three years old.
Upon awakening and failing to hear pots and pans rattling in the
kitchen, smell coffee perking, or hear the sound of Mama's voice,
I went in search of her. The kitchen was empty. I had looked in
all the rooms except the front bedroom in which my parents slept.
This door was closed and I didn't see any of the other children or
Papa. Sounds came from this room so I planted myself by the
door. Each time someone opened it, I tried to sneak in but was
pushed back and told to stay out of the way.

Finally Papa rushed into the bedroom, then back out, taking
me with him as he left. Somehow we were in the truck. I say
"truck," but I think it was once a car. Half of the body was cut
away, then a box fitted on back and the whole thing painted blue.
As I remember, we called it Bluebird. I sat there expectantly while
Papa grabbed the crank, jabbed it in place, and cranked furiously.
It caught, roared to life, then shook and rattled, ready to take
off—and take off it did, over ruts and bumps, dust billowing from
behind.

"Where we going, Papa?" I asked when I could hold still long
enough.

"To get Miss Minnie."

I wondered who Miss Minnie was and why he was going to
get her, but said no more. One didn't keep asking Papa questions.
Besides, I was too busy grasping at something to hold onto as
Bluebird roared and rattled onward. Then we were in front of a little house somewhere, and Papa had rushed in to get Miss Minnie, who turned out to be a small, light-complexioned woman with big round eyes that looked like our calf’s. I think I stared at her all the way back home. She paid me no mind and disappeared into the room Mama seemed to be in, taking her little black bag with her.

I was told to go play. How could I play, not knowing where my Mama was? I stayed right by that door, trying to see inside every time it was opened. I could smell the sharp smell of Lysol and hear queer noises. Finally someone took me by the hand and led me in, only I couldn’t see a thing. Dark green shades covered the windows—only a slit of light here and there. Blankets covered the head and foot of the bed, and the sharp smell was stronger. By then I was terrified. Was Mama in this dark, queer-smelling room? If so, what for?

Then I heard Mama’s voice. “Don’t you want to see your new little brother, Hon?”

I peered toward the bed and saw my mother’s face—a light blur. A bundle of something was beside her, but all I was interested in was finding Mama again. I had not the slightest interest in a brother, new or otherwise. However, someone unwrapped the top part of the bundle and I was told to look. It was a tiny face with tightly closed eyes. I peered at it, speechless, and left the room, still speechless.

That was my introduction to my baby brother, Sam. Where had he come from? This question was put to each member of my family or anyone else I could lay hold of. I was answered with a grunt or silence until I got to my brother Frank.

“Miss Minnie brought him,” he told me.

“I didn’t see him in the truck.”
"That's because she put him in her little black bag," he assured me.

"She did?"

"Yeah, that's what the little black bag is for."

So that was it! What a smart brother I had, to know all of that, and he took the time to tell me. Well, I felt I should know something too.

"Dat's right, dat's right," I volunteered. "I went with Papa to get Miss Minnie and she hid him in her bag."

Having gotten started, I couldn't leave well enough alone. I had to make it even fancier.

"I went in the house with Papa. There were a lot of babies on shelves, and Papa let me pick him out."

"Sure enough?"

"Uh-huh."

I almost believed I was fully responsible for the arrival of Sam and have always had a special feeling for him, that in some way he was also mine.

Much later, I learned that Miss Minnie was a midwife. Back then most babies were born in their mothers' beds with either a doctor from town or a midwife to attend the birth. Our nearest hospital was James Walker Hospital in Wilmington, thirty to forty miles away. Some years after Sam was born, a White doctor in Wallace had rooms built over his office for White women to deliver but not for the Black women.

Sometime during the 1950s another White doctor, named Dr. Hawes, built a clinic in the next town, Rose Hill, and delivered babies of both races. Of course, the rooms for White women were on one end, and the rooms for Black women were on the other end, but he gave good care to all his patients. His fee was fifty dollars for nine months of prenatal care and delivery. If you pre-
ferred, he’d bring his nurse and a portable hospital bed and deliver at your home. It’s said that he delivered three thousand babies before he died. Now Duplin County, where Iron Mine is, and the surrounding counties all have nice, up-to-date hospitals and ambulance service and provide all kinds of care.

Our home was a weathered six-room farmhouse with a long wraparound porch and a swing on one end. My mama’s family had a large farm with lots of acreage. Her parents had nine children, and each time one married, a piece of land was sectioned off and given to that child. When Mama married Papa, she was given fourteen acres on the south end. That’s where she and Papa built their house and raised their six children, plus about that many more children belonging to other people.

Our water source was a deep well near the kitchen door. It was fed by a spring of cold crystal clear water. The front yard of our home, like that of most farm homes of that time, was hard-packed dirt, shaded by large oak trees from which gray moss hung like old men’s dirty beards. Peach, apple, and pear trees grew in backyards or fields. Our flower yards were on each side and toward the back, a profusion of different colors. They held mainly zinnias, marigolds, cock’s combs, bachelor’s buttons, four-o’clocks, and others whose names I don’t remember. But I will never forget the tall, lavender and purple hollyhocks that grew in back of and beside our house. It was under those that I took my little brother to play.

For the next few years, most of my recollections revolve around Sam: Papa buying him a crib with rockers that he refused to sleep in, Bennie and Frank going to his bed each morning to bend over and nuzzle him or just bending over him with their eyes closed. I sometimes wondered if they were praying over him or catching a few more minutes of sleep after Papa routed them out of bed. Watching Mama nurse Sam fascinated me—it seemed a funny
way to eat. This was also when I discovered the difference between the sexes. I always watched Mama change Sam's diapers and noticed he didn't look like I did. I asked her why.

"Because he's a boy and you're a girl."

This made me fret. I wanted him to look like I did—in fact, I wanted him to be a girl. I already had three big brothers and only one sister. All of them were older and none of them had time for me. I pondered on ways to make Sam a baby sister instead of a baby brother. I decided the most logical thing was to dress him like a girl. So one sunny summer morning while playing among the hollyhocks, I told him I was going to put one of my dresses on him.

"Huh," said Sam.

Running in the house, I got down my green Sunday dress (my best) that was hanging behind the door, my yellow hat with a narrow black ribbon that went around it and hung from the back, and last but not least, my best pair of pink silk bloomers. They had rubber around the legs. Step-ins (panties) were kept for girls in their teens. Soon all this finery adorned Brother Sam.

I beamed happily, "Now you are a little girl like me."

"Huh," said Sam.

His answer to everything, whether in answer to a question or a statement, was "Huh." A man of few words was Sam.

Now I needed a name for my new sister. I pondered on this for some time, but pondered alone. Sam was too interested in himself as a girl and his finery to worry about a name. I recalled Mama reading the story of Mary and Martha in the Bible, and since I was already Mary, what better name for a sister than Martha?

"I know, I know. Martha, that's a good name. It goes with Mary."

"Huh."
“Come on, Martha,” I said, taking “Martha” by the hand to go play under the pear tree in back, but around the house came Mama.

At sight of Sam, she stopped and stared in wonder at her baby son—then came the blast. When it was over, “Martha” was once again Sam and my Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes were back behind the door. Mama also made sure my ears were full of words.

I think it was about this time that Bennie became ill with some kind of fever, malaria or typhoid. He was very sick and I remember Mama’s worry and how she tended to him. I’d go look at him lying there in the bed with the tall wooden headboard. He was so thin and quiet. What I remember most about his illness is that Mama had to teach him to walk all over again once he was able to get out of bed. Sam was also learning to walk at this time. She gave each of them a stick for support, then got between them, and up and down the porch they went. Mama’s eyes were shining with happiness. Her first- and last-born sons, learning to walk together. God had spared Bennie and now she was helping both boys learn to walk.

Aside from my family, other people have a special place in my heart and childhood days—Mary Elizabeth (or Mary Lizzie as we called her); her mom, Mrs. Helen Smith; and her stepfather, Willie Smith. The Smiths lived in town, but my parents raised Mary Lizzie on our farm. I don’t know why they raised her, but I think it was because her mother worked and had no place to leave her. We all loved her dearly. She was a tall, pretty girl.

Mrs. Helen and Mr. Smith once took me to a circus, the only one I’ve ever been to. There I saw my first elephant, tiger, and lion. I was thrilled speechless, afterward, I traveled back to the car perched high on Mr. Smith’s shoulder. When I was at home again with my family, the circus was all I could talk about. Some-
one asked me if I'd been afraid of the lions and other animals. I was indignant.

"What do you think I am—a fool?" (This was a favorite expression of my idol, Mr. Smith.)

"Mary!"

This from Mama, followed by a good dressing-down. Fool was classified with all the swear words we were forbidden to use or we'd end up in eternal fire along with the devil.

When she was grown enough to be on her own, Mary Lizzie moved to town to live with her parents. She learned to drive and used her dad's car to come out to see us often. I'd also go stay with them—more happy memories. Being in town was exciting. Theirs was a neat white house on the eastern side of town, with electric lights, an oil stove (instead of wood) for cooking, and a large gramophone or "talking machine" with legs (better known now as a record player). You could put on a record, wind it up with a crank, then close the top, making the music low and muted. And how exciting the house smelled—a mixture of cigarette smoke, oil stove, perfume, and whiskey. At home the chief smell was food cooking, coffee perking, and wood smoke from the heater and the kitchen stove. I loved that smell too. It meant "home."

I loved going uptown on summer afternoons with Mary Lizzie or Mrs. Helen. They'd use a little Vaseline to twist my hair in long sausage curls, and I got to wear a pretty dress, and shoes and socks in summer, on weekdays! How grand I felt, wishing Sam could see me stroll along Front Street. Mr. Smith owned the barbershop on Back Street. The lotions, talc powder, and hair tonics smelled so good. We'd wait for him to close up, then get in the car to ride back to the house, where he'd carry me in on his shoulder.

When I visited, Mrs. Helen took me fishing at the millpond not far from their house. The covered bridge over the water is still
there. All I ever caught was trash and once a small turtle. While in town, I played with Ernestine “Teen” Stevens and Rick (I think her last name was McMillan). We caught tadpoles, played games, and, along with some girls who were considered “fast,” played in an unfinished house across the street that we’d been forbidden to play in. Rick was older and sort of quiet, slim and very light complexioned with long brown hair. Teen was more my type: brown, short, plump, and ready to try new things—like going to the house that was off-limits. Rick wouldn’t go and told Mrs. Helen on us. I got a scolding and so did Teen. We tore up Rick’s Sunday hat to repay her. This earned me a spanking; I don’t know what Teen got.

During one such visit, Papa showed up one afternoon in the old truck with Sam. I was happy to see them until I learned they had come for me. I couldn’t explain it, because I was always glad to be going home from any place. This time I cried as though my heart would break. Mrs. Helen begged Papa to let me stay until the end of the week and they would bring me home.

“No suh, she’s got to go home to keep Eunice company at the house and play with Sam. It’s work time now.”

My clothes were packed, and I was promised a new dress when I came back for another visit; then I was in the truck, still crying. Mrs. Helen gave me a final hug and kiss and a pretty quart jar of peaches. More kisses from Mary Lizzie and I was on my way, waving from the back window and trying to see them standing in the dusk also crying and waving. I never saw either of them again. I had only been home a short time when word came that they’d left town and moved to New York. Mrs. Helen had been caught with a jar of bootleg whiskey. They left the state to avoid prosecution. Only Mr. Smith returned for a visit; later, he was killed in a wreck.

Our family boarded teachers. One teacher, Miss Johnson,
stayed with us for a while, but I don’t remember when she came. Miss Johnson had several boyfriends to come a-courting at our house. We had a heater in only one room, so they had to sit with the rest of the family or freeze in the unheated living room (or parlor, as it was called then). One suitor was Oliver Tate. I don’t know what he used, but he had shiny black hair and a shiny face. They put their chairs side by side as far from the rest of us as possible and twittered at each other like two birds until bedtime, whereupon he bid us all goodnight and took his leave. Try as we might, no one ever understood a word they said. We wondered.

I think another boyfriend was my cousin, Oscar. He was long, lean, and lanky and seemed like his knees should go “clank, clank” when he walked. His style of courting was to recite a poem. I can remember one line he kept repeating: “If I was a cat, I wouldn’t do that.” Everybody laughed and laughed.

The third boyfriend was another cousin and one of my favorites, Willie E., known as Cap Jack. I loved to hear him sing and whistle “My Blue Heaven.” His voice was so clear and tender. I can hear him yet as he would come through the path in the woods between his family’s house and ours, whistling or singing. I’d stand still to listen until I saw him come out at the end of the field.

Maybe his singing ability helped him, for eventually he and Miss Johnson were married and she became Cousin Beulah. One summer after they married, she took me home with her. It was my first train ride. I kept rubbing my hands over the stiff plush covering the seats. It was fascinating to see houses, trees, and telephone poles rushing by the window. Her parents’ home in Snow Hill was a pleasant white house on a hill at the corner of the street. It had a porch with a swing. Besides her mother and father, she had one sister and two brothers named Robert and Lotus.
While visiting Cousin Beulah’s family, I made friends with a plump, older girl named Lucy. She took me with her to church to practice for a play, to someone’s house to pick plums, and to other places. Most of my excursions with Lucy were made in a purple taffeta slip. Mama had made me a “best dress” from purple organdy, all fancy with ruffles, lace, and bows; the slip went with it. I knew better than to put on the dress for anything less than church services or some big event, so I wore what I considered the next best thing: the slip. I’d also wear my black patent leather Sunday shoes and white socks, and away I’d go with Lucy.

The visit was pleasant and I hated for it to end, but soon I was once again on the train going back home. A wonderful and fearful thing to ride, it huffed, puffed, chooed, and hissed out steam. A bell clanged while black smoke puffed up as it moved along very slowly, then picked up speed. Soon it was rocking down the rails like mad. I saw people go up front and pull down a white paper cup to get a drink of water. I longed to do the same but didn’t dare leave the safety of my seat beside Cousin Beulah. At that time, she lived out on the highway with Cap Jack, his parents, and his cousin Jessie Mae.

Cap’s mother was my mama’s sister, and next to Mama I loved her more than any other woman I’ve known. We called her Sis Ette, and she was so sweet and gentle. I especially remember her hair. It was very soft, and strands would come out from the knot she wore it in and curl around her glasses on her forehead. She always called me “Hon” and would give me a pinch of snuff for running to get it down from a shelf and carrying it to her. This was done secretly as Mama had a horror of both snuff and the box it came in. To her, both were nasty. Sis Ette showed me how to put it in my cheek and pack it down, then spit. Most of mine came out with the spit. All of it had to be out before I got home or I’d get a real switching. Mama finally broke me from snuff by filling
my mouth and lips with it and making me sit out in the hot sun and swallow the whole mess. Boy, was I sick! I heaved and heaved, and cried and heaved some more. I was cured.

Then there was Cap’s father, Cousin Archie—short and partly bald with a thick black mustache. His morning ritual was to put on his clothes, then go to the end of the porch by the kitchen door and wash his face and hair (or head). This was done summer and winter. In the winter, when ice was in the water bucket, he’d crack the ice and wash in it anyway; he was real tough. His name for both me and Jessie Mae was “Little Gal.” I didn’t mind being a little gal, but Jessie Mae always protested.

“But Uncle Archie, I’m not a gal. A gal lives in a mule or horse stable,” she’d say.

She was about twelve and fat, with red hair and green eyes, and everything tickled her. She’d laugh and laugh until her face was red and shiny with tears. She spent a lot of time playing house with me. I loved her too.

Another love of my life was, and still is, music. All kinds, but my favorites have always been the classics. No words, just music—loud, wild, and wonderful. If it was gay and lifting, I’d close my eyes and imagine sunshine, blue skies, flowers, and birds singing, and I’d feel happy. As a child, I just had to dance. I made up my own dance of hops, leaps, and skips. I had a really wild record going one day and was dancing my heart out when Eunice came in unexpectedly and caught me doing one of my originals. She laughed and laughed and said I looked for all the world like a one-legged chicken hopping up and down. I screeched and cried and begged her not to tell anybody, but my chicken-hop dance became a big joke among the family and friends, all except Mama. She just smiled a little and told me to dance if I wanted to and I did, but I made sure I was alone.

I couldn’t stand sad music though. It made me depressed and
fearful. Mama’s oldest brother, Julius Vatson (also known as Buddy Vat), gave me records of concerts and classical music. No one else liked them except maybe Bennie. He also loved music, often sitting in the corner by the gramophone at night, keeping it wound up and playing record after record. I can still hear the lovely sound of “Shine On Harvest Moon,” sung by a group of Black men called the Jubilee Quartet. I can see the big, round October moon rising over the woods in front of our house, shining on the porch chairs turned against the wall for the night. I can see the shadows of the oak trees in the yard and the well at the corner of the house and smell the smoke from the oak and sweet gum logs burning in the heater. All the family would be gathered in from their day’s work, full and content. Mama would be doing some needlework, patching some of the menfolks’ overalls or shirts, or piecing a quilt together with Eunice helping her or studying. The rest of us would be sitting quiet, listening to the voice asking the moon to “shine on, for me and my gal.” I was always lost in beautiful music.

Another song I especially loved to listen to was “Carolina Moon” by Kate Smith. It went:

Carolina moon keep shining, shining on the one who cares for me.
Carolina moon I’m pining, pining for the place I long to be.
How I’m hoping tonight, you’ll go to the right window,
Scatter your light, tell her I’m alright, please do.

The room, lit by an oil lamp, filled with worn furniture and the glowing-hot cast iron heater, may not have looked like much to some people, but for me, it was the nicest room anywhere. Surrounded by all those I loved, I felt safe, warm, and contented—like I was the richest girl in the world.

I was happy to just stay at home, play with Sam, and follow Mama around the house as she attended the various chores. One
such morning as Sam was napping, I had my first experience of seeing something I couldn’t explain. I had a kitten I loved dearly—my first one. Its favorite place was napping on a sunny spot on top of our kitchen stove after it cooled off. However, my kitty died and I grieved for awhile, then things went on as usual. This particular morning, Mama had washed dishes and cleaned the kitchen, then moved on to make beds, with me right at her heels, running my mouth. I got hungry and Mama told me to go in the kitchen and look for a biscuit or something in the pie safe (where baked goods were stored). As I entered the kitchen, I stopped. There was my kitty sleeping in his usual spot of sun.

Delighted to see him, I shrieked to Mama, “Here’s my kitty come back to me!”

As I did so, he raised his head, looked at me, then jumped to the floor, running behind the wood box with me in pursuit. Though I searched the kitchen, he was nowhere to be found. Mama told me it was just my imagination, that my kitty was dead and couldn’t come back. Nonetheless, I knew he had. For me, seeing was believing, but I kept that to myself.