

Praises for Bliss and Blisters in Love & Marriage

Very interesting and compelling! An intriguing read. I really felt what you went through and alternately wanted to bash your mother-in-law and Vincent.

–Dr. Joy Wassel, Professional Counselor

I thoroughly enjoyed your book. I couldn't stop reading it! It immediately captured me and seemed like I was in Davida through the whole experience. There were so many things that I could relate to.

–Laurel, Educator

Very engaging! I felt like I was watching every scene unfold before my very own eyes! I can relate to so much that took place being that I married my high school sweetheart.

–Kelly, Minister

This is life! This book is an excellent tool that includes several points that need to be analyzed. Young people need to know the real meaning of love, seek the ulterior motive for marriage, and consider many things before rushing into a lifelong partnership.

–Rev. Dorcas McReynolds

It was specifically hard hitting for me because I could relate to so much of what Davida went through as a woman. Many of the issues she struggled with are so relevant to what women go through these days...especially feeling caught in a toxic relationship and/or marriage.

–Glenetta, Educator

If Davida could speak out to women in shelters, young girls with boyfriends or husbands that do not treat them with respect and honor she might say: Speak out and never let anyone make you feel small. No one has the right to take away your dignity and pride.

–Fran Lewis, Author, Educator

Bliss and Blisters

in

Love & Marriage

A Novel Based on a War Bride's True Story

Gloria Shell Mitchell



EncourageMint
Books

GARDENA, CALIFORNIA

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Bliss and Blisters in Love & Marriage by Gloria Shell Mitchell is a novel based on a true story. The names have been changed to protect the identities of the innocent, or otherwise.

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Dedication

To

Effie Pearl Javis

Young adults

Young couples

Military families

Transitional Youth

War Veterans and spouses

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Prologue

I AM DELIGHTED TO share my story of love and loss during the Vietnam War era. Perhaps our marital relationship would have been quite different had the military draft not been a reality in our young adult experience. We'll never know. Yet, on behalf of the 58,220 young men and women who lost their lives in combat and for other causes on foreign soil (per the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC), I felt compelled to share my personal war for peace at home in South Carolina.

As a pregnant spouse waiting for my husband to return from Vietnam, my desperate cries to God on his behalf and the other troops who had been deployed to a war zone intensified my prayer life. Out of the many young brides who lost their husbands and children who lost their fathers, God allowed me to see my husband return from Saigon, and our daughter to get to know her father. I did not say that he returned safely. But my gratitude for answered prayers outweighed the pain experienced in the tumultuous relationship that followed agonizing months of watching, waiting, praying and hoping for God's favorable response.

Much has been said about Amerasians (children born to Vietnamese women and United States servicemen), so I share my story about how the war impacted American wives and children, including the unborn child, of troops deployed to Vietnam. With so many of our young men killed, maimed, or missing in action, I realized how population control is achieved through war by killing the males, separating spouses, and cre-

ating conflict between men and women. Spouses of returning war veterans have a story that is quite different from that of war widows and war babies. America has a class of overlooked war brides who are not Asian.

While writing *Bliss and Blisters in Love & Marriage*, I thought of the many young women who married during the Vietnam era (1965-1975) and later experienced trauma in their marriage to war veterans. They either divorced or remained in a marriage often described as "a living hell." In my story, Vincent Henderson returned from Vietnam with PTSD and I had no idea what had happened to the man I married. Due to the shortage of eligible men in a desired age group, some war brides never remarried. Consequently, children born during the same period often grew up without their biological father or a male role model in the home.

I pray that my story will inspire you to show compassion for our military families at home and abroad during times of peace and war. The surviving family members of the estimated 22 veterans who commit suicide each day need our condolences and prayers. May God bless them, you and your family, and may God bless America.

David Kincaid Henderson

My First Love

WAAA! WAAAAHHH! A CRYING baby woke me up. I opened my eyes and saw a nurse dressed in white from head to toe. She placed a lumpy pink receiving blanket in the arms of a woman in the hospital bed next to mine. Across the aisle was a woman nursing a baby at her breast and another one holding a four-ounce, glass baby bottle. Both held a bundle wrapped in a blue blanket. Each one of the women looked like they had been through a rough time. They looked tired, drained like a deflated balloon.

Do I look like that? Why was I in that room? Didn't they know that I didn't have a baby?

The three mothers spoke gibberish to their newborns. Their "gitchie gitchie goo gaga" baby talk annoyed me.

Why not speak plain English so the baby can learn real words right away?

Storybooks don't tell the truth when they end with, "And they married and lived happily ever after," I thought. That could only happen if the couple lived in a bubble and had no contact with other people, no problems and no children. Nothing about crying babies, changing diapers, feeding tiny sucklings, and losing sleep made me sense that those women were living happily ever since they married.

I turned my back toward them and faced the wall. My mind replayed the sequence of events that had brought me to the Columbia Hospital as a patient. About every half hour a nurse interrupted my thoughts to check my blood pressure and stick

a thermometer under my tongue. Sleep escaped me, so all I could do was wrestle with my thoughts.



Two months before high school graduation in June 1966, I met Vincent at Corinthian Baptist – my home church in Columbia, South Carolina. My best girlfriend Elaine, who was engaged to Danny Henderson, had persuaded the choir director to invite his family to participate in a Sunday afternoon musical. The entire Henderson family – Danny, his mother, father, sister Regina and younger brother Vincent – reminded me of the Von Trapp family in *The Sound of Music* when they entered the choir stand. Their family unity was impressive. The applause was thunderous before they sang one note.

The Henderson family sang an “A” selection that released electrifying shockwaves and sparked a shouting frenzy throughout the church. Each time the women sang, “*There’s not a friend like the lowly Jesus,*” the men sang, “*No, not one! No, not one!*” They sounded like a host of angels singing.

For their “B” selection, Vincent stepped to the microphone. I was mesmerized by his falsetto voice and his confidence as he cooed in front of a packed church. I felt like Cupid’s arrows had penetrated my heart as the tall, skinny guy wearing high water pants sang *Glory to His Name*. I couldn’t wait to tell him that he sounded like Smokey Robinson.

Glory! Glory! Glory!

Down at the cross where my Savior died, down where for cleansing from sin I cried, there to my heart was the blood applied – Glory to His name... Vincent sang with passion. Anyone who

hadn't seen the song in our hymnal might have thought he'd written the words himself.

When the Henderson family reached the chorus, the entire church sang *Glory to His name with them*.

Vincent shifted the microphone stand to his left like he was James Brown on stage. He extended his right arm as if inviting people to come and enjoy a thrilling experience with Jesus while singing: *Come to this fountain so rich and sweet, cast thy poor soul at the Savior's feet, plunge in today and be made complete – glory to His name*.

A heat wave swept through the church. Even after singing stopped, the musicians continued playing and people kept on shouting, running and dancing in the aisles. Some cried tears. Others hollered, "Hallelujah!" "Thank you Jesus!"

Ushers ran around passing out paper fans with Popsicle stick handles, donated by Foster's Funeral Home. A variety of fragrances plus a musty odor filled the hot air. Women waved laced handkerchiefs while shaking their heads and slinging snot mixed with tears. A stranger walking in would have thought we had all gone cuckoo.

Suddenly a woman seated near me let out an ear-piercing scream, jumped up and threw her baby in the air. A chunky female usher rushed over and caught the baby while a male usher stepped over people seated in the pew behind the woman and grabbed her flailing arms. Nobody was injured because the ushers, like police officers, saw trouble and ran to handle it.

A man dashed through the aisles as though being chased by a rabid dog. Several ushers rushed to form a circle around him and locked hands. They let him jump and shout in the middle of the circle until he dropped to the floor.

That was my first time seeing and hearing the fired up Henderson family.

Perspiration rolled down my back as I danced along with everyone else. We had a Holy Ghost party until the musicians stopped playing. The place cooled down after people sat, but moaning amid shouts of "my, my, my" continued for quite awhile.

"Oh happy day!" I said, following Elaine toward the door after the benediction.

We stood outside in the April breeze discussing whose table we would visit first as women set up food for the big eating that was about to take place.

Danny approached us with dreamy-eyed Vincent, who wore tight pants that were too small for him, at his side. Vincent's dimpled-smile was so charming that it made my heart melt like butter as we made eye contact. Both brothers smelled like Old Spice.

"I looked for you two inside," Danny said. "Davida, meet Vincent."

"I feel like I already know you," Vincent said. "Danny told me about you."

"Really? Good things I hope. You know you showed out in that choir stand."

"Well glory to his name!" he said, smiling.

He's so cute!

His smile was as enticing as his singing.

Vincent pulled out an Afro pick and pushed it through his hair a couple of times. He flashed me a grin that made me want to swoon. I could have sworn I heard Fontella Bass on the church grounds singing, "Rescue Me."

"Let's go eat now," Danny said. He took Elaine's hand and turned to walk away. I stood there beside Vincent for an awkward moment before Danny turned back and said, "Davida, will it be all right if I bring Lil' Bro with me Friday night when I come to Elaine's house for the spring fling?"

"That's a good idea," Elaine said. She smiled at me and nodded.

I was embarrassed. I didn't know if Vincent liked me.

"I'm looking forward to Friday night," Vincent said. "Let's walk together." He winked at me and gestured with his hand like a gentleman.

"Ladies first."

"Thank you," I giggled.

Everybody had decided what I would do without my saying a word.

We ate, laughed and talked while sitting in folding chairs beneath a shade tree until time to leave. After the meal, Elaine and I watched as the Hendersons drove away in their '57 Chevy.

"See ya'll Friday night," Vincent said, sticking his head out the car's rear window. Danny, seated on the other side of Regina, leaned forward and waved.

Elaine and I waved back.

"He likes me!" I giggled.

"I told you he would," she said.

I left church thinking about what I would wear to the party on Friday night. At home I chose my favorite pink jumper dress, anticipating lots of compliments on wearing girly pink. I also decorated a two-inch comb with a pink flower to put in my hair and set them aside for Friday evening.

Vincent showed up dressed in tight, high water pants again and a plaid shirt. He resembled Jed Clampett from the Beverly Hillbillies, except for being black with an Afro. I figured his family didn't have much money for clothes and he didn't have a job yet like Danny. But his family had each other, and that was more important.

Vincent literally swept me off my feet as he whirled me around in his arms in a swing dance. Cinderella must have had a similar experience at her ball. All evening I danced only with Vincent – my prince charming. What a wonderful evening!

We met at the perfect time. With my first boyfriend Alex the jealous woman beater out of my life, I was free to find the perfect mate. When we broke up, I vowed never to let any man hit me again in life. My dream companion would be a gentleman, taller than me, older, and a high school graduate. An optional qualification would be a man who was willing to serve or had served his country in a branch of the military. Vincent was six feet tall, three months older, and a college-bound high school senior with only a couple months remaining before graduation.

Meeting Vincent at church meant God had shown special favor by giving me an added bonus – a man who knows, loves and serves the Lord. My well-rounded guy and I had a terrific time laughing, talking and dancing.

Surely, this is the man of my dreams.

After the party, Vincent visited me a week later on Sunday afternoon at my house, a half- mile down the road from Elaine's. He brought me red roses from his mother's flower garden and a bunch of bananas, my favorite fruit. The man convinced me that he was attentive, too.

Danny and Elaine married two weeks after they introduced us and then relocated to Orangeburg, SC. With his older brother and his ride gone, Vincent begged his father to let him drive the family's '57 Chevy from Sumter, forty-nine miles away, to visit me in Columbia. I never welcomed anyone into my house or my heart as warmly as I did Vincent. On his second Sunday afternoon visit he popped a surprise question as we strolled toward his father's car that evening.

"Will you think about going to the prom with me?"

"Yes! I'll go" flew out my mouth. Embarrassed, I added, "Oh, I tend to think quickly on my feet."

"Great!" He laughed and pecked me on the cheek. "We'll talk more later."

I remembered Mama saying, "It's more important that the man love you than you love him. You can learn to love him after you first respect him." Her words rang in my ears as I watched a real gentleman drive away.

Vincent must be my husband, I thought as I waved goodbye. Who else would take that long ride from Sumter to Columbia? He passed a lot of girls' houses to get to me. And he invited me to his senior prom. Wow! That's huge! And we just met two weeks ago.

What did I need to think about? I knew him and his family. His brother and my best friend thought we were meant for each other. Besides, I could wear the same outfit I'd worn to my own senior prom. The people in Sumter had never seen me, or my gown.

I see a green light here and all signs say, "GO!"

Prom Night

LOOKING AND FEELING AS glamorous as Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8*, I floated across the dance floor at my boyfriend Vincent's senior prom on the last Friday night in May 1966. Around eleven o'clock, my 6' 2" handsome prince wrapped one arm around my tiny waist and guided me toward the double exit doors of the Fountain Bleu Inn in Columbia, South Carolina.

"Where are we going now?" I giggled, feeling victorious over the two girls who had called me a heifer when I showed up with Vincent. I couldn't help it if he didn't want one of those hags for his date. I pressed closer to him, the searing heat from their glaring eyes scorching my back. They'd better not set my pink chiffon on fire, I thought.

"Davida, I want to show you a secret place," he whispered.

"Where you go, I go."

Vincent helped me into his father's '57 Chevy. He lifted the hem of my gown so it wouldn't get caught in the car door. Then he shut the door, ran around the front of the car, and hopped behind the steering wheel.

I leaned my head against him and he slid his right arm across my bare shoulder. I thought about how angry those two girls would be if they could see me now.

Percy Sledge's melodic words "When A Man Loves A Woman" floated from the car radio as a cool breeze drifted through the driver's window. I listened to the music and read the road signs as Vincent drove toward nearby Lake Herron.

He broke our silence the moment he pulled into the parking lot and saw lots of cars.

"They beat us here," he groaned. "I wanted a better spot."

He lifted his right hand while backing between two cars as I sat up straight.

"Oh, look at that full moon!" I said as he turned off the engine. I peered through the windshield. It was my first time seeing Lake Herron. The magnificent beauty of the moonlight sparkled against the dark water that seemed so calm.

"This is so beautiful! Let's get out and walk closer to the water."

"Not right now," Vincent said. He cupped my chin in his hand and turned my head toward him. His lips pressed firmly against mine as he groped for the zipper in the back of my gown.

"Backseat," he mumbled. He opened the driver's door, jumped out and pulled me past the steering wheel.

"Hey!" Can't we enjoy the moonlight and talk awhile?"

"Yeah. But the steering wheel is in the way up here."

Even with his help, I had difficulty climbing into the backseat because of my long gown and petticoat. Vincent pushed me onto the seat. I was barely in when he climbed in beside me. Before the door slammed shut, I felt his hand beneath my gown.

"I could hardly wait till the prom was over," he panted.

The view of the lake wasn't as pretty from the backseat. A moment later I couldn't see it at all because Vincent pushed me down on my back, threw my gown and petticoat over my head, and pounced on me like a lion attacking its prey.

How could he ruffle my beautiful pink gown? Wasn't the long dress supposed to be a deterrent to sex?

After kissing and fondling me for a hot moment, he ignored my attempts to push him off of me. I don't think he ever heard me yelling, "No!" He won the tussle.

Instantly, I went from feeling like a lovely princess to a tramp that had been picked up and raped by a beast dressed in a tuxedo. During a few passionate minutes in the backseat of a borrowed Chevrolet at Lake Herron, our relationship was sealed forever. That was not the way I'd imagined my first time.

I don't remember any of the songs that played on the radio as he drove me home. But I was well aware of the pain in my private parts, the tears rolling down my cheeks, and the thoughts running through my mind. Would he brag about scoring the way a lot of guys did? Would I get pregnant? Would he dump me and get a new girlfriend? His arm around my shoulder made me feel that he still liked me, but I didn't like myself.

Vincent held my hand as we walked down the path to my front door. He leaned over to kiss me but I turned away. He kissed the back of my neck instead.

"I love you, Davida," he whispered.

"Goodnight," I mumbled and stepped inside.

After easing the door shut to avoid waking Mama at one o'clock in the morning, I tiptoed to the bathroom to check my ripped gown. Now the girl in the mirror looked like the wild and frustrated Elizabeth Taylor in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. I felt ugly and dirty. There were bloodstains on my white petticoat

when I slipped off my dress. It's a good thing those two hags can't see me now, I thought.

If Vincent loved me, why had he attacked me like a piranha? Why had he spoiled our lovely evening? Why had he ignored me when I kept saying "NO!" and tried to push him away?

Dang! I wished I could have my innocence back. My wonderful evening had gone awry because I hadn't considered timing, place, opportunity, personalities, and passion. Nobody had told me that it was common for girls to lose their virginity on prom night.

My first evening alone with Vincent reminded me of the Bible story I'd read in Song of Songs about the love relationship between a young man and a peasant girl. Our evening began with Vincent saying, "How beautiful you are!" Next, he took me to the banquet hall, his prom, so everyone could see his love for me. Then he took me to his special place and ended up kissing me and saying, "You are so beautiful and you smell so good. No wonder those girls were jealous of you." I had no idea he would also take me to his bedroom – the backseat of his father's car. That was not the way the story was supposed to end.

A Big Decision

A FULL SCHOLARSHIP TO Waller College was my ticket out of country living. Even though I didn't know anybody who had actually gone to college, I looked forward to being the first of Mama's eighteen children to have that experience. So I got scared when my period was late for the first time.

Vincent came over to see me one Sunday afternoon three weeks after the prom. I acted calm, like nothing was bothering me, until we sat side by side on the metal swing in a shady clearing beneath some pine trees in my front yard. I smiled at him.

"Listen to me and don't get alarmed," I whispered. "Don't do anything to draw attention to us. Got it?"

"Uh! Okay," he said. His big brown eyes connected with mine. He didn't have a clue that I was about to share bad news.

"You need to know that this is the first time in my life that my period has ever been late. It was due eight days ago."

"Let's get married right away," he said, reaching for my hand.

I folded my arms.

"Married! I've already accepted a full four-year scholarship to Waller College. I'm not ready to get married AND I don't want to have a baby. I'm going to college!" I looked around to see if anybody had overheard me. Then I stared at him hoping for a helpful reaction.

“People who love each other get married,” he said softly. He looked hurt. “When my sister got pregnant, she and her boyfriend got married.”

“Mine did that too but that’s not me. I’m praying that my period is just a few days late. God knows a baby is the last thing I want.”

“Well, I won’t mind. I want you to be my wife whether you’re expecting or not. And I’m not going to stop asking until you say “yes.”

His smile put me at ease. It was hard to stay angry with him. He always acted like a gentleman except that night when he lost control.

“Just stay tuned for more is all I can say right now,” I said. “I won’t let anything stop me from going to college.”

By the time my personal calendar showed that my period was four weeks late in spite of my prayers, I had tried everything I could think of to make that monthly flow appear. At the public library, I learned that pineapple and Vitamin C in oranges were natural abortion foods so I ate both everyday for a week, but still had no signs of menstruation. Next, I inserted two Preparation H suppositories and drank a bottle of Phillips’ Milk of Magnesia. It felt like Rotor Rooter had pumped out my stomach but still not one drop of blood. A few days later, I deliberately strained to lift three concrete blocks stacked on top of each other. All I got was a backache.

Finally, I remembered that my best girlfriend Elaine once said she drank a bottle of Castor Oil mixed with Pepsi Cola and it brought her late period on right away. I did the same thing. That nasty concoction only made me vomit and have diarrhea. Why was my period so stubborn?

I was the only one who could fix the mess I found myself in. How could I find a doctor to perform an abortion at a price I could afford? I groaned at the thought of wasting my college savings from my part-time sales job at Sears on an unplanned expense.

Since all Vincent wanted to do was get married, there was no need to tell him I was not going to have the baby. I hated shotgun weddings. Nobody should be forced to marry. And no girl should ever feel pressured to marry just so her baby could have the daddy's last name. Marrying against my will would make me feel trapped like a hamster in a cage. I would have to start searching for the nearest opening to freedom even if I had to claw my way out.

One night while talking to Vincent on the phone I made him vow to keep a secret.

"Promise me that you won't breathe a word of what we talked about to anyone else. Our business is our business."

"Davida, for the tenth time I promise. But you're still going to be my wife."

Feeling relieved that my secret was safe I fell asleep wondering how I'd find a doctor who would help me get rid of an unwanted baby.

Worry over missing my period was like a flesh-eating disease destroying my insides. Tormented day and night by my shameful secret, I went to work but not to church. Those folks at Corinthian Baptist were not going to make me stand in front of the congregation and confess that I had sinned. Would God embarrass a girl like that? Hmm... I didn't know. Maybe God would. The boyfriend never had to suffer embarrassment for getting a girl pregnant.

I turned onto my side on the rollaway bed in the living room. Tears wet my pillow but I didn't care. Maybe God would see them and have pity on me. I needed help.

After I got off the city bus the next day, I read all the store signs on my way to work. I stopped when I saw OPEN in the window of Dr. Levell OB/GYN. It was near closing time at 5:00 p.m. I went inside to ask about an appointment.

"Can I help you?" asked a plump woman seated behind the receptionist sign. Her short black hair with gray streaks looked like it had been chopped off in a hurry with dull scissors. In front of her stood a tall, thin man with brown hair dressed in a white jacket. He was reading the contents of a manila folder in his hands but turned toward me when he heard my voice.

"Um, um." I wondered if I should say, "I want to know for sure if I am pregnant?" or "Do you perform abortions?" I think I took too long to answer.

The doctor closed his folder.

"You seem troubled," he said compassionately. "What can I do to help you?"

"Well, actually I am troubled," I stammered. "May I speak with you privately?"

"Sure. Follow me," he said, handing the folder to the woman. I followed as he turned and walked into an examination room. He closed the door behind me when I entered.

"I think I'm pregnant," I whispered.

"Well, let's see," he said. "Just slip off your panties and lie down."

He turned and put on a pair of latex gloves while I stepped out of my panties and climbed onto an examination table.

When he laid a folded white sheet over the bottom half of me, I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see what he would do next.

"Scoot down to the edge," he said. Then he put my feet in some cold, metal stirrups.

"This will only take a minute," he said. "You will feel a slight pinch." Then he poked his fingers inside me and I felt the pinch and flinched. He removed his fingers and said, "That's it."

"That's it?" What was he telling me?

"Yes. Congratulations! You're six weeks pregnant. You can get dressed now."

Dazed, I sat up thinking, now I know for sure. What do I do now?

He took off the disposable gloves, tossed them into the trash can, and washed his hands in the sink. I wished he had removed whatever he felt inside me and tossed it, too.

Feeling like a fork had been stuck in me, I got off the bed and put my panties back on. No need to wear a pad everyday anymore. All hope of seeing blood had vanished.

"I don't want to have this baby," I mumbled.

He looked older than my daddy so I figured he'd heard those words lots of times.

I got scared when he stared into my eyes through his thick horn-rimmed glasses with a wrinkled forehead. "Then you need to tell your parents."

"That's the last thing I want to do. I will pay for your help."

"How old are you?" he said.

"I'm eighteen. But I have a job and I've already graduated from high school."

"Then you will need seventy-five dollars and your parent's permission to terminate the pregnancy. Bring the money and

a parent to see me very soon. You have a two-week window to return. That's your safest bet. You may leave."

He opened the door, stopped and turned back.

"Remember, the sooner you come back, the better." Then he stepped out of the room.

Knots were being tied in my stomach as I rushed out of the examination room with my head down. I was too embarrassed to look at the receptionist. I'd lost all hopes of keeping the secret between Vincent and me. If I didn't act soon, everybody would know what happened on prom night.

Oh, no! What will Mama say? Even if I have the money the doctor won't help me without her permission. I rushed out of the office.

How do I tell my mama what I've decided to do?

That night at work, I painted a smile on my face as I cried on the inside. I'd never imagined that a time would come when I'd wish my period would show up. Never before had I thought of a monthly period being a girl's best friend.

It was hard trying to talk to my mama about something so personal. The two-week window was almost up when I removed the stopper in the bottom of my piggy bank and dumped all my savings into a handkerchief on my lap. Tears wet the dollar bills as I remembered that my South Carolina fat-belly pig contained my Pennsylvania Waller College stash. I counted eighty-seven dollars plus change. Seventy-five dollars would take almost all my money. But, if I didn't pay it, then I could forget about college altogether.

Not being able to wait any longer for the right time to approach Mama, I went into her room one Thursday night and sat at the foot of her bed. I wanted to persuade her to go

with me to see the doctor without telling her why I needed her company.

"Mama, I went to see a doctor and he says you need to come with me to see him tomorrow."

"Why? What's the hurry?" she said. "A baby grows for nine months after you miss your monthly."

My mouth flew open. Mama was smarter than I thought. She knew I had missed my period and hadn't said a word. Suddenly I felt relieved that we were talking about pregnancy. We'd never done that before. If it takes nine months to become a baby, then at almost two months I'd lose nothing but a clump of blood. Right? That must be why the doctor told me to come back soon.

"Dr. Levell said he will terminate the pregnancy for seventy-five dollars but only with your permission."

"Dr. Levell! That abortion doctor killed a sixteen-year-old girl. I read about him in the *Palmetto Times*."

"So what do I do then?" My heart dropped to my knees as I stared at her. I felt completely defeated.

"Well...Mama scratched her head. I'll take you to somebody I know."

"What! You had all these babies, and you knew about abortion?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you ever have one?"

"It's wrong, that's why. God put that baby there for you to have it."

I thought about the babies Mama had after she and Daddy separated. How could she tell me it's wrong to have an abortion and not think it's wrong for her to have sex without being

married? Something was wrong with her thinking. I shook my head.

"But I don't want to have a baby. Babies should not come where they are not welcome. Remember when I went fishing and caught an eel? I threw it back in the water. Too bad we can't do that with babies. They deserve to have a mama who wants them."

"A lot of babies come where nobody wants 'em. Sometimes a woman gives birth and gives the child away or puts it up for adoption. When married people can't have children of their own, they're glad to get somebody's child."

"I don't want a baby! I want to go to college."

"All right. The woman I know charges twenty-five dollars. Her job is to get rid of babies when mental patients get raped. Is Vincent going to give you the money?"

"I already have the money."

"I'll call and see when she wants you to come. But I still say it's wrong."

"I know Mama. Thank you for helping me. Call the lady. I've got to do this. I really have to do it."

Mama went into the living room and called the nameless woman to arrange an appointment.

"She says she can do it tonight cause she's busy the other nights. You sure you wanna do this?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

Mama called an independent jitney driver to carry us to the woman's house.

"You'll have to pay the jitney two dollars," she said.

"Don't worry. I have the money."

I tried to read Jane Eyre until it was time to leave for my midnight appointment, but tears kept clouding my eyes. I sat on the sofa wondering why I was crying.

Then I realized that anger made me sad. Here I was in agony while Vincent was going about his business like he was not responsible for getting me pregnant. Why did I have to go through all this mess alone? I hadn't asked for sex. Vincent pinned me down on that backseat and I couldn't get up. Why did I have to get pregnant? Some girls have sex all the time and never get caught. Pregnant girls always have to stand in front of the church congregation and confess they sinned and ask forgiveness. Everybody knows the girl's boyfriend sinned too, but they don't humiliate him like that. Why are church folks so cruel when a girl gets pregnant out of wedlock?"

Lots of questions were still coming to mind when the jitney showed up around 11:40 p.m. Mama got in the front seat of the old Mercury and chatted with the driver while I sat in the backseat wondering what my fate would be. It was close to midnight when we arrived downtown at the nameless woman's house.

"Wait for us," Mama told the man as we got out of the car.

Feeling relieved that we both would return in a little while, I followed her along a walkway to a side door of the big brick house. The way Mama rang the doorbell three times was an indication that she had been there before.

A stout black woman with a rag tied round her head like Aunt Jemima answered right away.

"Hey, how you been," Mama whispered when the woman opened the inside door.

In the dim light I saw the woman put her index finger over her lips and heard a popping sound as she opened three latches on the screen door.

Mama didn't say another word.

Dang! She made triple sure nobody would break into her house, I thought. I followed Mama into the big, ice-cold house that smelled like a lemon grove, and then into a wide hallway that had a dim ceiling light.

"Go wait in the living room," she told Mama. Her husky voice sounded like a man's. She pointed to a room furnished with a yellow French provincial sofa and two matching chairs, all covered with clear, hard plastic. On a coffee table lay a stack of magazines and a large family Bible opened in the middle, as usual. We watched Mama go in and pick up a magazine before she sat on the sofa.

This woman likes yellow, huh? No wonder she's a sourpuss.

"Now follow me," she said.

Thank God Mama was there. I would have been terrified had I been alone.

The woman swept across the hardwood floor like she was wearing roller skates. I followed in hot pursuit, fearful of making a wrong move. At last we stepped into a little room that contained a metal folding chair, a small metal table cluttered with lots of medical tools and supplies, and a bed like the one in Dr. Levell's examination room.

"Take off your panties and put them on the chair," she said. "Then sit down on the edge of the bed. I'll be right back. This won't take but a few minutes."

She went into the bathroom, ran some water, and returned carrying a pail of water and wearing a doctor's white coat with no name sewn on it.

Though I longed to know what she was going to do to me, I dared not open my mouth as she put the pail on the table. All of a sudden she stood in front of me waving her index finger back and forth close to my face like she was trying to hypnotize me.

"You will remember nothing about anything that happens here tonight," she said. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes ma'am."

Pains in my chest made me think I was having a heart attack. If I had changed my mind about the abortion, I would have been too scared to tell her.

"Some time after you leave here you will start bleeding. If you have to go to the hospital, tell the doctors you just started bleeding and you don't know why. Repeat after me: I just starting bleeding and I don't know why."

"I just started bleeding and I don't know why," I said.

"Good! Don't tell them anything about coming here. Do you understand me?"

Terrified by her big eyes and her deep voice, I was speechless. My head bobbed like a yo-yo. How did my mama get to know this woman?

"Answer me," she thundered.

"I understand," I said, trembling.

"Lie down, put your legs up here, and look up at the ceiling," she said.

I obeyed.

"Open your legs wide. Now expect to feel a pinch."

The big woman leaned over the foot of the bed and disappeared beneath a sheet she draped over me from the waist down. She first pressed down on my stomach. Then I felt something like a wire coat hanger being poked into my vagina. Then she scraped inside me with something that felt like a wire pot scraper. After a few minutes, she stopped and headed toward the bathroom with the pail.

“Get up and put your panties back on,” she said.

I jumped off the bed, put on my panties, ran and stood by the door. Common sense told me not to leave without her.

“What must you say?” she said coming out of the bathroom towards me.

“I just started bleeding and I don’t know why,” I said.

“Good!”

I followed her back to the living room where I vaguely recall Mama thanking her and handing her the cash. She opened the side entrance and I beat Mama to the jitney’s car. Never again would I want to return to that house.

Ten minutes past midnight, we were on our way back home. I wondered if the quick procedure had worked. I didn’t see or feel any signs of change. Staring at the few visible stars in the dark sky, I thought about how some people, like the nameless woman, have secret lives that they only reveal to a select few. The woman used skills she had learned from her occupation to supplement her income with a side business. She had everything under control behind those three locks on the door. Her lights burned late into the night to extend a helping hand to the poor and needy. I was one of them. Did her job of terminating pregnancies make her a murderer? Was I a murderer?

Abortion Blues

DURING THE NIGHT – AROUND two o'clock in the morning while everyone was asleep – sharp pangs attacked my lower abdomen. It felt like a scalpel was forcing its way into my heart as it sliced through internal organs that tried to block its path. Struggling to hold back a bloody discharge, I staggered toward the bathroom. The moment I plopped down on the toilet, I had what felt like a super-cleansing bowel movement. Ah, what a relief! I looked between my legs into the toilet bowl and saw a beautiful sight.

Blood at last!

When I stood up blood came running down my legs. Inside the toilet was a bloody mess. I shook violently with chills. It felt like a hurricane had suddenly passed through the bathroom.

Oh, My Gosh! I wanted to scream, but I clamped my mouth shut with both hands. Nobody needed to see what I was seeing. There on top of the waste inside the commode lay a teeny, sleeping baby. With only two missed periods, I had expected to see a clump of blood, not a baby's head, buttocks, and legs. It had the form of a human being. I slammed the lid down on the commode.

"I didn't know! I'm soooo sorry. I didn't know!" I muttered. "God please forgive me. You know I'm not ready to be a mother. This wasn't on my list of things to do or know before going to college." I lifted the lid and took one last look to be sure that what I'd seen was real. It was. Then I closed the lid again and flushed.

"Please don't let it stop up the commode," I pleaded. To be sure everything had disappeared, I raised the lid to check. Only water was in the toilet bowl. "Whew!"

That scary woman knew what she was doing. She really did. I laughed to keep from crying. Scraping was the only thing I had not tried to do. Then a thought hit me like a hammer blow to my head. If the woman is a murderer, then I must be one too.

Fighting back tears, I put on a fresh Kotex sanitary napkin and tiptoed back to my rollaway bed. The heavy bleeding soon required more than one napkin, so I put on two, then a third one. My stomach pains kept getting worse.

"Help me, Jesus! I don't want to die."

I waited for almost twenty minutes to see if the bleeding would stop. It didn't. Afraid I might bleed to death like my oldest sister Zenobia had done after a miscarriage, I staggered to Mama's bedroom and shook her shoulder.

"I think I'm dying. I need to go to the hospital. The woman said this might happen."

Mama jumped out of bed and ran into the living room. She called the jitney that had taken us earlier that night.

"He's on his way. Take a sheet to sit on."

The jitney's headlights showed up so quickly till it seemed he had been waiting in front of our house. Mama threw a housedress over my gown and helped me walk out to the car. I dragged myself into the backseat. Mama tossed a brown paper bag containing a change of clothes on the seat beside me, closed the car door, and went back inside the house. This time I was going all alone.

Slumped over in the backseat in excruciating pain, I rested both hands on my aching stomach. Afraid of dying, I kept on crying, "Help me Jesus! Help me Jesus!" I must have passed out in the car because the next thing I knew the driver was helping me walk into the emergency room of the Columbia Hospital. As soon as I sat down he mumbled something about his car, shoved the paper bag into my lap, and left.

A Reality Check

THE LAST THING I remembered was arriving in the emergency room. How did I end up in a hospital ward with mothers? Something had happened that I didn't know about because I no longer felt the heavy bleeding or gut-wrenching pains.

"Turn on your back, Hun," a nurse gently said.

I rolled from my side where I had been facing the wall, onto my back.

"Ohhhh," I moaned as a sharp pain traveled through my pelvic area.

"I know it hurts," she said. "But you'll survive."

She lifted my hospital gown and tugged on my sanitary napkin and then covered me up again.

I turned my face toward the wall as tears trickled down. This was not a bad dream. The pain let me know that whatever I endured was real.

As soon as she left me, someone called my name.

"Davida Kincaid!" a man's authoritative voice shouted like a police officer coming to arrest me. As he approached my bed, his shoes scraped the tiled floor like they were either too big for him or he was too tired to lift his feet.

I turned my head and looked up at the man with the annoying gruff voice. He was an old white man with gray hair on the sides and bald in the top. He wore an unbuttoned white coat that hindered me from reading his name.

"Who gave you the abortion?" he barked as he towered over me with a much younger doctor at his heels.

"I just started bleeding but I don't know why." I said exactly what the scary woman had told me to say.

"You had an abortion!" he said. "Admit it!"

"My stomach hurts," I said. He didn't know that I feared the woman more than I feared him.

"All of you come in here telling the same old lie," he said. "You know you had an abortion."

He made me feel better by telling me I wasn't the only one who had been to that scary woman or someone else. But I wished he hadn't told everybody in the room my business. Patients should have a right to some privacy.

"Let me see what's going on with you now." He pulled back the sheet and pressed my stomach. He checked my sanitary napkin, too.

"We performed a D&C when she came in here hemorrhaging last night," he told the younger doctor as he examined me.

I knew that D&C stood for dilation and curettage, a procedure to remove tissue from inside my uterus to stop the hemorrhaging.

"That's a common procedure after a miscarriage or abortion," he said, looking down at me. "Did you know you could have bled to death?"

The younger doctor nodded in agreement while I just stared at them, listening. I pretended not to know what he was talking about.

I couldn't fool him. He knew he the truth.

"We'll watch you for the next day or so and then you can go home if there are no complications," the older doctor said.

"Thank you," I said as he pulled the sheet back over me.

I sighed with relief as he clumped away to visit the woman in the bed next to mine. I prayed that the secret Vincent and I shared would be safe.

For two days I heard crying babies and saw new mothers come and go. Most of the time I lay in bed with a white sheet over my head, hoping nobody I knew would see me in the maternity ward. With all the responsibility a baby brings, I wondered why any young girl would want to become a mother and give up her freedom forever.

When discharged on the second day, I ran out of that hospital delighted that my secret was safe.

A week later Vincent and I were seated in my front yard beneath the pine trees again. I began telling him about my experience and he listened until I said Dr. Levell poked his finger inside me.

“That dirty old man had a lot of nerve!” he said.

I stopped talking. Oh, My Gosh! I thought. He had no idea what I’d experienced. If he couldn’t handle the beginning, why waste my breath telling him the scary part of my story? That Sunday evening, however, I felt closer to him because we now shared a precious secret. Preserving that secret came with a price tag. I dared not break up with him because I would be ashamed if he told others what had happened between us. Boys liked to brag about how many girls they had pumped up.

We continued to date, but Vincent always used condoms because I insisted. But I still worried about the condom breaking or him faking the use of it. Getting married might have been easier after all. At least sex would be legal, and I wouldn’t be fearful of getting pregnant again or keeping Vincent as my boyfriend to preserve our secret.

"Wearing condoms while making love is like taking a shower wearing a raincoat," he complained.

"You have no idea what I went through because of you. I will not let that happen to me again. It's my body. I'm the one who almost died, not you. Do you think that's fair? Trust me when I say that taking two aspirin and a nap did not solve the problem you created. The least you could do is repay me the twenty-seven dollars I spent while enduring pain and suffering."

"I'm sorry," he said, stroking my cheek. "I didn't know about the money. But I promise to give it to you. Why didn't you call me? I would have come. We are made for each other."

He was a sweet boy, but he still had a lot of growing up to do.

I smiled at him, wondering, why does God allow boys to make babies when they're not even trying?

I stood beneath the pines and waved goodbye as Vincent drove away. Then I stared at the blue sky and thought about my knotty decision to abort versus give birth. I had terminated my baby's life, and then called on Jesus to save my life. Selfish, huh? Some girls get by with doing wrong. But I didn't. With sex, it's only a matter of time before truth surfaces. That night when millions of tiny sperm raced inside me to be the first one to reach my egg, it was like Vincent had thrown dice. But God decided the outcome. One night changed my life forever. But who knows? Perhaps I was born so I could have an abortion and tell my story to save the life of some other unborn child.

Depression tried to creep into me when I realized that everyone, out of billions of people on earth, owes thanks to a girl or woman who was brave enough to give birth. I thought

about my mama who had given birth to eighteen babies, with no twins, and I saluted her.

“Thank you, Mama,” I whispered. “I wasn’t as brave as you this time but I will be next time I get pregnant. Then I’ll be older and married.

Grateful for Another Chance

THE GREYHOUND BUS WAS leaving the terminal in Columbia early Saturday morning, August 28, 1966, when I noticed that I was wearing the bargain white gold engagement ring Vincent had placed on my finger to “scare the Waller College boys away.”

I’ll wear it when I come home for Christmas break, I thought, after slipping it off and tucking it inside the zippered compartment of my pocketbook.

I leaned back in my seat and tried to picture campus life, my roommate named Unique Flowers, showering in a dormitory with forty girls... Outside I saw signs for South of the Border along I-95 and the Welcome to North Carolina marker as we headed north to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Following twelve hours of an uneventful bus ride, a taxi transported my trunk and me from the bus terminal in the hills of Greene County to Mesquite Hall at Waller College. The driver carried my trunk into a huge lobby with a wide wooden staircase leading to the second floor. A blonde girl wearing an orange vest with Waller College stamped across the front of it greeted me. She had been slumped on a leather sofa in front of a floor model television set.

“Welcome! I’m Laura, the resident advisor or RA. And what do they call you?” She sounded like a true New Yorker. Pronunciation of the word “call” gave her away. She stared at name cards on the counter with a room number and keys taped to them.

"Davida Kincaid is my name." I wondered if she detected southerner in my voice. I pointed to a teepee-shaped card and said, "Room 219 has my name on it."

"Yeah," she said picking up the card and keys. That was my room last year. It's top of the stairs, second floor, go left, end of the hall on the right across from the showers. Rachel will help you carry your trunk upstairs."

"Rachel?"

A brunette with short hair popped up off the leather sofa as if she'd waited to hear her name. She had also been perched in front of the television set.

"At your service," she said. "I'm Rachel. And you are?"

"Davida." I smiled. She looked like a tomboy.

"Let's do this!" she said.

Rachel grinned at me, bent down and grabbed the handle on one end of my trunk. I grabbed the other and followed her up the stairs – all fourteen of them. It was hard to keep up with her. I got the feeling that she really didn't need my help.

Rachel unlocked my room door and flicked on the wall switch.

"Wall or window?" she said.

"What do you mean?" I stood gazing at the two wooden twin beds, two desks, two lamps, two chairs, two three-tier chests, and one closet.

"You're the first to arrive," she said. "Most of the parents will bring their girls tomorrow. Being first to arrive allows you to choose which view you want – none or window?"

"Window."

We marched over to my bed and slid the trunk underneath.

"Wow! A perfect fit. Everybody needs to read and follow instructions in that college letter," I said.

"Yeah," she said, heading for the door. "There's no shortage of rules around here. Good night."

Tired from the long ride, I put linens on the bed next to the window facing the administration hall. I prepared to take a shower so I could rest well. It felt weird walking across the hall to bathe, but not nearly as strange as it felt showering in a room with eight white shower curtains behind a door that I could not lock.

I lathered my body with Lifebuoy and danced behind the curtains. I was free to inhale soothing hot steam for as long as I desired without interruption.

"Progress! This is what I call progress. How many ways can I say the word progress?" The more I uttered the word, the more grateful I felt.

No more speculating about college. I'm in my new home and I love it!

Around eleven o'clock that night, I knelt beside my bed and prayed, "Thank you Jesus for allowing me to arrive here safely. Thank you in advance for a fantastic semester and a great relationship with my roommate Unique and everyone else on campus. Amen."

On Sunday morning I woke up to the sound of doors slamming, loud male and female voices in the hallway and car engines starting and stopping outside. I raised the window shade and saw cars rolling in and out of parking spaces. The parade of moms and dads and little sisters and brothers carrying trunks, pillows, Teddy Bears and Raggedy Ann dolls had begun. Like a lookout that spotted land, I was delighted to see a bustling

campus with buildings nestled in the woods. Unlike my house in the country, the grounds had paved sidewalks everywhere that were littered with people my age.

So this is Waller College! I like it here already.

I slipped on a pair of blue jeans and a shirt as noises from the hall became louder and louder. People swarmed the dorm floor. Being on the end of the hall didn't allow me to see anyone so I went and pulled open the door at the same time someone stuck a key in the lock.

"Unique!" I said, staring at the key in her hand.

"Davida?" she said.

"Yes. Come on in. I got here last night." I stepped aside and pulled the door open all the way.

The tall girl about six feet tall and as slim as Popeye's Olive with two long braids strutted in. She had a light complexion and perfect teeth. Her smile was infectious. I liked her right away.

A tall, black girl with long hair! She is unique! What a perfect name.

Behind her came a tall man carrying her trunk, a tall, slender woman carrying a large fishnet bag with several shoeboxes in it, and a long-legged, skinny little girl around ten-years-old carrying a Teddy Bear about her size.

"Hey Davida! Hi Davida! Hello Davida," each said as they entered our room.

"Hello! Hello! Hello!" I replied each time and shook hands. They were such nice people.

Wow! I didn't know going away to college was such a big family affair! Unique is so fortunate. I'm glad I arrived first. That way she won't know that I came alone.

Disappointment crept over me. Why didn't I have that type of family? With watery eyes I sat at my desk arranging school supplies as Unique's family members helped her stack shoeboxes in the closet, hang clothes and decorate her side of the room. The constant chatter about her desires and their willingness to please her was unreal. Or perhaps, I should say, was unique to me.

Feeling devalued, I got up, mumbling, "I'll get out of your way." Then I rushed out of the room before anyone could see my tears. On my way downstairs I passed by open dorm rooms and saw people milling about. I saw one black couple carrying pillows and boxes into a room on the opposite end of the hall. All other parents were white.

I must be the only student who came here alone.

Downstairs I plopped down on the den couch in front of the floor model television set. I realized that I was in the same hiding spot where I first saw Laura and Rachel. My self-pity tears rolled freely. What a great place to let it all come out.

I pictured Vincent's parents visiting his all-black Allen University in Columbia even though he wasn't staying on campus. I loved the way his family did things together. Would we have time to write to each other every day like we promised? Would I tell him about the fun things done on campus and hurt his feelings, or tell him I'm sad because we're miles apart? Dang! I had a lot of unanswered questions.

I Love Lucy was on the black and white television set but I wasn't watching it. Laughter from the audience provided an alibi for my tears. The painful truth was that I'd looked forward to coming to Waller College and now upon arrival I didn't feel like I belonged. Arriving early and alone made me

unique, being engaged and not free to date other guys made me unique, and crying while others were rejoicing at move in made me unique.

Maybe my name should be Unique Kincaid.

An Unexpected Twist

AFTER THE PARENTS HAD left, Mrs. Bonner, our dorm mother, called a meeting with all of the students. Four black and thirty-six white girls assembled in the den of Mesquite Hall where I was already seated on the leather couch.

Mrs. Bonner, a short widow in her fifties who had no children of her own, read the house rules. She spoke a bit above a whisper so we had to be very quiet.

"I need each one of you to sign beside your name to indicate that you were present when we reviewed the rules," she said. There was total silence. Nobody wanted to get kicked out for disobedience. Mrs. Bonner had a reputation for being good at her job – firm, fair, and friendly. Her forty girls respected her from the first day on campus.

I'd been the first person in the den but by the time the circulated clipboard reached me for signature, I was one of the last to sign. Mrs. Bonner would have no trouble out of her forty girls.

How delighted I was to live in a place that had indoor plumbing and showers with hot water, a cafeteria that served wholesome meals including whole steaks that I did not have to share with anyone, and a job where I could earn spending money without leaving the campus. There was no social life for me, just work and study, since I aimed to be faithful to my fiancé and make good grades to be able to keep my scholarship. I also sent a few dollars home every payday to help my poor mama.

Unique was more sociable than I so she made friends with several other girls who had more free time, especially Patricia. We seldom were in our room at the same time because of our different schedules, interests and backgrounds. She was seeking a boyfriend and I already had one. I suppose we were made roommates only because we were both black.



Although my name wasn't Unique, I felt unique knowing Vincent wanted to marry me while the six black guys on campus didn't even want to know my name. I made up my mind to write him every day so he wouldn't be disappointed at mail call.

Vincent sent me this shocker before he had completed one semester at Allen University:

My dear Sweetheart,

My hand is trembling as I write this letter. The thing I was afraid of has come true. I received a draft notice. That means I have to report for duty in the Army.

No more college for me. But I heard that I might get out of going to war in Vietnam if we get married. They ship single men out quicker than married men.

You know I love you. I want you to be my wife and have my child. If we are married and I do get sent to Vietnam, I know that you will not forget about me. And if we have a child and I don't make it back alive, then there will be a little Vincent Jr. or Veda to remind you and other people that I once lived. Please don't turn me down again. I am desperate. Tell me you will marry me.

Much love,

Vincent, your future husband

P. S. I can't wait to get married.

"We can get married when I come home for Christmas break," I wrote. "We can marry secretly and I'll return to school. Then nobody but the Army would know our little secret and I can keep my scholarship."

I couldn't think of any other way to encourage him from miles away. Although educational deferment was not guaranteed, he had failed to supply proof of college enrollment. He ranked 1-A, available for military service.

It didn't seem realistic to send a young man who had never left his parents' home in South Carolina overseas to Vietnam. He had never been on a Greyhound, train, ship or airplane. Why would the Army send inexperienced men into battle in a foreign country? Vincent's next letter had an Arkansas postmark.

"I've been inducted into the United States Army. That means I was sworn in. I have to complete basic training down here along with a whole busload of men from South Carolina about my age. We are all fresh out of high school and college. Please pray for us to pass boot camp. It's rough." P.S. I can't wait to get married.

"Wow! The Army wasted no time in sending you away from home!" I replied.

Campus Life

EVERYTHING ABOUT COLLEGE WAS new and exciting. I didn't dare tell my roommate, Unique, that I was engaged. She had gone to school with white girls all her life. She had an accent like them and ran around with them, too. Did she think she was one of them? Her untidiness was unique for a girl that had to take care of personal hygiene each month. Didn't her mother teach her to wash out her blood stained panties right away in cold water? Yuk! One good thing that was unique about her was her little sister Carol who sent both of us a weekly handwritten dose of encouragement.

I felt like I was a runt living in a pigsty among a bunch of girls my same age that came from another world. I never knew what I'd encounter from day to day and I certainly wasn't equipped with proper responses. Naked girls slinging wet hair ran through the halls yelling about having forgotten the shampoo or the blow dryer. Some didn't bother to fold their bloody sanitary napkins or put them in the trashcan. Others left wet clothes on the shower floor or dirty underwear in front of the commode. Didn't they recognize their own belongings?

Mrs. Bonner, my white dorm mother, was a stickler for obeying house rules. She relied on the RA to run each floor but she closely monitored our going out and coming in.

One night the Fantastiks concert ended at 10:55 p.m. and the dorm curfew was 11:00 p.m. We all got ten demerits for violating the 11:00 p.m. curfew. I was only five minutes late

but everyone who entered after curfew was late, regardless of how late.

"Why give us ten demerits when it wasn't our fault?" Unique said.

"Because you had a choice to stay or leave," she said.

After that night, I bolted for Mesquite Hall like a streak of lightning from wherever I was. A second tardy meant twenty demerits and the loss of evening activities for a whole month. Nobody wanted to be confined to dorm and class only. Nobody!



In history class we discussed the military draft and I understood Vincent's plight much better. A girl from Israel, whose family had migrated to New York, made me aware of cultural differences. In Israel, "conscription" or drafting for women begins at age 17. She would have been drafted into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) but her parents migrated to the United States and she was safe. She passed around a picture of her best friend dressed in uniform, holding a rifle that was as long as her height. My eyes were opened to the fact that women, too, could be drafted.

I told Vincent about drafting in Israel and let him know that it must be awful for him to have been drafted. Too bad he couldn't afford to run away to Canada like some others did.

The campus garbage men, cooks, janitors and maids were white people. With only one black family in Waller, poor whites got the jobs. By interacting with them I learned that regardless of economic status there are both good-hearted and mean-spirited people in all races. Exposure is what everybody needs

because books fail to tell the whole truth. Why is it so hard for some people to believe that God made all human beings from one basic design for all cultures?

In English class Sue, a hateful white girl from New Brunswick, New Jersey, was brazen enough to criticize my voice. She got on my nerves. Every time I spoke in class she made a weird noise as if my voice made her skin crawl.

"I hate southern women!" she smirked. "They always sound like they're trying to seduce all the men when they talk. Why don't you go back to the south?"

I ignored Sue the first time she insulted me.

Lord, tell her that you made me look and talk differently. I didn't make myself or have anything to do with my voice or where I grew up.

"I hate southerners!" she said again in a class discussion of the Civil War.

"There's room enough for billions of people on this planet, including you. So, maybe God sent me here so you can see that northern whites are not superior to us."

"You're nuts!" she said, jerking her neck like it was a Jack-in-the-Box.

I had a mean thought: Maybe if her neck snapped and her head fell off and hit the floor the shock would knock some sense into her.

I felt sorry for saying something to Sue. Everybody knows you can't talk sense to a fool.

Lord, please forgive me.

After class I ran to the dorm feeling like I wanted to punch something or somebody. Sue didn't care how her mouth offended people. I didn't want to stoop to her level and insult

her back so I pacified myself with a private saying, "No fool is going to make me lose my cool."

I burst through the door and saw our chubby maid, gray-haired Miss Dempsey. She was swirling a feather duster over the oak tables and leather couch in the den. Unlike Sue, an arrogant northerner, Miss Dempsey was a nice one and we all liked her. She was humming "Summertime" when I showed up.

"Do you like your job," I said.

"Oh, I love my job," she said. She stopped working and stared at me. "Child, I'd have to look for work in Pittsburgh if I couldn't work here. Some people drive that thirty-six miles to and from work every day in all the snow we get around here. Not me! I just walk to work."

"Ha! Ha! I wonder who's smarter. You or them?"

"Me! That's who. Every evening I get to enjoy my house while they're still driving home."

She made me think that I should be grateful for the things I could enjoy. But I couldn't because I kept thinking that those who have don't enjoy what they have and those who don't have don't have a chance to get what others have.

On the way upstairs to my room I thought about the first time a cafeteria server put a whole T-bone steak on my plate. I couldn't believe all that meat was for one person until I saw that everybody got one. Students were throwing steaks in the garbage, meat that my little sisters and brothers would have enjoyed tasting. Life can be so unfair.

Unique was next door playing Monopoly that night when I sat at my desk to write Vincent a letter. Rain scratched the windowpane like needles, as I penned my thoughts.

Living on campus is like being in a big stage play. There's plenty of action until we go to class. Going to class is like taking a restroom break during the intermission. This week is pledge week. The fraternities and sororities hazed the "frosh" yesterday. Underclassmen were banned us from walking on the sidewalks. Now I know that concerts and other activities take place on weeknights so we can support the Cougars at sporting events on the weekend. Waller has the number one wrestling team and number two football and basketball teams in this part of the country. People from neighboring cities attend our college ballgames and wrestling matches.

I've come to the conclusion that college is a good dumping ground where parents can drop off their children and see them turn into adults as they learn how to make decisions on their own. The requirement to earn a "C" or better in all classes is the only thing that reminds me that we're in school. Rather than worry about making good grades so I can stay here, I concentrate on my studies for the sake of learning. That's new for me.

I dared not tell Vincent that I was enjoying myself. He wanted to hear that I was pining for him. I couldn't tell that lie because I was having the best time in my life.

Can you believe the cafeteria serves cold sandwiches for Sunday dinner? That's the best meal of the week down south. That's the night the air in our dorm is filled with the aroma of pizza. I hated that smell until Unique dared me to taste a slither of hot pepperoni. She bet me fifty-cents that I would like it. She was right. One tiny bite was all I needed to become a pizza lover, too. Now that I know how to play 500 Rummy and Monopoly and munch on pizza, I'm all set to get through midterms and finals week.

Stretching my arms, I leaned back in my chair and thought about my conversation with Miss Dempsey. Her life is simple. She's free to be herself. I guess when people become an adult at twenty-one they don't feel as pressured to do what everybody else does. I disliked pizza but had never tasted one freshly made. What I ate here tasted nothing like the boxed frozen pizzas I used to eat at home. Was I like Sue who hated southerners without attempting to get to know them? At my first wrestling match I thought the clash on the mat between two half-naked guys was nonsense. But once I learned the rules, the sport made a lot more sense and I began to appreciate it.

Every experience was a part of my well-rounded college education. Vincent would only know what I told him about campus life and I'd only know what he told me about military life. I was certain he experienced things in basic training that he did not tell me and I didn't need or want to know them, either.

I stuffed my letter into an envelope and licked the flap. Then I put the letter aside and opened my accounting textbook. It was study time. Several weeks after settling on campus, I started wondering how my younger siblings were getting along without me. Did they miss me? Why didn't anyone write me? I masked my concerns by smiling. No wonder Vincent wanted to get a letter everyday. It hurts to feel that you've been forgotten. I made up my mind to keep in touch by sending Mama a few dollars every time I received pay from my work-study job. My family would hear from me even if I didn't hear from them. I grew to appreciate Vincent's letters and his

constant reminder that he still loved me even though we were miles apart.

My Financial Aid Challenge

I NEEDED TO MAINTAIN a 3.0 grade point average (GPA), to keep my academic scholarship. My personal goal, however, was to earn a 3.5 so I could make the dean's list.

While working at Sears my last two years in high school, I acquired a love for accounting and decided to pursue a degree in Business Administration. I was one of two females in my accounting class. Ridiculed, Ann from Delaware and I became study partners and made a pact to show the guys that we had every right to be Accounting majors.

Things were going well in all classes except for Economics. The professor from India, whose accent made it impossible for me to comprehend, posed a major threat to achieving my goal.

Oh my gosh! The first day I sat in Mr. Rahada's classroom I tried in vain to take notes in musty air. I looked around the room and noticed other students diligently taking notes. Convinced that the poor communication and musty armpit odors were my concerns alone, I feigned note-taking but I didn't understand anything he said.

This must be "culture shock," I thought while doodling. Does my southern dialect cause me to learn differently than northerners? I pondered words like call, wash, y'all versus you all...The language barrier and the professor's body odor were unbearable. Being the only black student in the class, I didn't dare tell anyone my struggle because I didn't want to be seen as being prejudiced.

My inability to comprehend Economics worsened until I became completely lost in class. A "D" on my mid-semester report card, the first low grade I'd ever made in my life created a fear of failure. I read every assignment but still didn't understand the material. The closer I got to final exam time, the harder I prayed.

"How can I improve my grade in Economics so I can earn at least a "C" so I won't lose my scholarship?" I pleaded with God, but he didn't answer me.

As a last resort, I read my entire Economics textbook from cover to cover. On the night before the final exam, I studied all night long, memorizing what I considered to be important facts in each chapter. At eight o'clock I took the final exam after pulling my first all-nighter.

For two hours I sat in that exam and emptied everything I could remember into the essay questions on my blue book final examination. I finished the exam and left feeling drained but glad that my last and hardest exam was over.

Usually I was one of the last to leave an exam, but this time I checked and double-checked answers and left ahead of the rest of the class. I figured they had more to write than I did. Oh well! Whatever the outcome, I knew I had done my best.

I boarded a Greyhound to head back to South Carolina. The long ride home gave me lots of time to cast out negative thoughts about not being able to return to Waller after Christmas break. Why wouldn't a college ensure that the instructor could speak English clearly? How could Mr. Rahada get a job smelling like that? As the bus rolled southward on I-95, sleep overtook me. When I woke up, my new concern was how to

avoid marrying Vincent. If I flunked out of college I would have no excuse not to get married.

Decisions! Decisions! Decisions!

At home I checked the mailbox each day waiting for an envelope from Waller College. The dreaded envelope, addressed to: *The Parents of Davida Kincaid*, arrived a few days before Christmas. Knowing it contained my semester grades I took courage and ripped it open. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before opening my eyes and reading the printed card. Six A's appeared in the grade column so I looked at the subjects to see if Economics was listed.

"I got an 'A' in Economics!"

I read the comments: *Final exam grade 99/100 – the highest grade in the class*. I read the same line over and over just to be sure my eyes had not deceived me.

"I've got all A's!" I shouted. "Hey, everybody, I earned all A's!" I waved my grade printout in the air like it was a flag and jumped up and down.

"Thank you Jesus! Thank you Jesus! You did hear my prayer! Thank you Jesus! Thank you Jesus!"

My eight sisters and two brothers ran to our mailbox beside the road and gathered around me. They were excited too.

"Why are you so happy?" they said.

Unlike Mr. Rahada, I tried to explain so they could understand.

"Listen. I didn't understand anything my Economics professor said because of his accent. So I read all the chapters in the textbook and taught myself. Then I took a big test and felt dumb because I finished ahead of all my classmates. My report card shows that I made the highest grade in the class. I

thought I was the only one who didn't understand. Boy, was I wrong! From now on, whenever fear of failing pokes a finger at me like this (I pointed my index finger toward my face) I'm going to chop it off! (I pretended my report card was a hatchet and chopped my finger.) And you should do the same thing."

They used their fingers and imitated me, laughing.

"Good! You must believe in and not doubt yourself."

While teaching them I was thanking Jesus that I would return to Waller College and wondering how I could conceal my secret marriage to Vincent.

Preparation for Marriage

ON CHRISTMAS EVE VINCENT arrived home, eager to get married. He drove us to the courthouse that morning to apply for a marriage license. We climbed the steps holding hands while laughing and talking. At the top of the steps we saw a sign posted on the door: "Closed for the holidays December 24 – January 1."

"Oh no!" Vincent groaned. "I have to report back December 31."

"Oh, that's too bad." I think I spoke too quickly.

"Davida, you're glad, aren't you?"

"Noooo. It's just that I don't see why we should rush to marry. You just finished basic training and I just finished my first semester in college. A summer marriage would be better. Then we will have more time to prepare."

Vincent turned to leave but then stopped abruptly.

"Wait!" He reached in his uniform coat pocket and pulled out a tiny jewelry box and opened it. A diamond ring with a gold band flashed before me.

"For you, Sweetheart." He reached for my left hand.

With a gaping mouth, I watched as he slipped the ring on my finger and then lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it.

"Wow! It's so beautiful! You even had it sized."

I held up my hand to admire the stone. This time I didn't need a magnifying glass to see it. I threw my arms around him. Standing on the steps of the closed courthouse, I felt

my love and respect for him grow a notch. His thoughtfulness convinced me of his love for me.

So this is what Mama meant when she told her girls, "You want a man who loves you. You can learn to love him later."

"Vincent Henderson, I love you! We'll get married during the summer. I promise."

"That's our only choice now. Let's go, Mrs. Henderson."

I giggled as we descended the steps with our arms around each other's waist, pretending like we had just tied the knot. A few drivers honked at us. We laughed all the way back to the Chevy.

Our second stop was a planned trip to Motel 6. Vincent went in and registered us as Mr. and Mrs. Henderson. We laughed when he showed me the receipt. He drove around and parked in front of room 57.

"This is a step up from the backseat of this '57 Chevy," he said.

"You'd better use a condom and it better not break. Do you hear me?"

"I know, I know. You like for me to take a shower wearing a raincoat."

"That's right. And that's the way it will be until we officially say, "I do."

"I can't wait!"

We spent a few hours playing husband and wife in room 57. I lost track of time. We showered together and watched a little television before Vincent took me home so he could return his father's car.

We spent the holidays with family. His mother welcomed me as her "smart little daughter-in-law in college." We at-

tended a house party at the home of Danny and Elaine, and spent Christmas day with his sister Regina, her husband Bob and their son Robbie. We went dancing at a couple of night-clubs and spent time at the range hitting golf balls.

Vincent bribed his father so he could use the family car. We went everywhere together, even back to Lake Herron to see the stars and moonlight on the water that I didn't get a chance to enjoy on prom night. Vincent's family car was our hangout, with the engine running and heater on, until it was time for him to return to his duty station in Alabama.

It felt great not having to open a book or go to class.

All I had to do was enjoy my time with the man who loved me, my future husband.

"Remember, we need a date for next summer," he said before kissing me goodbye.

"Don't worry. Take care of yourself. We've got plenty of time to set a date."

After Vincent's departure, I heard daily reports about the escalation of warfare in Vietnam. Confusion between the terms Vietnam War and Vietnam Conflict inspired me to read books pertaining to warfare. From my Literature reading list I selected *A Stillness at Appomattox* about the American Civil War and *A Tale of Two Cities* about the French Revolution. My reading convinced me that Vincent needed my daily letters AND daily prayers if I expected to marry him next summer.

Second Semester at Waller College

I RETURNED TO WALLER College feeling proud about making the Dean's List. This time I walked from the bus station carrying a duffel bag loaded with goodies from South Carolina and my new engagement ring tucked inside.

While ascending the stairs of Mesquite Hall, I saw Patricia, Unique's running buddy from Wisconsin, standing at the top. With a serious look, she beckoned me with her hand.

"Davida, there's something important you should know before you go to your room."

"What is it?" Her tone sounded urgent.

Does she want me to switch rooms with her? I thought. If so, then my answer is "no." Had she broken friendship with Unique? That would be interesting.

I followed Patricia into her private room on the opposite side of the staircase.

She pushed the door shut after I entered and, like a serpent strikes its unsuspecting prey, she lashed out at me with her tongue.

"Why didn't you ask Unique to study with you?"

"What are you talking about?" I said, dropping my duffel bag.

"It's your fault Unique is on academic probation!"

"My fault! I had nothing to do with her grades."

"Yes you did! If you hadn't spent so much time reading and writing love letters she wouldn't have been bored in her

room. That's why she came to my room or went other places and didn't do her work."

"Wow! I'm too tired to listen to this nonsense. Unique has her own desk and the freedom to use it whenever she chooses. Anyway, let her tell me if she has something against me."

I shook my head, picked up my duffel bag and walked out.

Stupid girl! More people need to study logic like I did so they'll know the difference between attacking a person and attacking an issue. That was an ad hominem fallacy.

Without mentioning Patricia's accusation against me, and feeling no guilt about my roommate's current situation, I entered my room and found her at her desk studying. Yea! What a rare sight.

"Welcome back!" I said. "Did you enjoy your vacation?"

"Umm... a little bit. I've got to study more this semester. I'm glad you're back."

She didn't mention being on probation and neither did I. We both knew that she preferred spending time with boys. So what could I say? Unique studied for a whole three days before Patricia tapped on our door three times. Unique went out with her buddy and soon was busy running around again.

After midterms she got her second warning.

At our monthly family meeting, Mrs. Bonner told us that both Patricia and Unique had been placed on academic probation. It was hard to believe that Patricia had tried to blame me when she knew very well that she was the bad influence on Unique. I didn't feel a bit guilty. Both were warned after midterms that dismissal was imminent.

Later on, both Patricia and Unique were dismissed.

I couldn't figure out why they didn't try to stay in school so they could continue having fun. There were only thirty blacks on the whole campus and we lost two. At orientation we were clearly told to "*Maintain at least a 2.0 GPA if you want to stay and play, or you will leave and grieve if bad grades you receive.*" That was very clear to me, especially because I needed a 3.0 GPA in order to keep my scholarship.

Unique's parents were angry when they came to pick her up. This time, an unhappy little sister complained about having to give up the bedroom she had inherited. They all came in a huff and verbally assaulted Unique as they moved her things out of our room.

"We can't tell family members that our honor student couldn't earn at least a "C" average in college," her mother said. "Everybody knows that students choose their own classes and instructors. It makes no sense to stay in a class and fail! Students drop a class when they think they won't do well in it."

"Not our daughter! She's Unique! " her father said. He looked at Unique and said, "I told you about temptations on campus. You know I met your mother here. We know about campus life. Are we supposed to go home waving a red flag announcing that our daughter flunked out of Waller College? You're going to get a job and repay student loans and your grandma for all that money she spent on the education you did not receive. You'll learn that it's hard to get a good job without a college degree."

While helping her clean out her desk, I thought about how much I hated to see Unique leave. She was really a nice person who got caught up in campus life and forgot that her freedom

from parental control came with a price tag as well as a sacrifice of time and effort.

"I hate to see you go," I said, hugging my sobbing roommate before she left.

"I hate to go. Keep on doing what you're doing. It's working for you."

When the door closed behind her, I cried aloud. That could have been me. I felt sorry for her parents because they had given her everything she needed to be successful: a monthly allowance, good looks, nice clothes, phone calls, care packages from home, campus visits, encouragement, hugs and kisses. I couldn't understand why she wouldn't focus on her studies so she could stay in college. Unique's parents made me realize that children make their parents proud when they go to college, especially when they choose to attend their parents' alma mater.

My mama didn't know anything about college. I wonder if she's proud of me?

I sat on the side of my bed and cried a long time. We all knew that college was designed to help children grow into responsible adults in a semi-sheltered environment. But it's up to each student to do what's necessary to make the grade.

Unique didn't appreciate all she had. Maybe they gave her too much stuff. In my case, Struggle could have been my middle name. I had nothing to look forward to but a ride home on Greyhound and Vincent's smiling face.

Vincent loves you, Davida. Forget about what you don't have and concentrate on what you do have. Unique was busy seeking the love that you have already found.

My second semester was a piece of cake. After final exams in mid-May, I was staring out the window of a Greyhound bus when I saw "South of the Border" and got the urge to sing.

"Nothing can be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning. Nothing can be greater than to be in your home state'r in the morning." I sang softly as the bus rolled across the South Carolina state line. The sky seemed bluer. The sunshine felt warmer. The scenery was more beautiful in my home state. It wouldn't be long before I would see my family again. Vincent wasn't home yet, but I knew he would show up.

I had a new attitude about South Carolina, life, family, love, relationships, Vincent, marriage, my future, everything. Seeing Unique and Patricia flunk out of college was an experience I never wanted to have. Things I used to complain about, like country living, didn't seem so important anymore. I made up my mind that during summer break I would get a job, marry Vincent, and enjoy spending time with my family. In the fall, I'd return to Waller College.

A Token Black

I WENT STRAIGHT TO the employment office early on Monday morning and left there an hour later to interview for a government job with a local board of the Selective Service, not knowing anything about what they did. I was hired on the spot as a summer intern – the only black employee in the office. My workday was from eight in the morning until five in the evening. The downtown office was only one block from the bus stop. The fixed pay scale was fair and much higher than I'd earned as a salesgirl in high school at Sears Roebuck and Company.

Hallelujah! Attending college has benefits.

My job required mailing out draft notices to new inductees in the armed forces. Young men came into the office when letters were received. During the first week on my busy job, I learned to recognize fear of draftees, to empathize with returning veterans, and to sympathize with grieving relatives. I admired the courage of draft-dodgers and soldiers who went AWOL (absent without leave). But most of all I appreciated the fact that Vincent was stationed in Alabama rather than Vietnam, and that his name was not on my mailing list.

While doing my job of recruiting for the Vietnam War – dubbed a conflict, I had a great idea and shared it with my supervisor.

“Why not send all gang members and hoodlums who liked to fight to Vietnam? In that way, the bad guys could kill each other and the good ones would be spared.”

"Oh, no!" She said. "The military needs people who will obey orders, not do what they want and get everybody killed. Men who will not follow orders and those who protest the war cannot be relied upon to defend America or its allies."

That same day a young man who claimed to be a conscientious objector came into the office. He was one happy fellow when I handed him a copy of his status.

"Hallelujah! I see no difference between being in the Army and being a member of a street gang," he said. Both fight over turf under a color. Bloods and Crips have their colors – red and blue. The government fights under colors – a red, white and blue flag. The Bible teaches us to love people, not hate or kill them. I agree with Muhammad Ali. The Vietnamese people never did anything to me. Let them fight their own war over there just like we fought our own Civil War over here. No other country meddled in our affairs."

"That's interesting!" I said. "I never thought of war that way. Sometimes we see, and yet we don't see until someone opens our eyes. Now I know why you're happy about being ranked 1- O. At least you're still available for work that will benefit this country."

"Oh, there's plenty I can do other than go fight strangers in a foreign land."

That conversation inspired me to study the classification system to gain more understanding. I learned that many young men were classified IV-F (not qualified for any military service). They often had a problem like asthma, flat feet, mental disorders, drug habits, or some undesirable characteristic that prevented effective military service. Others were homosexuals or men with a criminal record.

Uncle Sam wanted the best young men to send into battle. My cousin Homer, Mama's brother Clyde's son, was one of them. The Marines' appeal for "a few good men" attracted him. He was excited about being perceived as one of America's finest troops wherever he would be deployed.

The draft notices I mailed out basically said "Uncle Sam wants you" or "Uncle Sam rejects you." The dreaded notices from the President of the United States read:

"Greeting: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States, and to report at (address) on (date) at (time), for forwarding to an Armed Forces Induction Station.

The men said opening a draft letter was like opening a report card. Sometimes they got what they wanted and sometimes they didn't. Either way they had to accept the report.

Many young men like my Vincent enrolled in college to get a draft deferment and found out that poor grades were unacceptable. If Unique and Patricia had been males who flunked out of college, that could have proved to be a fatal mistake.

I heard the pleas of many young men who viewed the president's greeting as an invitation to die. Some ran off to Canada. Others expressed a desire to leave the United States but could not afford it.

Hmmm...Would people still consider Muhammad Ali the greatest if he had gone to Canada rather than jail for draft evasion?

"I am soooo sorry about your dishonorable discharge," I told one young man.

"No need to feel sorry for me," he said. "I don't care about getting kicked out. At least I came back alive."

He sounded like he deliberately did something wrong so he would be discharged. He didn't say what he did and I knew better than to ask.

Each story like each man was unique. I loved it when they came into the office because they kept the work from being boring and helped me to better appreciate my own experiences. Living in my house out in the country wasn't so bad when I heard about people sleeping in a foxhole.

One day I was listening to a young man's story when I remembered Vincent telling me how scared he was when he opened his letter and saw that he had to report to duty even though he was a college student. That man made me realize that many of them married and had a child to reduce the chances of being drafted or deployed to Vietnam.

Does Vincent really love me? Does he just want to use me to get the marriage deferment or to avoid being deployed?

I knew my negative thoughts came from listening to stories at the Local Board. Those men didn't have anything to do with Vincent and me because he loved me before Vietnam became an issue.

How does someone recognize genuine love when manipulation is so real? That's another thought that gnawed at my mind. Some people truly believed "all's fair in love and war," but I refused to doubt the sincerity of Vincent's love.

Sometimes I had the pleasure of issuing DD form 214, an honorable discharge that veterans looked forward to receiving when separating from active duty. The discharge papers entitled them to receive VA benefits. A few men who returned

home after completing their tour of duty in Vietnam came into the office to pick them up in person. One day a jubilant young guy with a crew cut ran through our little office sticking his papers in our faces.

“Woohoo! Uncle Sam, I’m through with you! Whoop ti do!” he hollered.

I tried to imagine how Vincent would act when he got his.

The VA benefits were incentives to serve in the military. Vincent didn’t volunteer for duty, but his service record would make him a model citizen and move us one step closer to acquiring our own home after we become Mr. and Mrs. Henderson.

Tragedy Strikes

ONE EVENING AFTER WORK I was explaining the requirement to register for the military draft to my brother Harry who would turn eighteen in a couple of months. Uncle Clyde, Mama's brother, called and I answered the phone on the table next to the leather sofa where I was sitting.

"Hey, where your mama at?" he said. He sounded like he had something stuck in his throat.

"She hasn't come home from work yet. Is something wrong?"

He cleared his throat.

"Yeah. Some people from the Marines just come by. They say Homer got killed fighting overseas."

"What? Oh, no!"

"Yeah. That's it. Tell your mama." He hung up.

I stared at Harry through eyes filled with tears. I thought about Homer, who had graduated from Madison High along with me last year. Next I thought about Vincent in the Army infantry, and then all the men who talked to me at the local board office.

"This is unbelievable!" I said.

"What's that, sis?"

"I hate to tell you this, but Homer got killed in action. They sent him to Vietnam when he left last Christmas and now he's never coming home again."

"That's real, huh? And I gotta sign up, too?"

"Sorry, Bro. If you don't they could put you in jail like they did Muhammad Ali."

Harry's eyes got twice as large. I had his undivided attention.

"Sis, most of the time I ain't scared, but this war talk is giving me the heebie-jeebies."

"Maybe the war will be over by the time they call your name. I sure hope so."

The conversation with Harry was still fresh on my mind when I walked into Friendship Baptist Church behind Homer's flag-draped coffin and sat with the family in a wooden pew. I was numb. An usher handed me an obituary with Homer's picture on the front cover. He looked full of life dressed in uniform, complete with his white hat.

"Good guys always wear white hats."

The highlight of the funeral service occurred when a woman stood and read the obituary:

Private First Class (PFC) Homer Phelps responded to The Marines' motto, "We're looking for a few good men." He served nine months in the United States Marine Corps. He completed basic training at Parris Island, South Carolina and spent a brief time at Camp LeJeune, North Carolina before coming home for Christmas last year. He waved farewell to his loving family before deployment to South Vietnam.

PFC Phelps wrote and told his mother that all of the troops in their camp had been killed the day he arrived. The new troops had to clean up the base before they could even get some rest following the long flight from America. Three days after his nineteenth birthday, his family received news that he

was traveling through a rice paddy when a bullet pierced his skull and he died instantly on June 3, 1967.

I sat sniffing and thinking: *Homer only lasted a few months in Vietnam. God, I pray Vincent doesn't have to go. Think about all the wasted effort to graduate from high school. For what? For this?*

The military funeral included a lot of pomp and circumstance around the flag-draped coffin that was never opened. The twenty-one gun salute, the playing of Taps, and the flag presentation to the family were impressive events. But I struggled with the feeling that Homer's body was not inside that coffin. Why have a coffin if you can't see who's inside? How would we know if they made a mistake in identifying the remains?

Homer's funeral gave me the heebie-jeebies about Vincent's safety. I became determined to help Vincent escape deployment if that would keep him alive.

Chaos Reigns

AT THE LOCAL BOARD, young draftees shared their fear of being killed in Vietnam. Grieving mothers came into the office crying over the loss of their sons.

“My son is gone!” a woman yelled as soon as she stormed into the office one morning. “I spent eighteen years training him to be a good husband and father. For what? You killed him! You killed my boy!” She fell on floor, sobbing.

I cried too. All I could think of was her son being sent off to die as though his life didn’t matter to anyone. The young men were called GI’s, Government Issue. That meant they were the property of the United States government just as much as the uniforms they wore, the bunks in which they slept, and the guns they carried. They didn’t belong to their parents anymore. No wonder the mothers were coming in hollering at us for sending out draft notices.

Every day young men brought in documents in hopes of getting a marriage deferment. I filed all the paperwork without fully understanding that the fate of these young men was determined by what doctors had written to give them an exemption and how local board workers felt about the information that had been received.

That summer I started wearing my engagement ring because three young men proposed marriage when I briefed them about the marriage deferment.

“Let’s go get married today,” the first guy said. “You can get to know me later.”

"I'll give you whatever you want," the second one said. "I'll thank you for the rest of my life."

"You would be a Messiah like Jesus Christ if you save my life," the third said.

Of course I laughed. Wives were in great demand.

The first Friday that Vincent arrived home on weekend furlough, I was ready to become Mrs. Henderson but the courthouse was closed in observance of the Fourth of July holiday. That was our second no license, no marriage attempt. It was up to him to arrive in time to make things happen. There was no guarantee but we hoped marriage would make a difference in his status.

After that first summer furlough, Vincent was transferred to an Army base in Georgia where he was required to earn enough leave time at the new base in order to come home. Frustrated, he wrote a letter and made a crazy suggestion:

"Go to the courthouse with Danny and request a marriage license. You and Danny can go before the justice of the peace and marry. Danny can pose as me and they won't know the difference."

"But I will know," I replied. "Besides, I want us to be married by a preacher."

In spite of three months of planning to meet, we were still unmarried at summer's end. I returned to Waller College knowing that I had tried to rescue Vincent from Vietnam.

A Wedding Lesson

TOWARD THE END OF my third semester at Waller College, my older sister Beverly who lived in New York sent me an invitation to her November wedding that would occur the week before final exams in December. I phoned her to apologize for being unable to attend.

"I can't get to New York and back to Waller in the same weekend," I said.

"Yes you can. You can fly standby on an Eastern Airlines Whisperjet from Pittsburgh Airport for just eighteen dollars with your student discount."

"You mean an ordinary person like me can fly on an airplane for less than the price of a bus ticket?"

"Silly! The airline doesn't care who you are. Just give them your money, take your ticket, and pray that the plane is not full. That's all you have to do."

Nervous and excited about taking my first flight and attending my first wedding, I called and booked my reservation for standby tickets. The new experiences promised to be helpful in my future travels and in my life as a newlywed.

My roommate Earnestine Clemmons from Cleveland, Ohio made last minute reservations to fly home for her grandma's funeral. Together we prayed for seats on our planes so we would arrive on time and return to Waller on Sunday. We paid Jacob, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed classmate who lived in Waller and had his own '65 Mustang, to take us to the Pittsburgh airport. We left campus around three o'clock on Friday

afternoon with me in the front passenger seat and tiny Earnestine in the backseat behind me.

"My mom asked me to stop by the house to help her with something," Jacob said. "This shouldn't take long."

"Do what you have to do," I said.

Jacob pulled into the driveway of a long brick house nestled in a wooded area and stopped.

"Wait here," he said. "If I take too long or if you get cold, then come on inside. I'll leave the front door unlocked for you just in case."

"Okay," Earnestine and I both said.

He ran into the house and left the front door cracked.

We waited in silence while checking out the house, the lawn and nearby woods. Sounds from a hooting owl and chirping crickets came from the woods. Sunlight faded and dusk set in. My feet got cold so I glanced at the front door.

"Are you cold?" I said, turning to look at Earnestine.

"I am. Didn't he tell us to come inside if we get cold?" she said.

"He did. Let's go. Maybe he forgot about us."

"Yeah. We need to go before we get sick out here."

I got out of the car and pushed the seat forward so Earnestine could get out. Rushing to get out of the bitter cold, I went on ahead and entered the house after gently pushing the door. Admiring the beautiful hardwood floors, I walked past a wall until I stepped into a huge room where a chubby boy with short blonde hair sat on a leather sectional sofa watching television.

The boy screamed when he looked up and saw me enter the room. He climbed up on the sectional sofa and pointed in my direction.

I froze.

"Bear! There's a black bear in here!"

"Bear! Where is it?" Earnestine cried from behind. She dashed into the room past me."

"Help!" the boy yelled with both hands gripping his cheeks. "There's two of them in here!"

Earnestine stopped running and looked back at me. Our eyes met.

I was too stunned to say a word when we realized that the terrified boy was afraid of us. What were we supposed to say to a boy who didn't know that people come in different colors?

Jacob rushed into the room followed by a blonde woman with a long, swishing ponytail. He saw the boy standing on the sofa screaming his head off.

"See! There they are!" he said, pointing at us.

"Terry! Terry! Calm down! These people are with me," Jacob said.

The mother ran to the sofa with arms outstretched to embrace her younger son who by now had dropped down on the sofa on his knees, sobbing.

"Let's go!" Jacob said heading toward the door.

Earnestine ran past me. In her size zero jeans, her legs looked like pencils on the move. She climbed into the backseat and didn't utter a word.

"Sorry about that," Jacob said, backing out of the driveway. "Terry gets frightened living in these woods. Sometimes bears do come up to the house."

"Oh, that must be frightening," I said, thinking, that boy is too big not to know the difference between a black bear and a black person.

Did Jacob leave us outside on purpose? Maybe it was an experiment. How was he able to leave right after we had the encounter with Terry? Hmmm...

Jazz music flowed from the radio and cut through the cold silence. A few minutes later warm air circulated and thawed out my feet. Feeling the need to focus on positive thoughts to get over being insulted by Terry, I concentrated on naming the tunes played on the way to Pittsburgh.

Jacob dropped us off at the airport in plenty of time for our flights to New York and Cleveland. Earnestine didn't say a word until we were out of the car.

"Okay black bear, see you on Sunday," she said.

"You got a lot of nerve calling me a bear. Didn't your mama teach you to name the members of the animal kingdom? Have a good flight."

"You too." she said.

I bought my ticket and went to the gate to check in. The ticket agent told me to listen for my name to be called if any seats were available after full-fare passengers had boarded the flight. Soldiers dressed in uniform had first priority for standby tickets. I couldn't wait to tell Vincent so he could stop wasting precious time riding buses.

I sat watching others board while praying for my name to be called. "Davida Kincaid" a uniformed ticket agent said.

I jumped up and headed toward the counter to get my boarding pass.

"You have seat 7A in first class," she said. "Enjoy your flight."

I felt like a celebrity as I strolled toward the same door through which eighty-five passengers had disappeared ahead

of me. A young stewardess with long brown hair was busy serving us during the entire flight. She wore a cute navy and green uniform about size 6. I wondered if women had to be thin and attractive to get that job. She served mini- bottles of liquor, peanuts and food. I didn't even drink alcohol but I got two bottles to give to somebody who did. During the entire flight I couldn't tell whether or not the plane was moving except at takeoff and landing, when the whispering made my ears hurt. I fell in love with the Whisperjet at first flight.

In less than two hours the plane landed at John Fitzgerald Kennedy (JFK) Airport. My older sister Lynette picked me up from the airport and I spent the night at her house in Brooklyn. The next day I attended Beverly's church wedding.

At three on Saturday afternoon we were seated and waiting for the wedding to begin. Several people showed up between 3:30 and 4:00 p.m.

"Weddings don't take long," Lynette said. "Latecomers take a chance in missing the whole thing. People say it's bad luck to start the ceremony when the hand on the clock is going down, so it usually starts half past the hour when the hand is moving up."

"Why? What does the start time have to do with the success or failure of a marriage?"

"Absolutely nothing. That's just a superstitious belief. The couple makes or breaks the marriage; not the ceremony."

"What you just said makes sense to me."

The church was abuzz with conversations as I kept looking back to see when the ceremony would start. At 4:40 p.m. organ music got our attention. Five minutes later the preacher entered from behind the pulpit area and the groom stumbled

in behind him dressed in a gray tuxedo with lavender shirt, bowtie and cummerbund. The best man propped up the inebriated groom so he wouldn't keel over. I think the rich fragrance from red roses in the floral arrangements prevented guests from smelling the groom's booze.

I leaned over and whispered to Lynette.

"Is the bachelor party the night before designed to get the groom drunk so he won't know what's going on the next day?"

"Sure looks that way. They're usually sober by this time of the day."

Staring at the swaying groom, I wondered how Beverly would feel marrying somebody who could barely stand up straight. Lynette said it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before she comes to the altar, so Beverly was in for an unpleasant surprise.

I checked out of the ceremony as thoughts of what I'd do if Vincent showed up drunk came to mind. Shoot him, slap him, cancel the wedding, or...

Leave him at the altar. Yeah. That would teach him.

"Ladies and gentlemen I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Trenton Watkins," the preacher announced about twenty minutes later.

Beverly, looking gorgeous in her white lace gown with matching shoes looked thoroughly disgusted when the best man escorted Trenton as the three of them exited the sanctuary. How embarrassing!

I was thrilled to be in attendance even though the only thing I could recall about the wedding was a drunk groom and a woman singing The Lord's Prayer accompanied by beautiful pipe organ music.

"That preacher ought to be ashamed of himself for marrying a man who didn't know what he was doing. I feel sorry for Beverly."

"Trenton really is a nice guy," Lynette said. "He just got carried away last night."

"Yeah. He did. In more ways than one," I giggled.

Lynette drove us to the reception at the Ritz Carlton Hotel. I felt rich and famous like Jackie Kennedy when a doorman opened the car door and extended his hand to help me get out. The fur coat I borrowed from Lynette to wear over my royal blue knit outfit made me feel extra beautiful. What a boost to my self-esteem!

Yesterday I was a black bear. Today I'm an upper crust socialite. What a contrast!

Inside the hotel, I gasped at the sight of beautiful lavender and gray decorations everywhere, including those hanging from chandeliers. Champagne stations, a wide variety of delicious-looking foods, and a three-tier cake about three feet high were on display in the ballroom. The reception cost a pretty penny plus a few thousand dollars.

Vincent and I would have a private ceremony in front of a preacher. We could use that wedding money to make a nice down payment on a house.

The photographer took lots of photos of the couple when the bride tossed her bouquet of white and lavender roses, when Trenton clumsily removed her garter and nearly fell flat on his face, and during the couple's first dance when Beverly held him up for a hot minute before other guests ran out on the floor and the best man rescued the groom. I couldn't tell

whether or not the couple was fighting when they cut the cake and stuffed some in each other's face rather than their mouths.

"To love, happiness and a long marriage," the best man said in his toast.

Beverly looked at Trenton with a scowl on her face when he gulped his glass of champagne following the toast.

Another drink was the last thing Trenton needed.

I saw Beverly slip out of the room while we were eating. Others were drinking and dancing as the live band played "Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher and Higher" by Jackie Wilson.

"Where's Beverly going?" I asked Lynette.

"She's going to their room so she can change out of her gown."

An hour later Beverly hadn't returned.

Trenton didn't miss the bride until he held up a glass to drink a toast he made.

"To my wife! Hey! Where's my wife?" he blurted.

The best man took the glass out of his hand and whispered in his ear.

Trenton looked around the room like he'd lost something valuable. Then he staggered out with his best man at his side.

Everybody kept on dancing and eating and drinking until the reception ended.

"I guess the couple decided not to come back downstairs," Lynette said.

"Perhaps, it's for the best," I said. "Beverly didn't look happy at all."

After leaving the hotel, I spent that Saturday night at Lynette's. The next morning she shared highlights of the wed-

ding saga while we were en route to JFK for my flight back to Pittsburgh.

"Beverly was furious with Trenton. She called from the airport to tell me that he came upstairs to their bridal suite and passed out on the bed. She didn't even get a chance to tell him how much he embarrassed her by showing up drunk nearly two hours late for the wedding. She thought he had jilted her. Some men do that, you know.

"They were supposed to catch a flight to Jamaica at 11 p.m. for a three-day honeymoon. That didn't happen. Beverly left him sleeping off his drinks at the hotel and flew to Jamaica by herself. Trenton will be sober when he wakes up and realizes they didn't get to enjoy the bridal suite and he missed his flight."

"They wasted a lot of money," I said.

"That's what I said. But Beverly said Trenton paid for everything. It's usually the bride who spends all that money. Anyway, she paid him back for making her wait on him at the church. I worried about him showing up late and then I worried about him being drunk, but I tried to act normal. She probably would have left him at the altar if she hadn't spent almost a year planning that wedding. I know she took pictures at the reception because they had already paid the photographer to capture her hard work."

"Wow! The bride will remember her wedding day and the groom will remember his wedding night. What a way to start a marriage!"

I thought about telling her that I would have a private marriage to Vincent, but that would spoil my secret. Whatever Vincent and I decided to do, we'd do it together.

"Well, I learned a lot about marriage this weekend," I said.

"Know that how you start out is how you'll end up in a relationship. They started out playing tit for tat. It's going to be a rocky road ahead unless they change their ways."

"I hear you," I said, jumping out of the car. "Thank you so much for a great weekend and for all the things you've taught me about love and marriage."

On the return flight I thought about the difference between a wedding and a marriage. A wedding is a single expensive event. Marriage, an ongoing program that must be constantly reviewed and updated, requires work to iron out the kinks over time.

A couple needs more than love to keep marital bliss from turning into blisters.

By the time of my Sunday afternoon arrival at Waller, not only had I learned more about relationships and marriage, I'd found a new way to travel and save time and money.

Marriage 101

IN MY NEXT LETTER to Vincent, I described the flight to Beverly's wedding in New York and all the travel time saved. I didn't think he knew that soldiers received priority boarding as standby passengers when dressed in uniform.

His reply before Christmas break assured me that he had done his research and had acquired a new take-charge attitude. He wrote with holy boldness:

My Dear Future Wife,

Don't come home this Christmas unless you are ready to get married! If I get killed in Vietnam and don't leave a child behind nobody will remember me.

Look what the Bible says:

And who is the man that is engaged to a woman and has not married her? Let him depart and return to his house, otherwise he might die in the battle and another man would marry her. (Deut. 20:7 NASB)

When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife whom he has taken. (Deut. 24:5 NASB).

We are supposed to get married. I need you to be serious about this. It's a matter of life and death. If you love me you will do the right thing.

Love,

Vincent, your soon to be husband

Well! Excuse me. Now he's gone back to being the man I met at church.

I decided I'd better learn more about pregnancy prevention because once we were married he wouldn't wear a condom and I couldn't make him.

Vincent's new determination led to thoughts of creative ways to avoid pregnancy. A classmate named Thomasina Bates came to mind. We had talked briefly in the grocery store one day last summer. She got married shortly after graduation from high school and a whole year later had no children and wasn't expecting. I called her.

"This is kind of embarrassing for me to ask but I figured you could help me. I plan to get married soon but I want to stay in college. Please tell me how you avoid getting pregnant?"

"Girl, you just take a hot douche with vinegar; as hot as you can stand it."

"Why hot water?"

"Because the heat will kill the sperm."

"Hmmm... heat does kill germs. That sounds reasonable."

She was living proof that her birth control strategy works.

"Thanks a lot. That's what I'll do."

When in doubt, find out. The quick douche sounded much easier than using the rhythm method and ovulation period. Figuring out when to abstain from sexual intercourse was too much work. I didn't want a loop or birth control pills that Vincent might discover. A good old-fashioned method was all I wanted since I wouldn't need to use it long. Killing sperm right away was something I could excuse myself to the bathroom to do.

After talking to Thomasina, I hung up the receiver feeling confident that I could marry during Christmas break and return to school with no problem. It would not matter if Vincent were

deployed to Vietnam or remained in the United States. He would never have to know why I didn't conceive.

I made reservations to fly standby from Pittsburgh on Eastern Airlines Whisperjet and sent Vincent my itinerary. Instead of spending a whole day traveling to and from Columbia by Greyhound, flying offered more vacation time.

Vincent did not share his travel plans. But around two o'clock on a Thursday afternoon we spotted each other walking toward the baggage claim area at the Columbia Metropolitan Airport. Vincent had flown from Georgia.

"Hey, the courthouse is still open!" he said. He ran over and scooped me up in his arms and whirled me around.

The Army had made a strong man out of him. I liked that kind of attention.

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" I said.

"That's what I wanted to hear!" He set me down gently on my feet and we kissed. In baggage claim he grabbed his army green duffel bag that matched his green dress uniform and my black and white tweed suitcase.

We ran outside through the glass doors.

At curbside, his brother Danny sat behind the wheel of his Mustang like the driver of a getaway car. Vincent tossed the bags into the open trunk, slammed it shut, and then slid into the backseat beside me.

This is not exactly what I expected today but what the heck!

"Take us straight to the courthouse," Vincent said.

"Yes Sir, boss," Danny said, pulling away from the curb.

"I've got orders for Vietnam but right now I'm going to enjoy every day with you. I'll try to get the orders changed after we get married.

"The tone of your last letter told me you'd gotten orders. Promise me you won't even think about not coming back to me if you have to go. You know I pray for you every day."

"All I want to do now is enjoy life. Let's not let anything spoil our time together while we work on Vincent Jr or Veda."

"Is that all you think about?"

"No, right now I'm thinking about getting to the courthouse on time."

We laughed and talked about the coincidence of arriving at the airport at the same time even though we both flew standby from cities in opposite directions.

"I knew what to do when I received your flight schedule. Then I prayed for no more delays. I only have ten days home before I ship out again."

"I'm so glad God finally brought you two together," Danny said, looking in the rearview mirror as he drove along. "Now my brother can stop worrying me about wanting to get married. Davida, he was afraid you'd find a college dude and dump him. I kept telling him it would work out one day if it's meant to be. So, here you are, together at last, and you didn't even plan to meet this way."

"Man, you weren't supposed to tell her what I told you," Vincent said. I laughed as the brothers argued about what a woman should and should not be told about a man's feelings for her.

Around three o'clock that afternoon on December 21st we obtained the long awaited marriage license. We agreed to be married by his pastor, Rev. Wright. His mother and mine would serve as the two witnesses we needed.

Now it's time to put into practice everything I've learned about marriage.

My pastor didn't know me because my family didn't attend Corinthian Baptist. But since everyone in Vincent's church either knew or was kin to the singing Henderson family, I knew their pastor would do whatever Vincent's mother asked of him. So, I let them schedule our marriage appointment and notify me.

"Rev. Wright wants us there at 2:30 Saturday afternoon. Is that all right?"

"Sounds good. Please give me his phone number?"

"What do you need that for? I'm picking you up."

"I know. But I want to ask him one question if you don't mind. It's kind of personal."

Vincent asked his mother for the pastor's number while I held the receiver.

She yelled out the number and I wrote it down when he repeated it.

"Thanks for being such a good son and listening to your mother," I teased.

"Pretty soon I'll be the head of my own house," he said.

After ending our conversation, I called Rev. Wright to ask where I could find the marriage vows in the Bible.

"Well, eh, the traditional wedding vows aren't in the Bible," he said.

"Really? Okay, thank you. See you Saturday."

I hung up feeling quite confused. God told people to marry but didn't say how to do it or what to say. I wished I'd paid more attention to the preacher at Beverly's wedding.

Mama agreed to ride with Vincent and me on Saturday without my telling her where we were going. I told her it was a surprise. When Vincent picked me up that day, Mama met his mother for the first time in the backseat of the '57 Chevy.

"Here we are," Mrs. Henderson said. "Today we are going to witness our children getting hitched. My son's been waiting a long time for this day."

"I sure hope it works out for them," Mama said. She didn't sound a bit surprised. "Some marriages work and some don't. Yours did I reckon, but mine didn't."

"This marriage has to work out," Vincent said.

Vincent is man enough to handle both mamas.

At 2:10 p.m. a sober Vincent and I were standing in front of Rev. Wright in the living room of his home. My mama stood next to me, and Mrs. Henderson stood beside her son. I wore a pink wool suit and Vincent wore his green military uniform. We looked nice even though we didn't have anyone to take our picture and capture the moment.

Rev. Wright held up a little black book and told Vincent to repeat after him:

"I, Vincent, take thee, Davida, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

Vincent repeated every word.

"While I was still trying to figure out the meaning of "plight thee my troth," Rev. Wright told me to repeat after him:

"I, Davida, take thee, Vincent, to be my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse,

for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.

I repeated just fine until I heard the word "obey." My mind drifted.

We're finally getting married. Was he asking me to obey Vincent? We never talked about that. I looked up at Vincent and smiled but didn't open my mouth. Was I supposed to tell the truth?

He stared at me so I looked down at the floor.

Rev. Wright read again, "to love, cherish, and to obey..."

Obey? We're the same age. I chuckled at the audacity of the pastor to ask me if I would obey my husband. It was silent for a long time so I looked up.

Rev. Wright, dressed in his long black robe, stared into my eyes over the top of his cat-eyed rims hooked to a chain around his neck. Then he scratched the bald spot on top of his head.

I'm sure he saw a naïve nineteen-year-old bride about as smart as Lucille Ball.

"Marriage is a solemn ceremony," he growled. "It is not be to entered into lightly."

I took a deep breath to regain my composure and sighed deeply. Next I cleared my throat.

Rev. Wright should have officiated at Beverly's wedding, I thought. He would have told Trenton he was too drunk to marry. Hmm... then what would have happened?

"I do," I whispered, feeling like I had a frog stuck in my throat.

In less than ten minutes we had tied the knot forever.

The preacher signed the marriage license and then handed each of us the pen to sign. Rev. Wright said he would mail it to the courthouse and we would receive an official copy in the mail. Otherwise we could go down and pick it up after the holidays.

As we were leaving, Rev. Wright hugged all the ladies. But he shook Vincent's hand, saying, "Love that little wife of yours man and she will respect you."

"I do love her, sir," Vincent said, handing him an envelope containing his fee.

By 2:30 p.m. we were back at the Chevy.

Rev. Wright must not have heard about marrying when the clock is on the upswing.

My gentleman husband opened and closed the doors for all the females and then sat behind the wheel and slammed both hands on the steering wheel.

"Oh! Why did you do that?" I said.

"I thought you were never going to say, 'I do.' You made me nervous!"

"Now son, be nice," his mother said. "The little girl in her got scared."

"Yeah. I guess that's it," I lied. It was not the time to discuss the word obey.

"All's well that turns out well," my mama said. "At least you only have to marry one time. That's one time to be scared. The rest of the time you gotta be strong."

"Come closer, *wife*," Vincent pulled me close to him in the front seat while he drove our mothers home. I was bashful but their presence didn't bother him one bit.

While they yakked about marriage and other stuff in the backseat, I sat there thinking about my marriage and Beverly's wedding. I'd been so busy admiring my sister's beautiful white gown and focusing on the drunk groom that I hadn't heard anything the preacher said. Did he explain why people get married? There must be a bigger reason to marry other than to dodge the draft or get a marriage deferment.

Why didn't Rev. Wright ask Vincent to promise to obey? How could I be expected to keep marriage vows that I didn't remember or understand? Listening to the preacher read the vows was like hearing a Sunday morning sermon. One moment the message sounds good and I want to remember it, but before it's finished I've forgotten most of what was said. Is the purpose of marriage to legalize sexual intercourse? Is it to prevent bringing illegitimate children into the world? Do people marry to escape from their parents' home and their rules? Will we still be legally married if the preacher forgets to turn in the marriage license? Why would a preacher perform a ceremony in less than ten minutes for a marriage that's supposed to last a lifetime? Surely he didn't do it for the measly twenty-five dollars in that envelope.

That night it was time to use Thomasina's secret strategy.

Ten Days of Marital Bliss

VINCENT TOOK MAMA HOME first and then drove to Sumter where he had arranged for us to spend our first days and nights as husband and wife in the guest room of his sister, Regina and her family. Regina's husband Bob, a soldier, had also come home on furlough from Georgia. He had been drafted but he didn't have to worry about being sent to Vietnam because they had a five-year-old son, Robbie. I assumed he had informed Vincent about the marriage deferment.

We celebrated our wedding night dancing the night away at the Club Royal. Vince and I sipped Cherry Cokes while Bob and Regina drank Gin and Tonic and Scotch on the Rocks. A live band played the latest hits like *I Was Made to Love Her* by Stevie Wonder, *I Never Loved a Man (The Way I Love You)* and *RESPECT* by Aretha Franklin. When the band took a break, the four of us rested in our booth while the jukebox continued to play hit after hit.

Nestled in Vincent's embrace, I was singing *Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher and Higher* along with Jackie Wilson when Regina interrupted the tender moment with my husband.

"So, how do you feel about aborting Vincent's baby?"

"What?" I glared at her. Then I saw her moist lips and glassy-looking eyes and knew her alcohol was talking.

She stared at me, waiting for a response.

I pulled away from Vincent's arms and glared at him. I kicked his foot but he didn't look at me. He didn't say a word.

He told our secret!

Not getting any support from him I turned back to Regina.

"I feel just fine." I kicked Vincent's leg hard beneath the table. "Ow!" he cried out and flinched.

"My brother told me all about it," she said.

I know she would have continued prying had the band not returned and started playing "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" by Gladys Knight and the Pips.

"Let's dance!" I said, sliding out of the booth. Vincent followed me to the dance floor and whirled me around until the song ended. I didn't say anything until he put his arms around my waist for the slow dance to the Righteous Brothers' song; *You've Lost That Loving Feeling*.

"Didn't we agree that what happened between us was our secret," I whispered in his ear. "Why did you tell Regina our business?"

"She's my sister. We always talk about everything. I didn't know she would bring that up tonight."

"From now on what we do is our business, not hers! I have never felt so humiliated in my life. You know that people under the influence of alcohol tell their business and everybody else's, too."

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I would never do anything to embarrass you. You know how much I love you, even when you fuss at me. Let's just concentrate on being happy during this short time we have together."

"All right. I forgive you. Now promise you won't tell her our business."

"I promise."

Vincent pulled me closer so that the side of my face was buried in his chest. I welcomed his warm, firm embrace and soon became enraptured by the music and the lyrics.

May we never lose this loving feeling.

That night we made love. We could hear Regina and Bob making love in their bedroom, but I asked Vincent to be quiet so they wouldn't hear us. The bed kept on squeaking. After Vincent fell asleep, I slid out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom to take my hot douche with vinegar.

The next day, Christmas Eve, Vincent and Bob went out for a man-to-man talk. I decided to surprise my husband by baking my first sweet potato pie – his favorite dessert. Homemade pies were my mama's specialty so I never helped with them.

I asked Regina if I should add sugar to the sweet potatoes – trusting her expertise as a seasoned wife of six years to guide me through the process.

Hmmm...She patted her lips with her index finger for a moment.

"No, 'cause they're already sweet. That's why they're called sweet potatoes."

"Oh, why didn't I think of that?"

Confident that I had heard the voice of an experienced baker, I made two pies so Vincent could have a whole one. I never liked thick piecrusts, so I applied as much pressure to the rolling pin as I could until my dough was paper thin. After baking, I hid my beautiful pies in the breadbox for the surprise Christmas gift.

On Christmas Day, Danny and Elaine stopped by with six-month-old Danny Jr. Uncle Vincent was having fun with

Danny's "little man" when I invited Elaine into the kitchen to show off my surprise.

"Come, let me show you something," I said, moving toward the kitchen.

She plopped down at the table while I pulled out one of my pies.

"Look what I made for the first time! I made it to surprise Vincent at dinner tonight."

"It looks terrific! I sure hope it tastes as good as his mama's?"

"Oh! What made you say that?"

"Have you gotten to know his mama?"

"A little bit. She's a nice lady. Don't you think so?"

"You're in for a big surprise."

"But...I thought you liked her."

"I did. Liked is past tense. She changes after you marry her son. Just watch your back because she's a backstabber. She'll make you lose your religion if you're not careful."

"Are you kidding me? She's the one who got Rev. Wright to marry us."

"She does whatever her sons want her to do, especially Vincent, her baby boy. Danny is jealous of the way she compares him to Vincent who's in the Army now."

"What? He was drafted for goodness sake!"

"Doesn't matter. Vincent qualified, Danny didn't. She's already banking his allotment checks."

"Is there something else I should know? Please, go ahead and spit it out."

"Know this, if you tell her your business she'll try to run your house."

"Thanks for being my friend and now my sister-in-law. You have never been afraid to deflate my bliss-filled balloon. I love you for that. Don't worry. I won't be around here long. I'm going back to college as soon as Vincent leaves."

"I wish somebody had warned me when I was a newlywed. When Danny acted up I called her because I didn't want my mama to know I was having trouble in my marriage. What a mistake! Work on your marriage first, before the babies start coming. Everything changes once they arrive."

"Vincent thinks we're going to work on a baby, but I have a secret pregnancy prevention plan to practice."

"I hope it works. You know Danny Jr. came out holding my loop in his hand."

"I remember. That won't happen to me."

"Elaine, let's go!" Danny called from the living room.

"Duty calls," she said, getting up. "One more thing," she whispered. "Whenever he complains about his mama, just listen. Don't bad-mouth her. They stick together like peanut butter and jelly."

Danny handed Danny Jr. to Elaine as soon as she entered the room. She wrapped their son up like he was headed to Alaska instead of to grandma's house a few miles away. I was proud of the way my friend had adjusted to their unplanned baby.

Didn't Danny know how to bundle up their baby? If not, he should ask his mama.

After they left, Vincent drove the Chevy to the country for me to visit my family. In the usual holiday tradition of giving, mama gave us a couple slices of her sweet potato pie to go. We left there and went to visit his parents. Ma Henderson

gave us slices of homemade cakes and pies to take home. We didn't eat at either place because we'd planned a quiet dinner at Regina's house.

After our meal of baked Cornish hens, rice pilaf, broccoli and yams, compliments of Regina, I announced my surprise.

"I have a surprise for you."

"What is it" Vincent said.

"Your favorite pie!" I ran to the breadbox and pulled one out. "I made a whole one just for you." I placed my surprise on the table in front of him and sat down to observe. His smile was priceless. He cut a slice about one fourth of the pie, and put it on a saucer.

"Wow! It's creamy and moist just like I like it."

I watched as his taste buds connected with my sweet potato pie, waiting to hear him say, "Ummm, delicious!"

He stopped chewing, frowned, gagged, dropped his fork and cupped his hand over his mouth.

"What's wrong?" I said.

Vincent jumped up and ran to the garbage can. He leaned down and threw up.

"Tell me what's wrong." I said.

"It's *nasty!*" he said, wiping his mouth like he'd had a sip of 666 Cough Syrup.

Did you put any sugar in it?"

"No, it's already sweet."

"Not sweet enough to eat," he said.

"I'm sorry you didn't like it," I said.

I glanced across the table at Regina and Bob. They were laughing like a couple of hyenas. Instead of slapping Regina, I rolled my eyes at her and then snatched the partial pie off

the table and tossed it in the garbage. Next I trashed the pie hidden in the breadbox.

"I'm glad you were the first to taste the sugarless sweet potato pie," Regina said.

"I don't believe you said that!" I said. I ran down the hall to our room and fell facedown on the bed, sobbing.

Vincent came behind me, stretched out beside me and pulled me close.

"Honey, thank you for trying to make my favorite pie. I'm sorry I couldn't eat it. Don't worry. Your mama and mine made sure I had plenty of my favorite dessert."

"If Regina didn't know how to bake the pie she should have told me. She sat there acting innocent when she was the one who told me it didn't need any sugar."

"That's my sister! All her married life she probably passed off mama's pies as her own and Bob never knew the difference."

He slowly zipped down my dress in the back and unsnapped my bra. His hot hand stroked my back until I felt a little better. Oops! Then he took advantage of the opportunity to work on getting me pregnant. This time I didn't care if the bed squeaked or he hollered. After some time Vincent lay still like he was exhausted. We had fun! I wondered if Regina and Bob were laughing while they explained to Robbie the noise coming out of his bedroom.

Maybe Mama was right when she said, "The heaviest thing a man can lift is a woman's skirt."

I crawled from beneath him like a turtle coming out of her shell, and tiptoed to the bathroom. After filling the red rubber bag hanging behind the door with two capfuls of vinegar and

hot water, I squatted over the commode and douched. When the gallon bag was empty, I returned to bed feeling refreshed and safe from pregnancy. That was enough water to drown all the sperm. Vincent was asleep when I again snuggled against his warm body.

The next day we all visited Pa and Ma Henderson. Loud-mouth Regina shared a step-by-step account of what happened from the moment Vincent salivated over my delicious-looking pies until I tossed them in the trashcan. Everyone got a good laugh, except me.

Vincent sat beside me on the sofa, rubbing my back while Regina blabbed. I hoped he would tell her to shut up but he didn't.

"It was my first time baking homemade pies, people. Give me a break!"

They kept on laughing. It was as though I'd talked to the wind. I shook my head at that pathetic bunch. Elaine was right. I could only imagine what she had already experienced in almost two years of marriage.

Vincent and I spent ten days together before I returned to Waller College. I didn't tell anyone I had gotten married out of fear that I would be dismissed from school. I resumed my studies as usual thinking no one would ever know how I spent my Christmas break.

By the time Vincent received orders to report to nearby New Jersey for deployment to South Vietnam, I had already missed my period. I groaned at the thought of having to make major decisions about school, doctors, and a place to live. I flew to New Jersey to tell him about the pregnancy and for help in making decisions.

"That's great news!" he said. "If I don't return there will be someone like Lil' Danny Jr. left behind to remind everyone of me."

The thought of becoming a young widow crossed my mind for the first time.

"Oh, you're coming back, all right! You helped make this baby, so you have to help take care of him or her. I don't want to rear a child by myself like my mama had to do after my daddy left us."

I pretended to share Vincent's happiness about the pregnancy while I was with him that weekend. We decided that I should live with his parents so I could have my own room and transportation to and from the doctor's office. He called his mother and told her to make room for her new daughter-in-law and his baby.

"Mama's as excited as I am about a Vincent Jr. or Veda on the way," he said.

Having settled everything with him, I returned to Waller College determined to tell Thomasina Bates that her secret strategy failed to protect me. I called her.

"Hey, I followed your hot douche instructions to a tee, and I mean to a T, and got pregnant anyhow."

"You took hot douches?" she sounded surprised.

"I asked you how you prevent pregnancy and that's what you said you do."

"Oh no, you have to take cold douches. I got confused. Hot douches make sperm swim faster. I must have misunderstood what you asked me at the time. I always take cold douches right away to kill sperm."

"Well thanks a lot, Mrs. Confusion! It's too late for me to find out if cold douches really work! What I can tell you for sure is that hot douches don't prevent pregnancy. I trusted you to help me and now I've got a lot of problems."

I hung up the phone, furious with myself for trusting a scatterbrain.

How could she treat something so important so lightly?

With Vincent now on his way to Vietnam for ten months, I had to learn how to access my military benefits. I was afraid to ask Regina. She might send me down a rabbit hole. I didn't even know if Waller College would allow a pregnant student to attend classes – married or not – and I was too ashamed to ask. I decided to withdraw from college to maintain my high GPA.

My sophomore roommate, Earnestine, was seated at her desk when I dragged into our dorm room.

"You look like you saw a black bear. Do you want to talk about it?" she said.

I sat on my bed and tears sprang out of nowhere. I told Earnestine all about my marriage to Vincent during Christmas break.

"And now I'm pregnant. I've got so many grown-up decisions to make."

"You're a smart girl. I'm sure you'll do what's best for all of you."

"Please don't tell anybody."

"Don't worry. I won't tell a soul what you've shared with me. You can trust me to be your friend regardless of whether you decide to stay or go."

"Thank you so much." I ran over and hugged her. "You're the best roommate ever!"

"We're supposed to be here for each other. We are family away from home."

Confident that our friendship was sealed forever without cutting our fingers and mingling blood like we did as children, I began reading library books about pregnancy to prepare to make wise decisions. Every book advised women to get prenatal care as early as possible. Four weeks into the semester I withdrew from Waller College stating family problems at home. I caught a Whisperjet to Columbia, was picked up from the airport by Pa and Ma Henderson, and went to live in their home.

What a mistake! Vincent's mother didn't want her son's wife in his room. She wanted her son. I didn't want to be pregnant, but I didn't want to have an abortion, either. My Waller College connection through Earnestine's letters was bitter-sweet. While she wrote about the wrestling, basketball and archery teams plus other activities on campus, I wrote about my monthly visit to the OB/GYN doctor. How boring! Later on I got hooked on soap operas and watched them religiously. Having no car to go out in the country where Mama lived made my occasional weekend visit to family a bonus blessing. As a deserted, young, pregnant bride living with her mother-in-law, it didn't take long to realize that my life could be described in one word, *miserable*.

Uncontrollable Circumstances

DURING MY FIRST WEEK IN the Henderson household, I faced several new challenges: living with in-laws, babysitting hard-headed Robbie, arranging for transportation to Mama's house whenever I wanted to spend time with my family, preparing a nursery for my new baby, adjusting to gaining weight, and seeing pictures of my friends and classmates on television or in the daily newspaper under the caption *Killed in Action or Missing in Action*.

On Monday morning at ten o'clock, one week after I moved into a lively Henderson home full of fake smiles and laughter, I answered the doorbell wearing a robe and pink sponge rollers in my hair. There stood a short lady with a big afro and huge grin. She looked cute dressed in her purple sweat suit and matching headband. I figured she was Ma Henderson's friend because she appeared to be about the same age.

"Good morning," I said. "Mrs. Henderson is at work."

"Oh, I know that. I'm Ethel, her neighbor. I just stopped by to see the fool who came to live in this house."

I stared at her through the screen door, feeling embarrassed for my appearance.

"Are you serious?"

"Serious as lung cancer. You don't know what you've done."

I laughed and shook my head while she stared at me, shaking her head.

Where did this woman come from?

"How do you know what I'm going through?" I said, scratching my scalp.

"Trust me. I know your mother-in-law quite well. I was living on this road when the family moved into this house twenty years ago. I used to babysit the mama's boy you married. Just want you to know I'm available *when*, not if, you need me."

She waved goodbye, then turned, ran down the steps and jogged down the road.

I went outside and stood on the porch while she jogged away. She turned and ran up the steps at the last house on the right side of the road. I watched her go inside.

She called me a "fool" to my face and I didn't get offended. I remembered Elaine's warning and filed Ethel's visit in my subconscious mind for future reference.

On days when I had a doctor's appointment, I spent a little extra time in Columbia shopping for nursery furniture and supplies. I looked for bargains and saved most of my allotment checks for a down payment on the home Vincent and I would purchase when he returned. I wanted to show my husband that I was a smart accountant.

We'll get the heck out of Dodge City as soon as he gets back from Vietnam.

Each month I gave Ma Henderson the housing allotment Vincent had promised to pay to show our gratitude for the exclusive use of his bedroom. The new eight-room house with beautiful bathroom fixtures contained four bedrooms. The only thing missing was indoor plumbing – a project for which I was delighted to provide financial assistance. I sensed that she felt entitled to the money received. Not once did she ever say,

"Thank you." I wondered if she expected more, but I didn't bother to ask.

Every single day I wrote a letter to encourage my husband. His ten-month tour of duty could not pass soon enough. It was hard finding something to say when nothing new was happening except my belly was getting bigger like a balloon being inflated. Every time I heard the name "Saigon" I pleaded with God to protect Vincent and send him back home safely.

At first I tried to mentally prepare myself if I ever heard the name Vincent Henderson announced on television. Then I made up my mind not to entertain any negative thoughts.

"No bad news is coming to this house because I'm praying too hard," I told myself. "Thank you God for not letting me down. Our baby will know his or her daddy. Please don't ever let Vincent's name be announced or appear on the screen."

The six o'clock news made me a praying woman.

"Please God, send somebody to encourage the young widows, the pregnant wives, soldiers wounded in combat, children who will never know their fathers, parents who lost their sons, siblings who will never see their brothers again..."

I prayed and covered my eyes with both hands whenever television news reports announced or scrolled the identity of slain United States troops. When did I sign up for nightly torture?

The country was already devastated over reports of war casualties, when my faith was attacked by news of the assassination of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. God allowed a praying man, a preacher and leader to be killed while he was away from home in Memphis, Ten-

nessee. He would never return home to his young wife Coretta and their four little children. Why?

I was still trying to recover from that shocking news, when two months later as I watched television in the Henderson home, a special news bulletin interrupted regular programming and I heard the report of the assassination of attorney general Robert F. Kennedy on June 5, 1968. He died the next day and left behind a wife with ten children and one on the way. I felt so sorry for his young widow, Ethel, who would have eleven children asking for their daddy.

Pandemonium broke out in America. There were killings everywhere. My baby leaped inside me like he or she knew something bad was going on. Would Vincent ever feel the kicking inside my belly? Would Vincent Jr. or Veda get to know daddy? I got scared. Sometimes I prayed out loud without thinking about it.

"Oh my God! We need our troops to come home and protect America!" I said.

"Don't worry, child," Pa Henderson said. "Bob and the rest of them fellows stationed 'round here gonna defend this country. Now is the time to trust God."

Reports of war casualties made the marriage vow, "for better or for worse" make sense. I battled constant thoughts of becoming a young widow in spite of getting airmail letters from Vincent as often as he could send them. How I longed to return to Waller College and concentrate on minor problems like passing an Intermediate Accounting or Economics test. The worst thing about being at Waller would have been trekking to class in the snow and trying to hide my big belly.

Having no control over Vincent's tour of duty or my baby's developmental process forced me to learn patience. As a woman in waiting, I became addicted to soap operas that consumed most of my days, especially *Days of Our Lives*, *Another World*, and *Dark Shadows*. I discovered that my favorite shows also aired nothing but gloom and doom. They made happiness in love and marriage seem like a fairy tale.

There must be some happy couples somewhere. Vincent and I will be the exception.

Vietnam Victors or Victims

THE AVERAGE AGE OF the troops was 19-24 who shed their blood for our country. Discussions with classmates revealed that many of the draftees were young blacks who had recently graduated from high school or dropped out. I was constantly drawing a red line through names in my 1966 yearbook and writing KIA for "killed in action."

I didn't understand why so many human lives were destroyed. My husband said they had to avoid the Viet Cong every single day. Nobody, not even Vincent, could tell me clearly why the United States, a world super power, had to send troops to fight in Vietnam – a little country in Asia. Why couldn't our government devise a scheme to defeat the Viet Cong like the Greeks did when they used the Trojan horse to bring down the city of Troy?

There must be some super intelligent minds in this country. Where are they?

College students were often exempted from the draft, but for some reason Vincent was not. Death was the gruesome future for many of our classmates who could not afford to go to college or run away to Canada. Was I the only one who thought that we needed our troops alive at home to defend America's border?

I sent Vincent a picture of my fat tummy during my fourth month of pregnancy. He wrote back urging me to have my gynecologist say that I was having a difficult pregnancy. In that case, The American Red Cross would bring him home sooner

because I needed my husband. But I couldn't do that. At every doctor's visit I received an excellent report.

Vincent wrote: *The enemy used guerrilla warfare instead of standing up and fighting like a man. There was ambush after ambush. I hid behind sandbags to be safe.*

Reading his letters was torture. I felt like I was a part of the action in Saigon.

"Lord don't let him become a statistic," I prayed. "You know my heart's desire has always been to have a husband who loves me and for my children to have the same father and mother. I don't want to be a war widow. You promised to give me the desires of my heart if I kept my mind on you. By praying every day, I trust you to give me my heart's desires."

"Vincent shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord," became my daily declaration. I found that one and many other Bible verses that I memorized because I recited them so often. They comforted me when I was fearful or felt lonely.

One day when several troops were killed in Saigon, I wrote, "The battle is not yours, it is the Lord's." Another time Vincent confirmed that, "No weapon formed against you shall prosper" was true because an enemy round entered his bunk but went back outside before it exploded. He was safe. The drudgery of writing letters that didn't say much was replaced with the joy in finding the right words in the Holy Bible to encourage Vincent.

Regina told her neighbor Bertha Nell that I wrote letters to Vincent everyday. Bertha Nell's boyfriend was in the Marine Corps at Parris Island. She asked me if I would agree to write love letters for her to send to him. I was flattered that Regina

admired my writing enough to recommend me to her friend. It seemed like fun to make up romantic stuff that would take my mind off the challenges of being married and separated from my husband.

I wrote a sample letter for Bertha Nell and gave it to her to read, but she asked me to read it to her instead. I read it aloud and was quite pleased with my own creativity.

"It's so beautiful," she giggled. "Tony'll love it."

"Be sure you copy it in your own handwriting," I said. "You don't want him to find out later than you deceived him."

"It's fine just like it is." She signed her name, put my draft in an envelope and licked the seal.

Tony loved it enough to ask her to write back again and again. She let me read his letters to her so I could write a reply. Tony had fallen in love with my letters.

After almost six weeks of sending my love letters, Bertha Nell began picking them up, signing and mailing them.

"Don't you want to know what I said to your boyfriend?" I said.

"Nope. I just know it's beautiful and he'll love it."

"What will you do when Tony finds out you didn't write them?"

"By then we'll be married and it won't matter."

About a month later, Regina came over to tell me that Tony graduated from basic training and came home.

"Tony told me how much he loved those letters," she said. "They went to the courthouse and got married before they sent him to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Bertha Nell won't need you any more 'cause she moved up there. You sure helped her snag a nice-looking guy."

"I should have charged her for writing those love letters."

"Too late now. They're gone bye-bye. I don't even think she could read."

"What! Now I've got a guilty conscience. I enjoyed writing the letters and hearing her praises. But I don't like the thought of having deceived a man I don't even know."

"Well, there's nothing you can do about it now. You'll get over it. I never started writing Bob, so I'll leave it that way. When he calls or comes home on furlough, we say all we have to say to each other then. But I'll tell you, my brother says your letters keep him pumped up. He can't wait to get back home to you."

I giggled. Regina made me feel like I had done something right. Knowing our history, that was a big step toward boosting our relationship.

Lord, please don't let Vincent tell her all our business.

Reality Sank In

Was I crazy when I married Vincent? That thought entered my mind one night while watching the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. Life can be rough for a child who grows up without a father. My mama struggled to take care of us after my daddy left.

How could I risk having my child long for daddy like I longed for mine?

Reports of heightened fighting in Hanoi and ambushes in Saigon appeared daily on the news. Both "The Columbia Record" and "The Palmetto Times" reported familiar names and photographs.

This is a frightening time to be a newlywed. Lord, help us get through this?

Many young wives were unfaithful while their husbands were serving in Vietnam. I guess fear of the unknown, lack of self-control, or impatience drove them into another man's arms. A classmate who got pregnant by another guy while her husband was in Vietnam was terrified that he might learn the truth. She wore two girdles to hide her protruding stomach for as long as she could.

"I'm scared of what he might do if he comes back and I tell him," she sobbed. "And I'm scared of what might happen to him if I file for divorce while he's over there. The bad news might kill him or cause him to be killed."

"I feel sorry for both of you," I said. "I can't imagine what I would do if I were you." I thought about "abortion" but didn't

mention the word for fear of what she might do. She got herself into that mess and she'd get herself out without my help.

"People need to know that it's hard being a wife when you have a husband stationed somewhere in the world other than at home," she said. "Temptation is real and it feels real good."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right. I'll pray for you to do the right thing. I memorized Romans 12:18 because I always want things to go well, even though they don't. That verse says, *If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.* That tells me God knows that sometimes things happen to disturb our peace or the peace of other people. Making tough decisions is a part of life. That's all I can say right now."

Rev. Wright's words and my parents' bad marriage taught me to take seriously my promise to be faithful "till death do us part." So I asked God to help me never to do anything to make Vincent regret choosing me to be his wife.

Pregnant with Patience

A COUPLE OF WEEKS after I moved into the Henderson home, I learned that Regina was also pregnant. Since she had already delivered a baby, I let her teach me about pregnancy. I double-checked everything. She arranged for us to have the same gynecologist and the same pediatrician. With both our husbands away in the Army, we relied on our driver, retired cabbie Pa Henderson and his '57 Chevy, to take us to our appointments, sometimes on the same day.

Her baby was due August 20th and mine September 25th. We waddled around like a duck as we gained weight. I felt like a stuffed pig. Dr. Bowman advised us to keep the weight gain under twenty pounds, so we competed to see which of us would weigh the least at each checkup. The fatter we got, the more we argued about the gender of our babies.

One evening we sat in front of the television discussing what we would deliver.

"I read that the more weight the mother gains the more likely she'll have a boy."

"I'm having a girl because that's what I want," Regina said. "Besides, this pregnancy feels different from the first one when I had Robbie."

"I'm having a boy or a girl baby. That's all I know. Then I'll lose these excess pounds."

"I know what you both gonna have," Ma Henderson said, standing in the doorway to the kitchen. "Neither one is a boy 'cause you carry him low and narrow with your belly poking

out. Both of ya'll gonna have a girl 'cause you carry her high, tucked in those wide hips you got." She said what she had to say and went back into the kitchen.

Regina and I looked at each other and laughed. How could Ma Henderson see our hips beneath a tent shaped maternity top?

She's got a lot of nerve talking like she's the all-knowing God.

"I hope you're right ma 'cause I want a girl," Regina said.

"That's one of those old folks' sayings," I said, hoping Ma Henderson was wrong so she'd stop thinking she knows everything.

"When is this baby coming? That's what I wanna know. My due date has already passed. My baby has already dropped and Lord knows I'm tired of carrying this load."

"How will I know when it's time to deliver?"

"Oh, don't worry. You'll know when your water breaks."

A few days later around six o'clock on Tuesday morning, September 11th, Regina came through the front door with Robbie as I was walking down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Daddy, I need to go now!" she yelled. "My water broke at home."

"Git up, Hun!" My mother-in-law hollered behind her closed bedroom door.

Regina stood in front of the door and cried out in pain every now and then while her ma was in the kitchen making coffee. I went into the kitchen to get a cold drink of water from the refrigerator and saw Ma Henderson pouring coffee into a thermos jug. On the table was a bologna sandwich in plastic wrap.

"What's going on with you? Ma Henderson said, glancing at me while pouring Carnation cream in the coffee. "I heard you go to the bathroom five times last night."

How embarrassing! I don't even know how many times I went to the bathroom.

"I don't know. I don't have any pains. I guess I ate something that didn't agree with my stomach."

"Are you sure you don't need to go with them?" she said.

"My baby isn't due for two more weeks."

Regina had shared her experience with contractions, and I double-checked it with Elaine. Their stories helped me to understand the doctor's handbook. I wasn't ready to deliver. I wanted my baby to come late like Regina's so Vincent could be at the hospital with me. He was due back home in a month.

"Almost ready!" Pa Henderson went into the bathroom wearing a white T-shirt and overalls with one strap hanging off his shoulder.

"Hurry Daddy!" Regina cried. "The contractions are five minutes apart."

He ran out of the bathroom so quickly that I wondered if he had time to pee. He hurried toward the front door where Regina stood gripping the bottom of her big belly.

I got the urge to pee while following Ma Henderson to the door as she rushed to give her husband his breakfast in a brown paper sack and his coffee.

"Happy Labor Day!" I hollered to Regina on my way to the bathroom. I returned to my room and put on a sweat suit. A few minutes later I headed back to the bathroom.

"Owww!" I cried, when a sharp pain shot through my back and lower abdomen.

Ma Henderson banged on the bathroom door.

"You all right in there?"

"A pain shot through my back." I stood up and another sharp pain caught me by surprise.

"Owww!" I cried again.

"I knew you should've gone with them!" she said. "Now we gotta find somebody to take you too. I'm gonna call Vertell next door and see if she's home."

When I came out of the bathroom, she was hanging up the receiver.

"Vertell's on her way. Call your doctor and tell him you coming too."

I called Doctor Bowman and his nurse answered.

"This is Davida Henderson. I think I'm in labor."

"Tell him 'bout your labor pains!" Ma Henderson said.

A pain hit again and I grabbed my lower belly.

"Owww!"

"How severe is the pain?" the nurse said. "Is it mild or moderate?"

"The worst pain I've ever felt in my life."

"Is the pain mild like a pinch or moderate like an aching tooth?"

"Worse than both of those."

"How far apart are your contractions?" she said.

"About every ten minutes. I keep having to use the bathroom."

Beep! Beep! The sound of a horn got my attention.

"Vertell's here," Ma Henderson said. "Tell them you're on your way."

"Okay," the nurse said, overhearing her. "We'll see you in a little while."

Pains like sharp menstrual cramps attacked my belly from every which way. Was I wrong for expecting my water to break by gushing out? Why didn't Rev. Wright tell us that parenting is a serious matter, not to be entered into lightly?

I dreaded the pain I'd have to endure to get the baby out my body. I wouldn't wish my pains on my worst enemy.

Making a baby is fun. Delivering a baby is painful.

Ma Henderson grabbed my packed suitcase and the diaper bag out of my room. I hadn't finished shopping for my baby yet. I didn't know what color to get for him. I didn't want to get blue or pink so I only packed one yellow outfit just in case he turned out to be a she.

"I sure hope your baby doesn't come before we get there," Vertell said.

"My husband is supposed to be here driving fast to take me to the hospital," I said. "He's supposed to hand out cigars when his son is born. Do you know what the father hands out if it's a girl?"

"Well, in real life things don't always work out like we want," she said. She glanced at me and then drove faster. "Vincent and Bob can't be here and wherever the Army stationed them at the same time. I'm really glad your mother-in-law called before I left for work."

"Ohhh, I'm so glad you could take me. Pa Henderson just took Regina."

"Owww!" I bit my bottom lip until the pain subsided.

Whatever she said after that went unnoticed. The pains had my attention. It's not time yet, I kept thinking, and hoping.

The pains were killing me. Was I losing my baby? Why did I have to experience pain to the 99th degree because Eve was cursed for disobedience in the Garden of Eden? Why? God must have stopped at 99 degrees because he knew one more degree would have killed her.

Vertell drove me to the doctor's office in half the time Pa Henderson usually took.

"Thank God we made it!" she said, stopping in front of the entrance.

Dressed in her business suit, she hopped out and ran around the front of the car to assist me. But as soon as she opened my door, a young man with long blonde hair came out of the office.

"Let me help you," he said.

"I really appreciate your help," she said.

"Thank you," I said, as he grabbed my suitcase off the backseat.

"I hope all works out well for you, Davida. Take care. I'm going to work now."

"Thanks so much for everything," I said.

While Vertell sped away, the young man escorted me into the doctor's office, carrying my suitcase.

"Regina was just admitted to the hospital," the nurse said as soon as she saw me. "Your mother-in-law said to tell you her husband is coming back here for you."

"I was just here yesterday," I said. "The doctor told me to come back next Tuesday."

Doctor Bowman stepped into the room.

"Babies come when they get ready," he said. "Come on in and let me take a look."

I followed him into an examination room and lay down on a bed lined with white linen.

"Did you get jealous of your sister-in-law?" he said. Before I could answer he was washing his hands. "You're in labor too. Go check in at Mercy Hospital. Regina is already over there. Both of these babies are coming today."

But, I'm not ready yet! That's what I started to say but out of my mouth came "Owww!" I was ready to get rid of those pains.

When I left the room, I saw Pa Henderson in his usual spot – in front of the television set. When he saw me, he sprang from his seat and flashed a broad grin showing all his false teeth.

"My wife called them and said you was coming, too," he said. "I'm ready to go."

"I feel so bad about disturbing your rest like this."

"Shucks! This is exciting! I can't believe it! Not one, but two grandbabies coming into the world on the same day. That ain't nobody but God."

After my bathroom visit, Pa Henderson picked up my suitcase and walked ahead of me to hold the door. He helped me get into his Chevy.

Vincent is missing in action over here.

I waddled behind him wondering why doctor Bowman had given us a due date. Both Regina and I missed it. Did having the same delivery date mean that we both conceived on the same night? Had I done something wrong to make my baby come early? I had a long list of questions and was short on answers.

Well, so much for my baby's daddy being here to welcome him into the world.

One thing was real – the pains proved that I wasn't experiencing false labor. Whether I liked it or not, Vincent Jr. has said, "I'm ready to come into the world today."

Birth Pains

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT Mercy Hospital, a young orderly helped me get out of the car at the emergency entrance.

"I'm going home to get some shut-eye," Pa Henderson said, from his seat behind the steering wheel. Then he drove away with my suitcase and diaper bag in the trunk.

Oh, well. He'll bring them back. That's one less thing to worry about.

A frail nun dressed in her long black and white habit greeted me at the door. She touched my arm with her bony index finger and spoke a tad above a whisper.

"We'll take good care of you here, my dear."

I think she tried to mimic God's still small voice. Her warm smile and kind words put me at ease.

"Owww!" The pain was worse. "I'm ready to get this over with."

"Come with me," she said. "We've been expecting you."

I followed her down the sterile hospital corridors where orderlies were rolling patients in beds and wheelchairs, in and out of rooms. We went into a dressing room.

"Put this on," she said, handing me a flowered blue and white hospital gown.

My admission papers had been filled out months ago when I chose to use the same gynecologist and pediatrician as Regina. The process was easy because she had prior experience with the military when Robbie was born. The Army would pay all of my hospital and doctor bills.

Cramping pains slowed me a bit, but I changed as quickly as I could, which wasn't fast enough for me. I lay down in a bed as the nun instructed before she got busy with some paperwork. An orderly pushed a gurney through the double doors. He stepped on a lever to raise my bed to make it level with the gurney and then transferred me onto the gurney by pulling the white sheets beneath me. It was a seamless process.

The nun laid her paperwork on the foot of the bed and then patted my arm.

"Labor and Delivery," she said.

A cool breeze brushed my cheeks as the orderly whisked me a short distance away and parked the gurney outside double tan doors marked "Labor and Delivery."

"You're next," the nun whispered.

"Do you want something for pain while you wait? You can choose a spinal tap or ether."

Neither Regina nor doctor Bowman had mentioned painkillers and I didn't recall reading anything about them in my pregnancy guidebook. I didn't know which one to choose.

"Owwww!" I cried. "Tell me which one most people choose."

"The ether is a gas. I'll give you an inhaler to hold to your nose and you can inhale as often as needed to control the pain."

"Give it to me!" I said.

She put the tube in my hand. I put it to my nose and squeezed, and squeezed.

"Press the button when you feel a pain," she said. "I'll be back in a moment."

The barrage of pains became less severe as I drifted to a euphoric state and on to sleepy land. I kept on inhaling the ether until I felt no pain at all.

Annoying voices in the distance disturbed my rest. I wanted the noisemakers to hush.

“Wake up! Wake up! You’ve got to stay awake and push.”

Were they talking to me? All I wanted to do was sleep.

“Take that gas away from her. Talk to her to keep her awake!” A man sounded quite upset.

Cold fingers suddenly pried my fingers off the trigger on the inhaler.

“Wake up!” a woman hollered in my ear.

Why won’t they leave me alone?

“Push! You’ve got to push!” I heard a woman say.

“Pushhhh?” I moaned, dozing off. I was sleepy and quite annoyed with the woman whose cold fingertips kept touching my face.

“It’s a girl!” I heard a woman say after a long period of rest. Then she held a baby girl beside my head so I could see her.

I glanced at the baby and wondered why she showed her to me.

“She looks like Tweety Bird,” I said. I felt like I’d been constipated for a long time and just had a gigantic bowel movement. What a relief.

Adjusting to My Newborn

ALL I WANTED TO do was sleep but the nurses wouldn't let me. They poked my arm and drew blood, and checked my temperature, my sanitary pad, my blood pressure. Every few minutes somebody was bugging me until I gave up and let them pat, prick and poke.

Around eight o'clock that night I woke up and saw Regina sitting up in the hospital bed next to mine. She looked disheveled, but happy. She smiled at me.

"Well, we did it," she said.

"Did what?"

"We pushed those babies out. That's why you were so tired. That was hard work. We both had girls. Sorry! Mine was born at 1:14 this afternoon."

"They showed me a girl but I didn't know it was my baby," I said. I felt sad because I wanted a boy to prove Ma Henderson wrong.

"I know you wanted a boy but you'll love her just the same."

"You woke up just in time," a nurse said, entering the room with a pink receiving blanket. I sat up in bed and she placed a baby girl in my arms. A tiny bracelet on her arm showed Henderson, girl, born 4:14 p.m., September 11. She handed me a little card showing her length, weight, date of birth, time of birth, my doctor's name and her pediatrician.

I counted ten tiny fingers and ten toes. Then I marveled at the tiny whole person that had come out of my body.

She's amazing! What a beautiful miracle!

Regina whipped one breast from beneath her hospital gown and stuck the nipple in her baby's mouth. I saw eager sucking like I'd seen puppies do many times after a dog gave birth. I was amazed that a newborn baby comes into the world knowing where to find food.

Breastfeeding looked painless. Soon it was my turn to try it.

I pulled my tiny breast out from the hospital gown opened in the front and put the nipple at my baby's mouth. She moved her head back and forth until her mouth latched onto my nipple and areola like the suction cup of a vacuum cleaner. Pain shot through my body.

"Ouch!" I felt like a leech was sucking the life out of me and I couldn't stop it.

"Waaaahhhh!" Veda cried. Her body stiffened and she threw her fists in the air like she wanted to punch me.

"Nurse!" I called, and she popped into the room like she had anticipated my call.

"We charge five dollars per scream," she said, approaching my bed.

Regina laughed and kept right on nursing her baby like it was an easy task.

Why did nursing work for Regina but not for me? What did I do wrong?

The nurse showed me how to place the nipple at my crying baby's mouth so she could latch onto it. I did and Veda started sucking. It felt strange to watch a tiny creature nibble on my nipple. Soon she stopped sucking and started crying again. I cried too. I didn't know what was wrong.

"Squeeze your nipple a few times to start the milk flowing," the nurse said. "This is not uncommon. She's not getting any milk."

I did as instructed but after a few squeezes of the areola, nothing squirted out of the nipple.

"Your milk is not flowing," she said.

"What does that mean?"

"If your milk is not flowing by the time you are discharged, we'll give you something to dry it up. Meanwhile, you'll need to bottle-feed. I'll be right back."

She stepped out and soon returned with a bottle while Veda and I both cried.

"Breastfeeding is so easy. It's natural," Regina said.

"For you it is. You've got experience, mother of two."

Show off! Why did they put us in the same room?

I felt like a failure. Regina knew I wanted to experience nursing my baby. How could she be so insensitive?

Oh boy, I can already hear her telling her family my business, again. Thank God for nurses. They're compassionate strangers.

The nurse returned and handed me a warm, four-ounce glass bottle of milk. The moment I put that nipple in her mouth Veda stopped crying. Her body relaxed as I held her close to my bosom. I also relaxed while she enjoyed her meal.

"You ladies were doing everything alike today until now," the nurse said. "It's a good thing the babies weren't born at the same time. That would have messed up everything for your doctors."

"God knew I needed Dr. Bowman's undivided attention. I'm glad to hear that I got it, because I don't remember anything about being in labor and delivery."

While watching Veda make the bottle of milk disappear, I thought about the night Vincent and I had overheard Regina and Bob making love in the bedroom next to ours. Out of 365 days in the year, only God could have arranged for two cousins to come into the world on the same day around the same time while both their fathers were away in the Army. Hot douche or not, we both probably conceived on the same night. This could not be a coincidence. And it's no coincidence that we ended up in the same hospital room at the same time after giving birth to girls, either.

Veda was asleep when the nurse removed her from my arms. As I settled back in my bed, I glanced over at Regina who had fallen asleep. She was right when she said I would love my baby girl. Even though I became a mother by default, I will be a mother forever. That's a whole lot longer than four years in college.

Having a baby is a huge responsibility. What good is having a husband when I had to be alone when I gave birth?

Everything happened in one day without warning. Not only did the son I was expecting turn out to be a daughter, but she will have to share her birthday with her cousin. I had no time to request that Vincent come home on emergency leave like he asked, and if I had he would not have arrived in time to see the pain I suffered. How I wished I could have seen him run around passing out cigars like proud fathers do. Nothing happened the way I'd expected. Nothing!

I wished I knew why things happened the way they did. Surely I didn't end up in the room with my sister-in-law just so she could make me feel bad about not being able to breast-

feed. Hmm... Maybe I needed to learn that someone greater than I was in control of my life.

“What a long day,” I sighed.

It was time for me to get what Pa Henderson called, some much-needed shut-eye.

My Mother-in-Law, the Outlaw

A WEEK LATER, PA Henderson drove Regina and me home from the hospital. In the Henderson house there was tension in the air. Vincent's daughter and wife were there but we were no substitute for Ma Henderson's favorite son. She was hostile toward me.

One Tuesday afternoon, I sat in a wooden-rocker bottle-feeding my two-week old Veda, when my mother-in-law entered the den in the afternoon carrying a baby wrapped in a blue blanket. It was odd for her to come home in the middle of the day.

She plopped down on the sofa across from where I sat and unwrapped the blanket to reveal a boy about eight months old. She sat him up on the sofa beside her.

Since I was the babysitter for Robbie and I knew that child wasn't Danny Jr., her other grandson, I inquired about the strange boy.

"Whose child is that?"

"Oh! This here is Vincent's son," she said, staring over her black-rimmed eyeglasses as if waiting for my next question.

I gasped and stopped rocking.

"Didn't he tell you about him?"

"No, he didn't tell me!"

"Well this here is his son."

She took off the boy's jacket and proceeded to make him comfortable.

I jumped up, ran to my room and slammed the door behind me. I tucked Veda in her crib while mumbling unpleasantries about her grandma.

"God, why did she do that to me? Why? What did I do to her? I don't even know if she told the truth."

I threw myself across the bed and sobbed into my pillow. The horrible unveiling of the devil in my mother-in-law crushed me. How could a Christian woman I had admired turn out to be as cruel as Cinderella's wicked stepmother?

Am I supposed to stay here until Vincent comes home next month?

"God, why did she do that to me? What did I do to hurt her?"

God didn't answer me but I got the urge to go and confront her. I jumped up ready to go tell her, "You wouldn't like it if your mother-in-law treated you the way you treat me."

Her behavior made absolutely no sense. I didn't care if she put us out of her house. She'd be doing us a favor. And I'd tell her son, too.

Furious, I stormed down the hall. Both she and the boy were gone. I didn't know who brought her home or how she left. All the rooms were empty. Either she trusted me not to set the house on fire, or she ran away thinking I might come out of the room swinging an ax or brandishing a knife. Whatever the case, I decided to write Vincent a letter to tell him that his mother had hurt me in words and deeds this time. He needed to get home soon before somebody was killed.

After writing the frank letter to Vincent, I sank into the fluffy cushion of the rocker and began rocking my pain away. The seesaw motion helped to ease my anger.

What was she trying to prove? Did she forget what it felt like to be a new wife and a brand new mother? Lord, how can this Christian woman be so evil?

About thirty minutes later I heard the Chevy in the driveway so I went into my bedroom to avoid seeing Ma Henderson. I noticed that she did all her dirty work when Pa Henderson wasn't around and I didn't want to create a problem between them because I loved my father-in-law.

When I heard her in the kitchen banging pots and pans and singing, "Jesus is on the mainline, tell him what you want," I got the urge to get out of her house before I exploded. How could she pretend that she had done nothing wrong? I told God about it but now I needed a flesh-and-blood person who would talk back to me.

All of a sudden I remembered that Monday morning when Ethel stopped by the house and announced that she would be available when I needed her.

Ethel! I need Ethel right now.

Ma Henderson owed me an apology. Instead, she was telling me in a loud song to call on Jesus. What a hypocrite! What made her think she could treat me any kind of way?

Nobody in my family would believe what happened today, especially since everybody assumed I was happy living in the Henderson home. And I had no desire to go and live out in the country where we had no transportation.

Ethel would help me decide what to do.

Standing beside Veda's crib, I stared at my sleeping baby and stopped pouting.

"We need your daddy to come home now," I whispered.

Veda must have agreed because she started crying. I felt sorry for waking her.

"Ethel. Go talk to Ethel," an inner voice said.

I grabbed my jacket and put it on. Then I bundled up my six-pound baby and flung the ever-ready diaper bag over my left shoulder. With Veda in my arms, I left the house without saying a word.

"Please, let Ethel be at home," I prayed with every step I took down the dirt road that Tuesday evening.

She would listen to the latest episode in the ongoing saga of life in the Henderson home. I was sure she would give me her honest opinion and some sound advice.

Before my feet landed on her concrete porch, Ethel's Chihuahua started yapping. She opened her front door wide to welcome me.

"Go sit down, Cocoa," she said. Her baby – the dog – growled and backed away from the door.

"Hey, Davida. Come on inside. What brings you here?"

"I'm sorry to bother you but I really need to talk to somebody other than God right now."

"Sure. Anytime. I'm making spaghetti for dinner. Just sit at the kitchen table while I stand at the stove and stir my sauce. Make the baby a bed on the end of the table. Otherwise Cocoa will think you brought her a playmate."

Her kitchen was spotless. Every dish was neatly arranged like it was a model home for sale. Sparkling glass cups that looked brand new hung beneath the cabinets.

"Your cups are pretty the way you have them arranged," I said. I was taught to always compliment the host on something inside the home. I didn't forget my manners before

starting a serious conversation with a woman I'd only briefly met.

"Thank you. I'm glad you like it."

She stirred the spaghetti and then drained it. After filling two cups with Welch's white grape juice, she placed one in front of me.

"How did you know my mother-in-law was driving me to drink?"

"Young lady, know that nothing you say will surprise me."

She fixed us both a plate of spaghetti and meatballs and cheese toast. A bowl of tossed green salad added the color needed for a balanced meal. Then she sat opposite me and said the grace.

"God bless this food as it provides the nourishment our body needs. Let it taste good and let our conversation be productive in Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen. You didn't even ask me if I wanted dinner."

"You look like you need a good meal. Now tell me what madness drove you here today."

While Veda slept, I ate my unexpected meal and dumped the garbage I'd held inside me since the day I moved into the Henderson home. I shared things I'd been afraid to release for fear of upsetting Vincent while he was in a war zone. Finally, I told her how anger had driven me to come and talk to her.

"Today, she brought home a baby boy about eight months old. I asked whose child he was and she said, 'This is Vincent's son.' I didn't know if I should faint or slap her. I felt like doing both."

"I'm glad you didn't do either one."

"She'd never mentioned that baby before. I don't know where she got him from or how she came home in the middle of the day or how she left. I don't know why she pulled such a cruel stunt."

"Now you already know your mother-in-law. Just write Vincent a letter. Tell him exactly what happened and see what he says about it. Don't let her intimidate you."

Ethel, picked up a Bible off the table and read Joshua 1:9 aloud:

"I command you – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

"I needed that," I said.

"You probably don't know that your father-in-law walked off and left his family when your mother-in-law was pregnant with Vincent. She didn't hear from him until Vincent was two years old. That woman struggled to keep her house and food on the table during that time. She loved that baby boy to death. Caring for him kept her from losing her mind. That's why she's closer to him now than to her other children. Vincent knows she treats him special, too. You married a mama's boy. She can't help herself."

"I'm not trying to take him away from her. Well, maybe I am. But children are supposed to grow up and leave their father and mother and cling to their spouse."

"If Vincent moves out of her house, then they will have to separate. You would be taking him away from her. She's jealous of you and the allotment check you're getting."

"Oh my goodness. I wondered what I'd done to make her hate me."

"Nothing. Her son wanted a wife and he couldn't marry his mama. That's what."

We talked a little longer. After dinner I felt strong enough to return to Ma Henderson's house. I'd already endured months of abuse. A few more weeks would not kill me.

"Thank you for listening and for encouraging me. I've got my peace back."

She took both my hands and prayed for me before I left.

"Lord, please give this young wife strength to hold on until her husband returns and they can move into their own home. Give her peace of mind. Don't let her worry about anything. Remind her that you are in control of everything regardless what she goes through. Bless her to trust you to supply everything she needs. Amen."

At dusk, I walked back home, determined to act as though Ma Henderson had not upset me at all. She and her husband were seated in front of the television when I entered the house. I peeped into the den and mumbled, "Goodnight," before heading to my room.

Following Ethel's advice, I tore up my angry letter that I had not mailed. Instead, I wrote Vincent a long letter telling him everything that had happened. Writing about the situation was therapeutic. The power of the pen strengthened me.

"There!" I finished the letter and prepared to mail it and await his reply.

About a week later I received a letter from Vincent. I went to my room and opened it. It contained pictures of his comrades and himself in a Vietnamese hut. Before reading it carefully, I skimmed for his reply about a baby boy.

"Ignore my mother. The only child I have is our daughter, Veda. We will move into our own house when I return. I guess it's true that two women can't live in the same house. I also sent my mother a letter asking her to treat you like her own daughter."

I believed him. That settled it for me. I leaned back on the bed and read.

Maybe she'll stop making my life miserable after she reads his letter.

Well, whatever Vincent wrote made Ma Henderson despise me all the more.

"You need to stop squealing on me and upsetting my son!" she barked.

Regina came by that afternoon and I showed her the recent pictures from Vincent. Everything I shared with her was positive because I didn't want her to know there was friction between her mother and me. I wondered how much her mama had told her.

"My brother looks like he's having a great time over there," she said after a quick glance at a couple pictures. "In this one he looks like he just had a good piece! Look at him! Don't you think so?"

She held up a picture in which Vincent was wearing only a pair of shorts. His body looked sweaty like he'd been working out.

Stunned, I snatched my pictures out of her hand and walked away shaking my head.

"You're disgusting! I'm through sharing my pictures with you. So, what do you think Bob is doing down in Georgia? He's close enough to come home more often but he doesn't. Why haven't you moved down there to be with your husband?"

I went into my bedroom, and I closed and locked the door behind me.

Lord, please hurry and get me out of this house. These people are crazy.

One Battle Ends, Another Begins

FRIGID WAS THE TEMPERATURE of my relationship with Ma Henderson until the day Veda turned five weeks old. That's the day we rode to the Columbia Metropolitan Airport with Ma and Pa Henderson to welcome Vincent home from Saigon.

On a sunny October morning I spotted Vincent's long legs, minus the high-water pants, among all the other troops dressed in army green uniforms. As he descended the steps of a jumbo jet the medals on his cap and his coat pocket glistened in the Carolina sunshine. I waved one arm to get his attention while clutching Veda against my bosom with the other.

"Your daddy's home!" I whispered.

Several soldiers approached the terminal like they were marching in formation. Vincent strutted toward me like a proud peacock as I ran toward the gate to meet him. The moment our eyes met I knew he wasn't the same guy I'd married ten months earlier. His eyes looked sad – like those of Jewish holocaust survivors who witnessed atrocities people could not even imagine.

He embraced me with one arm and with the other he lifted the pink receiving blanket and peeked at our baby.

"Hey Veda," he whispered, "Daddy's home." He sounded so weary.

Ma Henderson came over to him, sobbing. I stepped aside as he embraced her.

"Thank you Lordy! I got my boy back safe and sound," she said. She trembled while Vincent held her in his arms.

Pa Henderson stepped over, grabbed his son's right hand and shook it hard.

"I'm mighty glad to have you back home, son," he said. "Mighty glad! How you feel?"

"Tired right now. But, I'm ready to live." Then he muttered, "I'm back from hell."

Vincent gently pulled away from his mother. Then he came over and placed his arm around my shoulder and together we followed his parents out of the airport to the parking lot.

In the backseat of the '57 Chevy, I leaned against Vincent's shoulder all the way home as we rode in silence. The old Vincent would have pulled me closer. The tired man next to me kept peering out the side window as if he were alone, seeing the world for the first time. The trip reminded me of the long ride home in a limousine after we buried my grandpa in a cemetery. Vincent's experiences in Saigon coupled with the long flight home had taken a toll on him.

He'll be all right after he gets some rest, I thought.

I believed Vincent was a good Christian because I met him at church singing in the choir. But scary thoughts entered my mind during that time of silence. What if I'd been wrong about him? I'd been wrong about his mother and sister who sang in the church choir with him. His quiet daddy had fooled me, too. He was quite a joker.

At least Danny is cool. He and Vincent get along fine. We'll be okay.

"Thank you God for my husband's safe return from Vietnam," I silently prayed. "You have given me my heart's desire

for us to be together as a family. Now Lord, please let us move into our own house very soon.”

The Reward for My Faithfulness

AFTER EATING LUNCH PREPARED by his mother, we went into our room. Vincent removed his coat and shoes and then stretched out on top of the bedspread. I sat on the side of the bed and began sharing my dream of us purchasing our own brand new home.

“Let’s talk later on. I just want to rest now,” he said.

“Okay. I’m sorry. I’m just so glad to have you back.”

I spread the comforter over him and kissed his forehead. While he slept, I sat on the side of the bed figuring out how much money we would need to buy a house. His honorable discharge would help us a lot.

Vincent slept for hours and I only left the room once. That was to get a bottle of formula. When he woke up, I was right there.

“When you report to the Army for counseling to help you adjust to being back in the states, may I go with you?” I said. “It would be nice if we both knew what to expect now.”

“The Army is through with me,” he said. “All I have to do is go to my local board and pick up my DD 214, my honorable discharge papers.”

“But that’s not fair. They can’t just throw you away. Uncle Sam didn’t send you outside to live in a tree house for ten whole months and then tell you to come back inside. Doesn’t the government care what you experienced and want to help you adjust to civilian life again? Don’t they know you had never left home before they drafted you and sent you to Vietnam?”

In his letters Vincent had described gruesome killings, unimaginable fear, and hideous attacks against American troops. It seemed only right for him to receive some kind of counseling or debriefing to help him adjust to the real world. I couldn't believe the Army sent him straight home to his family like he'd been away on vacation.

"Please tell me this one thing, did they give you a final check up to make sure you didn't contract a contagious disease or something? "

"Davida, you have nothing to fear. I'm perfectly fine. Some other soldiers might need a check up or counseling, but not me. I've been to hell and back. I just want to live again."

"I believe you. But I want to live with the Vincent I married. Not a stranger."

I didn't understand what *live again* meant, but I got the feeling that caring for a wife and newborn were not included in the definition.

As we sat on the side of the double bed, I put my arm around his waist and stared into his eyes. As a naïve twenty-year-old wife who only spent ten days with her husband before he left for Saigon, I didn't know what to expect now that he was at home.

"You're scaring me," I said.

"I don't want to talk about Nam," he said. Rubbing his brow with both hands, he fell backward on the bed.

I hushed. Then I stood up and stared at him.

Was I giving him a headache?

For ten months I longed for my prince charming with his award-winning smile to come and deliver me from his wicked mother. I prayed for his safe return and for us to have no prob-

lems with Ma Henderson when we moved out of her house. Oh, I knew she would miss the extra income she got for us living there, but that was her problem. I wanted out. My little family was together for the first time and Vincent didn't want to talk. What was I supposed to do now? Tears dripped from the corners of my eyes and I started sniffing.

I think Vincent heard me sniffing, because he sat up. His white gauze t-shirt revealed big biceps that I didn't recall seeing before. He looked like a strong man.

"Davida, I'm sorry. I'm so tired. It was a long flight. You talk and I'll listen."

Feeling encouraged, I sat beside him and shared the most important things on my mind. He looked at me through half-sleepy eyes.

"Well, I saved nearly all of my monthly allotment checks so we could buy a new house with a FHA 235 loan or purchase one using the GI bill with no money down. We can easily afford our own home."

I thought my excellent stewardship would impress him, but he didn't say a word.

"I opened both a checking and savings account at First Citizens Bank. Both your name and mine are on the accounts."

Vincent listened but said little or nothing more than a grunt. I rattled on and on, trying to bring him up to date in one day.

"I'll go to work to help pay the bills when we get the house. Marriage is supposed to be a partnership where two people work together to get the things they want. Since we both will have jobs, there won't be a financial strain on you."

"Okay, tomorrow we'll start looking around," he said.

Then he slid down in the bed and fell asleep again.

Veda woke up crying as soon as Vincent fell asleep. I ran to the crib, picked her up and stuck a bottle in her mouth so she wouldn't disturb her daddy's rest. I rubbed my nose against her forehead and sang softly to her while sitting in a Lazy Boy recliner.

"House-hunting we will go, house-hunting we will go. Hi ho, my baby-o, house-hunting we will go." Veda sensed my excitement and smiled. After feeding her, I got up and paced the floor, patting her back until she burped. She fell asleep while resting against my shoulder. I stroked her tiny head full of straight black hair.

I loved the tiny bundle in my arms and the sleeping giant in our bed. At half past midnight I put Veda in her crib and then crawled into bed next to my husband. What a day! I was so happy I could scream but I remembered I was in Ma Henderson's house.

Tomorrow! I mean today, will be a great day! I can hardly wait!

Back From Vietnam

VINCENT'S SIDE OF THE bed was empty when I woke up to the sound of my baby's cries. I gathered her in my arms and went to the kitchen to get a bottle of formula.

Ma Henderson was seated at the table facing Vincent. She was wrapped up in her housecoat. He wore Army khakis and a white t-shirt. I never thought about him needing civilian clothes now that he was back with a few extra pounds and muscles.

The two of them were talking and sipping from a coffee mug. I'd never seen him drink coffee before.

What else had I never noticed about him? Was that a new habit?

They stopped talking when I entered the kitchen.

"Good morning you two," I said.

"Hey Babe," he said, looking up at me.

"Good morning," she said, staring at her mug.

I handed Veda to her daddy. He quickly put down the mug and adjusted to the intrusion on their tête-à-tête. I walked over to the refrigerator knowing I'd surprised him, but I knew he would figure out how to hold his daughter, a mug and a conversation with his mama at the same time.

"I tiptoed out of the room because I knew you were tired," he said. "I heard you get up twice during the night. Veda's got some good lungs."

"Yeah, you're right about that. I'm sorry she disturbed you."

"Oh son, you'll get used to hearing her cry," Ma Henderson said. "You got no choice. You're home now. Ya'll can stay here as long as you like."

I heard her comments while staring at the bottle warmer on the counter in front of me and knew she was talking indirectly to me. There was no doubt in my mind that he had already told her that we were going house-hunting today.

"Hun, I want to drive over to the Ford dealership where I used to go and pick out my dream Mustang when I was growing up," Vincent said. "We'll just ride over and look at new cars and come right back home."

"All right," I said. "Give me time to get our baby ready."

I handed him the bottle to feed Veda while I went to get dressed. A cute yellow sweater, tan slacks to match Vincent's, socks and a pair of buddies for foot comfort rounded out my outfit. My husband had missed my entire pregnancy, so now he had to become attracted to the new me, ten pounds heavier after giving birth.

When I returned, his mama was holding Veda.

Had Vincent fed his daughter?

I took Veda from her grandma and cleaned her up so she'd look and smell nice for her daddy. I wrapped her up in a cute Winnie-the-Pooh receiving blanket for the short ride to Liberty Ford. I grabbed a bottle of formula from the refrigerator and rushed outside when I noticed that Vincent and Ma Henderson had already gone out to the car.

Ma Henderson was already in the front passenger seat. I reminded myself that it was her husband's car. Vincent sat behind the wheel but he got out and opened the door for me when I came with Veda. Grateful that chivalry had not died in

Vietnam, I hopped into the rear seat and placed Veda on my lap.

Vincent drove to Liberty Ford dealership, a mile away to check out the new Mustang – our dream car. While he parked the car, a bald, overweight white man wearing a tweed dress jacket with patches on the sleeves, ran out to greet us. As he approached the driver's side of the car, we all smelled a stench.

"Somebody has a serious gas problem," Vincent joked.

"I didn't pass gas," I said.

"And I didn't neither," Ma Henderson said.

The clock showed ten-thirty when Vincent turned off the engine.

Yippee! A few minutes here and then we go house-hunting after we take his mama home.

"Good morning," the salesman said. "Can I show you our newest models today?"

"We're here to look at the new mustangs," Vincent said.

"Well, you've come to the right place. We've got your Mustang. C'mon, let me show ya'll around."

Vincent got out of the car and came around to open the rear passenger door for me. Then he opened the front passenger door for his mother.

I placed my left hand beneath the tiny bundle in my lap and touched something warm and wet. That's when I noticed the brown circle on Veda's blanket where a brown liquid had seeped through. I looked around for the diaper bag that I carried everywhere. Then I remembered running out to the car without it. My baby had diarrhea and I didn't have anything to even wipe my hand.

"Go on without me," I said. I was too embarrassed to get out of the car with a stinky baby and a dark brown stain in the front of my sweater and slacks.

"Veda and I are both a mess and stink. I'll clean us both when we go back home in a few minutes."

Ma Henderson stood outside looking down at the backseat mess I was in.

"Why didn't you bring the diaper bag?" she said.

"I forgot it. Vincent said we're going right back, so it's okay. We'll wait right here. I did bring a bottle just in case Veda wakes us hungry."

"You have to always carry a change of diapers for babies," she chuckled.

"I see that," I said, feeling humiliated in front of Vincent. Ma Henderson knew very well that I always carried a diaper bag with me – except this one time.

"Go on and look. I can survive this odor for a few minutes."

The salesman stood outside watching us like a hawk, waiting for the decision.

Vincent rolled down the front windows a bit to allow air to pass through so the foul odor was more bearable.

A few minutes of looking turned into hours. I sat there, waiting and wondering what they were doing.

Finally, an excited Vincent returned alone at fifteen past three in the afternoon. Ma Henderson wasn't with him. She knew I didn't want to see her.

"They're going to let me take a new car home today! I had to sign all the paperwork to make us the owners of a brand new red Ford Fairlane! The manager needs your signature and a check for \$300 to close the deal."

"What? We only came here to look at Mustangs! Didn't we agree to go house-hunting today?"

"Oh, we will. But we need a car so we can go look at houses."

"I don't get it! Didn't we agree to buy a Mustang? I'm confused."

"Yeah, I know. But I got a good deal on a bigger car. It's a family car. Trust me. You'll like it."

"Family car, huh?"

I sensed the influence of Ma Henderson. He probably brought her along to co-sign for the car that I didn't know we were going to buy today. He held a clipboard in front of me that contained lots of papers and a pen attached to it. He was too excited for me to halt the action and I was too tired and annoyed not to sign. So I signed as instructed wherever I saw the letter "X," being careful to use only my right hand since it had not been contaminated with feces. I couldn't believe I was signing for a car that I had not seen. Vincent hurt my feelings by making a major purchase without consulting me until after he made the commitment. But I was glad his mother was able to see that he needed my signature, not hers.

He took the checkbook out of my purse and held it open while I wrote a check to Liberty Ford for \$300.00.

"You sign the check and that will be your part in this deal," he said.

Purchasing his first car with money I'd saved gave him the ultimate high. He ran away with papers in hand like a lottery winner eager to claim the prize. I didn't like my part in the deal, but I liked the fact that he was fired up, and I was not about to quench the flame.

At three-forty that afternoon, five hours after we arrived, Vincent and his mother returned to the car.

"At last! A few minutes turned into five hours! Please get us out of here."

"I lost all track of time. I'm sorry, Babe. We're going home now." He rolled his window down a little more as he drove away.

"Hey, it's cold back here. Roll that window up. You can smell poop for a few minutes. I've smelled it all day long."

"I didn't know it would take that long," Ma Henderson said.

"Where's the new car we just purchased?" I said.

"They're going to wash it and get it ready for us to pick it up before closing time at six o'clock. Mama helped me pick it out since you couldn't come inside."

Whoop ti do! Oh, you don't say. I never would have guessed.

"Did you enjoy car shopping, Ma Henderson?"

In my heart I knew they made plans while sitting at the kitchen table.

"Oh yes! That was my first time ever shopping for a new car! Did you see us go on a test drive?"

I groaned. She had the new car shopping experience that should have been mine.

"The stink odor knocked me out for most of the five hours you two were gone."

"When we pick up the car, I'll drive the Chevy and you can be the first to drive the Ford back home," Vincent said.

I hushed. He didn't pacify me. If I'd opened my mouth he would have known how angry I was with both of them. He probably would have let his mama drive our new car home if she had her license.

Back at home, Vincent laughed and talked with his mama while I cleaned up my messy baby. Veda would have thanked me if she could talk. After she was clean, I took her straight to Vincent and put her in his arms.

"Your turn for baby duty!" I said, and left the room.

I glanced at Ma Henderson who sat across the table from him with a gaping mouth.

Why don't you tell him how to be a daddy? You know everything.

After bathing and changing my clothes, it was getting close to six o'clock, so I grabbed the diaper bag and went into the kitchen to get Veda.

"Leave the baby with me," Ma Henderson said.

"Yeah, thanks ma." He handed Veda to her and then went and stood at the front door like a horse waiting for the gate to open. "This is our first big moment for the two of us to be together."

Vincent didn't know that this was the first time his mother had ever offered to keep his daughter. I couldn't believe how nice she acted around him.

Being nice, I nodded and kissed Veda's forehead.

"Mommy and daddy will be back soon. Okay?" I said.

"I bet you'd run out that door if she answered you back," Ma Henderson said.

Vincent laughed. He took my hand and pulled me toward the front door. For the first time in months I had something other than war and a baby to think about. I felt real good, like a young lady going out on a date with the man she loves.

At the car dealership, the salesman drove the shiny red Fairlane in front of us and stopped. He got out, left the driver's

door open and handed Vincent a set of keys for the ignition and for the trunk. I slid behind the wheel and saw another set dangling from the ignition of the running car. Following a quick tutorial on how to operate light switches, brakes, wipers and mirrors, it was time for me to drive our new car off the lot.

Dang! I got more instructions by the salesman for handling a new car than I got at the hospital for handling a live baby who will be in my life much longer than a car. We got an owner's manual for the car, and nothing but a tiny identification card and hospital discharge papers for our baby.

God made me a baby carrier and didn't give me any instructions. Wow! I messed up today, but I'm learning that parenting is a big job for life.

"Follow me home Mrs. Davida Henderson, you new car owner," Vincent said. His smile diffused my anger. I was now a wife with a husband I could see, hear, and touch. My daily letter writing days were over.

With mixed feelings of gladness and sadness, I followed the Chevy.

Vincent got so excited about a new car that he never even thought about the family he'd left in the car. I'm sure his mother stayed away just for spite so I could learn a good lesson about always carrying a diaper bag.

"Things will be different once we get our own house," I vowed, as I parked the new Ford Fairlane in the Henderson driveway.

Pa, and Ma Henderson, with Veda in her arms, stood ready to examine our new vehicle as soon as I opened the driver's door. I welcomed my baby into my arms and went inside the house.

Let them savor the moment.

That evening at dinner, my mother-in-law gave her husband a step-by-step account of the new car purchase and the reasons why she and Vincent chose the Fairlane rather than a Mustang.

"Davida sat in the car with the baby the whole time we looked at all those new cars because she didn't bring..."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I muttered. "She's the flawless Christian who never makes a mistake! Good for her!" I blotted her out with good thoughts of house-hunting. I knew they would laugh about my confinement to the car.

From now on I know to expect the unexpected from babies, in-laws, war veterans, and a man with a new car.

What Makes a House a Home?

“WE CAN GO HOUSE-HUNTING tomorrow,” Vincent said in our room that night. “I didn’t know buying a new car would take a whole day.”

“Do you promise? I can’t take any more surprises.”

“Oh baby, I promise. We have to have a car to drive around looking at houses. I’m really sorry about the baby boo boo, too. You did a good job of handling that.”

“Thank you. I hope that never happens again, on my watch or yours.”

“You wear those few extra pounds well,” he whispered.

“Thanks. Those big biceps of yours are quite attractive, Mr. Henderson.”

Vincent put his arms around me and I forgot all about the mama drama that day. Confidence in birth control pills prescribed by Dr. Bowman allowed me to freely enjoy consummating our marriage again. I stuffed a hand towel in his mouth to keep him quiet out of respect for his parents across the hall. Frustration is a catalyst for action. He mumbled “house-hunting” in his sleep.

I got up early the next morning and was already dressed and sitting at the kitchen table reading Webster’s Dictionary definition of “house” when Vincent came out of the bathroom.

“I smell fish!” he said, entering the kitchen. He sat down at the table licking his lips.

Ma Henderson had left her son some hot grits simmering on a top burner and fried catfish in the oven wrapped in alu-

minum foil. I went to the electric Kenmore stove to fix his plate.

"Your mother told me to make sure breakfast was hot when I served it to you."

His fork sank into the pile of grits like a diver plunging into the deep end of a pool. Ma Henderson knew how to please her son, and I was learning.

"I looked up the definition of house versus home," I said, sitting across the table from him. "A house is a building or enclosure in which people live or a residence. A home is a place where one's domestic affections are centered. Living with in-laws while my heart yearned for a place of my own meant I lived in a house, not a home. That's why we have to be quiet here like we had to do at Regina's when we first got married. We need our own home."

"I'm ready," he said with stuffed jaws. "Living in the house with my parents doesn't feel good. A man needs his own house. I mean home."

I placed *The State* newspaper beside his plate. It was folded to the real estate ads.

"St. Andrews Estates is a brand new subdivision with homes that require no money down with the GI loan," I said.

Veda started crying at the top of her lungs and I ran to check on her.

"Excuse me. Duty calls. Eat and enjoy while I get Veda ready to go. You can bet I won't forget her diaper bag this time."

"I know you won't."

"Calm down! Mommy's coming!" I said, running down the hall to our bedroom.

About an hour later, my family was riding through the arched entrance to St. Andrews Estates. All of the houses were newly constructed but some were occupied because cars were parked in the driveway or draperies covered the windows.

"Oh, look at that house!" I said, pointing to one in a cul-de-sac.

Vincent drove the Fairlane that we nicknamed Farlie into the driveway of a beautiful brick veneer, three-bedroom house with a large front and back yard and an adjacent garage. The house had everything I wished for while growing up.

"This is perfect for us! Oh Vincent, what do you think?"

"Ohhhhh, I don't know. Even if we buy it with no money down under the GI bill we still have to pay on it every month. We already have to pay Ford Motor Credit. Next you're going to want furniture. Don't forget, I don't have a job yet."

"We both will get a job." I patted his thigh to remind him that he had me.

We jumped out and stood looking through the picture window when a black middle-aged man drove his Chevrolet Impala into the driveway behind Farlie.

"Hey there! I'm Arnold, the only real estate agent you'll ever need. I know you want to look inside and I've got your key." He got out of the car carrying a leather briefcase.

"We sure do want to take a look inside," Vincent said. "Outside looks pretty good."

"Inside looks even better," Arnold said, unlocking the door.

I entered first and went straight across the living room and into the den and kitchen area. Right away I noticed a tall rectangular space.

"Hey, where's the refrigerator?"

"Women always ask, 'Where's the refrigerator?'" Arnold said. "You will need to install your own. People like different styles to meet their family size and needs. That's your choice. Go on, take your time and look around at everything that *is* here."

Arnold laid his briefcase on the kitchen counter and began rummaging through it.

Vincent and I stared at each other for a moment, and then we dashed off like children set free to roam in a candy store. Together we explored all three bedrooms, two bathrooms and the closets. Staring through the picture window, I marveled at the beauty of the clear blue skies. The brightness of the sunbeams filled the large living room. Then we went outside through the sliding glass patio door. That's where Vincent took my hand.

"Davida, this looks like a nice place for a backyard wedding."

"You're right. But since I'm already Mrs. Henderson, I'd prefer to spend money on a home of our own rather than a wedding. That's why I deposited most of my allotment money."

"Smart woman. Do you think we can afford to live here?"

"Yes! All things are possible if you only believe. But we must make it happen."

We admired the view of the neighbor's brick houses and lawns from the back, front, and sides of our house. Living in the cul-de-sac would mean less traffic, a safer play area for Veda, more privacy and peace.

The last area we inspected before returning to the kitchen was the two-car garage that housed connections for our own

washer and dryer. I visualized my dream powder blue mustang parked beside Farlie.

"House-hunting is fun," he said.

"Yeah! This house feels right. I could see it becoming our home."

We looked at each other. He kissed me on my cheek and we both giggled like little children in the toy department of Sears.

"While growing up in the country, we grew almost everything we ate. So I always said I want nothing but grass and a few trees growing in my yard. Just like this."

I'd found my dream house but I knew better than to rush Vincent. He had to feel good about his decision. Our own private corner in a barn would be better than tipping around on eggshells in his parents' house.

We were still holding hands when we returned to the kitchen through the garage entrance. Veda slept through the whole tour in her daddy's arm.

Arnold smiled when he saw us. He seemed eager to run and stick the SOLD sign in the front yard. We found him standing in the combined den and kitchen area clicking a Bic pen and pointing to a stack of papers spread out on the countertop.

"Sign here!" The papers were calling Mr. and Mrs. Henderson.

"Under the GI bill you can buy this house right now with no money down and get a low interest rate," Arnold said. "You'll have a couple of months before the first mortgage payment comes due. That's enough time for the VA to help you find a job and for you to get a few paychecks under your belt before you start making payments. I know a nice family man like you

got an honorable discharge, so I can run the credit check today and put your family in your own home in no time."

Oh, he said "home." To me Arnold said the magic word that should have reminded Vincent of my *house* versus *home* definitions.

"Just like that?" Vincent said. "I just returned from Nam two days ago. I haven't even picked up my DD 214 yet."

"Yep." He nodded at Vincent. "We don't need to see it. Uncle Sam made it easy for you guys. Your history shows up when we run a credit check."

"We don't have any furniture yet," I said.

"You can move in and furnish one room at a time," Arnold said, looking at me.

"Give us a few minutes to talk it over." Vincent turned to me and said, "Davida..."

"You know I love this house! I can't wait to make it our home."

"All right." Vincent reached for the Bic pen in Arnold's hand. "Where do I sign?"

I glued my mouth shut to prevent any sound during the signing of several papers. The deal wasn't final until the last paper was signed. On the outside I was calm, but on the inside the real me kept shouting HALLELUJAH! Firecrackers popped in my head. Arnold's stare warned me to hush. Furniture could always be added later.

Arnold briefly explained each printed page. Vincent signed first and then I signed as co-owner. We did the same thing for six carbonated pages. It seemed like we were signing our lives away. Since Arnold had worked several years for Century 21, we trusted him to work everything out for us just like he said.

Vincent backed out of the driveway at 6508 Miracle Trail, I blew a see-you-later kiss to the new house that would soon become our home.

"Do you realize that we bought a house in two hours?" I said.

"Gosh, is that all? That was quicker than buying this car."

"Yeah, and we didn't spend one dime. I had no idea it was that easy. Thank you for the experience, Mr. Henderson."

"It was a pleasure to share it with you, Mrs. Henderson."

The car shopping experience that he had with his mother came to mind but I didn't mention it. That would have upset me all over again.

"Savor the moment," I told myself.

"Let's not mention the house until we get VA approval," Vincent said.

"I agree. Let's keep it our *big* secret." I think he needed to find the right words to break the news to his mother who missed out on this experience.

We went back to the Henderson home and started our job search by reading *The State* Newspaper employment section.

The following week Vincent and I rode together to apply for work at NARCO Chemical – a plant that made textiles. We reported to the same personnel office but met with different interviewers. Vincent was the first one called in since he had preferential treatment as a veteran.

After my interview, I returned to Farlie and saw Vincent sitting in the car, grinning. I stopped in front of the windshield and did the Bounce while waving the company brochure. It was celebration time.

Vincent jumped out of the car, hugged me and we kissed. Then he opened the car door for me like the gentleman I'd grown to love.

"Get in Mrs. Davida Henderson, new mother, new homeowner, new employee."

"Thank you Mr. Vincent Henderson. You and Farlie made it all possible."

I waited for him to slide behind the wheel. Then I opened the brochure and read a section as he drove back to his parents' house:

Listen to this. In the Doffing Department, employees are required to work swing shifts from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon for seven days. Following one day off, you will return to work from four in the afternoon until midnight for seven days. After two days off you will return for seven days from midnight until eight in the morning. Then after four days off, the cycle of rotating shifts will be repeated.

"We've got to find a good babysitter for these work hours."

"Don't worry. My mama can help out with Veda when we work the evening and night shift."

"Umm... Yeah. Your mama! That's a good idea. You ask her."

"I'll ask her but I already know she'll say yes."

His mama will be in our business again. But he's right. She only works part-time during the day.

The following Monday we began day shift together. But on Thursday, Vincent was transferred to a different shift and to the Creel Department that made yarn.

"Did you tell them that we only have one car?" I said.

"We'll have to work out a car schedule so we can still get Veda to the babysitter."

"That's not the way we planned things," I said.

Ma Henderson had to be informed, and I was the one to tell her.

"I might be late getting home to my baby when I have to wait for Vincent to bring the car. But I'll get here as soon as I can."

"I won't complain if you come late. The good Lord blessed ya'll with jobs that pay good money. More hours mean a bigger blessing for me."

Oh no! Now she knows how much we earn. Her son tells her all our business.

I deposited my first weekly paycheck before we went shopping for a bedroom suite and sofa at Kimbrell's Furniture Store. Vincent paid fifty-dollars down and got more credit extended to us. Credit felt pretty good. We agreed to leave the mahogany furniture on layaway in the store pending approval of the home loan. Then we would have it delivered.

"That's all the debt we're getting in," Vincent said. "Don't even think of furnishing that whole house."

"But we need to buy a refrigerator. Otherwise we won't have any place to store our food and Veda's formula."

"See, the bills are stacking up and we haven't started paying any of them yet."

Vincent shook his head like he was struggling with a decision. He cleared his throat and propped his clasped hands beneath his chin. That meant he was unsure about what to say. Serving in Vietnam had not changed that habit.

"Don't worry," I said, massaging his back. "Every house needs a refrigerator. I told you I'm going to help you get everything we need."

"Okay. A refrigerator. That's the last thing!"

"Yes!" I hugged him, grateful for his compliance with my request. "Thank you husband."

A refrigerator is a no brainer. That was an unnecessary fight.

My husband had earned my respect by the impressive way he put his foot down. His firmness made me feel safe with him as head of our family.

"I love you," I whispered when we snuggled close that night.

"I love you, too, Babe. You're pulling things out of me I never knew were in me."

Shift Work

ON MY FIRST DAY at NARCO Chemical, I was assigned to a team of four female doffers in which a tall, skinny, light-skinned lady named Darlene was the captain. She had seven years experience as a wife and six years threading machines that converted fibers to yarn. She taught me my job and a whole lot of other things, too.

Darlene and I talked during each fifteen-minute break in a soundproof room.

"All this running should burn off my ten pounds of baby fat," I said.

"Oh yeah! You'll get used to running from machine to machine in no time." She reached under her t-shirt, pulled a tiny purse out of her bra and showed me a picture of two boys. "See how chubby I was after I had my twins. I was twice your size when I came here. My twins are three now. This work will whip you in shape and keep you slim."

"Wow!" I stared at her twins for a moment. "I gained twenty pounds when I was pregnant. I can't wait to get rid of the extra weight."

I tried to imagine carrying two babies at one time. She must have been huge.

"Pounds will fall off and stay off. I'm a witness."

She tucked her photo into the miniature purse and hid it again inside what looked like a size DD bra. I would have been embarrassed to let people see me take a purse out of my brassiere. But not, Darlene! I was amazed at the way she

let nothing bother her, including a leather purse with a metal snap in her bosom.

"I bet you could teach me a lot about this thing called marriage. I really didn't know what I was getting into when I told the preacher, 'I do'."

"Well, my husband and I had five good years together. But lately it's been "hell!" Harold is an only child. Two years ago my father-in-law died of lung cancer after smoking three packs of cigarettes a day for thirty years. My mother-in-law came to live with us 'cause she's scared to stay in the house by herself. She never worked outside the home during the whole forty-two years they were married. Lucky me, huh?"

"My husband and I just bought a house so we could move out of my in-laws' house. They need to have their own space and I hope we never have to prepare a room for his mother or father."

"In this life we plan to say 'no' but foul balls have a way of circling back to hit us between the eyes just when we think we've batted a homerun."

"You're right about that. I thought I was safe from pregnancy and along came Veda."

"I'm glad they assigned you to my team. I'm going to help you in everyway I can."

We returned to the floor and Darlene showed me how to work faster and smarter by using shortcuts when loading creels of yarn, threading and doffing machines. She talked fast and worked like a beaver. By her doing more than her share of the work, I was able to keep up with the experienced women on the other side of the machine while in training.

During lunch break we talked again.

"You can ask me anything about NARCO, the work, anybody who works here, marriage...really anything. I've been here six years. I know which supervisors might backstab you and which ones you can trust. I know the workers and the slackers. I know shortcuts to finishing early so you can have longer breaks..."

"I'm so glad to be on your team. You're just what I need right now. On a personal note, my husband is his mama's favorite son. What's it like being married to an only son?"

"The same as you being married to a mama's boy. You just have to let your mother-in-law know where you stand. But you should wait until you move into your own home, though."

We both laughed.

"The wait is almost over. I don't know if I can last on this job, but I know I have to work."

"Oh, don't worry. Everybody felt that way on the first day. You're a new mother, a new wife and a new daughter-in-law. You're learning how to be all those things plus a new doffer at the same time. That's a lot. You'll do fine."

Her words were soothing. I felt overwhelmed with details and didn't think I could keep up the fast-paced work. By the end of my first day, my jeans gave my gut more breathing room.

We moved into our own home on Miracle Trail in Columbia during Vincent's four-day weekend. I worked graveyard shift the day we moved. I went to work tired that night and Vincent was late picking me up the next morning. By the time he arrived, I was livid.

"Don't you realize that I'm tired when I get off work? I'm ready to go home."

"Don't get mad at me! I overslept. I'm human. I was beat after moving yesterday and driving you to work last night. And you know Veda wakes up crying during the night."

"All right! Now you know some of what I go through." I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes. I sighed with relief. Thank God I didn't have to drive.

At work the next night I told Darlene about our first argument.

"Yesterday the challenge of having only one car slapped me in the face. Vincent drives me to work and takes the car home so he can drive back for his shift. Then I drive the car home when my shift ends so I can pick him up later. We seldom have the good fortune of being assigned to the same shift. Many times I can't remember whether I'm going or coming from work."

"Girl, I know what you mean. My mother-in-law lives with us so we don't have to take the twins to a sitter. But oh, how I wish we had some privacy like you two. She's an old widow and she ain't going nowhere except to heaven, or maybe hell. I'm not sure which one."

"You need to stop joking like that."

"Sometimes she's so evil I wonder if she'd be nicer if she didn't go to church at all. Even my children say she's evil. Everything is all about her. Keeping her comfortable. Cooking her foods that diabetics eat. Getting her medicine. Taking her to the doctor. Taking her to her itty-bitty church across town where she's the announcement clerk. Cheering her up when she's depressed. Girl, you got it good. You can say "good-bye" and hang up the phone on your mother-in-law. Not me. Yak, yak, yak is all I hear when I'm at home. I can do nothing

right. She forgot we were married five years and got along fine before she came to live with us."

"I don't like having somebody else take care of my baby. But I have to trust his mother to babysit while I work holidays, evenings and night shift. Day care centers provide care during the day. It's hard to find time to sleep when you've got a baby. Around our house, I seldom know what to do, when to do it, or where to do it, especially when it comes to getting sleep and pleasing my husband. I do a lot of things to keep the peace because we have Veda."

"I know you know that a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. And a girl's gotta do a whole lot."

"Everybody talks about the bliss in marriage but nobody told me about the blisters. I'm trying to get a grip on things before blisters turn into boils."

As we walked back to the work floor, Darlene laid her hand on my shoulder and said, "I wouldn't trade my problems with you for all the tea in China."

"And I wouldn't trade mine with you for anything in the world."

We doffed the first machine (collected bobbins of thread), cleaned it and began stringing it up again for the next shift. We knew what to do, when and where to do it according to a tiny schedule given us each day.

Marriage would be boring if we did the same thing the same way day after day with no problems.

All night we worked and talked, especially when we doffed a machine early.

"I'm usually exhausted by the time I get home. Yet Vincent expects me to cook, clean house, take care of Veda, shop,

wash, iron, and so on, plus make myself look attractive for him. He works and then relaxes when he comes home. He expects his food to be hot, except when he goes out to play dominoes with his buddies. Women don't get a fair shake in this thing called marriage. I had no idea what I was getting myself into."

"Marriage is what you make it. Harold knows he's got to help out at home. You've got one baby. Think about me with twin boys. That's double trouble."

"I can only imagine."

Darlene was right about the work at NARCO whipping me into shape. I lost twenty pounds during my first two months. The weight loss gave me a sense of accomplishment. That is, until Ma Henderson commented about it one afternoon that I wore a new purple pants suit.

I handed her some money for babysitting and she looked me up and down like I was a mannequin.

"Gracious! You lost a lot of weight! Are you sure you ain't sick? I know my son. Nothing wants a bone but a dog, you know."

Now I'm too skinny for her precious son.

Why didn't she say anything about the good money I paid her to keep Veda while I worked my butt off? A simple 'thank you' would have been fine. I knew not to give her a piece of my mind for being so rude, because that would mean I let her bring me down to her level. With nothing to say, I drove away feeling proud of having self-control and my own home.

My family enjoyed the benefits of having our own home. Sometimes I cleaned up, and other times I ignored the mess. Veda was free to cry loud and long without my hurrying to quiet her down. Vincent and I were free to make as much

noise as we wanted in our bedroom. We could walk through the house nude if we wanted to do that, too. There was no one to tap on our bedroom door and disturb our time together. In fact, we never even closed our bedroom door because the nursery was across the hall.

Whatever the challenges of homeownership, they were worth it.

The Onslaught of Blisters

BEFORE LONG, UNWANTED, UNEXPECTED, ugly things started popping up everywhere. Painful blisters that could not be ignored attacked our marital bliss.

Blister #1 Unclear Roles

Vincent and I had to answer to no one but each other. We had to solve our own problems. Sharing one car was a major challenge for us because Farlie had to go far, averaging eighty miles per day and four trips back and forth.

“Our second argument was over the car, again,” I told Darlene one night at work. “Vincent showed up so late that I wondered if he would come at all.”

Darlene listened. I could tell she was thinking about a solution.

“You’ve got to stand up for your rights or Vincent will walk all over you.”

The next time Vincent was late I yelled at him.

“The car is always here when you get off! Why don’t you do the same for me?”

“Sometimes things come up. Today my mama needed me to take her to the doctor cause her blood pressure was up.”

“Why didn’t she call her own husband? Can’t you see how insensitive and irresponsible you are? Why should I have to wonder when you’ll get here with the car? I know you’re re-adjusting to civilian life but I have to pick up Veda from the

babysitter's house. Plus I'm tired and want to go home at the end of my shift. Why can't you understand how I feel when Farlie is not here on time?"

"I'm sorry," he said for the thousandth time.



When I came home from work nothing was done at home. When he came home I had meals prepared and other household chores done.

"Don't you know that men are supposed to share household responsibilities?" I said while cooking dinner, as Vincent sat in front of the television like his daddy.

"A man is supposed to provide for his family. I do that. You work because you want more than I can pay for by myself. The wife is supposed to run the house and make her husband feel like a king in his home. That's what my mama taught me. All my daddy ever did was go out and earn the money, bring it home and give it to my mama. She buys the bacon and pays the bills with it."

"Your mama works too!"

"Yeah, that's only because she wants a few extra things. She doesn't make enough money ironing other people's clothes to count that as a job."

"Just remember, I'm not your mama. It's a new day now. My contribution to our standard of living is important. Don't take me for granted."

Blister #2 Unreasonable Expectations

That evening Vincent criticized the meal I threw together. I fixed his colorful plate of canned Del Monte whole kernel corn,

cut green beans and Libby's corned beef hash. He pushed it away as soon as I set it in front of him.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah, but I want real food. I want the kind of meals you have to sweat over like my mama prepares for my daddy."

"What! I told you I'm not your mama. She taught you how to cook. Cook your own meals if you want that kind."

"A woman's job is to please her husband. Sometimes I eat this stuff, but I feel like a real meal today. Give me something else."

"I have a baby to care for, the house to clean, and a job just like you. I'm telling you that I get tired and need your cooperation, just in case you haven't noticed that I happen to be human."

"I know where I can go and get some real food."

He got up, walked out without saying another word and drove away.

It didn't matter that he was gone for hours. I needed a break and I enjoyed my peace.

Blister #3 Disrespect

One day when Vincent was off, he failed to pick me up from work. After waiting more than an hour, I called Darlene – who had her own car – to come and rescue me. Marital advice came with the ride.

"I don't know where Vincent is but I believe he's okay. I just wish he'd told me he wasn't coming back for me."

"I trained Harold to come straight home after work. He also knows to call me to get permission before working a double-shift."

"How do you train a grown man?"

"You talk to him like you talk to a child and tell him what you will and will not tolerate. That's how."

"But shouldn't he use common sense?"

"Everybody doesn't have common sense. It's only common if it's not foreign to them. Put your foot down and don't back off."

"Most of the time I suffer silently because I'm afraid I'll explode when I open my mouth. Vincent begged me to marry him, so I refuse to beg him to treat me like his wife. When I cook hot meals on my days off and he doesn't come straight home from work, I eat and then hide the leftovers in the freezer. I know they call that being passive aggressive, but it feels good to hear him searching the freezer for something to eat late at night."

"Everything you say, I've already done it. That's all part of his training. You can teach, but can't make him learn the lessons."

We laughed. She had a clever way of shooting from the hips even though she barely had any.

"I can't share marital problems with my mama because she's too hard on men. One time I told her Vincent didn't come home after work and I was afraid something bad had happened to him. The first thing that flew out of her mouth was, 'I told you men are cheaters!' I don't want to hear that."

"Your mama might have a point there. She's been around long enough to teach you a few things. But I know you don't want to hear that."

"If I complain to my mother-in-law, she defends her son. She'll say, 'Vincent needs some time to settle down after com-

ing back from the war. Be patient with him and give him some space.' I can't trust his sister Regina to tell the truth. My best friend Elaine, who married Vincent's brother Danny, hides the problems in her marriage. She pretends everything is okay when anyone who knows her can tell that she's going through a lot. So, you're an angel sent from heaven. Thank you for listening to another day in the life of Davida Kincaid Henderson."

"Davida, whenever I talk to you, I see how far God has brought me in my marriage. Don't you feel better when you talk about all that ugly stuff? Some people try to hide the pain in their marriage. They don't know others on the outside can see problems in their face and eyes and the way they behave. Marital problems are like blisters on your face. Everybody sees them but you, unless you take a good look in the mirror."

"Before I met you I dumped everything on God in prayer. Then one time I felt like I would explode if I didn't talk to a person who could talk back to me. Ever since that night when I talked to Ms. Ethel, I stopped being ashamed of my problems and started telling people what I'm going through. We'll never know who can help if we don't share. I'm learning how to be a wife, and learners make mistakes."

"It's dangerous keeping garbage inside you. It can cause serious stress-related health problems. Stress is a killer. I refuse to let Harold drive me crazy or make me commit a homicide or a suicide. My twins need their mama. I'm telling you, Veda deserves to have a healthy and happy mama. Don't let Vincent stress you out!"

Blister #4 Unfaithfulness

"I know of a lot of military wives who cheated while their husbands were in Vietnam. Maybe I would have been better off had I been unfaithful. Vincent arranged for me to stay with his parents while he was gone. Hmm.... perhaps he's smarter than I thought."

"Yeah, he outsmarted you," Darlene said, laughing.

"Why didn't I think of that before he left? He knew I was already pregnant. So I didn't have to worry about getting pregnant again. Is this my reward for my being faithful to one man, saving my allotment checks, praying and writing letters everyday and waiting patiently for him to return? What about me? Don't I deserve to be happy?"

"Marriage has an adjustment period. You've got to sink before you swim. Just be careful not to drown while you're thrashing around in the water."

"What happened to the bliss in our marriage? How can we retrieve it? That's what I'd like to know. He has to know that one person can't make a marriage work."

"He knows that! I'm not taking sides, but maybe this time your mother-in-law is right. He needs time to adjust after coming back from Vietnam. Uncle Sam needs to do a much better job of looking after their "government issue" after these GIs return home."

"I know you're right. Thanks for the lift."

I felt a few more pounds lighter when Darlene dropped me off at home.

Blister #5 Deception & Distress

Vincent came home with a lame excuse about being stuck in traffic on I-26 and unable to find a phone booth to call my job or his mother. On the morning of his no show appearance, he claimed that he arrived two hours late and I had left NARCO. So he visited his mother to avoid a fight.

After that day, he picked me up whenever he dropped me off at work. That means he sometimes didn't bother to come home to take me to work. In that way he could say get home the same way you got to work. I think he forgot that I was working to help him pay the bills.

Oddly, Farlie would not start whenever I was at home and Vincent went out with his buddies. Since he never had a problem starting our new car, I suspected he did something to prevent me from driving it.

One Saturday afternoon I told Vincent that Veda and I were going to visit my mother while he went out with the fellows.

"Please don't do anything to keep me from driving *our* car this time. I've told you where I'm going."

"Farlie will be waiting for you in front of the garage."

Through the picture window I watched him stroll past our car and get in the backseat of his buddy's Cadillac. Then I went outside, buckled Veda in her car seat and slid behind the wheel.

I turned the key in the ignition, but Farlie made no sound.

"I told him I was going to Mama's house!" I yelled, pounding the steering wheel with both fists.

After releasing the hood latch, I jumped out of the car determined to find out what Vincent had done to prevent the engine from starting. I lifted the hood and searched in vain for a missing part. Nothing. Through teary eyes, I walked

along the driveway searching the grass for anything that might resemble an automobile part.

"I'm going to find out what he did to this car!" I cried.

I knew I was making a public spectacle of myself in front of my neighbor who was sitting on her front porch. But I didn't care. I saw her watching me. A couple of times she even leaned over to say something to the woman seated next to her.

I shook the hedges like a madwoman. Then, a round black gadget, tucked inside the hedge closest to the garage door, dropped on the ground.

"Aha! I found it!"

I didn't know what it was or what to do with it, but I knew I'd found it. I picked up the part then ran over and poked my head under the hood. I fussed aloud as I tried in vain to attach the missing piece. Everybody knows pieces to a jigsaw puzzle must fit somewhere.

"Where does it fit?" I said.

"Can I help you?"

A woman's calm voice startled me. I stood erect. Beside me stood my next-door neighbor, a military housewife and mother of six.

"I'm trying to find out where this piece fits. My husband took it off to keep the car from starting. It must fit somewhere right under my nose, but I don't know where."

"Please allow me to show you where to put the distributor cap?"

Wow! Here's a woman who knows the name of automobile parts.

I handed her the round black gadget that was shaped like a cup. With the experience of a mechanic, she screwed the distributor cap in the proper place.

"You did it!"

"Believe me, I've learned a lot in my twenty-two years of marriage. It took some time before I realized my husband was the culprit. Your husband doesn't want you to go out when he's not here, because you might run into him."

"Oh, so that's why the car won't start when he's gone."

"You've got to stop feeling sorry for yourself and fight back. Otherwise he'll keep you upset. I bet you he won't try this trick again. I'm next door whenever you need me."

"Thank you so much."

"No, thank you for allowing me to help. Some young people don't think we 'old heads' know anything. Enjoy your evening with your mother."

She was walking away when I started the car. Farlie's engine purred as usual. It was late that afternoon when I arrived at mama's house in the country. She was in the kitchen making a pound cake. My little siblings gathered around me in the living room and made a fuss over Veda.

"Oh no! I'm out of McCormick pure vanilla extract!" My mama cried like her best friend had died. I knew that flavor was the last, but necessary ingredient, she added to cake batter. And only McCormick would do.

"I'll run to the store and get some," I said.

Leaving Veda with Vera, my teenage sister, I ran out to the car. My ten and eight-year-old sisters, April and Gladys, ran behind me.

"Can we go, too?" they said.

"Hop in."

I headed down the deserted country road to the nearest store four miles away. We'd gone almost three miles when Farlie made a weird noise and then the right front side slumped down.

"Thump! Thump! Thump."

"Oh no! I've got a flat tire!"

At first I continued driving slowly, trying to reach the main road where there would be other drivers who might stop and help me. But I became concerned about causing more damage to the car. I stopped on the asphalt road without pulling over so a driver would know something was wrong. A full moon provided light and revealed the entrance to Corinthian Baptist Church's cemetery.

"What are we gonna do?" April said.

"I'm scared," Gladys said. "Dead people might get us."

"Awww Vincent! I'm so mad at you right now. I asked you to show me how to change a flat. But no! You said, 'You don't need to know that. Just call me and I'll come and fix it.' So where are you now when I need you? How can I call with no phone out here?"

"What are we gonna do?" April said.

"Wait here," I said.

I got out and left the girls in the car. The jack was with the spare tire hidden underneath carpet in the trunk. I removed the jack and set it in place beneath the side of the car that had the flat.

"Get out of the car before I jack it up" I said, thinking their weight would make me have to work harder.

My sisters got out and stood near me watching the cemetery, as I removed the flat tire and replaced it with the new one.

Not a single car passed us as I worked in the moonlight. Anger toward Vincent drove out fear as I rushed to get us out of that God-forsaken place.

I changed the tire, tightened the bolts with the lug wrench and then tried to let the car back down. The jack handle would not budge. I tried again and again to let the car down, but nothing happened. Desperate, I asked the girls for help.

"You two lift the front end while I snatch the jack from under the car."

They tried lifting, but that was a dumb idea.

Finally, I got so frustrated that I yelled at Vincent.

"I told you to show me how to change a tire before this happened! Now look at me!"

With tears streaming down my face, I kicked the jack handle as hard as I could.

"Click! Click! Click!"

The car inched down like a heavy ball dropping one step at a time. We stared in amazement until it stopped dropping.

"Yay! You did it!" the girls said. They didn't realize how astonished I was.

I tossed the jack and jack handle in the truck and we hopped back in and headed to the service station next door to Piggley Wiggley.

"This was my first time changing a tire," I told the mechanic. "I don't know if the lugs are on tight enough for us to be safe."

He checked them with a lug wrench and each one was already tight.

"You did great, ma'am! They couldn't be any tighter if I'd fastened them with the machine."

His words boosted my confidence level to one hundred percent. I did it! I didn't need a man to change the tire. I learned how to do it myself.

We went inside the store, got Mama's vanilla extract and an ice cream sandwich for each of us to have the special treat we deserved. We rode back to the country singing a song that I made up to the tune of "The Bear Went Over The Mountain":

"She had a flat tire on the way, she had a flat tire on the way, she had a flat tire on the way, and changed it by herself. She changed it by herself, she changed it by herself, she had a flat tire on the way, and changed it by herself."

That night I removed the distributor cap when I returned home and hid it under our bed. When Vincent went out to drive the car the next morning, it didn't start. He searched outside a long time before he came inside.

"Where's the distributor cap?" he huffed.

"In a safe place where only I can find it. If you ever pull that dirty trick again I'll throw it away next time and neither of us will go anywhere. I learned a lot about cars last night."

My bold declaration put an end to Vincent's car trick. Mama was right when she said on the day we married, "You have to be strong from now on." Darlene and a veteran wife had given me great advice. I was not too proud to accept help. I wanted my marriage to work.

A wise wife needs her own toolkit and skills to know when, where and how to use each tool. The unexpected could happen anywhere, at any time.

Blister #6 Financial Matters

Two thousand, four hundred fifteen dollars remained in our savings account after purchasing the house, the car, and furniture for the dining room, den, our bedroom and the refrigerator. I continued making regular deposits every payday and brought the total savings to more than three thousand dollars.

One payday I came home and saw seven fancy dress suits, shirts, slacks and matching shoes for each outfit spread out like a colorful quilt on our bed. I assumed Vincent had spent his entire paycheck on outfits for himself.

"What's all this?" I said.

"I haven't bought any new clothes much since I came home. It's time for me to start dressing better."

"Are you still going to pay the mortgage?"

"Yeah, I'm going to pay." He handed me the usual five hundred dollars cash.

I guess he couldn't wait until Christmas to see what gifts he'll get, I thought.

Vincent slid open the sliding closet doors and began rearranging his clothes to make room for his new wardrobe.

"Your job requires casual work clothes. Where are you going to wear dress suits? Are you going to start going to church again?"

"Can't I just want to dress up sometimes?"

"Sure. A working man is entitled to buy new clothes. I just wish you had told me about the shopping spree so I could have bought myself some new clothes, too."

Convinced that he planned to dress up to go to nightclubs, I left him alone. I didn't have the energy to argue about his new clothes, especially since he had already spent the money.

I left him arranging the suits and shoes and went to prepare dinner.

A couple of days before Christmas, I went to First Citizens Bank to make my usual deposit in our savings account. The balance the teller stamped in my yellow savings book was very wrong and I spoke up.

"Hey, this shows a balance of two hundred dollars. That's a big mistake. I had over two thousand dollars in the account before the one hundred I deposited today."

We argued for almost half an hour about the mistake.

"Please let me speak to a manager," I said.

The confused teller went to get a manager who came and helped her to examine documents. They discussed the matter while I waited patiently at the teller's window. I was confident that they would discover the bank error. The young teller showed the older woman a gold signature card and they both smiled.

"Mrs. Henderson, I see the problem," the manager said, approaching the window with the gold card in her hand. "This is a joint account. Last week Vincent Henderson came in and withdrew all but the one hundred dollar minimum required to keep the account open. He requested cash. Here's a copy of the withdrawal slip." She showed me the document containing Vincent's gigantic chicken scratch signature.

"What! He did this without the savings book?"

"Yes. He didn't need the book. Is he your husband?"

"Yes. He was when I came in here! I put his name on the account. Now take it off."

I twirled and headed for the exit. I was angry enough to hurt somebody.

Driving home I thought about the flashy suits and matching shoes he'd laid out on our bed. He wanted me to see how he spent the money I saved. All those months I sacrificed my desires in order to build a comfortable nest egg for our family, and he wiped it out in one transaction. I felt like an idiot. Vincent kept doing things that caught me off guard. What could I do? He'd already spent the money.

A joint account is not supposed to mean 'I deposit' and 'you withdraw.'

Escalation of Blister Assaults

MARITAL PROBLEMS ESCALATE WHEN they go unchecked. Addressing one problem can lead to the discovery of another in the same way that a rotten spot on one strawberry can contaminate the entire batch.

Blister #7 Ingratitude

On a Friday evening, eleven months after Vincent returned from Vietnam, I was in the kitchen washing dishes when I heard a loud thud. It sounded like a tree had fallen into our house or somebody had jumped in through the window. I dropped my wet dishcloth in the sink and ran down the hall to our bedroom.

What the heck was that?

I ran toward the noise wondering how a tree or a person could fall through a tiny bathroom window located high above the ground. At first I put my ear to the bathroom door and heard only silence. I knocked. No answer.

What if I open the door and a burglar rushes out?

I was scared, but I eased the door open so nothing would jump out and attack me.

Vincent lay sprawled on the floor on his chest with his soiled pants down.

"Vincent! Vincent!" He didn't respond.

The stench of something dead or dying filled the air. I held my nostrils and stepped over him to find the source of the odor. The toilet bowl was filled with bloody feces.

His dress slacks were all messed up. I thought about the times he had left me stranded and considered abandoning him when he needed my help.

Treat him the way you'd want him to treat you. If he dies, you'll never forgive yourself.

I hesitated for a minute and watched to see if he would move. He didn't.

"Vincent! Vincent!" He still didn't respond.

Convinced that he really needed help, I pulled up his jockey shorts and slacks and then dragged his limp and stinky one hundred and sixty pound body to the car. I dumped him on the floor in the back and then ran back for Veda and her diaper bag.

My one-year-old got an earful as I sped to the emergency room of the Columbia Hospital. I hoped a policeman would stop me and then escort us to the hospital, but it didn't happen.

"Your daddy ought to be glad Farlie started this time! I had to think twice about helping him..."

I drove in front of the emergency entrance for ambulances only and ran inside.

"Help me! Somebody help me! My husband blacked out! He's in the backseat of the car!"

Two men dressed in blue hospital uniforms ran toward me pushing a gurney. I turned, ran outside and pointed to Farlie. They opened the backdoor and pulled Vincent out of the car. In no time at all they had placed him on the gurney covered with white sheets, and whisked him away. I parked the car in the parking lot before going inside.

"We'll be all right now," I told Veda and myself.

Clutching my daughter, I ran through the emergency entrance with the diaper bag and my purse swinging from the same shoulder. One of the men who had followed me earlier pointed to the room where they took Vincent. A doctor had already examined him by the time I got there.

"How is he?" I panted.

"Another five minutes and he would have died from internal bleeding," the doctor said. "You saved your husband's life by acting so quickly."

I blew my chance to end this so-called marriage. Why? Why did I act so quickly? I don't understand why I was at home when he blacked out.

Vincent was transferred to the VA hospital after being treated for a bleeding ulcer. He remained hospitalized for four weeks. When his condition improved, he must have contacted all of his girlfriends. Meanwhile, I continued to work and visited him when I could. The nightstand in his room became littered with cards, flowers, and candy from unknown women.

"What's all this? I saved your life and this is how you repay me?"

"I asked them not to send me anything but they wouldn't listen."

"That means you can't control your girlfriends. I don't blame them. I blame you for not telling them you're married."

I was seated at the beside of my bedridden husband, when a woman about my age entered the room, stepped back to double check the room number when she saw me, and then approached the foot of his bed.

I thought she had entered the wrong room.

"Who are you looking for?" I said as I stood up.

Vincent turned his head toward the door. He looked horrified when he recognized her.

"Who's she?" I said.

"Oh, God! I gotta call my mama."

He reached for the phone and then stared at me.

"What's my mama's phone number?"

"Here you are lying helpless on a hospital bed fearing a confrontation between one of your girlfriends and your wife and all you can think of is calling your mama! What a despicable spoiled brat you are!"

I knew he'd lied about being a single man. Guilt was written all over his face.

"Don't bother calling your mama. Your wife is leaving!"

I brushed past the woman and went home.

Again, I wished I'd let him die.

Thoroughly disgusted with the mama's boy I had for a husband, I was glad I had not given him the satisfaction of witnessing a confrontation with his mistress. He was not worth my breaking a fingernail or getting a scratch on my face. I knew I had every right to stay there, but I was fed up.

God why are you allowing me to suffer all this punishment when I only wanted to love one person and be loved by him?

Reckless Living

MY MAMA TAUGHT US a Bible lesson from Proverbs 9:8 that I'll never forget: "If you correct foolish people, they will hate you for it. But if you correct someone with good sense, they will love you for it." That's the difference between wisdom and foolishness. It was hard for me to know when to speak up and when to keep quiet and let Vincent screw up and stew in his own juice.

Blister #8 Lack of Communication

I expected Vincent to be a changed man after he was discharged from the hospital. Knowing his wife saved his life ought to mean something to him, right? After spending four weeks in the VA hospital, Vincent was discharged with instructions to rest for a week before returning to work. All week he stayed at home and acted like a dutiful father. He kept his daughter while I worked.

His near death experience taught him a lesson.

Vincent was wilder than ever after he returned to work. Neither "whoremonger" nor "womanizer" adequately described him. Nobody could tell me how to stop him from cheating on me, especially when our different work schedules freed him to do as he pleased.

One night Regina called and I answered the phone while Vincent was in the bathroom preparing for a night out.

"Danny got killed tonight! She was crying and sniffing.

"What? Are you serious?"

"Would I lie about a thing like that? Some woman's jealous ex-boyfriend shot him."

"Oh no!"

"Tell my brother *our big* brother is gone!" She hung up.

I ran to the bedroom where Vincent stood admiring himself in the mirror. He looked like a pimp in his flashy gold suit. Either he planned to perform in the nightclub or pick up some performers after hours.

How long must I go through this crap before he settles down? When I drop this bombshell about Danny, maybe he'll be scared into doing right.

"Regina just called. Danny was shot and killed tonight. I'm sorry."

He glanced at me and saw that I was serious. Then he plopped down on the foot of our bed and stared at himself in the mirror on the dresser. I stood in the doorway watching his reaction and saw intense anger. He began punching one of his hands with his clenched fist, slowly at first, and then faster and faster.

Who is he hitting? Does he realize that what happened to Danny could also happen to him?

"Why? Where? Who did it?" he said.

"A woman's jealous ex-boyfriend killed him. Regina said they had just pulled up at a nightclub in Columbia."

Vincent stood up.

"Then I'll go and kill him!"

My anger reached the boiling point. I stepped into the doorway with my hands on my hips and my legs spread apart to block his way.

"No you won't!" I shouted. "Danny had no business out there just like you have no business going out there. He has Elaine and Danny Jr. at home just like you have a family at home. My friend Elaine has been hurting for a long time, but she didn't tell anybody that your big brother was a wife beater. Why? He was jealous of you (his younger brother), who got all the attention from his mother. That's why! He couldn't hit his mother so he took out his anger on his wife. Did you know that? Elaine kept quiet because if she'd told her family, her daddy would've come and beat the crap out of Danny and hung him up for his blood to dry. I'm glad Elaine didn't hurt him. Listen! I didn't save your life for you to go and get yourself killed. Don't you care at all about us?"

I shocked him and myself. My skinny body couldn't have stopped him from leaving, but my words made an impact.

He paced the floor in front of the dresser as I waited to see if he would breakdown and cry. He didn't. I stood ready to console him if he needed me.

"I don't know what to do. I've got to do something! I went to war and came back alive. Danny stayed home and got killed. That makes no sense. Am I supposed to let somebody kill my brother and get away with murder? No! I've got to do something!"

"You could start by acting like a married man and stay out of those nightclubs so the same thing won't happen to you. Both your mother and I need you alive and well."

"All I want to do is live! Can't you see that? I just want to live!" He stormed into the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

I folded my arms and stared at the closed bathroom door.

Who or what can get through to him. He desperately needs help.

Would Vincent harm himself, or go after Danny's killer? If so, what could I do to stop him?

Lord, where is the man I wrote letters to everyday? I asked you to bring him home safely. Did you answer my prayers so I could be tormented in this marriage?

Poor Elaine. My best friend was now a young widow. Danny Jr. will have to grow up without his daddy. That could have been my baby and me, but God had pity on us and spared Vincent's life. Why didn't he protect Danny? Elaine prayed for him all the time.

I leaned against the doorjamb reflecting on the words that had poured out of me. Vincent stayed in the bathroom for more than an hour, so I went back into the kitchen. I didn't understand how I could've wished him dead or out of my life forever. Had I changed? Had months of separation changed both of us?

What is it about men and marriage that I don't understand? Don't they choose the woman they want to marry so they can always have access to sex? So why can't a man be satisfied with his own wife? Where's the husband who never cheated on his wife? He could teach men and women a lot about what it takes to practice self-control.

I expected Vincent to run to his mother's house. But he didn't. He stayed in the bathroom for hours (the same bathroom in which he almost died). He came out and went straight to bed.

Did he pray in there?

Only God knows.

Blister #9 Arguments and Stonewalling

Vincent shifted into self-destruct mode after Danny's funeral. He was so wild that I quit telling Darlene about his behavior. Shame made me become a silent sufferer like Elaine.

Nobody would believe the crazy things going on in my home.

One day while putting away the laundry, I found a tiny silver box for a ring tucked in a corner of Vincent's underwear drawer. The ring was missing but inside the box was a picture of a Vietnamese woman. It was obvious that Vincent had hidden the picture. Given the horror stories about women inserting razorblades inside their vagina to cut the American serviceman's penis, I'd never even thought about him fraternizing with the enemy. The picture convinced me that Vincent had *fun* times in Vietnam in spite of letters reporting nothing but gloom and doom.

I was fed up with his half-truths, and fed up with myself for being so gullible.

Can I trust anything he says?

That evening I greeted him at the door dangling the 2X2 picture in his face.

"How stupid of me to believe you spent all your time fighting the Viet Cong! So, is this the Viet Cong or your Vietnamese girlfriend?"

"Quit spying on me! You're jealous of everybody!"

"Oh, now I'm a spy! I just happened to find this in *our* house. You act like I have no reason to question you. Haven't I seen enough evidence that you don't respect the institution of marriage? You skunk! The whole time you were gone I was busy praying for God to protect you while you were busy screwing the enemy!"

I thought about Regina's 'good piece' comment. Knowing Vincent, he'd probably already told Regina the truth about that Vietnamese woman.

"I don't have to take this," he said, turning around to head back out the kitchen door and go into the garage. I ran around him to block his escape.

"This time, you're going to hear what I have to say! I've been patient with you long enough!"

We yelled at each other. I'm sure neither of us heard what the other said. Vincent grabbed my arms, picked me up and put me aside like I was a little girl. He ran out of the door into the garage and I ran behind him. He got in the car and locked the doors. Determined that he would hear what I had to say for a change, I kept on yelling as I jerked the handle of the locked car.

"You're *always* running away!"

He started backing Farlie out of the driveway. I released the handle when I realized he did not plan to stop. He acted like he wanted to run over me.

I stood sobbing as I watched him drive out of sight. Why couldn't we ever have a decent conversation about our relationship? Was he trying to drive me crazy?

Blinded by tears, I staggered inside and fell across our bed. I had unleashed explosive anger and I didn't get a chance to dump all the garbage that had built up inside me. Dang! I pounded my fists into the mattress and cried until I felt Veda climb up on the opposite side of the bed and put her arms around my neck. I looked into her big brown eyes and saw fear.

"Oh, poor baby! Mommy's sorry."

I'd better calm down before I destroy both of us.

"Mommy's sorry for scaring you, Sweetheart. I love you." I pulled her close and wrapped one arm around her. "I'm so sorry you have to hear us argue."

Vincent called later that night.

"I'm going to spend the night at mama's. I want to give you some time to cool off. Can you find a ride to work?"

"Oh, don't worry about us. I'll get to work. Stay as long as you like 'cause you're not a husband to me anyway." I hung up.

I was too angry with him for running away to care *what* he did.

Mona, my veteran next-door neighbor, agreed to take me to work and keep Veda so I could show Vincent that I could get along without him and his mama. Darlene brought me home.

Veda and I had peace in our home and lots of laughter, especially while watching The Bugs Bunny Show together. I didn't fret about when her daddy was coming home with the car or what he was doing.

Happy parent, happy child, happy home...

My vacation from marriage drama felt good.

"Only when I became self-confident and determined to stop crying all the time did I learn that I could live in peace. Mama was right, "A wife's gotta be strong."

Vincent stayed at his mama's house for a whole week. At least that's where Regina claimed he was when she called on Vincent's behalf at the end of the week.

"Davida, is it okay for my brother to come back home?" she said with laughter in her voice. "He's over here crying, 'I

want to come home but my wife won't let me.' I heard you caught him in a lie."

I pictured Vincent standing beside her putting words in her mouth.

"I never told him to leave. He can come home whenever he wants if he leaves his foolishness over there."

That night Vincent returned with a humble attitude.

"I was wrong for accusing you of being jealous. I should not have left. I'm sorry. I want to try again to make our marriage work."

"Then promise me you'll respect me and my feelings."

"I promise to do better."

"Maybe spending time apart was good for both of us. We'll see."

We sat on the sofa and had a decent conversation. I told him about the fun I had watching cartoons with Veda.

"She's already a year-old. Can you believe that? You need to give her some attention so she'll get to know her daddy. Children grow up quickly. You can start tonight by reading her a bedtime story."

I handed him a Dr. Seuss storybook. He sat Veda on his lap and read *The Cat in the Hat*. At times he was animated and those big brown eyes followed every gesture and looked at the words on the page.

Now, this is how a daddy should behave around his child.

He made me proud of him for that rare experience. Veda fell asleep while he was reading, so he carried her to the nursery and tucked her in the crib. I let them have uninterrupted father-daughter time.

He entered the bedroom wearing his charming smile that made my heart melt from the day we first met. I welcomed his embrace when he pulled me into his arms.

"Can we try again to recapture that loving feeling we once had?"

"Yes. Can't you tell that I've been committed to this relationship come hell or high water until death do us part from the day we married?"

"I love you, Mrs. Henderson."

We got a fresh start that night. I was back in the arms of the Vincent I loved.

Blister #10 Venereal Diseases

Two days later I was in Dr. Bowman's office complaining about a heavy discharge.

"Has your husband been to see a doctor?"

"He hasn't said anything is wrong with him."

"He just didn't tell you. Gonorrhea is extremely painful for a man. If he acts like nothing is wrong, it means he has already been treated. He's waiting to accuse you of passing it on to him."

Armed with the doctor's words, a booklet on venereal diseases, and a receipt for a shot of penicillin, I prepared myself to confront Vincent for playing with my health. As soon as I heard Farlie pull into the garage, I sat down at the dining room table across from the kitchen door and waited for him to enter.

"Why didn't you tell me you had gonorrhea?" I said, holding up the booklet as soon as he closed the door behind him.

"You found out, didn't you? I didn't tell you because I knew you would get mad like you are right now. Anyway, I'm glad you went to see a doctor."

"Oh, like you really care about my health! You're despicable!"

Marital problems aggravated me. Too many things were happening at once and all of them had to be dealt with while I still had to work, pay bills, care for the house, our daughter and myself.

At lunch break the next day, I told Darlene about the VD discovery.

"I want to know three things: how can a wife stop a grown man from staying out late, spending his pay on things other than family obligations, and ignoring her feelings?"

"Marriage is a test of patience, tolerance, and strength," she said. "Only the strong survive. It helps if your husband has already been housebroken. In your case, I'll bet the war scrambled his brain so he can't even think straight."

"I think you're right about loose screws in his brain. I thought we should have had some kind of counseling when he came back from Vietnam. I didn't know what to expect and nobody ever said anything to me. Even when that bleeding ulcer nearly killed him the VA didn't tell me why it happened. I never expected marriage to a man who loved me to be like this. I can't imagine what life is like for people who have a shotgun wedding. It must be worse than a living hell."

"Some relationships get better over time. And some get worse," she said.

“Over a year has passed and I’m still waiting on our relationship to improve. One of us is going to break if things don’t change soon. I can’t take much more of this marriage drama.”

That's It, I Quit!

I WISHED I COULD be strong like Darlene and fight for my marriage, but I had no desire to engage in physical fights like she did with Harold.

That night I searched the Holy Bible to find out what God had to say about marriage. I'd listened to other people but I'd been so caught up in drama that I hadn't had time to go to church or take time to pray about anything except problems with Vincent.

"Okay God, what's my reward for being a faithful wife?"

I thumbed through the Bible and found these words in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 15 – the marriage chapter: *But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.*

I wrote the verse down and tucked it in my purse so I could read it to Darlene. The following day during break, I pulled out the verse and read it aloud.

"Here's proof that God has called us to live in peace. We shouldn't have to fight."

"Oh, but the passionate lovemaking after a fight makes it all worthwhile."

"You're nuts! I've seen too many bloody fights between my mama and daddy for me to risk getting injured or feeling guilty for knocking Vincent's teeth down his throat. I'd rather leave and let him stew in his own juice."

"One good fight where you pop him in the head with a fire log might be all you need."

"What if I pop him in the head and kill him? Who would take care of Veda?"

"Don't hit him *that hard!*"

"How do you control how hard you hit when you're angry? The problem with me is that I try to treat him the way I want to be treated. I'm like that with everybody. I don't even call in sick unless I really am sick because I'm scared I might get sick for real. I'm scared God will get me if I do what I know is wrong."

"Well, your husband is taking advantage of you because you're a goodie-two-shoes. You keep on forgiving him like women did a long time ago when they depended on their husband for support because they didn't work outside the home. Those women tolerated a whole lot of mess. One day you're going to tell Vincent you've had enough."

"That day is almost here."

A few days later day Vincent and I were eating dinner and talking about something that happened at work.

"I admire Darlene McDonald's boldness," I said. "She speaks up about anything she sees wrong and doesn't care who hears her."

"Don't listen to her!" Vincent said. "That woman is crazy! I work with her husband, Harold. Did she tell you that he tried to leave her and she chased him down with the car? She beat the crap out of him and he ended up in the hospital. Another time she busted all the windows out of his car and slashed the seats. He's scared to stay and he's scared to leave because she carries a gun. She shot at him once, already. The man is miserable!"

He's got a lot of nerve talking about someone being miserable in a marriage. Did he hear himself talking? He was putting ideas in my head.

"So why doesn't he leave town if he's so miserable?"

"He worries about the safety of his children and his elderly mama."

"Wow! I knew Darlene was tough. I just didn't know how tough."

Putting her husband in the hospital had to be part of getting him housebroken. She never told me that part.

Vincent knew Darlene was my friend. By listening to him, I realized that men talk about women just like we talk about them. But I was careful not to feed him any gossip. Telling him that I admired Darlene really upset his apple cart. He flapped his jaws like he was scared I would follow her model of holding a marriage together.

You'd be dead by now, buddy. I see why she didn't bother to tell me how to housebreak him.

Was It a Conspiracy?

I LOOKED FOR HIDDEN motives behind every good deed because Mama taught us, "It's better to be safe than sorry." There had to be a snake somewhere beneath every rock.

Blister #11 Stupidity and Misplaced Priorities

On Wednesday morning October 1, 1969, Ma Henderson, who lived twenty miles away, called at 10:02. I had picked up Veda from her house earlier after working graveyard shift. Feeling groggy, I answered the phone.

"Tell Vincent it's the first of the month and I need the money to pay my telephone bill."

"Okay," I grunted, and hung up the receiver. Though tired as a mule, I couldn't go back to sleep right away. I regretted answering the phone as I lay wondering what trouble she was stirring up this time. I couldn't wait to pop the question to Vincent that evening.

"Please help me understand why your mother called here to tell me to tell you to give her money to pay her phone bill when she knows I'm working to help you pay our phone bill?" Explain that to me.

"Ummm.. She forgot I was working today. You know she doesn't make that much money. So I agreed to pay that one bill to help her out."

"Then give her the money by a certain date before the first so she won't have to call here."

"I'll take care of it."

On the first of November Ma Henderson called again. This time I was wide-awake when I answered the phone.

"Tell Vincent I need the money for the phone bill now," she said.

"Last month I told him to give you the money ahead of time."

How could anyone be so selfish? She knew we had a lot of bills before she asked him to pay her phone bill. Besides, she didn't consult me before they made that agreement, so why involve me now?

That evening I told Vincent about his mother's call.

"Your mother made another of her first of the month calls to collect the phone bill. Didn't we already have this conversation about you giving her the money ahead of time?"

"Oh, yeah, I forgot. I don't know how much it is until the bill comes. I'll give it to her."

On Thanksgiving Day the family gathered at the Henderson home for the holiday meal. We'd had a rough year of married life together and I was so thankful that I had dodged every dart thrown my way without mowing down the attackers, especially those present at the table.

After the meal, Ma Henderson was in the den sharing a story about something that happened at church while Regina and I were busy cleaning up the kitchen. I happened to be standing near the wall phone when it rang.

"Somebody get the phone!" Ma Henderson hollered from the den.

I picked up the receiver and heard the telephone operator say: "I have a person-to-person collect call for Vincent Henderson from Lisa."

I hesitated to respond.

Soooo, this is why Vincent paid his mother's phone bill every month and didn't know the amount ahead of time. He and Lisa were in constant communication and his mother was an accomplice.

"Vincent, this is a collect call for you from Lisa," I yelled. "Who is she? Does she know you're here with your wife and daughter?"

My mother-in-law's jaws dropped. She stared at the floor and tried to look innocent.

Vincent ran and snatched the receiver out of my hand. He mumbled a few words into the phone and hung up.

"Wait here until I get back," he said loud enough for everyone to hear. Before I could say a word he dashed out the front door and drove away.

Feeling hot under the collar, embarrassed, humiliated, and wanting to punch Ma Henderson since I couldn't kick Vincent in the groin, I sat down at the kitchen table and let everybody deal with the silence in that place. The whole family now knew Vincent was cheating on me. I didn't know how I was supposed to respond. I felt like I had wandered into enemy territory blindfolded and then the mask was removed and all of a sudden I realized where I was.

When was it appropriate to tell my mother-in-law to stay out of our business? I was speechless. Regina went out and turned up the volume on the television set and came back into

the kitchen. She finished the dishes, said goodnight and then left with her family.

I was certain Ma Henderson was glad I'd learned that she was entitled to receive payment for her monthly phone bills. Though the revelation was unexpected, a lot of questions were answered that Thanksgiving Day.

Stranded, all I could do was sit there and wait for Vincent to return from Lord knows where. I wasn't even sure that my lying husband would return.

About an hour later Vincent showed up. He ran inside like he was in a hurry.

"Davida, let's go home," he panted when he saw me sitting at the kitchen table.

Oh, so now he's in a hurry.

I knew he was eager to leave before an argument erupted. Good. I didn't want his mother to have the satisfaction of hearing anything I had to say. I got up, put Veda's coat on her and headed for the door. Vincent grabbed her diaper bag and ran outside ahead of me.

"Goodnight," I mumbled to his parents who were seated in front of the television.

He opened the passenger door. I got in and sat sleeping Veda on my lap. He closed the door like a gentleman. While on our way home, I broke the silence.

"I hope you had a Happy Thanksgiving!"

"I know, I know. I messed up again."

"I felt like a *fool* sitting in your parents' home waiting for my husband to return from a rendezvous with another woman. This is the last time you'll leave me stranded! I have feelings too, just in case you don't know it."

"I'm sorry about that. I knew you were mad so I had to get out of there fast. I know you won't believe me but that phone call came as a complete surprise to me."

I wanted to pop him on his head with a fire log like Darlene had suggested, but he was driving.

"Well, now it is no secret about why your mother calls every month to ask for money to pay her phone bill. She has to wait for the bill so she can see your total charges. Jesus! I cannot believe I once thought you and your mother were good Christian people. Man, did you deceive me! You're all a bunch of hypocrites!"

"See, that's why I left! I didn't want to argue in front of my family!"

"Liar! You left because your girlfriend called you! I will not accept the blame for your lack of self-control and you will not humiliate me like that ever again!"

"All I can say is, 'I'm sorry.'"

"Hush! Saying 'I'm sorry' is not good enough. You are one sorry man, but not half as sorry as I am for marrying you."

We rode home in silence.

Vincent slept on the sofa after I tossed him his pillow. That was the ideal place for him to spend the night.

He ought to be glad we purchased that sofa. Otherwise he'd have to sleep on hardwood floors or out in the car.

Vincent crept into bed during the night and took me in his arms. While locked in his embrace I was forced to listen.

"I'm sorry I keep messing up. I don't know what's wrong with me. I know I was bad before then, but, ever since Danny was killed something makes me just want to live as fast and wild as I can. Sometimes I feel like I want to destroy myself. I

know I've hurt you a lot. But I really love you. I wouldn't want anybody else to be my wife. I want to make you glad I'm your husband. I want us to be good friends again."

"Then you need to start being good and stop ruining my life. I gave up my dream of graduating from college to be a good wife and mother. You're making me hate I ever let you talk me into getting married. We are too young to have all these problems. I know we need help but I don't know where we can find it."

With the enticing scent of Old Spice reminding me of the man I once adored, I lay wrapped in his warm embrace. I felt safe in his arms in spite of all the changes he had put us through. The Vietnam War took away my Vincent Henderson and returned a man who was a modern day Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Like Mother, Like Son

WHEN I WAS GROWING up, our housecat had the audacity to jump up on the kitchen table one day while we were eating. He snatched a piece of fish off my plate. I chased him to get it back but he ran and hid under the sofa. Some people are just as bold.

Blister #12 Intruders

Vincent, Veda, and I were asleep one Sunday afternoon during my graveyard shift when the doorbell rang. I jumped up, put on my robe and went to the front door to send the solicitors away before they rang the bell a second time. It was hard trying to sleep during the day with a small child. We didn't need any additional interruptions.

It had better not be another Jehovah's Witness. I told them not to ring my doorbell.

Through the peephole I saw Ma Henderson flaunting her ten-gallon Sunday hat with a curved feather sticking up. She had visited our house once last year when we first moved in. That time she rode with us.

Hmmm... Why would she show up without calling first?

I opened the door and she strolled past me like I was a statue standing there. When I started to close the door behind her, she motioned for someone to follow her.

"C'mon in," she said.

I peeped around the door and saw another woman dressed in church clothes step over the threshold.

"Ya'll still in the bed? I'm glad I caught you at home. This is Sister Elouise. I came to show her the house."

"Excuse me! You came to do what?"

She knew I was not happy to see her, but she ignored me and kept on talking and walking through our home.

"This here is my son's living room. Let me show you the garage and his car."

I saw her wide hips go across the living room. She paused and glanced down the hall.

No way! She wouldn't dare go barging into our bedrooms.

She waddled into the den and out of sight into the kitchen area with Miss Elouise at her heels.

I ran down the hall and shook Vincent.

"Your mama barged in here with a church member and started taking her on a tour of our house. Go out there and tell her to leave!"

"Huh. What?"

"Go tell your mama that we don't want guests today."

I crawled across our double bed from the opposite side and pushed him out of bed. He got up, stepped into a pair of pajamas and went out to meet his mama and her church member. I closed our bedroom door behind him and waited to hear them leave.

He soon returned with the usual defense of his mama's actions.

"My mama didn't mean to disturb us. Miss Elouise just bought herself a new Ford Fairlane. So Mama rode over here with her to show off Farlie and the house."

"What does Farlie have to do with your mama?"

"She's just proud of all we've accumulated since I've been home. She wanted Miss Elouise to see the car she helped me pick out."

"Oh my goodness! You know I hate being reminded of that awful day."

"My mama doesn't mean any harm. She's really a nice person when you get to know her."

"Man, where is your backbone? Listen, if she sets one foot in this room I will not be responsible for what comes out of my mouth."

"Oh, I told her they have to stay on that end of the house."

He went back down the hall until his mama finished taking Miss Elouise on a tour. I was disgusted with both of them.

That Sunday evening Vincent took care of Veda while I took a nap to prepare to stay awake all night. When I woke up I picked up the receiver to call my mama.

Vincent was talking on the telephone in the den.

"You deserve so much better," a woman said, in a seductive voice.

Vincent cleared his throat when he heard me pick up the receiver.

"Why are you eavesdropping on my conversation?" he growled.

"I didn't know you were even on the phone, "Mr. You Deserve So Much Better."

"Why don't you leave her if you aren't happy in the marriage?" the woman cooed.

"Oh, I don't know," he said.

I slammed the receiver in the cradle and ran into the den while Vincent was still talking. He sat erect in the chair holding the receiver to his ear. He didn't say another word.

"Go on! Keep on talking." I stood in his face and glared at him.

His body stiffened like he was afraid I would hit him. I knew that was a fight-or-flight response. He probably expected me to swing at him like Darlene would have done. But all I did was wait for him to finish his conversation. After a long pause, he leaned back in the chair and dropped the phone between his thighs.

"Tell me, do you want your freedom from me? If that's the case, then say so."

He stared at the floor without saying a word.

"Dang! Answer me, Vincent! This time I'm not going anywhere without an answer."

Moving at a snail's pace, he raised his head and stared at me.

"Yes. I want to be free to live my life."

"Okay. That's all you had to say. Thank you."

I went back to the bedroom, determined to give him his wish.

Decision Time

BLISTERS EMBARRASS YOU BY showing up in places where you cannot hide them, and the longer they stay the more painful they become. Ugh! You never know when or if they will go away without you squeezing or sticking a pin in them. I needed to burst all blisters.

Blister #13 No Thought of Consequences

I started saving my pay in a separate bank account the week after New Year's Day. I bought and prepared food only for Veda and myself. All leftovers were stored in the freezer so Vincent would not eat any of it.

On Valentine's Day I left a heart-shaped box of chocolates on the kitchen counter with a card containing these words:

Dear Vincent,

I love you enough to set you free. Be grateful. Because I also love Veda and myself, I refuse to kill myself trying to make this marriage work. My desire has been for our child to know her daddy and have an intact family. But both of us must want the same thing. For years I longed for my parents to get back together after they separated, but it did not happen. Both you and my daddy taught me that sometimes it is impossible to remain married "till death do us part." May we go our separate ways and live in peace.

Love always, Davida

Vincent didn't acknowledge receipt of my message.

When he came into the bedroom he was greeted with an Arctic blast from a frigid woman. He soon got that message and made his bed in the den.

The following day I contacted a Century 21 realtor and put the house up for sale.

"The house is on the market," I told him. "They expect it to sell quickly because we have little equity or ownership in it. We will have about thirty days to move after the sale."

Vincent acted like I hadn't mentioned the sale of our home. He made no preparation for leaving. I knew he could always go back home to his mama, but I wanted my own place. I prepared a budget and devised a plan to achieve my goal.

Since Farlie had become Vincent's constant companion, I made plans to get my own car and go apartment shopping. In a phone conversation with my mama, I expressed my desire to purchase a Mustang.

"I want that Mustang I dreamed about before we got the Fairlane," I said.

"You betta take Vincent with you when you buy it," she said. "They say a woman needs to take a man with her so she won't get ripped off and get sold a pile of junk."

"I heard that too. But I want to surprise Vincent. Would you ask your friend Mr. Joshua to go with me? He's a shade tree mechanic who works on all kinds of cars."

"Okay. I'll ask him. He might have a Mustang parked in his yard. He keeps about ten cars on hand for spare parts if nothing else."

I wasn't ready to tell mama my business. She didn't know what went on in my house and I liked it that way. A meddling mother-in-law was bad enough. I didn't need anybody else to

tell me what I should or should not do. I was looking out for Davida and Veda for a change.

I deserve a DD 214 or at least a medal for the hell I've been through.

On my next day off, Mr. Joshua picked me up and took me car shopping while Vincent was at work. I told him I wanted to surprise my husband. That was the truth.

"I'm a F-O-R-D man," he said. "That stands for fix or repair daily. That's what I do. I'll take you to the best place to buy a used car and make sure they don't sell you a lemon."

"Thank you, sir. That's just what I need. Somebody to look out for me."

We found my used powder blue Mustang at Lentz Ford. It didn't take nearly as long to purchase my used car as it took Vincent and his mama to buy the new Fairlane.

Bluebell was parked in the garage when Vincent came home. He didn't say a word about it, nor did I.

Vincent told the truth about one thing. A car was necessary to go apartment shopping and get to work. I had to get Veda to and from the babysitter and to his mother's house at night. Having my own car allowed me the freedom to search for my own place anywhere in town.

I paid only the phone and electric bills until our house sold the second week in April.

"New owners will soon occupy 6508 Miracle Trail," I said. "We have thirty days to vacate the premises. We need to be out of here by the fifteenth of May."

"That was quick," Vincent said.

"The quick sale is better for us because it won't affect our credit rating."

"Well, I hate to see the house go. But you can always say you had a new house."

"Know this. If God spares my life, I will purchase another one."

When the real estate agent handed him the sales contract, he signed without saying a word. After I signed and gave the agent the papers, I assured him that we would move out by the contract date. That same day I began spending at least an hour a day packing clothes and all of the household items.

It was amazing to see how much we'd accumulated.

Vincent made no effort to move his things out of the house. Instead of staying away, he hung around more often; even on his off days. He had me confused.

Why is he staying close to home when he's free to come and go? I released him.

A few days after signing the sales contract, I was driving along a street in the Fair Oaks part of town when I spotted a man with red hair hanging a "For Rent" sign in the window of a newly-remodeled, two-bedroom apartment above a Laundromat. The location was a few blocks from our house on Miracle Trail.

I turned into the parking lot.

"Hi! How much is the rent?"

"Fifty dollars a month," he said.

"May I see the apartment now?"

"Sure. Let's go up and take a look. They just finished remodeling."

I followed him upstairs along the side of the building into a spacious, two-bedroom apartment with a living room, kitchen, and bathroom.

"You're the first to see this place."

This is no coincidence. It's perfect for us.

"I'll take it. You can put that sign away."

"I'll need fifty dollars cash deposit to hold it."

I glanced at my watch. It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon, the time when all banks close.

"I have the money but the bank is closed. Can you hold the apartment for a couple of hours? I promise to bring you the cash deposit."

Where would I get fifty dollars in cash?

"Okay. You look like an honest person. Bring the deposit to the rental office at this address." He handed me the rental flyer.

"I'll wait for you until six o'clock."

"It's a deal! I'll see you before six o'clock." I ran downstairs and hopped in Bluebell, feeling confident that I would borrow fifty dollars in cash from somebody.

But... who?

I went home and called Mama's job. She was a maid in the home of "two white women who loved each other." That was Mama's description of her bosses who were both professional women. They had given her a job as their maid to allow her to work close to home in the country for the same pay she earned when working downtown as a hotel maid. They had money because Mama got paid in cash.

They'll trust Mama enough to lend her the money because they've known her for so many years. Besides, I'll pay them back tomorrow.

Mama answered their house phone.

"Mama, do you think you could borrow fifty dollars in cash from one of your bosses right away? I need the money now. I promise to pay them back tomorrow."

"They're both at work. But come on over. I can lend it to you."

"Really! I'm on my way."

I drove the eight miles to the country past the house where I grew up. I was laughing, crying and wondering where Mama had gotten that much money. She knew I had to be desperate because I'd never borrowed from her in my whole adult life. What should I tell her if she asks the reason I need cash today? I certainly wouldn't tell her I was moving out of my new house. She'd find that out soon enough.

Mama came out on the porch when I drove Bluebell into the driveway. I hadn't seen her since we put the house up for sale. I didn't want to see her because she could read me like a prophet and tell when things weren't going right in my marriage. If I heard her say "Men are cheaters" one more time, I knew I would puke.

I don't need Mama's instinct to detect marriage problems today.

I painted on my best smile and jumped out of the car to hug her.

"Here's the money," she said, reaching in her candy-striped apron pocket. She pulled out a folded fifty-dollar bill and handed it to me.

"Mama, where did you get this?"

"I'm holding it for someone."

"Thank you so much!" I hugged her and kissed both cheeks. "Little five-foot lady, you saved the day! I'll pay you back tomorrow."

I rushed back to my car and hightailed it downtown to the rental office and arrived fifteen minutes before closing time. The landlord was waiting for me with documents ready for my signature. I was pleased to show that redhead that this twenty-one-year-old chick was a responsible woman who kept her word. I paid the deposit and drove away dangling two brass keys to my first apartment.

Ha! Ha! Without knowing it, Mama made it possible for me to get away from that cheating man. Now I know why Ruth Brown sang, "Mama, He Treats Your Daughter Mean."

The next day I drove back to the big black and grey brick house nestled in the woods to repay Mama her fifty dollars and give her a ten-dollar tip. Before I reached the house she came out on the porch wearing her candy-striped apron. I was surprised to see how much stuff she carried in her apron pocket. Never would I have expected her to have a fifty-dollar bill.

"Thank you for helping me yesterday. Mama, right now I don't want to hear that men are cheaters, but I do want to tell you that we sold our house. I needed money to move into a new apartment that I found yesterday. It's perfect for Veda and me. Vincent will probably go back home to live with his mama or somebody else. Now all I need is two men with a truck and no back problems to move the furniture."

"Davida, I ain't surprised one bit by what you said. You two stopped coming to the house together. You used to be a lovey-dovey twosome. That's a telltale sign that something

was wrong. You know Mr. Joshua has a truck. He could get somebody, maybe one of his grandsons, to help him move you.”

Oops! I told Mama my business. She didn’t criticize or interrogate me. She didn’t take sides, either. She simply respected my decision.

“Mr. Joshua could help me move, too?”

“Yeah, he helps people move anything from lumber and bricks, to vegetables and watermelons going to the Farmers Market. He’s dependable, too.”

“Hmmm... Thanks mama. I’d rather ask him than people I know. I don’t need anybody asking me why I’m moving out of a new house into a small apartment.”

Mama reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a tiny brown address book about the size of a box of matches. She gave me Mr. Joshua’s phone number and then went inside and called him from the wall phone in the kitchen. The cord was long enough for her to bring the phone outside.

“Hey Joshua, Davida wants to speak to you.”

She handed me the receiver and I arranged a date and time for him to meet me at 6508 Miracle Trail. I picked a day when Vincent would be at work.

“Gosh, Mama. I didn’t expect to tell you any of this and now I have a date for movers to come. You’re the best mama in the whole wide world!”

I hugged the little lady that Vincent called “a great mother-in-law” because she never meddled in our business. Too bad I couldn’t say the same about his mother. Mama was standing on the porch when I drove away happy.

Ernie K-Doe's song, "Mother-in-Law" was playing on the radio as I drove away. I started singing along. I laughed and cried at the same time when I heard, "She thinks her advice is a constitution, but if she would leave that would be the solution, and don't come back no more, mother-in-law."

When Vincent comes home to an empty house, then he'll know I gave him his freedom.

On moving day, the two men arrived in the morning after Vincent had left for his eight-to-four shift. From the picture window I saw a Ford pickup truck back into our driveway. That's the moment when I knew my marriage was really over. A freedom bell rang in my ears and I got excited. I was eager to get this move over and move on with my life.

Mr. Joshua and his young assistant entered through the garage.

"Morning. Caleb here is my grandson. We're ready to work."

"I don't know where to start. I've never done this before. Everything goes."

"Oh, I'll handle it for you," Mr. Joshua said. "You just show us where we're going and where to put things after we move them. We'll move the furniture one room at a time and set it up before we come back again. We save the refrigerator for last because it's heavy. We don't want to use up all our strength on that from the start."

"Okay, go ahead and do things your way."

Yippee! I'm moving into my first apartment all by myself.

While I wrapped my toaster oven and other kitchen appliances in newspaper, I thought about the time when I didn't own anything. Vincent was in Vietnam then. I walked into a

store and asked to purchase a sixty-nine dollar Polaroid Land Camera. I had enough money in my pocketbook to pay cash, but I wanted to purchase the camera on credit.

"Do you have credit already?" the salesman asked.

"No, I don't," I said.

"We can't let you have it unless you have good credit."

"Please let me speak to the manager?"

The beer-bellied manager strutted up to me and said, "I hear you want to buy a camera and you don't have any credit. Our policy is that you have one source of credit. All you have to do is go and buy one item on credit. Then come back and get the camera."

"All I want is the camera that I can afford to pay cash for right now. If I go somewhere else to establish credit, I'll buy the camera there and I won't need to come back to your store."

The manager looked at me, dumbfounded.

"You know, that's a good point." Then he told the salesman, "Let her pay the ten percent down and give her the camera on credit."

The next month when I paid the full balance for my camera, the salesman said, "Ma'am, you've got excellent credit with us. Come back anytime."

I looked around our house at all the things we'd bought on credit since then.

I just have to finish paying for them to keep my excellent credit.

The movers started loading the furniture from each room. They took the bed, kitchen table, and Veda's crib apart in the house and then put them together again after the move. Each time the pickup truck was full, I rode in the front seat with Mr.

Joshua while Caleb, rode in the cab with my belongings. They followed my instructions for setting up the beds and tables and chairs in my apartment.

Driving three blocks from Miracle Trail only took five minutes. But lifting furniture up the stairs slowed the movers down. We made several trips throughout the day. It surprised me to see all the boxes and other stuff I'd accumulated in only two and a half years.

By four o'clock, everything was out of the house except for my Kenmore refrigerator. Mr. Joshua and Caleb struggled with that big object. They tied a belt around the doors to hold them shut and used something called a dolly to roll it to the truck. I didn't understand why something that big didn't have its own wheels. Lifting it looked painful.

The movers deserve every dime of their pay for all that heavy lifting.

"Lord, please let them get it on the truck without killing themselves," I prayed. "I don't know how they'll get that refrigerator upstairs to my apartment. But I trust you to help them figure it out."

While Mr. Joshua and Caleb wrestled with the refrigerator, I cleaned out the house by tossing all of Vincent's clothes and belongings on the curb for trash pickup the following morning. I thought about the thousands of dollars from our savings that had purchased the expensive wardrobe of suits Vincent left hanging in the closet. I removed the suits last and tossed them on top of the heap thinking someone might want to take them. Vincent had ignored all my warnings, so I had no choice but to trash them.

I was determined to keep my word to clean the place and turn in my keys on time, whether Vincent did so or not.

He'll walk into this empty place and see the difference between a house and a home. I wish I could see the shocked look on his face.

Mr. Joshua and Caleb were securing the refrigerator on the truck when Vincent drove up and stopped in the street. He recognized his belongings and parked Farlie in front of them.

"Rats! Why did he come straight home today?"

He ruined my surprise by showing up before I left.

From the garage where I was putting the cleaning supplies, mop and broom in my car, I saw Vincent jump out of Farlie, run back and forth to pick up his belongings from the curb, and toss everything into the trunk and the backseat. I went back inside and walked through every room one last time to be certain that I had not left anything behind.

Instead of leaving, Vincent came into the empty living room and sat down on the bare hardwood floor. He was sitting beneath the picture window with his face in his hands when I headed out the front door. He didn't seem excited about being set free.

"I'm sorry you came straight home today. I really tried to be gone by the time you arrived. Consider yourself a free man."

He didn't move a muscle. It was as though I'd wasted my breath.

"Goodbye."

I walked out and closed the door behind me.

Mr. Joshua and Caleb drove away with my refrigerator and I followed close behind in Bluebell. Several times while driving

away I glanced at the bare picture window and front door but saw no sign of Vincent. The fact that he didn't say goodbye, didn't ask where we were moving to, and didn't try to stop me indicated that I had made the right decision. I left with a question on my mind:

How long will he sit there before he realizes that the house on Miracle Trail is no longer our home and he, too, is free to leave?

Epilogue

GOD KNEW HOW HARD I tried to make my marriage work. When I made up my mind that Vincent was not going to hurt me anymore, there was no turning back. Borrowing from Clint Eastwood, I said, "A girl's got to know her limitations." When I reached the breaking point it was time to let him enjoy his freedom. By freeing him, I, too, was free.

I usually went to work feeling like Atlas holding the world. But I showed up after my four-day weekend, happier than I was on the day that I saw the "A" in Economics on my report card from Waller College.

Darlene took one look at me and sensed the liberation of Davida.

"So what makes you so bubbly today?" she said. "Did you and Vincent make out this morning?"

"Girl, your mind is always in the gutter. And they say men always think below the belt. They don't know you. I'll tell you all about it later."

During lunch break I was talking to Darlene but soon got the attention of other women. They were all ears as I shared what I learned that weekend.

"I moved out last Friday. I'm now free to be me."

"What! That's a bold move! What did Vincent say?"

"Nothing. What could he say other than goodbye? He didn't even say that. I decided it was time to take care of Davida. A toxic relationship will poison your system and kill you or lead you to kill somebody. Divorce trumps a homicide

or suicide any day. My baby needs me and I have big plans for my future. I'm going back to school to finish what I started."

"Well all right now! You sound like you have a new attitude. Where has that person been all this time?"

"She's been hiding in shame and busy wallowing in 'woe is me' and 'self-pity.' Aretha was right. I need a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T when I come home."

"Ohhhh... What happened to make her come alive?"

"Well, I figured that if I work, why not buy myself a car so I don't get stranded? While I was getting the car, I got the Mustang I wanted. Then, since Vincent started spending his money, I saved more of mine because I knew I'd need a place to stay. Unlike him, I had no plans to go back home to live with my mama. I refused to lose the furniture I'd selected at Kimbrell's, so I took over the payments and kept all of it. I sold the house rather than let the bank take it and mess up my credit. I just rented my first apartment and learned that I have excellent credit in my name. And I intend to keep it, too."

"Sounds like you turned over a new leaf this weekend," Darlene said.

"Leaf? More than that! I turned to a new book, the Holy Bible, and back to my old way of life before I met the Henderson family. I went to Sunday School yesterday."

"Sunday School! They teach stuff about the Bible from a long time ago."

"Not the young women's class I attended! Those women discussed real issues that people are facing right now. I knew I was supposed to be there when the teacher said today's topic is "Grace in Divorce." Then she had us read Matthew 19:4-6 (NIV)."

I reached in my pocket and pulled out the note I wanted to share with Darlene.

"Hey, listen to this. I copied the verse so I could read to you what Jesus said that created the buzz in that classroom:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

"When I heard that, off my tongue rolled, 'No wonder my mother-in-law always vexes me! I left my mother, but my husband never left his mother.' You would have thought I'd popped open the lid on a bottle of Pepsi someone had shaken up. Problems spewed out all over that room. While the women talked, the teacher wrote a summary on the board that ended up being a list of ten A's that destroy relationships:

1. **Adultery** was the granddaddy blister. A lot of women struggle with adultery- their own and their husband's. Most of them talked about how their husbands cheated. But one woman said, "Women cheat too. I wasn't getting what I needed at home, so I got it from a co-worker." For a moment, a hush fell over the room. It made sense because a man has to have somebody to cheat with. I told them about the time I talked too long to a man I met at the Laundromat. I was standing there folding clothes when he asked me, "Where is your husband now?" At that moment I looked up and Vincent was walking through the door. He looked at the man who was talking to me and came straight over to me and asked,

“Where are my baseball socks?” I knew he suspected something. That told me that I’m not a cheater.

2. **Alternative lifestyles.** One woman’s sister left her husband for another woman. Another one said her husband hasn’t been able to find a job in eight years. She’s the breadwinner. But he does all the cooking and housework and everything a woman usually does, including packs her lunch.
3. **Addictions** to pornography, gambling, sports, cars, alcohol, and sex came up.
4. **Abandonment** was a big one. One of them has a husband serving life in prison. Can you imagine spending your days off work visiting prison? Another woman’s husband went, but didn’t return from Vietnam. He was listed as Missing in Action or MIA. Sometimes I wish Vincent... Nevermind. It has to be hard not knowing if you’re still married or not.
5. **Alienation** of affection came up and two women said their husband sleeps in the same bed or in the same house, but there’s no lovemaking and no desire for one another. Not because she had a headache for one or two nights. This has gone on for years! Another woman said her husband’s lovemaking is “okay” but it doesn’t satisfy her so she’d rather spend her time in the kitchen. Her food fetish is quite obvious.
6. **Aging** was one I never thought could present a problem until two women talked about impotence and midlife crisis. Those were new issues to me. One of them said

that her husband's use of weed added fuel to the flickering flame in their bedroom. The other said that her forty-year-old husband ran off with a woman the same age as their daughter. I didn't say it, but I knew things could have been worse if he'd molested their daughter. Look how Woody Allen married his adopted daughter. Can you imagine how his wife felt?

7. **Apathy** was where the couple grew apart because each one got busy doing his or her own thing. One woman got so obsessed with running here and there with her four children that she forgot all about her husband. The next thing she knew, he was gone. Another described her boring husband as "a big bump on a log that wants to do nothing but watch television all the time."
8. **Abuse** of every kind: physical, verbal, mental, emotional, sexual, financial and spiritual came up. One woman said her preacher husband beats her over the head with the Scriptures. She's ready to leave like I did, but the verse, "God hates divorce," keeps holding her back. We told her, "God hates a lot of other things, too." I felt sorry for her. I prefer the verse that says, "God has called you to live in peace." That's my verse. A woman shared that her husband tried to punch her in the face and missed. He ended up punching a hole in the wall. Now he has to repair the sheetrock. We laughed about that. Look how God protected her.
9. **Ailments** of every kind were discussed, including Venereal Disease, mental illness (especially PTSD among Vietnam veterans), heart disease, diabetes, lung disease of

a cigarette smoker and more. Of course I told about Vincent's bleeding ulcer that nearly killed him. A young lady about my age shared how her husband, an ex-marine who also served in Vietnam, has nightmares and sleeps with a rifle beside their bed. She's afraid he might shoot her one night when he wakes up screaming at the Viet Cong. I proudly walked out on Vincent, but she's afraid to leave. She thinks he'll hunt her down if she does. She's only 22. Can you imagine her living like that for the rest of her life?

10. **Attitudes, attitudes, attitudes abound.** We talked about downright meanness, using voodoo and casting spells to control a man, anger over an abortion the woman had without her husband's permission, frustration over not being able to get pregnant or not giving him a son to carry on the family name, pride and arrogance at one spouse being better educated than the other, or resentment toward the wife for earning too little or much more than the husband, and so much more. You would think men don't care where they drop their seed if you heard how many of their husbands fathered at least one child by another woman while married. One woman was pregnant at the same time as her husband's two girlfriends. All three of them had boys around the same time. I could go on and on and on.

"Whew! That's only ten issues, but all eighteen women in the class talked about marital bliss and the blisters in their relationships. It was something to hear! It's amazing how much can be discussed in just under two hours. I could relate to

at least five of the ten A's and one woman had experienced all ten in her twenty-seven years of marriage to the same man."

"Davida, I have never heard you talk like this. You are on a roll. What are you going to do next?"

"I'm going to get myself a babysitter and start attending the Saturday night women's support group, that's what. They talk about these issues and spend the evening doing things together and encouraging each other. I wish I'd discovered the group for newlyweds and people in their first year of marriage a lot sooner. All this time I thought nobody would understand what I was going through and I was too ashamed to open up to anybody but you.

"Please, don't get me wrong. I appreciate all you did to keep me from losing my mind. I learned that I had to deal with my own issues. I was so overwhelmed with being a wife, mother, doffer, daughter, daughter-in-law, homemaker and everything else, that I lost sight of myself. Now that I don't have a husband, I have to find my identity.

I also showed her a handout that the teacher distributed to each woman.

The Couple's Creed

Ask, don't accuse
 Build, don't destroy
 Compromise, don't curse
 Discuss, don't fuss
 Encourage, don't discourage
 Free, don't fault
 Grow, don't stifle
 Help, don't hurt
 Include, don't exclude
 Joke, don't jeer
 Kiss, don't despise
 Love, don't abuse
 Motivate, don't aggravate
 Notice, don't ignore
 Offer, don't beg
 Pray, don't punish
 Quit, don't push
 Respect, don't reject
 Stimulate, don't tolerate
 Trust, don't disgust
 Undergird, don't trample
 Vindicate, don't condemn
 Work, don't oppress
 eXpect, don't demand
 Yield, don't fight

Have a Zeal to keep, not break, your wedding vows.

Be AVAILABLE for and not ABSENT from one another

Be FRIENDS and not FOES

"Do not try to work together as equals with unbelievers,
 for it cannot be done. How can right and wrong be partners?
 How can light and darkness live together?"

(2 Corinthians 6:14 GNB)

"According to this list, Vincent and I did almost everything wrong. At one point I believed the lie that I deserved the painful experiences I endured in my marriage. But after hearing other women let go of the garbage in their lives that had been buried for a long time, I made a list of questions and presented them to God. He's the only one who knows all the answers.

"These are my questions:

1. How many times was I supposed to forgive Vincent for hurting me?
2. Is a wife supposed to let her husband trample her like dust on the ground?
3. What terrible wrong had I committed to deserve being treated so badly?
4. Was it wrong for me to continue to love my husband and try to keep my family together when he showed no respect for me, or our marriage?
5. Would he have come to his senses if I had left him sooner than I did?
6. Would we have been able to make our marriage work if my mother-in-law hadn't interfered in our relationship?
7. How should a faithful wife or husband respond to repeated infidelity?
8. Why do some people deliberately hurt those who love them?
9. God, where were you while I was suffering in my marriage?

10. Please tell me the good that came out of my years of torment?
11. What was I supposed to learn from all of my experiences in marriage?
12. Shouldn't the VA help families adjust after men return from the war?
13. I've been busy being a wife. How do I regain my identity as a person?
14. Should I file for divorce or wait and see what happens?
15. Lord, what should I do now?

“Only after moving into my own apartment, did I embark upon a journey of self-discovery. I've resumed my church and prayer life and discovered that everyone's life experiences are custom-made, complete with bliss and blisters, thorns and thistles, splendor and splinters. I'd been so busy focusing on what Vincent – my so-called other half – was, or was not doing, that I lost my true identity in Christ. Now I know that I, Davida Kincaid Henderson, must first see myself as the whole person that I am.”

About the Author

Gloria Shell Mitchell is a minister, educator, divorce researcher, author and radio show host. Her writing is based on years of research and personal experience as a teacher, child of divorce, divorcée, divorce coach, and facilitator of divorce support groups.

Others Books about Davida Kincaid

The Garbage Man's Daughter Series:

Letting Go of Shame (Book 1)

Letting Go of SECRETS (Book 2)

Letting Go of STRESS (Book 3)

Letting Go of SCARS (Book 4)

My Knotty Decision

Desire After Divorce

Helpful Resources for Marital Blisters and More

Support Groups

CHURCH and other small groups like Davida's Baptist Young Women's Group

DivorceCare

www.divorcecare.org

Participants receive help through separation and divorce (via meetings and online)

Mental Health America

www.mentalhealthamerica.net/find-support-groups

(Online support groups)

National Center for Men

www.nationalcenterformen.org/page25.shtml

Fighting for fairness and equal rights for divorced dads

Self-Help Groups

Adult Children of Alcoholics/Dysfunctional Families (ACA)

www.adultchildren.org

Helps people heal from effects of growing up in a dysfunctional family

Adult Survivors of Childhood Abuse (ASCA)

www.ascasupport.org

For adult survivors of neglect, physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse

AL-ANON

www.al-anon.org

Teaches family members of addicts to be supportive but “detach with love”

ALATEEN & PRETEEN

www.al-anon.alateen.org/for-alateen

Serves young people dealing with any family dysfunction, plus alcoholism

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

www.aa.org

The original 12-step program started by upper middle class Protestants

A. R. T. S. Anonymous

www.artsanonymous.org

A 12-step recovery path that releases artists to use their creative gifts

Celebrate Recovery (CR)

www.celebraterecovery.com

Christian program to help participants overcome hurts, hang-ups, and habits

Because I Love You (BILY)

www.bily.org

Helps improve communication and healthy boundaries in families

Bereavement Groups are found in most assisted living facilities and senior centers

Center for Victims of Torture (CVT)

www.cvt.org

For victims of torture including refugees and asylum seekers

Cleptomaniacs and Shoplifters Anonymous (CASA)

www.kleptomaniacsanonymous.com (For persons addicted to adrenaline.)

Clutterers Anonymous

www.cluttersanonymous.org

Deals with any clutter—physical, emotional or mental

Cocaine Anonymous (CA)

www.ca.org

A meeting where addicts, many who are professionals, talk about any substance

Co-Dependents Anonymous (CODA)

www.coda.org

For anyone who wants healthy relationships with others and themselves

COSA

www.cosa-recovery.org

For men and women affected by someone else's sexual addiction

Compassionate Friends

www.compassionatefriends.org

A non-12-step grief support group for anyone who has lost a child or others

Compulsive Eaters Anonymous HOW (CEA-HOW)

www.ceahow.org

Addresses eating disorders such as overeating, anorexia, and bulimia

Crystal Meth Anonymous

www.crystalmeth.org

Addresses any amphetamine use

Debtors Anonymous (DA)

www.debtorsanonymous.org

Deals with credit card debt and any money issues, plus credit restoration

Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)

www.dbsalaca.org

For anyone with a mood disorder

Dual Diagnosis Anonymous

www.dualdiagnosis.org

Handles co-occurring mental health conditions and substance use disorders

Dual Recovery Anonymous (DRA)

www.draonline.org

Distinguishes between taking drugs to get high and taking prescription drugs

Emotions Anonymous (EA)

www.emotionsanonymous.org

For any mental health issues and allows people to tell their stories

Families Anonymous (FA)

www.familiesanonymous.org

Offers a Tough Love approach wherein parents kick their kids out who use drugs

Food Addicts Anonymous (FAA)

www.foodaddictsanonymous.org

The disease of food addiction is addressed by abstaining from white sugar

Free N One

www.free-n-one.org

Christian program that helps with jobs and housing to maintain sobriety

Free N One Tough Love Support Group

For loved ones of addicts and alcoholics in Free-N-One

GAM-ANON

www.gam-anon.org

A program for people affected by compulsive gamblers

Gamblers Anonymous (GA)

www.gamblersanonymous.org

Participants engage in a range of risky behaviors such as shoplifting, street racing

Hearing Voices

www.hearingvoicesusa.org

For persons hearing voices, seeing visions, having other extreme experiences

Male Survivors of Sexual

www.malesurvivor.org

Addresses abuse, assault and trauma of sexually betrayed men and boys

Marijuana Anonymous

www.marijuana-anonymous.org

Formed because marijuana addiction wasn't seen as a serious problem

Millati Islami

www.millatiislami.org

An Islamic 12-step program for persons with problems of addiction

Moderation Management

www.moderation.org

Helps problem drinkers who don't consider themselves to be alcoholics

Nar-Anon

www.nar-anon.org

Support for family and friends of members of Narcotics Anonymous

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)

www.na.org

The focus is on the addiction rather than the particular substance

National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI)

www.nami.org

Provides peer support, information and advocacy for family and friends

National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

www.ptsd.va.gov/public/treatment/cope/peer_support_groups.asp

Neurotics Anonimos (N/A)

www.neuroticsanominos.us

Views self-centeredness as the root of emotional ills and love as the healer

Nicotine Anonymous (NiCA)

www.nicotine-anonymous.org

Abstinence from any form of nicotine-smoking, chewing gum, snuffing, vaping

On-line Gamers Anonymous

For those healing from video game and internet addiction

Overcomers Outreach

www.overcomersoutreach.org

Christians attend 12-step meetings during the week and share their faith

Overeaters Anonymous

www.aa.org

For people who use food as a drug

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG)

www.pflag.org

Peer support, information, and advocacy for LGBTQ families

Peace Over Violence

www.peaceoverviolence.org

Dedicated to building healthy relationships, families and communities free from sexual, domestic and interpersonal violence

Pills Anonymous

www.pillsanonymous.org

Members have become addicted to prescription pills

Rainbows

www.rainbows.org

Helps children and teens grieve and grow after a family trauma like divorce

Recovering Couples Anonymous

www.recovering-couples.org

A 12-step group for persons in a committed relationship

Recovery International

www.recoveryinternational.org

For mental health of people who need to manage their reactions and emotions such as people in bad marriages, vets with PTSD, disobedient wives

Refuge Recovery

www.refugerecovery.org

Freedom from uncontrollable thirst or repetitive craving through meditation

SMART Recovery

www.smartrecovery.org

Self-management for addiction recovery changes "stinking-thinking"

S-ANON

www.sanon.org

Companion to SA, often attended by wives of men who have affairs

Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS)

www.sossobriety.org

A non 12-step alternative to AA that appeals to atheists and Buddhists

Sex Addicts Anonymous

www.saa-recovery.org

Addresses sex with strangers, excessive masturbation, pornography

Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA)

www.slaafws.org

Members deal with being in love as a drug as well as an addiction to sex

Sexaholics Anonymous (SA)

www.sa.org

The goal is to stop lusting and become sexually sober
(Mostly married men)

Sexual Compulsives Anonymous (SCA)

www.sca-recovery.org

Mostly gay men who create their own "Bottom Line" for sexual behavior

Sex and Porn Addicts Anonymous (SPAA)

www.spa-recovery.org

Defines abstinence as no porn, no self-sex, and no sex outside a relationship

Sexual Recovery Anonymous (SRA)

www.sexualrecovery.org

Mostly consists of gay men who define their own sexual abstinence

Survivors of Incest Anonymous (SIA)

www.siasocal.org

A 12-step program that defines childhood sexual abuse as any hurtful actions

Survivors of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP)

www.snapnetwork.org

Provides advocacy efforts on behalf of those abused by priests

Taking Off Pounds Sensibly (TOPS)

www.tops.org

Encourages weight loss by members following their doctor's meal plan

Underearners Anonymous

www.underearnersanonymous.org

Teaches people to pursue their dream job with a prosperity vision

Workaholics Anonymous

www.workaholicsanonymous.org

Members learn to stop using work to suppress feelings or avoid problems