

HOT DOGS ON SATURDAY 1960, Tennessee



Josh Samuel s

DEDICATION

To Joe Lee Taylor, my dad (90 years old) Florence
Taylor, my mother (deceased at 30 years old) Mary
(Momma) Woodson (deceased in 1965) Bernice Walker
(Mary's granddaughter)

my siblings Erma
(Taylor) Manuel Connie
(Taylor) Ross Leroy
Taylor Elaine (Taylor)
Singleton

my daughters Andrea
Ca'Mille Samuels
Antoinette Samuels

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank God for giving me the experiences that led to the writing of this little book, a
book that I started back in 1989. I thank my dad, Joe Lee Taylor, for loving me.

I thank my two precious daughters, Andrea and Antoinette, for being my sounding board,
my cheerleaders, and my rock.

I thank my siblings, who are my closest allies, for their priceless love and support.
And to many dear relatives and friends, I am proud to share your love. Alone we are
weak, but together we rule the world. ***

(Misuse of the English language associated with the characters in this story is intentional. It is a depiction of the time, place and people involved.)

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INTRODUCTION

“Auntie Momma! Auntie Momma!” Bernice dashed through the front door of the small frame house, panting and crying hysterically. Her pale green dress was soaked in perspiration on that hot Tennessee afternoon. A thin layer of rich red dirt clung to her bare feet and parts of her legs.

Bernice had run nearly a half mile from the dry goods store up town on Bolivar Street. Sweat poured down her sun-burnt face as she raced from room to room near hysteria, tracking dirt on the spotless wooden floors. Her long black hair fell heavily down her back, wet strands clung to her neck and face. She found Mary out in the back yard

removing sun-dried clothes from a wire fence that doubled as a clothesline.

Mary took one look at Bernice's face in the doorway and knew something had gone drastically wrong. She tossed the clothes back over the fence without removing her eyes from Bernice, and she walked hurriedly toward the house, fearing the worst without knowing what the worst could be.

"Lord, help us," Mary murmured as she rushed up the back porch steps and flung open the screen door. "Baby, what's wrong?" She pleaded to Bernice who stood just inside the door. "What in the world is the matter?" Bernice's mouth opened but nothing spilled forward. The only sound Mary heard was the frantic breathing of a distraught young woman.

Mary grabbed Bernice's hands and pulled her through the doorway and out onto the porch; she rushed across the porch and lowered herself into the worn kitchen chair that sat near the porch's edge. Bernice sat on the porch near Mary's feet, her small trembling hands still caught between Mary's larger, firmer ones. Mary had never witnessed Bernice in such rambling disarray; her heart pumped wildly as Bernice attempted to regain some sense of composure. **CHAPTER 1**

Bernice and Mary lived together on a dusty road called Bradford Way in a little rural community just east of Memphis, Tennessee called Leesville. Their closest neighbors to the north were the Leigh family, who lived on a hill about two city blocks away. The neighbors to the south were the Andersons, who were nearly three city blocks away. In back of Mary's house lived the Jeffries, a bit more comfortable financially than the others, yet genuinely kind people; a sprinkling of other families lived within a one-mile radius on

all sides, and there was the small store that everyone frequented up in the town of Leesville.

On the north side of town lived predominantly white people. And on the south side of town lived predominantly black people. There was only one school in Leesville for all of Leesville's black children; it was a large brick building that consisted of first through twelfth grades. The other school in Leesville was attended by white children. The black children that lived in the rural area of Leesville were either driven to school in a car or they were picked up by school bus and taken there. The Leigh' children were driven by bus.

In all, the families surrounding Mary and Bernice got along well and maintained a respectable distance between themselves. Everyone was pleased with his or her ability to keep out of the other's business. They all had been acquainted with each other for many years, and they supported one another in good times and bad. Their properties had been handed down from generation to generation, and no one ever spoke of moving away or selling out. Leesville was their home forever. Often they could be heard saying to each other (and to anyone that would listen) that "We was born here and we goin' die here!" And they meant it.

In fact, Bernice was the only one in that small community who had never made such a statement. She knew the world was much larger than Leesville and she aimed to explore it one day.

Many years prior, Bernice had set out to separate herself from the others in the community by way of her dialect. She had taken great pains to perfect her speech every since she was a little girl. She mimicked her grammar school teachers in their speech

because she felt it sounded so much richer, more sophisticated than everyone else's dialect. In high school, she continued to study her teachers closely in their speech, strengthening her knowledge even more. And now she commanded the English language the way she felt everyone should command it. It was no secret that her eyes were on a bigger, brighter prize in life.

CHAPTER 2

"Auntie Momma, did you hear about Mrs. Leigh?" Bernice asked through a shaky voice. She spoke without hesitation; "Mrs. Leigh *died* last night, Momma. She *died*! I didn't even know, did you, Momma?"

Mary stared into Bernice's face as if she had just witnessed a head-on crash. "Dear God," she murmured without taking her wide-open eyes from Bernice's face. "Dear God," she repeated, almost trancelike. Her body sank back into the chair as if she had just lost a large portion of that part of her body that allowed her to sit up straight. "Who said that? Who told you that? How you know that true, babe?"

"Momma, it's true! Everybody's talking about it at the store. Everybody said they're going over there to see what they can do for Mr. Leigh and the children. It's true, Auntie Momma. Mrs. Leigh is gone." as tears clouded her eyes. "They said her tubes busted. She was pregnant in her tubes."

"Lord help us! Babe, I didn' know. I ain't heard a thang 'bout it. I ain't seen her lately but I... Lord, Lord." Mary rocked back and forth in the old kitchen chair, still cradling Bernice's hands in her lap; her face was rippled with shock, pain and confusion.

Mary thought back to earlier that morning when she was washing clothes. She remembered the phone ringing time and again but she didn't stop to answer it. She never

stopped her busy work to answer the phone. She needed to get those clothes on the line while the sun was bright and strong in the back yard. "Lord, Lord," she whispered as she rose from the chair and walked slowly into the house and into her bedroom. She fell on her knees and began to pray. Bernice followed and kneeled beside her in silence.

Hours later, after Mary had prepared an early but not-so-thoughtful supper, the two ladies retreated to the front porch and sat in the old wooden swing, with Mary again clutching Bernice's hands and calling on the Lord for dear strength. Time seemed to stand still for the ladies as they swung in their own sadness.

Later into the evening, the big orange sun crept behind the old poplar and oak trees that skirted the distance, but neither of the ladies acknowledged it. On most days, the two ladies could be found sitting in that swing, staring into the melting sun and rejoicing in the gift of another day well done; this was not one of those days.

After a long silence, Bernice spoke. "Auntie Momma, who's going to take care of those little children up there?" Bernice held a soft spot in her heart for children and she had stated on many occasions that she wanted to have "a house full of little rascals" after she was married. "Mr. Leigh can't do it; he's got to go to work every day. What's going to happen to his children?" Bernice began to weep again, quieter this time. Her sleeveless dress had dried from her earlier run and hung limply from her shoulders. She shivered in the mid-summer evening's air.

"I don' know, babe; I don' know what goin' happ'n. We just gotta leave it to the Lord. All we can do is leave it in the Lord hand. He'll make a way. The good Lord always make a way."

Mary spoke as tears escaped her closed eyes. She knew she didn't have the emotional strength to go to the Leigh' house that day. She resigned to go up on the hill the

next day.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Fred Leigh, Sr. sat on his front porch, face caught between his weathered young hands, sobbing openly. He had been sitting out on that worn down porch since long before daybreak. He was dressed in work clothes, the same ones he'd worn since his dear Gertrude passed away.

“My wife dead, Lord! Help me, Lord. Please help me, Lord,” he prayed and mourned through every word. “I need ya, Lord. My li'l child'n need ya, Lord. We can't do nothin' 'thout ya, Lord.” He carried on his one-man prayer meeting for hours, right on the rugged, wooden steps, his strength and pride long diminished, replaced with visible pain.

Nestled on both sides of Fred were the twins, seven-year-olds Mary Jane and Mary Jean, surrounded by his pain while feeling a fair share of their own. After all, they remembered their mother well, and they understood that she had passed on and that they would not see her again on this earth. Their appearance spoke loads. Their hair was tousled; the flower-patterned nightgowns their mother had sewn the year before were in dire need of soap and water; and their feet were bare and dirty. For sure, they were in need of serious care, and in more ways than the eyes could see.

Inside the house sat a sprinkling of relatives and neighbors who'd been contacted throughout the night and early morning of Gertrude's passing. Word of her death spread like melting butter in a hot skillet. People from throughout that tiny Tennessee town and from across the country had been calling all morning, keeping the loud, red telephone ringing nonstop.

Of course, no one was surprised about the many callers and visitors, given the fine

reputation that Gertrude had with everyone since she moved into that community with Fred nearly 14 years earlier. She had just graduated high school, and accepted Fred's offer to marry and move in with him, against a few of her relatives' objections.

Debbie, twenty-seven years old, was Gertrude's younger sister. She lived within three miles of Leesville with her husband, Alfred, both of whom were elementary school teachers in a nearby town. Debbie had always been very close to Gert. And when Gert announced her engagement to Fred, Debbie was ecstatic. She knew that, although Fred had only a third-grade education, he was a good, hardworking man, and she knew he would take good care of her big sister. And he did take care of her until the day she died. **CHAPTER 4**

Visibly shaken, Debbie held two-year-old Derek, the Leigh's youngest child, on her lap inside the Leigh' house. She rocked back and forth in what had been Gert's favorite red and black rocker. "It's ok, baby," she repeated time and again, as if convincing herself as well as Derek of the validity of her words. "Everything will be okay."

Back in the kitchen, Carol was keeping busy. "Anybody like some coffee," she asked as she walked through the kitchen and into the living room carrying a steaming cup. "I got some real hot coffee on the stove in there."

Carol was Fred's older sister and had lived in some part of Tennessee all of her life, moving around whenever she grew restless or bored. She was divorced nearly three years earlier, and had taken to spending more of her time with Fred and his family, much to the family's delight.

Carol had never been a bothersome person, but rather she seemed to lift spirits

wherever she went. Having no children of her own, she often picked up the Leigh children for daylong outings; that allowed for some much needed private time between Fred and Gert.

However, on this most dark day, Carol's attempts to keep everyone's spirit up seemed all but useless; she too was suffering, yet she felt it necessary to maintain dry eyes for the sake of the children, as well as for her brother's sake.

A few people started to stir and move toward the kitchen as Carol stepped onto the front porch. "Fred, take this coffee here. You need somethin' in yo stomach." Fred never turned around. Carol sat the steaming coffee at Fred's feet and smiled at the twins lovingly before returning to the house. Someone had to take the reigns and she decided she was the only person there who was emotionally equipped to fill that role. **CHAPTER 5**

Fred's younger brother, Homer, arrived from Nashville earlier that morning. His wife, April, was due to arrive later that evening after picking up the children from school. They both had agreed that they would not pull the children out of school any sooner than was necessary. The bad news about Auntie Gert would be hard enough to deliver and they were in no rush to deliver it.

Since his arrival, Homer had spent most of his time on the front porch with Fred; at other times, he was in the back yard talking with Alfred. Alfred was not one to place himself willingly in the middle of visible pain and sorrow. But it was clear that Fred's pain had easily become his own.

"I thank I need a cup of that coffee," chimed a younger voice from the living room. It was Junior, the Leigh's eldest child, who had quickly assumed the head-of-

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