CHAPTER 1

I live across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower and around the bend from one of the best views in Paris. On my way to work, I pass the gilded bronze statues of the Chaillot Palace that overlooks the Trocadéro fountains. I've been taking the same route daily for more than two years, yet I'm dazzled every time I arrive at this spot. Weekdays, I am in one of my international corporate-lawyer suits, because that is what I do. Weekends, I wear sneakers and my housing-project-style baggy jeans, because that's where I'm from. Through headphones, I might be listening to Missy Elliott or Keith Sweat, or maybe the French crooners Julien Clerc or Véronique Sanson. I belong nowhere in particular anymore and feel comfortable most everywhere.

It wasn't always this way for me. For years, I fought against the undertow that menaces so many of us who grow up poor in America's ghettos. I grappled with all manner of demons, some created

by society and others strictly of my own making. My struggle was marred by spectacular failures and salvaged by unlikely comebacks. I was a college-bound project girl as drawn to books as I was tempted by violence.

I grew up in an old-fashioned American family headed by a traditional hardworking father and a tireless mother who stayed home to have children. Seven, to be precise. Luke was the first-born. Still marveling at the miracle of childbirth, my mother soon followed with a second, Ernest. By the time she had delivered Victor and Kevin, numbers six and seven, the only thing miraculous about it all was that she could still walk after such procreative efforts. Smack in the middle of the boys had sprung three girls, of which I was the second, between Ann, the eldest, and Jean, the baby girl. The middle of the middle. A perfect symmetry. And a most unremarkable position if ever there was one in a bustling family.

My parents were children when the Great Depression of the 1930s devastated the world's economy. They missed it. "What Depression? We were always so poor we didn't notice the Depression," my mother said. They migrated to New York in the 1940s, part of an exodus of black people hoping to trade Southern racism and poverty for Northern opportunity. In 1945, on V-J Day, my father, a twenty-two-year-old army veteran fresh from military service, applied for a job as a bus driver in his home town of Decatur, Alabama. The white station manager informed him that Negroes didn't drive buses in Alabama but that he could wash bus windows at the depot. Private Willie McDonald retorted, "I just got out of the army, where I did everything the whites did." He left Alabama that very night in the "Colored" car of a New York-bound train, accompanied by his eighteen-year-old girlfriend, Florence Birdsong. They had only their clothes, a large chocolate bar, and the Brooklyn address of a relative. Within a couple of years, Willie

and Florence were married in a ceremony at Manhattan's City Hall.

They were an idealistic Southern couple who believed in the American dream, not so much for themselves—with little formal education, they were realistic about their own prospects—but for their children. We were told to study hard in school in order to get good jobs making good money. "Good" was never defined, but when my father used the term, I knew it meant something grander than sorting mail in the post office, as he did. For my mother, good jobs meant any of the blue-collar jobs held by our neighbors, or, if you were bright and female, a position as a telephone operator, dental assistant, or nurse's aide.

My earliest memories of my father are heroic. There was the story of how, soon after my parents moved into the public housing project named Farragut Houses, a fire broke out in our next-door neighbor's apartment. The mother escaped with her infant daughter, but her twin boys were still somewhere inside. There was no time to wait for firefighters. Daddy dashed into the smoky apartment, holding a handkerchief to his face, and ran out with a screaming baby twin under each arm. As if in confirmation of that feat, the family album contains a photo of him, bulging with muscles, in a cape and tights, an "S" emblazoned across his chest. The bottom of the photo reads: "Coney Island Amusement Park—Brooklyn 1948." For me, Daddy was Superman long before I saw Clark Kent snatch off his glasses to leap tall buildings.

By and by, I learned about life-size cardboard figures with holes for faces, but that information did nothing to alter my belief in Daddy's superhuman powers. I eventually accepted the fact that he was probably not *the* Superman, but he was certainly *a* Superman. He did, after all, seem to know everything. And what he didn't know already, he taught himself. While working full-time as a postal clerk, he mastered Spanish, electronics, cooking, karate,

philosophy, shoe repair, sewing, and photography. One of his photos, taken on the Manhattan Bridge above the East River moments before a suicidal man loosened his grip, had been published in a local newspaper.

Although naturally bright, he was haunted by his lack of formal education. By way of compensation, he pushed us to excel in school, and stood poised to bask in our successes as though they were his own. Schooling meant everything to him, and I learned early that it should mean everything to me as well. Fortunately, I had a knack for it. Shining in school was guaranteed to keep me in his good favor, so I shone. My consistently high reading scores attracted the fawning attention of teachers and filled my parents with pride. By fourth grade, I'd already been nicknamed "College Material." The child in the middle of the middle had found a way to stand out, alone and special, in a crowd of siblings. Daddy's expectations were clear. All his children were to go to college and stay off welfare. "A good education is the ticket, and you have to grab it," he said repeatedly.

His naturally loud voice and strong personality at times added a harsh edge to his presence. On family car trips, he'd yell and fume for a navigator but we were all too intimidated by his exacting style to dare attempt reading a map. Mother's calm was a welcome relief from Daddy's intensity. Her ambitions for us were of a completely different order. "All I want is for my children to stay alive and out of jail," she'd say. She joked and clowned so much that often it seemed we were all kids playing together. My father subscribed to the old-school notion that a man's wife shouldn't work. I suppose that, to his way of thinking, a working wife diminished his breadwinner masculinity. So she stayed at home, straightening the girls' hair with a hot comb, barbering the boys' hair with clippers, and cooking, shopping, and visiting neighbors. Such was the life she found "up North," and she liked it.

We lived a Southern life-style in our Northern home. The air hung heavy with oppressive do's and don'ts: do eat all the food on your plate; don't talk back to grown people; do wash your ears and ankles; don't suck your teeth or roll your eyes; do finish homework before watching television; don't hum at the dinner table. Other taboos targeted cigarettes, alcohol, and even coffee, testimony to the simpler world my parents had left in the South. Forbidding the heavier-duty fare of the Northern projects—guns, heroin, and cocaine—hadn't even occurred to them.

Family living was a communal exercise. We watched television together, and went en masse to the public swimming pool, where we learned quickly to shove each other in the pool without being seen by our parents. We also did chores together: one team washed walls, another windows, and a third dishes. My specialty was cleaning the bathroom. True to their Southern roots, Daddy and Mother were excellent cooks, and much of our family time together was spent at the dinner table. No one dared begin eating before each of us had said grace. With hands clasped and eyelids fluttering open just slightly, I would whisper "Jesus wept," keeping a wary eye out for food snatchers. Only then would the feast begin: sumptuous spreads of collard greens, biscuits, green peas, macaroni and cheese, corn on the cob, and fried chicken. Dinner wasn't dinner without a homemade dessert: chocolate layer cake, apple or potato pie, peach cobbler, or some other treat, always made from scratch because packaged mixes were too expensive. Every evening was epicurean rapture.

Punishment was also a group affair, which only added to its sting. Punishable infractions could be anything from zinging eggs out the window, Ernest's way of practicing his throw, to eating all the cherries in the fruit salad, as Ann did, to bed-wetting, my intractable torment. For these lapses, we were whipped with a leather belt. There was nothing worse than glimpsing Ann's subtle

smirk as I cried out in pain. Our "spare the rod, spoil the child" Southern parents considered such discipline natural. To us, their Northern children, it was pure barbarism.

Childhood diseases were readily shared. I loved the individual attention being sick brought me, and endured my illnesses with pleasure. While the others had ordinary measles, I had German ones, a distinction that pleased me. Mine *had* to be more dangerous. I might even die. I hoped Mother realized this. The joy of being especially diseased ended when I caught the next one. Luke and Ernest had developed mysterious bald patches on their heads. Soon I had one. The boys got better, but my spot grew. The doctor I visited was stumped and told Mother to wash my hair daily. His advice caused the disease, which we eventually learned was ringworm, to spread, leaving me with nothing but bangs. I was virtually bald at seven years old. Mother blamed herself for listening to "that stupid white doctor," and sometimes I saw her crying as she daubed my scalp with salve. She made cute cotton bonnets in as many bright colors as she could imagine, but they did little against the amused cries and mockery of my schoolmates. Children, though, weren't my only tormentors. Mother stormed over to school one day and angrily threatened to "pull every strand of hair" from the head of the teacher who'd tried to make me remove my bonnet in class. I was thrilled that Mother would brawl for me and hoped to see her do it. My hair grew back within a few months; then I developed anemia. I couldn't walk even a few feet without panting from exhaustion and collapsing on the nearest chair. I was hospitalized for ten days. Nurses drew blood daily from my fingers to monitor my red-blood-cell count. Apparently, I had almost none when I arrived. I once overheard a nurse say mournfully to a colleague, "That little girl almost died." I was delighted. Could anyone be more special, more perfect? The morning I awoke to discover my hospital bed wet, I wished I *had* died. I'd learned from Mother's beatings and Ann's teasing that bed-wetting was the

shameful act of a very bad person who deserved punishment. Afraid to lose the affection of my doting nurses, I used the comics section of a Sunday newspaper to cover the wet spot on my bed and sat staring at it for hours, forever. Morning passed, then afternoon, and still I sat. Occasionally, a nurse would ask didn't I want to go to the playroom. "No, thank you, I just want to read," I'd answer with a sweet smile, terrified that I hadn't been good.

In reality, I was quite the "good" child, successfully socialized to be polite, quiet, and to smile at adults. The label "sweet" adorned my head like a halo. I was an angel of "thank you"s and "excuse me"s, a Southern-style little Brooklyn girl. I now regret this early training in stuffing emotions; perhaps having a wider range of expression then would have spared me the destructive outbursts I experienced later.

In contrast, Ann was the family bully who tortured anyone within reach but preferred Luke and me. The pepper-filled hand clamped over my nose so that I couldn't breathe without inhaling black pepper was hers. The voice calling me "yellow" because of my light complexion, or "pissy" when I wet the bed, was hers. It was Ann who squeezed open Luke's softcover diary and ran through the apartment reciting its contents. This was particularly cruel because Luke, skinny and sweet-natured, was a soft-hearted soul who cried to love songs and would do anything for a little brother or sister. Ann wasn't the only one to target Luke. Ernest picked fistfights with him for reasons that probably had more to do with their one-year age difference and a *mano a mano* struggle for dominance than anything else. Ernest regularly won. As resolutely thick-skinned as his older brother was sensitive, Ernest stifled his softer side. It showed though the day he cried after striking out at a baseball game Mother was watching. For my part, I admit that sometimes *I* was the culprit who ate all the fruit-salad cherries and let Ann take the blame. It was the least I could do to get back at her. Around adults, however, we were good and well-behaved,

smothered little creatures secretly lusting to curse, throw things out the window, and play with matches.

The projects were full of kids, and all the adults played parent to all the children. It wasn't unusual for a neighbor to order a rowdy kid home for "acting up." "You ain't my mother" was the usual retort, but we obeyed. Mother's friends visited during the day, when Daddy was at work, and brought their children. The women chatted and drank homemade lemonade while we kids practiced Supremes songs in rehearsal for later performances in front of yawning adults. Christmas was a time to parade new clothes and toys in the hallways, and Halloween an exhausting door-to-door run in homemade costumes and sparkling face paint.

Large families were the norm, and mine felt uncomfortably crowded. I discovered early that books could transport me from our noisy, cramped apartment to new worlds of open spaces and fun adventures. I devoured Nancy Drew mysteries, thrilled to the feats of Pippi Longstocking, and ate goat cheese with Heidi. Maybe the children of the Robertson clan, which numbered around seventeen, did likewise. There were so many Robertsons that the housing authority removed a wall from their apartment so the family could expand into the adjoining one. Mrs. Robertson was a large, silent woman with big bones and broad shoulders who called me "Sugar" in a slow Southern drawl. Neighbors commended her for beating Mr. Robertson every time he came home drunk with no paycheck. Daddy said a woman who beat on a man wasn't a real woman, and called her "low class."

The McDonalds were one of the project's "founding families." When my parents moved into our twelfth-floor apartment in Farragut Houses, the requirements for acceptance were strict. No single parents, no families without a wage earner, and no welfare recipients. The ultimate insult was to shout at someone, "Ya mama on welfare!" There were chained-off expanses of trimmed grass protected by "Keep Off the Grass" signs, neighborhood factories

that provided jobs, a flagpole decorated with an enormous American flag, a community center for children, a predominantly Puerto Rican Catholic church, and a predominantly black Protestant one. There was the Boys' Club, the liquor store, several grocery stores, a dentist's office, a pizza shop, a dry-cleaners, and the Brooklyn Navy Yard with its flock of white sailors. It was a time of possibilities—the availability of jobs and good public schools fueled private dreams and aspirations. Everyone wanted to get out of the projects then, too—to an affordable house, a nicer neighborhood, a better life. Later people yearned to get out just to stay alive.

What remains today is the Protestant church, the liquor store, a couple of bodegas, and a bare flagpole. The word "welfare" has lost its sting. The majority of families who live in public housing receive some form of government assistance. Collecting a monthly check, food stamps, and government surplus foodstuffs is no longer viewed as shameful.

Back then, the sense of community was strong because so many activities were done in groups. After school and throughout the summers, boys, and an occasional girl, organized teams to play basketball, punchball, stickball, and something called "Hot Peas and Butter, Come and Get Your Mother." The girls, and an occasional boy, jumped double Dutch and played hopscotch. We knew all the Top Ten Soul Hits by heart and formed singing groups that crooned "My Girl" and "Baby Love" or anything by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. Ann and two friends donned black sequined dresses and became the Primettes, gaining a certain measure of popularity from the various talent shows they entered. Ann had made it very clear that no, I could not be a Primette, because I was flat-chested, yellow, and pissy. Enviously, I'd sit on the top bunk bed watching as they rehearsed their dips, turns, and harmonies. Ann had so much that I lacked—street smarts, savvy, and ingenuity. I admired the ease with which she confidently

talked her way into and out of just about anything, and her ability to find a way to get whatever she wanted, money being the least of obstacles. If she needed new shoes for a dance, she'd talk someone into lending her money. Then she'd buy a pair of foxy high heels on a Friday, dance the weekend away, and return the shoes to the store on Monday. She repaid the debt with the refund. Amazed, I watched her repeat the scam weekly from one store to the next, a brilliant ruse far beyond the capacities of my bookwormish little brain.

My natural ability with words guaranteed success in school. My siblings' talents weren't rewarded in the same way. Luke was gifted artistically but received little encouragement, since, in Daddy's opinion, boys weren't meant to draw and paint. Ernest distinguished himself in sports, a field to which many are drawn but where few succeed; I often played baseball with him and his friends and was proud to be dubbed a "tomboy" because I didn't throw like a girl. Sports skill, however, wasn't what impressed Daddy and he didn't hesitate to condemn Ernest roughly for responding slowly to arithmetic quizzes. Ann's drawing ability and fashion sense would eventually earn her admission into Fashion Industries, the feeder high school for New York's prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology. However, her interest in fashion and singing had little value for a father focused exclusively on academics. And by the time Jean, Victor, and Kevin were making their way through the system years later, the public schools were so threatening that any talents they had took a back seat to the one skill that really counted—survival.

I began school in 1958 and there had my first experience of integration—of sorts. The student body was predominantly black and Puerto Rican and the teaching staff almost exclusively white. But the white teachers had chosen to teach in the projects and cared about their work. They were Irish, Italian, and Jewish, and perhaps had faced exclusion and prejudice themselves. Moreover,

the country's liberal political climate encouraged caring about the "underprivileged." We weren't evil or stupid or just plain bad—we simply did not enjoy the privileges others had. The obvious solution was to distribute those privileges more fairly. The "privilege" of adequate basic education, decent housing, and solid jobs would improve American society for all. Teachers embraced this ideal then. With the eighties came the rigid notion of a permanent "underclass." It was no longer a question of what we in the projects didn't *have*—it was what we *were*. Much like India's untouchables, we came to be seen as a class of people destined to be poor, undereducated, and unemployable. It was as though the larger society had decided that such was our collective karma and nothing could be done to change it.

From kindergarten through ninth grade, the years I spent in my neighborhood schools, I had two black teachers. One was Miss Betts, my second-grade teacher, whom I continued to visit over the years, even after I was attending college. The other was Miss Hall, who taught home economics and moonlighted as a bra model. What a racket we made laughing when she proudly showed the class her picture in the lingerie section of a mail-order catalogue—in her underwear!

I was in fourth grade when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. That day a teacher hurried into our classroom, red-faced, leaned toward Miss Higgins, and whispered in her ear. My teacher gasped. I'd overheard what was said. "President Kennedy's been shot." Mother was crying when I got home. Other grownups were crying like babies. "That's a damn shame," Mother said, sighing. "They killed that man because he wanted to do something for black people." Soon, glossy photos of the dead President hung all over—in the grocery stores, dry-cleaners, and our neighbors' apartments. My life was touched by another Kennedy, too. Robert F. Kennedy had come to the projects to campaign with mayoral candidate Abraham Beame. As Kennedy approached, smiling and waving next to

Beame, I grabbed hold of his hand. For a brief instant, his arm tensed. We walked hand in hand all the way down the block, me grinning up at him. I was disappointed that Kennedy never looked back at me. Instead, his eyes nervously scanned the rooftops of the buildings along our path. That haunting image never left me.

A more personal tragedy struck closer to home. Arriving home from school a little later than usual, I was met at the door by Mother, who wrapped her arms around me. "Thank you, Jesus! I thought you was that little girl!" The body of a ten-year-old girl had been found by police. She'd been thrown from the roof of one of the projects' fourteen-story buildings. By evening, all the little girls in the projects had been accounted for except one: Olga Lopez.

I couldn't grasp what had happened. Why would someone want to kill a little girl? Suppose *I* had been the one to go home for lunch, the elevator door opening onto a stranger? What was the meaning of the whispered talk of "sexual assault"? I had no frame of reference for the words. I tried to imagine what had happened to my friend but couldn't—it was unimaginable. Olga's killer wasn't caught right away, which gave us many occasions to run screaming to school. "There he is!" we'd holler. "He's *coming!!!*" The monster we fled in our imaginations turned out to be a quiet sixteen-year-old Boy Scout I used to play with. He gave himself up to the police several days after the crime and ultimately went to a psychiatric hospital. A decade later, I was the only law student in Torts class who personally knew the parties in one of the cases we were studying. Commenting on *Lopez v. New York City Housing Authority*, I turned to a friend from a middle-class New Jersey hamlet. "I grew up with that girl, *and* the killer." She shuddered. "You're kidding! God, Janet, where are you *from*?"

The cycle of seasons rolled on. Autumn brought bright red leaves, fresh loose-leaf paper, and new pencils; winter's snows draped roofs and window ledges in white and heralded snowball

wars; spring released its perfumes; and, at long last, summer closed schools and opened neighborhood fire hydrants. On Easter Sundays we wiggled into stiff clothes and absurd hats, and each December applied our best penmanship skills to Christmas wish lists slipped in vain under our parents' bedroom door. I collected certificates of excellence in everything from conduct to science; Luke built delicate replicas of ships from ice-pop sticks; Ernest studied his collection of baseball cards; and Ann drew leggy fashion models and rehearsed with the Primettes.

As for the younger ones, Jean marched with a church youth band, twirling a wooden rifle above her head, and Victor played with his GI Joe doll. On allowance days, they were my best (and only) customers for the Cracker Jack trinkets I steadily accumulated. Ann accused me of greed as I bartered over prices at the ironing board I'd covered with magic rings, figurines, whistles, and temporary tattoos, all gotten as free prizes. Life was good and about to get better.

"Mother, Mr. Mitchell said I'm getting skipped! He gave me this letter!" The parental-consent form I'd brought home authorized the school to place me in the sixth grade a year early because of my high score on the city-wide reading test. "Well, I'll be!" she exclaimed, reading the note. "Like I always say, you got your brains from me. That's my girl!" Then she hesitated. She'd heard it wasn't good for a child to be skipped, that they could develop mental problems, that the older kids would be jealous and cruel. I saw my star fading. "I won't get mental! Anyway, Mr. Mitchell said four other kids are getting skipped, too! So I'll be with my friends! Pleeeze! Mr. Mitchell said I'm really smart! Pul-leeeze!" She sucked her teeth. "Mr. Mitchell this, Mr. Mitchell that. Wait and see what your father says. And don't start that whining!" I got skipped. We were all smart and full of potential—future doctors, executives, and lawyers. But for the moment the five of us were merely new sixth-graders whom the older kids called "mad scientist skanks."

Mr. Mitchell would have been my fifth-grade teacher had I not been skipped. We had an unusual relationship. Whenever he saw me outside of school he gave me a dollar, nothing less than a fortune for a little project girl. Even if he saw me three days in a row. My own father gave me twenty-five cents a week, and that was only if I'd done my weekly chores. Which made Mr. Mitchell's act even more incredible to me. It went like this: I would happen to be walking near the park across the street from school, wearing my holey sneakers. I always wore my sneakers until the cloth tops resembled Swiss cheese. The more holes, the better chance I had of qualifying for a new pair; otherwise, Mother's response was, "Why you need new ones? I don't see hole number one in your old ones!"

Somehow, these little walks always occurred around five o'clock. From the corner of my eye I'd see Mr. Mitchell's white hair and the gray suit he wore daily. One of his shoes had a built-up platform heel and he walked with a limp. "Why, hello, Janet!" "Hi, Mr. Mitchell," I'd say, looking at the ground. "And how are you today?" "Fine, thank you." "Well, you have a nice day, young lady." "Okay." "Here, I want you to have this." "No, thank you." "Really, take it." "Okay. Thank you. Bye." Yes!! Mr. Mitchell's unofficial "allowance" kept me in chocolate cupcakes, potato chips, and Cracker Jacks for weeks!

I'm sure he chuckled each time he saw me just happen to be near school at the end of his workday. Why did he play along with my little game? I always thought it was those worn-out sneakers. But having acted on the same impulse myself, I think it might have been something else. The gesture itself—handing a child money—is perhaps crude. But when I've been back home and looked in the face of some little project kid, knowing what I know about their world and the larger world that awaits them with crossed arms, I've made the same gesture. It's a symbolic but powerful act of generosity and his touched my heart.

Ten years later, Mr. Mitchell's star fifth-graders were caught in the destructive currents of the projects. Jorge was nodding and scratching his way from door to door, selling stolen clothes to support his heroin addiction. Diane's dulled eyes and gray complexion bespoke her drug problems. And Danny, always a little pudgy, had ballooned in size on the methadone he was taking to kick his habit. Vincent had completely dropped from sight, and I was in college, feeling very "mental," indeed. Diane eventually joined Narcotics Anonymous and got clean, but Danny died of an overdose. In a sense, we had been the proverbial best and brightest of the projects. Getting skipped wasn't what dragged us down. The powerful undertow of the new projects did.

The summer after I was skipped, our family took a train trip down South to visit relatives. All I knew about the South was that my parents were from Alabama, and all I knew about Alabama was a song about a banjo. And my mother's stories. She was raised in Decatur, one of seven children herself, all too poor to go to school. She spent her childhood helping her mother clean the homes of white people. My mother never knew her father, who drowned cleaning a well when she was two. The story she had been told was that while my grandfather hollered for help, his white employers stood by and did nothing. Her grandmother was a mean-tempered Cree Indian, and one of her sisters had been murdered by a jealous boyfriend. The young woman's ghost was said to have been seen in my grandmother's apartment, which is where we were going to stay that summer.

I still was young enough to be free of regional prejudice at the time we all arrived at Grandma's place in the low-rise public-housing complex. Adults covered me with kisses, and I had a hoard of rowdy cousins to play with. There were homemade biscuits, crisp bacon, and ice-cold root-beer sodas that my cousins called "pop," and it was all right to say yes to seconds. People called my mother "Ma'am" and me "honey." The red dirt in the playground stained

my clean cotton outfits, but I wasn't scolded. I learned to ride a bicycle and played Tarzan with a rope tied to a backyard tree. At first, I was on nervous lookout for my aunt's ghost, but soon forgot her in the swirl of meals, sights, and playmates.

Out shopping with my mother and my aunt, I hopped aboard a city bus and, like any kid, plopped down in the seat with the best view—directly opposite the driver. Smiling and swinging my legs, I watched cars, houses, and trees whir past. The driver smiled. A white woman sitting opposite me smiled. I was pleased grownups were smiling at me, because that meant I was being good. I happened to glance back at Mother. It startled me to see that she and my aunt were frantically waving and pointing upwards. What was I doing wrong? I read "COLORED" printed above their heads. Oops! I jumped up and dashed to the back of the bus. The two women laughed heartily, much to my relief.

I have often wondered why no one expressed anger or resentment, why no outraged explanation was given me, no sense of wrongness conveyed. Perhaps they thought me too young to understand. What is more likely, I think, is that they had been so thoroughly socialized in the South of lynchings, Ku Klux Klan marches, and Jim Crow segregation that whites in front and blacks in the back no longer shocked them. It was just the way things were. And it didn't seem to matter that only a few years earlier the United States Supreme Court had made such racist practices illegal and the Interstate Commerce Commission had ordered the removal of all "White" and "Colored" signs from public buses. Jim Crow was ingrained deep in the Southern psyche.

It was several years before I again set foot in Alabama. The South and I had changed considerably. The "White" and "Colored" signs had been removed from public transportation. Some of my relatives had moved from public housing to their own houses, but always in the same neighborhood—segregation was still the Southern way, only now it was unofficial. The KKK still marched

through Decatur in their white sheets, but people simply laughed at them. I was a sixteen-year-old high-schooler and had grown into a Northern chauvinist with little interest in any family that was not from Brooklyn. The wonderful cousins, aunts, and uncles I'd met as a little girl seemed dreadfully "country" to me now. First, there were those silly double names—Bobby Jo, Sallie Bee, Willie Mae, Patsy Lou. Even the names that stood alone sounded absurd: Ezekiel. Arneda. Zoralene. Worse, there was the "BP" syndrome: all my sweet little girl cousins were now barefoot and pregnant. Patsy Lou was my age and awaiting her third baby, a thought most distasteful to a bookish, college-bound virgin. I still remember her bewildered expression that summer as she asked, sweltering next to me on a porch swing, "Why you always *reading*?" Had I not been trained always to be polite, I might have replied, "Why you always *pregnant*?"

But a ten-year-old is readily charmed and at the end of that first trip down South I couldn't have been more pleased with all things Southern. Upon my return, I started junior high school and found it to my liking. Excelling still came easily and school was more interesting. I took part in a pen-pal program set up with children in Israel. Until then, my entire universe consisted of the three square blocks of Farragut Houses. When I received a letter bearing a postmark from Jerusalem, I studied it with great puzzlement. My pen pal was a girl my own age named Zippora who wrote about the weather and her school; I did the same. I was fascinated by the foreignness of her life.

Music classes were an integral part of the curriculum. At home, the sounds of Motown filled the children's rooms. Mother hummed to Sam Cooke and Mahalia Jackson, and Daddy, always the maverick, blasted easy-listening music from windows opened wide on the projects. He said the projects needed more "culture" and less "racket." At school, however, the music teacher ruled. "Today we're going to hear something a little different," she announced

one afternoon. As far as I was concerned, any change from corny folk songs and patriotic jingles was welcome. She placed a record on the record player and passed around its jacket. On the album cover was a drawing of a tribe of massive women straddling wild-eyed horses. The women had uncombed, snake-like hair and wore cone-shaped steel bras. "Class, you are listening to Richard Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. Repeat after me . . ." Taking full advantage of the loud music, the class shrieked, "Rik-*kard Vog*-nuss Ride of the *Valeries*!" "Val-*kir*-ees!" she yelled. I'd never seen or heard anything like it and was captivated. After that experience, I heard the string section in Ben E. King's "Stand by Me" in an entirely new way. Such music would never replace Martha and the Vandellas, or the Four Tops, but I liked it. I recounted music class at dinner that evening and Ann mocked me for liking "whitey" music.

In homeroom, where attendance was taken, I discovered that music wasn't the only difference between my teachers' world and my own. It was the last day of class. Our homeroom teacher was wishing us all good luck when she suddenly burst into tears. "I . . . I feel so bad for . . . your people," she stammered. I was troubled. School was over, summer beckoned, and everyone had been promoted to the next grade. Did she know something I didn't? You bet she did. I have often felt the same sadness when I'm home, hanging out with my teenage nieces, who are all bright and potentially "college material." Yet they are already single mothers, already dependent on public assistance.

Junior high passed in much the same way as elementary school, painlessly. I was placed in a program for gifted students and selected for the math team. The special program offered language study; I chose French because most of the kids had signed up for Spanish, which was widely spoken in our neighborhood. I wanted to be different.

Not everyone in my family was having such a smooth time of

school. Luke passed hours reading in bed but always seemed blue. We thought it was just the ordinary angst of puberty. He was extremely bright and loved to recount tales about the Incas and the Aztecs, yet his grades were unremarkable. Ernest preferred a basketball to a book any day and earned average marks. He made it to the annual city-wide spelling bee, though, but tripped over "phrase," a word Ann worked into mean little jingles for months to come. For her part, routine schoolwork did little to satisfy her creative bent, and the poor report cards she brought home reflected the mismatch. She was only two years older than me, and my easy triumphs galled her, which undermined our relationship further.

The rhythm of school might have felt unchanging and safe, but everything else around me was in frightening transformation. The projects were different from what they had been in the fifties and early sixties. The difference was between low-income and no-income housing, between working families and welfare-dependent single mothers, between adolescent pranks and violent crime.

What began as a neighborhood for the working poor was fast becoming the last stop for the excluded poor. Families with no source of income other than what the State of New York doled out were now qualifying as tenants. "Recipients," snorted my father. He wasn't the only one snorting. Many of the projects' "founding families" were displeased. "I don't like this new breed they're letting in. When I moved in here, you had to have a job. Now all you need is a bottle of wine in your hand." The supply of jobs was dwindling, while the number of unskilled workers was increasing. I saw friends repeatedly go out job-hunting, confident in the value of their high-school diplomas, and return empty-handed. Buddy persevered longer than most. "Janet, listen up, I got this interview down at the docks loading trucks. It looks good. If you still gonna be on this bench when I get back—maybe we can check out the gym." The next time I'd see him, I'd ask what happened. "Oh, the truck thing? Bogus. But the unemployment