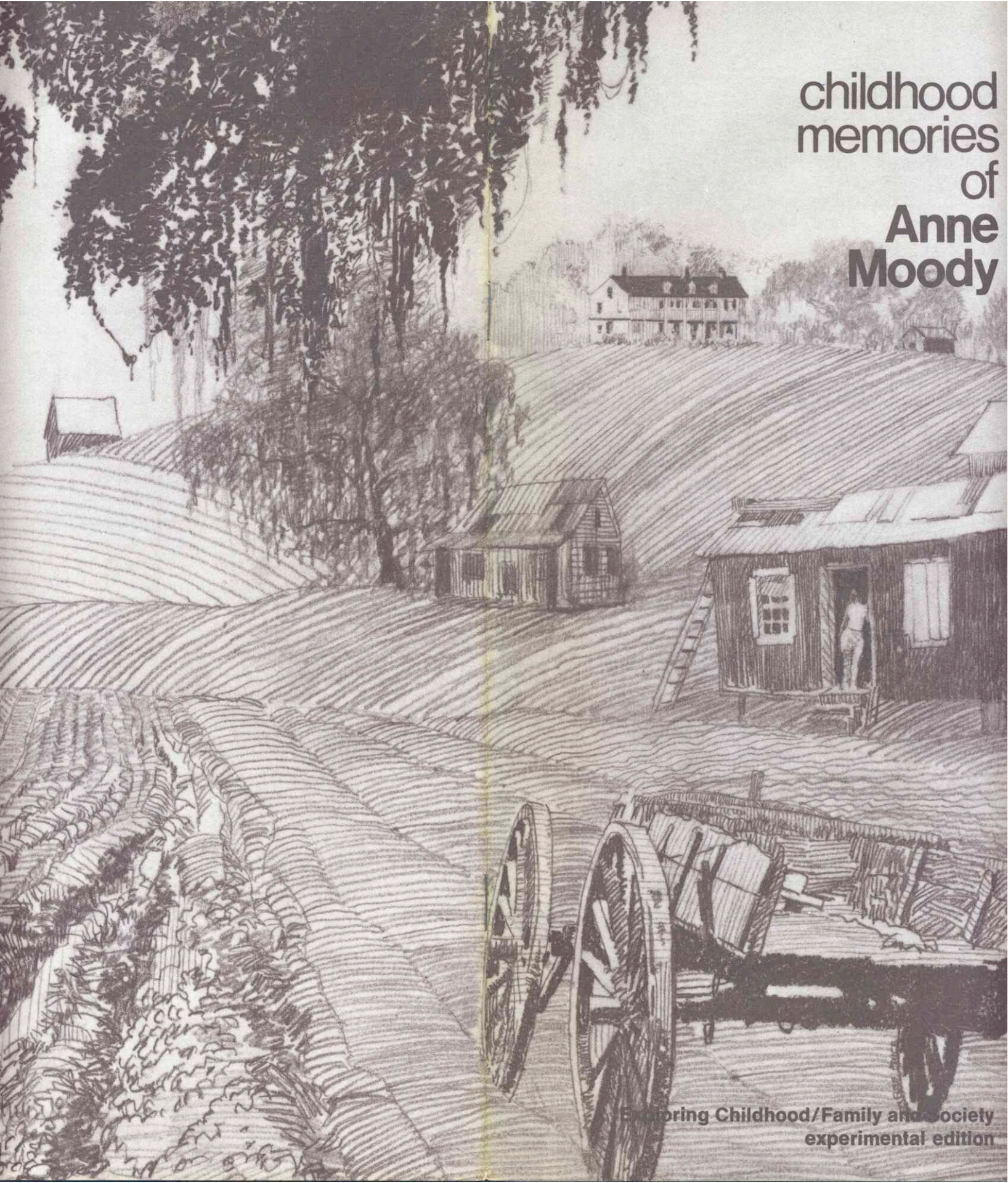


childhood
memories
of
**Anne
Moody**



Exploring Childhood/Family and Society
experimental edition

Each autobiography in this series presents one person's experience, lived and remembered in his or her own special way. While aspects of this person's life circumstances may be shared by others, each life is a unique combination of events, and should not be viewed as typical of any group.

Anne Moody describes her early childhood in the American South in the 1950s.

Growing up in Mississippi in a sharecropping family during the 1950's was the beginning of a journey toward self-knowledge for this young black American.

At age four, Anne Moody was confused by the instability of her world: irregular meals, her father's departure, her changing homes. But as she grew up she began to see beyond the "Negro shacks" that made up her environment. Although she still didn't understand why, she noticed that white children had advantages she didn't have. Only later did she discover how those advantages conspired to cripple those of her color. Beginning as a teenager she worked as a civil rights activist to create a society in which advantages were shared equally. As she worked, she gained a deeper understanding of the history of her people, the history of a system where a white-dominated society sapped the strength and labor of blacks for centuries.

The confusion she had as a child about why her family had to eat so poorly, why her father had to leave, and why they had to move so often, disappeared, for she began to understand the conditions that her father and mother lived under and how those conditions affected everything they tried to do or be. Anne Moody resolved to change those conditions.

Mama and Daddy had two girls. I was almost four and Adline was a crying baby about six or seven months. We rarely saw Mama and Daddy because they were in the field every day except Sunday. They would get up early in the morning and leave the house just before daylight. It was six o'clock in the evening when they returned, just before dark.

George Lee, Mama's eight-year-old brother, kept us during the day. He loved to roam the woods and taking care of us prevented him from enjoying his favorite pastime. He had to be at the house before Mama and Daddy left for the field, so he was still groggy when he got there. As soon as Mama then left the

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house, he would sit up in the rocking chair and fall asleep. Because of the solid wooden door and windows, it was dark in the house even though it was nearing daybreak. After sleeping for a couple of hours, George Lee would jump up suddenly, as if he was awakened from a nightmare, run to the front door, and sling it open. If the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day, he would get all excited and start slinging open all the big wooden windows, making them rock on their hinges. Whenever he started banging the windows and looking out at the woods longingly, I got scared.

Once he took us to the woods and left us sitting in the grass while he chased birds. That night Mama discovered we were full of ticks so he was forbidden to take us there any more. Now every time he got the itch to be in the woods, he'd beat me.

One day he said, "I'm goin' huntin'." I could tell he meant to go by himself. I was scared he was going to leave us alone but I didn't say anything. I never said anything to him when he was in that mood.

"You heard me!" he said, shaking me.

I still didn't say anything.

Wap! He hit me hard against the head; I started to boohoo as usual and Adline began to cry too.

"Shut up," he said, running over to the bed and slapping a bottle of sweetening water into her mouth.

"You stay here, right here," he said, forcing me into a chair at the foot of the bed. "And watch her," pointing to Adline in the bed. "And you better not move." Then he left the house.

A few minutes later he came running back into the house like he forgot something. He

ran over to Adline in the bed and snatched the bottle of sweetening water from her mouth. He knew I was so afraid of him I might have sat in the chair and watched Adline choke to death on the bottle. Again he beat me up. Then he carried us on the porch. I was still crying so he slapped me, knocking me clean off the porch. As I fell I hit my head on the side of the steps and blood came gushing out. He got some scared and cleaned away all traces of the blood. He even tried to push down the big knot that had popped up on my forehead.

That evening we sat on the porch waiting, as we did every evening, for Mama them to come up the hill. The electric lights were coming on in Mr. Carter's big white house as all the Negro shacks down in the bottom began to fade with the darkness. Once it was completely dark, the lights in Mr. Carter's house looked even brighter, like a big lighted castle. It seemed like the only house on the whole plantation.

Most evenings, after the Negroes had come from the fields, washed and eaten, they would sit on their porches, look up toward Mr. Carter's house and talk. Sometimes as we sat on our porch Mama told me stories about what was going on in that big white house. She would point out all the brightly lit rooms, saying that Old Lady Carter was baking tea cakes in the kitchen, Mrs. Carter was reading in the living room, the children were studying upstairs, and Mr. Carter was sitting up counting all the money he made off Negroes.

I was sitting there thinking about Old Lady Carter's tea cakes when I heard Mama's voice: "Essie Mae! Essie Mae!"

Suddenly I remembered the knot on my head and I jumped off the porch and ran toward her. She was now running up the hill with her hoe in one hand and straw hat in the other. Unlike the other farmhands, who came up the

hill dragging their hoes behind them, puffing and blowing, Mama usually ran all the way up the hill laughing and singing. When I got within a few feet of her I started crying and pointing to the big swollen wound on my forehead. She reached out for me. I could see she was feeling too good to beat George Lee so I ran right past her and headed for Daddy, who was puffing up the hill with the rest of the field hands. I was still crying when he reached down and swept me up against his broad sweaty chest. He didn't say anything about the wound but I could tell he was angry, so I cried even harder. He waved good-night to the others as they cut across the hill toward their shacks.

As we approached the porch, Daddy spotted George Lee headed down the hill for home.

"Come here boy!" Daddy shouted, but George Lee kept walking.

"Hey boy, didn't you hear me call you? If you don't get up that hill I'll beat the daylights outta you!" Trembling, George Lee slowly made his way back up the hill.

"What happen to Essie Mae here? What happen?" Daddy demanded.

"Uh . . . uh . . . she fell offa d' porch 'n hit her head on d' step . . ." George Lee mumbled.

"Where were you when she fell?"

"Uhm . . . ah was puttin' a diaper on Adline."

"If anything else happen to one o' these chaps, I'm goin' to try my best to *kill* you. Get yo'self on home fo' I . . ."

The next morning George Lee didn't show up. Mama and Daddy waited for him a long time.

"I wonder where in the hell could that damn boy be," Daddy said once or twice, pacing the

floor. It was well past daylight when they decided to go on to the field and leave Adline and me at home alone.

"I'm gonna leave y'all here by yo'self, Essie Mae," said Mama. "If Adline wake up crying, give her the bottle. I'll come back and see about y'all and see if George Lee's here."

She left some beans on the table and told me to eat them when I was hungry. As soon as she and Daddy slammed the back door I was hungry. I went in the kitchen and got the beans. Then I climbed in to the rocking chair and began to eat them. I was some scared. Mama had never left us at home alone before. I hoped George Lee would come even though I knew he would beat me.

All of a sudden George Lee walked in the front door. He stood there for a while grinning and looking at me, without saying a word. I could tell what he had on his mind and the beans began to shake in my hands.

"Put them beans in that kitchen," he said, slapping me hard on the face.

"I'm hungry," I cried with a mouth full of beans.

He slapped me against the head again and took the beans and carried them into the kitchen. When he came back he had the kitchen matches in his hand.

"I'm goin' to burn you two cryin' fools up. Then I won't have to come here and keep yo' asses every day."

As I looked at that stupid George Lee standing in the kitchen door with that funny grin on his face, I thought that he might really burn us up. He walked over to the wall near the fireplace and began setting fire to the bulging wallpaper. I started crying. I was so scared I was peeing all down my legs. George Lee laughed at me for peeing and put the fire

out with his bare hands before it burned very much. Then he carried me and Adline on to the porch and left us there. He went out in the yard to crack nuts and play.

We were on the porch only a short time when I heard a lot of hollering coming from toward the field. The hollering and crying got louder and louder. I could hear Mama's voice over all the rest. It seemed like all the people in the field were running to our house. I ran to the edge of the porch to watch them top the hill. Daddy was leading the running crowd and Mama was right behind him....

George Lee was standing in the yard like he didn't know what to do. As Mama then got closer, he ran into the house. My first thought was that he would be burned up. I'd often hoped he would get killed, but I guess I didn't really want him to die after all. I ran inside after him but he came running out again, knocking me down as he passed and leaving me lying face down in the burning room. I jumped up quickly and scrambled out after him. He had the water bucket in his hands. I thought he was going to try to put out the fire. Instead he placed the bucket on the edge of the porch and picked up Adline in his arms.

Moments later Daddy was on the porch. He ran straight into the burning house with three other men right behind him. They opened the large wooden windows to let some of the smoke out and began ripping the paper from the walls before the wood caught on fire. Mama and two other women raked it into the fireplace with sticks, broom handles, and anything else available. Everyone was coughing because of all the smoke.

Soon it was all over. Nothing had been lost but the paper on the wall, although some of the wood had burned slightly in places. Now that Daddy and Mama had put out the fire, they came onto the porch. George Lee still had Adline in his arms and I was standing with them on the steps.

"Take Essie Mae them out in that yard, George Lee," Daddy snapped.

George Lee hurried out in the yard with Adline on his hip, dragging me by the arm. Daddy and the farmers who came to help sat on the edge of the porch taking in the fresh air and coughing. After they had talked for a while, the men and women wanted to help clean up the house but Mama and Daddy refused any more help from them and they soon left....

A week or so after the fire, every little thing began to get on Daddy's nerves. Now he was always yelling at me and snapping at Mama. The crop wasn't coming along as he had expected. Every evening when he came from the field he was terribly depressed. He was running around the house grumbling all the time....

"Didn't getta nuff rain for nuthin'. We ain't gonna even get two bales o' cotton this year. That corn ain't no good and them sweet potatoes jus' burning up in that hard-ass ground. Goddamn, ah'd a did better on a job than this. Ain't gonna have nuthin' left when Mr. Carter take out his share." We had to hear this sermon almost every night and he was always snapping at Mama like it was all her fault.

During the harvest, Daddy's best friend, Bush, was killed. Bush was driving his wagon when his horses went wild, turning the wagon over in the big ditch alongside the road. It landed on his neck and broke it. His death made Daddy even sadder.

The only times I saw him happy any more were when he was on the floor rolling dice. He used to practice shooting them at home before every big game and I would sit and watch him. He would even play with me then, and every time he won that money he would bring me lots of candy or some kind of present. He was good with a pair of dice and

used to win the money all the time One weekend he came home without a cent. He told Mama that he had lost every penny. He came home broke a few more times. Then one Sunday morning before he got home one of the women on the farm came by the house to tell Mama that he was spending his weekends with Florence, Bush's beautiful widow. . . .

Mama had never considered Florence or any of the other women a threat because she was so beautiful herself. She was slim, tall, and tawny-skinned, with high cheekbones and long dark hair. She was by and far the liveliest woman on the plantation and Daddy used to delight in her. When she played with me she was just like a child herself. Daddy used to call her an overgrown wildchild and tease her that she had too much Indian blood in her.

Meantime, Mama had begun to get very fat. Her belly kept getting bigger and bigger. Soon she acted as if she was fat and ugly. Every weekend, when she thought Daddy was with Florence she didn't do a thing but cry. Then one of those red-hot summer days, she sent me and Adline to one of the neighbors nearest to us. We were there all day. I didn't like the people so I was glad when we finally went home. When we returned I discovered why Mama had gotten so fat. She called me to the bed and said, "Look what Santa sent you." I was upset. Santa never brought live dolls before. It was a little bald-headed boy. He was some small and looked as soft as one of our little pigs when it was born.

"His name is Junior," Mama said. "He was named for your daddy. . . ."

Next thing I knew, we were being thrown into a wagon with all our things. I really didn't know what was going on. But I knew something was wrong because Mama and Daddy barely spoke to each other and whenever they did exchange words, they snapped and cursed. Later in the night when we

arrived at my Great-Aunt Cindy's place, all of our things were taken from the wagon and Daddy left.

"Where is Daddy goin'?" I cried to Mama.

"By his business," she answered.

Aunt Cindy and all the children stood around the porch looking at him drive the wagon away.

"That dog! That no-good dog!" I heard Mama mumble. I knew then that he was gone for good.

"Ain't he gonna stay with us?" I asked.

"No he ain't gonna stay with us! Shut up!" she yelled at me with her eyes full of water. She cried all that night.

We were allowed to stay with Aunt Cindy until Mama found a job. Aunt Cindy had six children of her own, all in a four-room house. The house was so crowded, the four of us had to share a bed together. Adline and I slept at the foot of the bed and Mama and the baby at the head. [Aunt Cindy's husband] was always grumbling about us being there. "I ain't got enough food for my own chillun," he was always saying. Mama would cry at night after he had said such things.

Mama soon got a job working up the road from Aunt Cindy at the Cooks' house. Mrs. Cook didn't pay Mama much money at all, but she would give her the dinner left-overs to bring home for us at night. This was all we had to eat. Mama worked for the Cooks for only two weeks. Then she got a better job at a Negro café in town. She was making twelve dollars a week, more than she had ever earned.

About a week after she got the new job she got a place for us from the Cooks. Mrs. Cook let Mama have the house for four dollars a

month on the condition that Mama would continue to help her around the house on her off day from the café....

Shortly after we moved in I turned five years old and Mama started me at Mount Pleasant School. Now I had to walk four miles each day up and down that long rock road. Mount Pleasant was a big white stone church, the biggest Baptist church in the area.

The school was a little one-room rotten wood building located right next to it. There were about fifteen of us who went there. We sat on big wooden benches just like the ones in the church, pulled up close to the heater. But we were cold all day. That little rotten building had big cracks in it, and the heater was just too small.

Reverend Cason, the minister of the church, taught us in school. He was a tall yellow man with horn-rimmed glasses that sat on the edge of his big nose. He had the largest feet I had ever seen. He was so big, he towered over us in the little classroom like a giant. In church he preached loud and in school he talked loud. We would sit in class with his sounds ringing in our ears. I thought of putting cotton in my ears but a boy had tried that and the Reverend caught him and beat him three times that day with the big switch he kept behind his desk. I remember once he caught a boy lifting up a girl's dress with his foot. He called him up to his desk and whipped him in his hands with that big switch until the boy cried and peed all over himself. He never did whip me. I was so scared of him I never did anything. I hardly ever opened my mouth. I don't even remember a word he said in class. I was too scared to listen to him. Instead, I sat there all day and looked out the window at the graveyard and counted the tombstones.

One day he caught me.

"Moody, gal! If you don't stop lookin' out

that window, I'll make you go out in that graveyard and sit on the biggest tombstone out there all day." Nobody laughed because they were all as scared of him as I was....

....Every morning before Mama left for the café, she would take us across the road to Grandfather Moody. I would leave for school from there and he would keep Adline and Junior until I came home. My grandfather lived with one of my aunts. He was a very old man and he was sick all the time. I don't ever remember seeing him out of his bed. My aunt them would leave for the field at daybreak, so whenever we were there, my grandfather was alone.

He really cared a lot for us and he liked Mama very much too, because Mama was real good to him. Sometimes my aunt them would go off and wouldn't even fix food for him. Mama would always look to see if there was any food left for him in the kitchen. If there wasn't, she would fix some batty cakes or something for him and he would eat them with syrup.

Often when Mama didn't have money for food, he gave her some. I think he felt guilty for what his son, my daddy, had done to us. He kept his money in a little sack tied around his waist. I think that was his life savings because he never took it off.

Some mornings when Mama would bring us over she would be looking real depressed.

"Toosweet, what's wrong with you?" Grandfather would ask in a weak voice. "You need a little money or something? Do Diddly ever send you any money to help you with these children? It's a shame the way that boy run around gambling and spending all his money on women."

"Uncle Moody, I ain't heard nothin' from him and I don't want to. The Lord'll help me take care o' my children."

"I sure wish he'd do right by these chaps," Grandfather would mumble to himself.

Soon after school was over for the year, Grandfather got a lot sicker than he was before. Mama stopped carrying us by his place. She left us at home alone, and she would bake a pone of bread to last us the whole day.

One evening she came in from work looking real sad.

"Essie Mae, put yo' shoes on. I want you to come go say good-bye to Uncle Moody. He's real sick. Adline, I'm gonna leave you and Junior by Miss Cook. I'm gonna come right back and y'all better mind Miss Cook, you hear?"

"Mama, why I gotta say good-bye to Uncle Moody? Where he's goin'?" I asked her.

"He's goin' somewhere he's gonna be treated much better than he's treated now. And he won't ever be sick again," she answered sadly.

I didn't understand why Mama was so sad if Uncle Moody wasn't going to be sick any more. I wanted to ask her but I didn't. All the way to see Uncle Moody, I kept wondering where he was going.

It was almost dark when we walked up in my aunt's yard. A whole bunch of people were standing around on the porch and in the yard. Some of them looked even sadder than Mama. I had never seen that many people there before and everything seemed so strange to me. I looked around at the faces to see if I knew anyone. Suddenly I recognized Daddy, squatting in the yard in front of the house. He had a knife in his hand. As Mama and I walked toward him, he began to pick in the dirt. He glanced up at Mama and he had that funny funny look in his eyes. I had seen it before. He looked like he wanted us back so bad, but Mama was mean. She had vowed

that she would never see him again. As they stood there staring at each other, I was reminded of the first time I saw him after he left us, when we lived with my Great-Aunt Cindy. It was Easter Sunday morning. Mama, Aunt Cindy, and all the children were sitting on the porch. We were all having a beautiful time. It was just after the Easter egg hunt and we were eating the eggs we had found in the grass. Mama was playing with us. She had found more eggs than all of us and she was teasing and throwing eggshells at us.

As I was dodging eggshells and giggling at Mama, I saw Daddy coming down the road. I jumped off the porch and ran to meet him, followed by the rest of the children. He gave me lots of candy in a big bag and told me to share it with the others. As we walked back to the porch, I could see Mama's changing expression. Daddy was grinning broadly. He had something for Mama in a big bag he carried with care in his arms.

I don't remember what they said to each other after that. But I remember what was in the big bag for Mama. It was a hat, a big beautiful hat made out of flowers of all colors. When she saw the hat, Mama got real mad. She took the hat and picked every flower from it, petal by petal. She threw them out in the yard and watched the wind blow them away. Daddy looked at her as if he hated her, but there was more than hate in it all. This was just how he looked out in the yard now as he sat picking in the dirt.

I was very frightened. I thought at first he would kill Mama with the knife. Mama stared at him for a while, then went straight past him into the house, leaving me in the yard with him.

"Come here, Essie Mae," he said sadly. I walked to him, shaking. "They say you is in school now. Do you need anything?" he asked. I was so afraid I couldn't answer him.

He felt in his pocket. Out of it came a roll of money. He gave it to me, smiling. I took it and was about to smile back when I saw Mama. She came out of the house and snatched the money from me and threw it at him. Then Daddy got up. This time I was sure he would hit Mama. But he didn't. He only walked away with that hurt look in his eyes. Mama grabbed me by the arm and headed out of the yard, pulling me behind her.

"Ain't ah'm gonna say good-bye to Uncle Moody?" I whined.

"He tole me to tell you good-bye," she snapped. "He's sleeping now."

That night we had beans for supper, as usual. And all night I wondered why Mama threw back the money Daddy gave me. I was mad with her because we ate beans all the time. Had she taken the money, I thought, we could have meat too.

At the end of that summer Mama found it necessary for us to move into town, in Centreville, where she worked. This time we moved into a two-room house that was twice the size of the other one. It was next to where a very poor white family lived in a large green frame house. It was also located on one of the main roads branching off Highway 24 running into Centreville. We were now a little less than a mile from the school that I was to attend, which was on the same road as our house. Here we had a sidewalk for the first time. It extended from town all the way to school where it ended. I was glad we lived on the sidewalk side of the road. Between the sidewalk and our house the top soil was sand about two feet deep. We were the only ones with clean white sand in our yard and it seemed beautiful and special. There was even more sand for us to play in in a large vacant lot on the other side of our house. The white people living next to us only had green grass in their yard just like everybody else.

A few weeks after we moved there, I was in school again. I was now six years old and in the second grade. At first, it was like being in heaven to have less than a mile to walk to school. And having a sidewalk from our house all the way there made things even better....

For the first month that I was in school a Negro family across the street kept Adline and Junior. But after that Mama had them stay at home alone and, every hour or so until I came home, the lady across the street would come down and look in on them. One day when I came home from school, Adline and Junior were naked playing in the sand in front of our house. All the children who lived in town used that sidewalk that passed our house. When they saw Adline and Junior sitting in the sand naked they started laughing and making fun of them. I was ashamed to go in the house or recognize Adline and Junior as my little sister and brother. I had never felt that way before. I got mad at Mama because she had to work and couldn't take care of Adline and Junior herself. Every day after that I hated the sand in front of the house....

"Before school was out we moved again and I was glad....Our house, which was separated from the Johnsons' by a field of clover, was the best two-room house we had been in yet. It was made out of big new planks and it even had a new toilet. We were also once again on paved streets. We just did make those paved streets, though. A few yards past the Johnsons' house was the beginning of the old rock road we had just moved off.

We were the only Negroes in that section, which seemed like some sort of honor. All the whites living around there were well-to-do. They ranged from schoolteachers to doctors and prosperous businessmen. The white family living across the street from us owned a funeral home and the only furniture store in Centreville. They had two children, a boy and

a girl. There was another white family living about a quarter of a mile in back of the Johnsons who also had a boy and a girl. The two white girls were about my age and the boys a bit younger. They often rode their bikes or skated down the little hill just in front of our house. Adline, Junior and I would sit and watch them. How we wished Mama could buy us a bike or even a pair of skates to share....

One day when the white children were riding up and down the street on their bikes, we were sitting on the apple crates making Indian noises and beating the tin can with sticks. We sounded so much like Indians that they came over to ask if that was what we were. This was the beginning of our friendship. We taught them how to make sounds and dance like Indians and they showed us how to ride their bikes and skate. Actually, I was the only one who learned. Adline and Junior were too small and too scared, although they got a kick out of watching us. I was seven, Adline five, and Junior three, and this was the first time we had ever had other children to play with. Sometimes, they would take us over to their playhouse. Katie and Bill, the children of the whites that owned the furniture store, had a model playhouse at the side of their parents' house. That little house was just like the big house, painted snow white on the outside, with real furniture in it. I envied their playhouse more than I did their bikes and skates. Here they were playing in a house that was nicer than any house I could have dreamed of living in. They had all this to offer me and I had nothing to offer them but the field of clover in summer and the apple crates under the pecan tree.

The Christmas after we moved there, I thought sure Mama would get us some skates. But she didn't. We didn't get anything but a couple of apples and oranges. I cried a week for those skates, I remember.

Every Saturday evening Mama would take us to the movies. The Negroes sat upstairs in the balcony and the whites sat downstairs. One Saturday we arrived at the movies at the same time as the white children. When we saw each other, we ran and met. Katie walked straight into the downstairs lobby and Adline, Junior, and I followed. Mama was talking to one of the white women and didn't notice that we had walked into the white lobby. I think she thought we were at the side entrance we had always used which led to the balcony. We were standing in the white lobby with our friends, when Mama came in and saw us. "C'mon! C'mon!" she yelled, pushing Adline face on into the door. "Essie Mae, um gonna try my best to kill you when I get you home. I told you 'bout running up in these stores and things like you own 'em!" she shouted, dragging me through the door. When we got outside, we stood there crying, and we could hear the white children crying inside the white lobby. After that, Mama didn't even let us stay at the movies. She carried us right home.

All the way back to our house, Mama kept telling us that we couldn't sit downstairs, we couldn't do this or that with white children. Up until that time I had never really thought about it. After all, we were playing together. I knew that we were going to separate schools and all, but I never knew why.

After the movie incident, the white children stopped playing in front of our house. For about two weeks we didn't see them at all. Then one day they were there again and we started playing. But things were not the same. I had never really thought of them as white before. Now all of a sudden they were white, and their whiteness made them better than me. I now realized that not only were they better than me because they were white, but everything they owned and everything connected with them was better than what was available to me. I hadn't realized before

that downstairs in the movies was any better than upstairs. But now I saw that it was. Their whiteness provided them with a pass to downstairs in that nice section and my blackness sent me to the balcony.

Now that I was thinking about it, their schools, homes, and streets were better than mine. They had a large red brick school with nice sidewalks connecting the buildings. Their homes were large and beautiful with indoor toilets and every other convenience that I knew of at the time.

Every house I had ever lived in was a one- or two-room shack with an outdoor toilet. It really bothered me that they had all these nice things and we had nothing.