Chapter One

Bernie wielded switches to discipline ornery children and lots of them. She was heavy-handed and heavy-footed. She never wore shoes—feet always bare unless there was reason to dress them like graduations, school plays or funerals. She never did her hair (kept it tied down and in “mammy plaits”) but told her daughters that our hair was our crown. She said to never perm it or to cut it (Daddy staunchly agreed)—and that if we did, we would surely lose our strength just like Samson in the Bible. She talked about God almost every day, but she also drank herself into the grave. She called it her ‘medicine’, and she chased her medicine with water that sat in a tall, yellow cup on the nightstand beside her bed. She used words like ‘studdin’”, ‘hindparts’, ‘hussy’, ‘strumpet’,
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“Randy, you hear that? You hear that too, don’t you, boy?”

He lifted his head from the floor. His hound dog ears propped up like pup tents in the woods. The loose skin between his eyes creased, and the short, smooth hair down the middle of his back suddenly stood on end just like a freshly cut Mohawk. He did hear it.

I was no more than eleven. Yet I still slept in the warm, wonderful cradle of my parents’ bed. My father was soundly asleep as was the rest of the house. My mother was wide awake as was her custom at night. I’m not sure why I woke up, but I’m glad I did.

Randy’s mouth trembled as he growled softly,
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hauntingly. He bore every yellow-stained tooth in his jaw and its dark brown gingivitis too. He raised himself to all fours, his long tail pointing straight out like that of a stingray—mesmerizingly beautiful yet lethal. He was poised to attack. All he needed was the word from his master, and he got it.

“Randy...get ‘em, boy. Get ‘em! GET ‘EM!”

Hound dogs don’t bark. They howl, and that beagle tilted his head back and bayed in the air like a storybook wolf at a full moon—each wail getting louder and longer.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayrooooooo!”

Fast-moving and determined like an old locomotive barreling around a stretch of twisted railway, he shot from the bedroom. He bolted down the short hallway past our bathroom and scuttled into the livingroom. Bernie was hot on Randy’s heels just like that of a boiling mad overseer of a runaway slave. And I was hanging on Bernie’s coattail just like static cling on a half-slip that comes fresh out the dryer. The hardwood floorboards shook as she clumped, stomped and
galumphed from room to room. My mother was short, stout—low to the ground—and you felt it in her heavy gait.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayrooooooo!”

Someone was there—his back pressed into the drafty, shadowy corner of the livingroom by the front door. Randy had him cornered—nose to kneecap. The someone just stood there, frozen. I planted myself beside my mother—my eyes now as wide as fifty-cent pieces. We watched together to see just how long our beagle would bay at the unfamiliar visitor. I sensed that the someone was unwelcome but no one to fear. I sensed that whoever he was, the someone was just lost and looking for a warm place to stay. I sensed that my mother knew the same, and that within itself brought me comfort and ease. Eventually, my mother coolly moved past Randy and opened the front door. Without missing a beat, Randy whisked the someone out of the house and down our uneven, concrete front steps.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayrooooooo!”
Randy chased the stranger to the perimeter of our front yard and howled freakishly into the chilly, clear night air.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayroooooooo!”

Mommy filled most of the threshold. She stood there peering into the darkness—unspeaking and unflinching. Her eyes were unshakable and resolute yet sorrowful and empathetic. I had questions, but I waited. The someone was not easily swayed I sensed, but neither was Randy. He was protecting us from the stranger, and Bernie was protecting her family—the family who all still slept soundly in their beds.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayroooooooo!”

Clearly, someone was there. Clearly, we were not alone.

“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! Ayroooooooo!”

Clearly, he had a face and hands and made noise. Why didn’t I see him? Why couldn’t I hear him? Why had he come at this hour of the night?

“Ayrooo! Ayroooooo! Ayroooooooo!”
“Ayrooo! Ayrooooo! “Ayroo...”

And finally, the beckon comes.

“Randy, enough! Come inside, boy. Come inside.”

Randy responds on cue. His tail immediately falls limp. His ears rest at ease, and his fur relaxes and unruffles where the Mohawk trail once stood. The air had cleared now. The someone had left. It was over, or so I thought.

Randy had settled himself at the foot of the credenza in my parents’ bedroom and returned to a peaceful slumber long before Bernie moved again. She shall not be moved, I thought. Bernie continued to stand there face-to-face with the formidable, palpable night air. Breaths shone heavy on her bosom. The rise and fall made me wonder if the someone was still standing there hoping, praying, pleading perhaps. Maybe he was appealing to the mercy of Bernie who was now a someone in his world, a stranger to him from the other side. I sensed that she would not submit, that she could not submit, that it would be wrong. It was a hard battle to win, but
she did.

No words were ever spoken. When it was all over, she just shut the door and drifted by me, as if the *someone* had never come or left—as if he had never shaken up our world. I looked back at the door, the room, the pasty shadows in the corner, and I was filled with questions—lots of questions. But I followed my mother back to the bedroom, and I watched her sit on the bed—still, aggrieved, elsewhere. I had questions.

“Mommy...what did you see?”

“A man.”

“What kind of man?”

“A man with chains, baby. You didn’t hear dem chains draggin’ cross the floor?”

“No.”

“Well, he had chains. Long, heavy silver chains draggin’ cross the floor.”

“He was at the door?”

“He was standing there, but I told him he had to go. He
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couldn’t stay here.”

“What did he look like?”

“Tall, real tall. Long, stringy, white hair. And he had long, heavy chains hanging down from his wrists, all the way down to the floor...”

Even then, I knew that the chains had to have meaning.

“.But he had to go. He couldn’t stay here.”

I’m not sure about the rest of our exchange. Not sure that it matters anyway, as I don’t remember it as vividly. I do remember not being scared that night—not once, not at all. Bernie was good at protecting, and I was good at watching and at listening and at appreciating her for who she was and without judgment. She wasn’t crazy to me. Still I can’t help but wonder sometimes if she was chasing spirits or running away from them. That question remains with me.

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