

VINTAGE BROWN



RUBYFRUIT JUNGLE

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Rita Mae Brown

Dedication

Title Page

Introduction

Part One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Part Two

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Part Three

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Part Four

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Acknowledgments

The History of Vintage

Copyright

About the Book

Molly Bolt is a young lady with a big character. Beautiful, funny and bright, Molly figures out at a young age that she will have to be tough to stay true to herself in mid-twentieth century America. In her relationships with boyfriends and girlfriends, in the rocky relationship with her mother and in her determination to pursue her career, she will fight for her right to happiness. Charming, proud and inspiring, Molly is the girl who refuses to be put in a box.

About the Author

Rita Mae Brown is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the *Mrs Murphy* mystery series (which she writes with her tiger cat, Sneaky Pie) and the *Sister Jane* novels, as well as *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *In Her Day*, the *Six of One* trilogy and *The Sand Castle*, among others, and of the memoirs *Animal Magnetism* and *Rita Will*. An Emmy-nominated screenwriter and a poet, Brown lives in Afton, Virginia, with cats, hounds, horses, and big red foxes.

Fiction

In Her Day

Six of One

Southern Discomfort

Sudden Death

High Hearts

Bingo

Venus Envy

Dolley

Riding Shotgun

Loose Lips

Alma Mater

The Sand Castle

A Nose for Justice

Murder Unleashed

Series

Foxhunting Mysteries

Mrs Murphy Mysteries

Non-fiction

Starting from Scratch: a Different Kind of Writers' Manual

Animal Magnetism: My Life with Creatures Great and Small

Rita Will: Memoir of a Literary Rabble-Rouser

Dedicated to
ALEXIS SMITH

Actress, Wit, Beauty, Cook, Kindheart, Irreverent Observer of Political Phenomena, Etc. If I were to list her outstanding qualities, you, dear reader, would be exhausted before you get to page one. So let me just say the abovementioned woman took the time to give me a playful push in the direction of my typewriter. Of course, after you read the book, you may wish that she had pushed me in front of something moving faster than a typewriter.

RITA MAE BROWN

Rubyfruit Jungle

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
The Author

VINTAGE

Introduction

Where does the time go? If you find out, tell me. I'll go get some and bring it back.

Over forty years ago I wrote *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Loving the English language since I first learned to speak it, I found that I loved writing in it even more. My love for our language has deepened with the years, but then who couldn't be thrilled living in the cathedral of English?

If *Rubyfruit* helped you know you aren't alone, good. If I made you laugh even better.

This novel is pegged as a lesbian novel, therefore classified in the ghettos of literature. Any time any work or any person is qualified, it's always an insult. The message really is, 'This is not about people like yourself. You might enjoy it but after all, the subject matter concerns the "lower orders".'

There are no lower orders. There are no lesbians or transgender people or fill in the blank. There is only people, a wild mix of energy, different abilities, colours ranging from ebony to bleached white. We're everything and everybody. I don't even believe in male and female, it's a sliding scale and we are hag-ridden by a binary culture: male-female, black-white, straight-gay, rich-poor and so it goes. The gradations are infinite and the silliest mistake of all is to define people by their material possessions. It's even worse if people define themselves by money.

When I wrote *Rubyfruit Jungle* in 1971 (the year I wrote it was not the year it was published), the only way to begin to understand your situation was to take the label given to you by others, a label devised centuries if not millennia before, and to understand how this became hardened oppression. That work is done.

Think about it. Once you buy into a definition of yourself that has been made by others, you're a victim. Victims draw great strength from banding together and declaring a common oppression and a common (always glorious, of course) culture. Perhaps, but you're still a victim.

In its own simple fashion, *Rubyfruit* alludes to this without ever collapsing into non-fiction propaganda. This is not to rap non-fiction. I worship *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Gibbon. Then again, it's not propaganda.

Until we are willing to read, see, embrace any work of art by any gifted person, we are still held back. Think of this in non-artistic terms. Moses took the Jews out of Egypt. Could he take Egypt out the Jews? Only then can one be free. Let go of your oppressor. Many people cannot and many artists cannot. Whole careers are made by those who fall into disadvantaged categories (and economically and politically, they do). And it's not just those who are wrathful about their condition, it's those who become lawyers and self-appointed spokespersons for the rest. You might say that oppression sells.

The most revolutionary thing you can do is to be yourself, to speak your truth, to open your arms to life including the pain. Passion. Find your passions.

The English language, horses and hounds, the theatre are mine. I wish for you something that enlarges your life, teaches you to respect all life and forms and helps you connect to other people.

If *Rubyfruit Jungle* helped to push you on your path to freedom, I've done something right.

Onward and upward.

Rita Mae Brown, February 20

Part One

No one remembers her beginnings. Mothers and aunts tell us about infancy and early childhood, hoping we won't forget the past when they had total control over our lives and secretly praying that because of it, we'll include them in our future.

I didn't know anything about my own beginnings until I was seven years old, living in Coffee Hollow, a rural dot outside of York, Pennsylvania. A dirt road connected tarpapered houses filled with smear-faced kids and the air was always thick with the smell of coffee beans freshly ground in the small shop that gave the place its name. One of those smear-faced kids was Brockhurst Detwiler, Broccoli for short. It was through him that I learned I was a bastard. Broccoli didn't know I was a bastard but he and I struck a bargain that cost me my ignorance.

One crisp September day Broccoli and I were on our way home from Violet Hill Elementary School.

'Hey, Molly, I gotta take a leak, wanna see me?'

'Sure, Broc.'

He stepped behind the bushes and pulled down his zipper with a flourish.

'Broccoli, what's all that skin hanging around your dick?'

'My mom says I haven't had it cut up yet.'

'Whaddaya mean, cut up?'

'She says that some people get this operation and the skin comes off and it has somethin' to do with Jesus.'

'Well, I'm glad no one's gonna cut up on me.'

'That's what you think. My Aunt Louise got her tit cut off.'

'I ain't got tits.'

'You will. You'll get big floppy ones just like my mom. They hang down below her waist and wobble when she walks.'

'Not me, I ain't gonna look like that.'

'Oh yes you are. All girls look like that.'

'You shut up or I'll knock your lips down your throat, Broccoli Detwiler.'

'I'll shut up if you don't tell anyone I showed you my thing.'

'What's there to tell? All you got is a wad of pink wrinkles hangin' around it. It's ugly.'

'It is not ugly.'

'Ha. It looks awful. You think it's not ugly because it's yours. No one else has a dick like that. My cousin Leroy, Ted, no one. I bet you got the only one in the world. We oughta make some money off it.'

'Money? How we gonna make money off my dick?'

'After school we can take the kids back here and show you off, and we charge a nickel a piece.'

'No. I ain't showing people my thing if they're gonna laugh at it.'

'Look, Broc, money is money. What do you care if they laugh? You'll have money then you can laugh at them. And we split it fifty-fifty.'

The next day during recess I spread the news. Broccoli was keeping his mouth shut. I was afraid he'd chicken out but he came through. After school about eleven of us hurried out to the woods between school and the coffee shop and there Broc revealed himself. He was a big hit. Most of the girls had never even seen a regular dick and Broccoli's was so disgusting they shrieked with pleasure. Broc looked a little green around the edges, but he bravely kept it hanging out until everyone had a

good look. We were fifty-five cents richer.

~~Word spread through the other grades, and for about a week after that, Broccoli and I had a thriving business. I bought red licorice and handed it out to all my friends. Money was power. The more red licorice you had, the more friends you had. Leroy, my cousin, tried to horn in on the business by showing himself off, but he flopped because he didn't have skin on him. To make him feel better, I gave him fifteen cents out of every day's earnings.~~

Nancy Cahill came every day after school to look at Broccoli, billed as the 'strangest dick in the world.' Once she waited until everyone else had left. Nancy was all freckles and rosary beads. She giggled every time she saw Broccoli and on that day she asked if she could touch him. Broccoli stupidly said yes. Nancy grabbed him and gave a squeal.

'Okay, okay, Nancy, that's enough. You might wear him out and we have other customers to satisfy.' That took the wind out of her and she went home. 'Look, Broccoli, what's the big idea of letting Nancy touch you for free? That ought to be worth at least a dime. We oughta let kids do it for dime and Nancy can play for free when everyone goes home if you want her to.'

'Deal.'

This new twist drew half the school into the woods. Everything was fine until Earl Stambach ratted on us to Miss Martin, the teacher. Miss Martin contacted Carrie and Broccoli's mother and it was all over.

When I got home that night I didn't even get through the door when Carrie yells, 'Molly, come in here right this minute.' The tone in her voice told me I was up for getting strapped.

'I'm coming, Mom.'

'What's this I hear about you out in the woods playing with Brockhurst Detwiler's peter? Don't lie to me now, Earl told Miss Martin you're out there every night.'

'Not me Mom, I never played with him.' Which was true.

'Don't lie to me, you big-mouthed brat. I know you were out there jerking that dimwit off. And in front of all the other brats in the Hollow.'

'No, Mom, honest, I didn't do that.' There was no use telling her what I really did. She wouldn't have believed me. Carrie assumed all children lied.

'You shamed me in front of all the neighbors, and I've got a good mind to throw you outa this house. You and your high and mighty ways, sailing in the house and out the house as you damn well please. You reading them books and puttin' on airs. You're a fine one to be snotty, Miss Ups, out there in the woods playing with his old dong. Well, I got news for you, you little shitass, you think you're so smart. You ain't so fine as you think you are, and you ain't mine neither. And I don't want you now that I know what you're about. Wanna know who you are, smartypants? You're Ruby Drollinger's bastard, that's who you are. Now let's see you put your nose in the air.'

'Who's Ruby Drollinger?'

'Your real mother, that's who and she was a slut, you hear me, Miss Molly? A common, dirty slut who'd lay with a dog if it shook its ass right.'

'I don't care. It makes no difference where I came from. I'm here, ain't I?'

'It makes all the difference in the world. Them that's born in wedlock are blessed by the Lord. Them that's born out of wedlock are cursed as bastards. So there.'

'I don't care.'

'Well, you oughta care, you horse's ass. Just see how far all your pretty ways and books get you when you go out and people find out you're a bastard. And you act like one. Blood's thicker than water and yours tells. Bullheaded like Ruby and out there in the woods jerking off that Detwiler idiot. Bastard!'

Carrie was red in the face and her veins were popping out of her neck. She looked like a one-woman

horror movie and she was thumping the table and thumping me. She grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me like a dog shakes a rag doll. ~~‘Snot-nosed, bitch of a bastard. Living in my house, under my roof. You’d be dead in that orphanage if I hadn’t gotten you out and nursed you round the clock. You come here and eat the food, keep me runnin’ after you and then go out and shame me. You better straighten up, girl, or I’ll throw you back where you came from—the gutter.’~~

‘Take your hands off me. If you ain’t my real mother then you just take your goddamned hands off me.’ I ran out the door and tore all the way over the wheat fields up to the woods. The sun had gone down, and there was one finger of rose left in the sky.

So what, so what I’m a bastard. I don’t care. She’s trying to scare me. She’s always trying to throw some fear in me. The hell with her and the hell with anyone else if it makes a difference to them. Goddamn Broccoli Detwiler and his ugly dick anyway. He got me in this mess and just when we’re making money this has to happen. I’m gonna get Earl Stambach and lay him out to whaleshit if it’s the last thing I do. Yeah, then Mom will rip me for that. I wonder who else knows I’m a bastard. I bet Mouth knows and if Florence the Megaphone Mouth knows, the whole world knows. I bet they’re all sittin’ on it like hens. Well, I ain’t going back into that house for them to laugh at me and look at me like I’m a freak. I’m staying out here in these woods and I’m gonna kill Earl. Shit, I wonder if ole Broc got it. He’ll tell I put him up to it and skin out. Coward. Anyone with a dick like that’s gotta be chickenshit anyway. I wonder if any of the kids know. I can face Mouth and Mom but not the gang. Well, if it makes a difference to them, the hell with them, too. I can’t see why it’s such a big deal. Who cares how you get here? I don’t care. I really don’t care. I got myself born, that’s what counts. I’m here. Boy, ole Mom was really roaring, she was ripped, just ripped. I’m not going back there. I’m not going back to where it makes a difference and she’ll throw it in my face from now on out. Look how she throws in my face how I kicked Grandma Bolt’s shins when I was five. I’m staying in these woods. I can live off nuts and berries, except I don’t like berries, they got ticks on them. I can just live off nuts, I guess. Maybe kill rabbits, yeah, but Ted told me rabbits are full of worms. Worms, yuk, I’m not eating worms. I’ll stay out here in these woods and starve, that’s what I’ll do. Then Mom will feel sorry about how she yelled at me and made a big deal out of the way I was born. And calling my real mother a slut—I wonder what my real mother looks like. Maybe I look like someone. I don’t look like anyone in our house, none of the Bolts nor Wiegenlieds, none of them. They all have extra white skin and gray eyes. German, they’re all German. And don’t Carrie make noise about that. How anyone else is bad, Wops and Jews and the rest of the entire world. That’s why she hates me. I bet my mother wasn’t German. My mother couldn’t have cared about me very much if she left me with Carrie. Did I do something wrong way back then? Why would she leave me like that? Now, maybe now she could leave me after showing off Broccoli’s dick but when I was a little baby how could I have done anything wrong? I wish I’d never heard any of this. I wish Carrie Bolt would drop down dead. That’s exactly what I wish. I’m not going back there.

Night drew around the woods and little unseen animals burrowed in the dark. There was no moon. The black filled my nostrils and the air was full of little noises, weird sounds. A chill came up off the old fishpond down by the pine trees. I couldn’t find any nuts either, it was too dark. All I found was a spider’s nest. The spider’s nest did it. I decided to go back to the house but only until I was old enough to get a job so I could leave that dump. Stumbling, I felt my way home and opened the torn screen door. No one was waiting up for me. They’d all gone to bed.

Leroy sat in the middle of the potato patch picking a tick off his navel. He looked like Baby Huey in the comics and he was about as smart, but Leroy was my cousin and in a dumb way I loved him. We'd been sent out there to get potato bugs, but the sun was high and we were both tired of our chores. The grownup women were in the house, and the men were off working. That was the summer of 1956, and we were in such bad shape that we had to live with the Denmans in Shiloh. I didn't know we were in bad shape; besides I liked being out there with Leroy, Ted and all the animals.

Leroy was eleven, same age as me. He was the same height only fat; I was skinny. Ted, Leroy's brother, was thirteen and his voice was changing. Ted worked down at the Esso station so Leroy and I were stuck with the potato bugs.

'Molly, I don't wanna pick bugs no more. We got two jars full, let's go on down to Mrs Hershener and get a soda.'

'Okay, but we got to go down by the gully where Ted wrecked the tractor or my mom will see us and make us get back to work.' We crawled through the gully, past the rusty tractor and out the drainpipe to the other side of the dirt road. Then we ran all the way down to Mrs Hershener's tiny store which had a faded Nehi soda sign with a thermometer on it tacked to the door.

'Well, it's Leroy and Molly. You children been helping your mothers up there on the hill?'

'Oh yes, Mrs Hershener,' Leroy droned, 'we spent this whole day picking potato bugs so the potatoes will grow right.'

'Now aren't you just sweet. Here, how about a chocolate Tastycake for each of you.'

'Thank you, Mrs Hershener'—in unison.

'Can I get a scoop of raspberry ice cream for a nickel?' I grabbed my ice cream and walked out into the June sunshine. Leroy strolled out with a fudge ripple and we sat on the worn, flat wood planks of the porch. I spied an empty Sunmaid raisin box, nearly perfect except the top was torn, lying there in the iridescent tarpaper shavings in front of the store.

'What you want that for?'

'I got plans for this, you wait and see.'

'Come on, Moll, tell me and I'll help you.'

'Can't tell you now, here comes Barbara Spangenthau and you know how she is.'

'Yeah, right, gotta be a secret.'

'Hi, Barbara, watchyou doin?'

Barbara mumbled something about a loaf of bread and disappeared inside. Barbara was Jewish and Carrie was forever telling Leroy and me to keep away from her. She needn't have bothered. No one wanted to go near Barbara Spangenthau because she always had her hand in her pants playing with herself and worse, she stank. Until I was fifteen I thought that being Jewish meant you walked around with your hand in your pants.

Barbara rolled out of the store. She was even fatter than Leroy; her arms full of Fishel's bread, she started down the footpath with all the honeysuckles.

'Hey Barbara, you seen Earl Stambach today?'

'He was down by the pond. Why?'

'Cause I got a present for him. You see him you tell him I'm lookin' for him, hear?'

Barbara, filled with importance of her message, trotted down the road. Since she lived closest to the Stambachs, there was a good chance she'd deliver it.

'What you want to give Earl Stambach a present for? I thought you hated him since forever.'

‘I do hate him, and the present I got for him is something very special. You want to come with me while I get it?’

Leroy fell over himself in enthusiasm, and he trailed me back over the fields like a duck after its mother, all the way babbling about what the present’s gonna be. We went into the cool woods and I searched the ground. Leroy was looking at the ground too, although he didn’t know what he was looking for.

‘Ha! I got it. Now I’m gonna fix him good.’

‘I don’t see nothin’ but a pile of rabbit turds. What you gonna do? Come on and tell.’

‘Just watch, Leroy, and shut your trap.’

I scooped up a handful of tiny, perfectly round rabbit turds and put them in the Sunmaid raisin box.

‘Remember the dried raisins that Florence had out on the back porch? You go on down there and steal me a handful and come right back here.’

Leroy took off like a cement truck, his bulk shimmering in the afternoon sun. Within ten minutes I was back with a precious handful of honest raisins. I put them in the box and shook the contents hard. Then swearing Leroy to eternal secrecy, I started through the woods to Carmine’s fishpond to find Earl Stambach. He was down there all right, sitting there with a stick for a fishing pole waiting for nonexistent fish to bite a string with no bait on it. Earl was pretty stupid. The only way he made it through fourth grade was by brownnosing the teacher. We were now going into sixth grade and he still couldn’t get beyond five on the multiplication tables. Florence said it was because the Stambachs had so many kids that none of them ate enough, so Earl’s brain was starved. I didn’t much care why he was stupid, I was too busy hating him. He was all the time ratting on me in school because I was breaking this rule or that rule. Last time, I was sent to Mr Beaver’s office for stealing tablets out of the supply room. That was one week before school ended and I nearly didn’t get out of fifth grade because of it. Earl might be stupid but he learned how to survive and he learned at my expense, the mealymouthed weasel.

Earl heard us coming and looked up. A perplexed shadow ran across his face because he must have thought I was going to whip him for sure. So I smiled and said, ‘Hey, Earl, hey, you catching anything?’

‘No, but I got a big bite just five minutes ago. It must have been a tuna because it was sure big.’

‘Zat so? You must be a talented fisherman.’

Earl giggled and his left eye twitched. He couldn’t figure this no way.

‘Earl, I been thinkin’ that we got to stop irritatin’ each other. Now you know I hate it when you stool on me, and I know you hate it when I get mad at you and lay for you on your way home from school. Why don’t we call a truce and be friends? I won’t beat you up if you don’t tell on me when we go back to school.’

‘Sure, Molly, sure. I’d like us to be friends and I swear on a stack of Bibles I won’t tell on you ever again.’

‘Well, here then, I brought you a little present to make it legal. I just got them at Mrs Hershener’s cause I know you love raisins.’

‘Thanks, hey thanks.’ Earl snatched the raisin box, tore off what was left of the top and opened his mouth, tipped the box over it and gulped half the contents in one motion. Leroy started to laugh. I grabbed his left arm and gave him a pinch that would have ruined an orange. ‘You hush your mouth or I’ll whip your ass,’ I hissed.

‘I ain’t worried, Molly, I ain’t gonna laugh.’

‘What you two talking about?’

‘Oh, we was remarking how fast you eat, Earl. We ain’t never seen anyone eat quite so fast. Why you must be the fastest eater in all of York County. I bet you can finish off the rest of the box in half

second. Don't you think so, Leroy?'

~~'Yeah, Earl Stambach has got true speed. He even eats faster than my old man.'~~

Earl bloated up with all this praise, and he ruffled out his feathers. 'Oh, I can do it in less than half second, you watch me.' One fierce swallow and the Sunmaid raisin box was tossed into the pond. Earl was beaming and feeling big on himself.

'Earl, how did those raisins taste?'

'Like raisins, some were mushy and bitter though.'

'Mushy, now ain't that the strangest thing?'

Leroy exploded with laughter and fell down on the grass next to the pond. 'Earl, you are so stupid. You know that, Earl, you are so stupid. Molly gave you a box full of rabbit turds mixed with raisins.'

Earl's face crumpled under the blow. 'You didn't do that, did you, Molly?'

'You bet I did, you sneaking fart. You rat on me one more time and I'm gonna do a whole lot worse so you'd better lay off me, Earl Stambach. Let this be a lesson to you.' I took a threatening step toward him for effect but Earl was so green he wasn't worried about the outside of his body. 'I won't ever tell on you again. I promise, I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'"Die" is the right word, boy. You button your fat lip and if you even breathe a single word that I fed you rabbit turds, you've had it. Come on, Leroy, let's leave him here full of shit.'

We scurried over the pine needles and Leroy was laughing so hard he could barely keep his footing. I turned around on the rim of the hill to look at Earl down by the edge of the pond retching his guts out and crying at the same time. Fixed him good, I thought, I fixed him real good and he deserves it. How come I don't feel good about it?

'He ain't gonna bother you no more, Molly, you got him this time.'

'Shut up, Leroy, you shut up.'

Leroy stopped for a minute and looked at me with amazement, then shrugged his shoulders and said, 'We better get on back home before Carrie and the Mouth come looking for us.'

The summer of my revenge was also the summer that the crops died and Jennifer died too. Jennifer was Leroy's real mother. She was tall with a face like those ladies in Sunday School books. Her eyes were so big that when you looked at her that's all you could see. I called her Aunt Jenna although she wasn't really my aunt, but then none of them were my family. That summer was full of bad things, and it started with Ep's getting trimmed with a knife.

Couple of days after I got Earl good, Ep, Jennifer's husband, came in the house covered with blood. It ran down his face and matted in the thick, curly, blond hair on his huge chest. Jennifer screamed when she saw him, and Florence ran to the kitchen for a bowl of cold water. For all her faults, Florence was always the first to grasp what was needed in any situation. My dad Carl hadn't come home yet so just us kids and the women were there—with Ep soaking in blood and looking so mad I thought his brains would fry. Leroy's eyes almost fell out of his head when he looked at his old man all busted up. Ep didn't notice the two of us standing there, staring. Ted eased his father down into a chair and Florence came back into the room with basin, rags and an air of command. 'Put your head back, Ep, and let me get the blood off your face. Molly, go in the pantry and get gauze and merthiolate. Leroy, go pump more water for your father. Jennifer, you sit down, you lookin' pale as a ghost. Now, Ep, hold still. I know it hurts, but you just hold still. It ain't gonna hurt nearly as bad as when you got stuck in the first place.'

Ep gave in and let his head hang back, wincing each time the rag touched his wounds. He didn't get busted, he got carved. 'Ep,' Jennifer said low, 'honey, what happened? You went and lost your temper again, didn't you?'

Ep's anger started to drain away and he answered quietly, 'Yes, I went and lost my head but I couldn't help it and I didn't have one drink, I swear, not one drink.'

Florence gave him a dirty look but kept on with her business. 'Molly, go over to your Aunt Jenna and get her to show you how to make a butterfly stitch out of adhesive tape. Make a lot, he's got holes in him big as mouths.'

Leroy padded back into the room and sat a bowl of water on the oil tablecloth. 'Hey, Pop, you get him, the guy that got you? You get him, Pop?'

'Leroy, I wish you wouldn't ask those questions with such joy in your face,' Jennifer pleaded. She looked old, so old sometimes, and this was one of those times. The color seemed to have left her face and hidden somewhere. The lines around the top of her upper lip were drawn and it made her look strange. She was about two weeks away from having another baby. She looked like a grandmother that swallowed a weather balloon, and Carrie said that Jennifer was only thirty-three years old.

'What was the fight about this time?' she asked.

'Fought about the boys with that bastard, Layton.' That word made me cringe. How come whenever a person was bad they called him a bastard? My face went hot and I didn't dare look up from my butterfly bandages for fear someone would see my color. 'Layton he come on into the shop all puffed up like a banty rooster about his son, Phil. Phil got an appointment to West Point he says; then he gives me this sly look and asks how my boys doing. Well, I told him both Ted and Leroy going to the Point too. After all, I'm a veteran, got a purple heart and they ain't gonna refuse my boys when they are ready to go. They can't turn away sons of men shot up in the war. So Layton he roars laughing and says that being the son of a fool got shot up in the war don't mean they can go to so high a place as West Point. He says everyone on the hill knows my boys are so dumb they don't know their ass from their elbow. Well Jenna, I couldn't stand it no more. I told him his son Phil don't deserve to belong to

the army, that pansy sits down to piss ... we got into it after that and I laid him to whaleshit. Then he pulls a toadsticker on me and well, there's not more to tell.'

'There's a lot more to tell,' Florence intervened. 'The cops gonna come down here and haul you out if you gonna get in fights like trash. How'd you leave Layton? You didn't kill him, I hope?'

'Nah, I didn't kill him though I'd have liked to wrung his neck until his tongue hit the ground. Carl came by the shop on his way home and broke it up. He's down there now making some kind of peace with Layton. You know Carl's so good-natured he can get anyone feeling good again. He sent me home because I wasn't any help.'

Jennifer got up to check the snap beans cooking on the stove. Ep looked at the floor and studied his dusty shoes. 'Honey,' he called out, 'our boys ain't stupid. They'll do good, you wait. Seeing them do good will make me feel better than pounding on Layton anyway.'

Jennifer turned from the bubbling water and walked back in the room to give him a kiss. 'Sure, they'll do all right, but I don't think fighting is an example for them.' A sheepish grin took over Ep's face, and he put his hand on her bloated belly and kissed her hand.

Carl came through the door and made a big show out of tossing his gray worker's cap on the coat rack. He made it and we all gave a cheer. Under his arm he had a big piece of meat wrapped in greasy butcher's paper. His gold tooth in front glittered as he smiled. 'Lamb stew tonight, folks. It was left over after the day and I brought it home. So get out the carrots and celery, we're gonna have lamb stew.' Carrie sidled over to Carl and whispered in his ear. He patted her on the shoulder and told her everything was fine.

I ran over and jumped up high to put my arms around his neck. 'Come on Daddy, swing me in a circle till I get dizzy.'

'All right, pilot to copilot, here we go-o-o.' Carl worked hard and his robust, muscular body already had a taint of early age about it, different from Jennifer's but bowed some way.

After my swing, he went over to Ep and asked him how he was doing. Ep looked up to Carl the way boys look up to their fathers even though Carl was only ten years older than Ep.

'Supper's on the way, gang. Clear off this table and get these bloody rags out of the way,' Carrie announced later. The stew was brought steaming to the table and Leroy and I fought for a place next to Carl. Jennifer and Ep kept looking at each other over the table and Florence ran her mouth more than usual but there was no edge in her voice this time. She wanted to smooth things out. Leroy forgot to steal meat off my plate and Carrie laughed at everything Carl said. Carl talked more than I remembered him ever doing. He told stories about Sure Mike the burly man he worked for at the butcher shop, and he joked about the president of the United States. The grownups laughed at those jokes more than anything but they didn't make sense to me. In school they told us that the president was the best man in the whole country but I knew my father was the best man in the whole country; the country didn't know it, that's all. So I guessed it was okay for Carl to make fun of the president. Anyway, how did I know the president was for real? I never saw him, just pictures in the paper and they can make those up. How do you know someone is real if you don't see him?

Jennifer was losing weight instead of gaining it like you're supposed to do when you have a baby but she was so close to having the baby that no one paid much attention except Carrie. When it came time for Jennifer to go to the George Street Hospital, things seemed regular enough. She had the baby named Carl after Dad, but the baby only lived two days. She didn't come home. The grownups paid less attention to us than usual. Coming in from the outhouse, I stopped on the porch and heard Florence, Carrie, and Ep. It was a hot, sticky night. Leroy was on the porch spitting watermelon seeds so we both sat and listened.

Ep's voice sounded like a fuzzy radio show. He sounded worse than when he got cut up. 'Carrie, she never told me about no pains. She never told me anything. If she'd let me know how she was feeling,

I'd have got her to a doctor.'

Florence answered him in a calm voice that was even stern, 'My daughter, Jennifer, never was one to put herself first. She figured doctors ran too high and whatever was the matter with her had to do with the baby, so it'd be soon gone. Don't blame yourself, Ep. She did what she thought was right and God knows with all of us working we can't make hardly enough to keep going. She was thinking about that.'

'I'm her husband. She should have told me. It's my duty to know.'

Carrie came in on it. 'Women often get ailments they keep from their men. Jennifer was quieter than most that way. She mentioned to me that she had pains but how were any of us to know she's shut through with cancer? She didn't know. You don't know things like that.'

'She's going to die. I know she's going to die. When it's all through you like that, you can't live.'

'No, there's no way she can live. These things are in the hands of the Lord.' Florence was resolute. Fate was fate. If God wanted Jennifer then he would have her. Carrie seconded the motion. "'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.'" It's not our business, these things, birth and death. We have to keep going on.'

Leroy looked at me and clutched my arm. 'Molly, Molly what does it mean that Mom's got cancer? What are they talking about? Tell me what they're talking about.'

'I don't know, Leroy. They say Aunt Jenna's gonna die.' My throat hurt, there was a burning lump in it and I held onto Leroy's hand and whispered, 'Don't let them know we heard. Nothin' we can do except stay out of their way and see what happens. Maybe it's a mistake and she'll be home soon. People make mistakes sometimes.' Leroy started to cry and I took him out by the lima beans so nobody would hear either of us. Leroy sobbed, 'I don't want my mom to die.' He cried himself sick and then fell asleep. Even the mosquitoes didn't bother him. After awhile Carrie called us to come in so I got him up and half carried fat, lumpy Leroy back to the house to his little iron bed. Leroy slept in the same room with Ted, and I slept with Carrie and Carl in my own bed. I'd rather have been in there with Leroy, but people said it wasn't right, but that made no sense to me at all, especially tonight. 'Mom, let me stay in here with Leroy, just for tonight Mom, please?'

'No, you're not sleeping in here with the boys and Ted big enough so his voice is changing. You come where you belong. When you get older you'll understand.' She hauled me off and I took one last look at poor Leroy, eyes red and swollen and groggy. He was too tired to protest and fell back into a stupor.

He must have told Ted because next day Ted was more withdrawn than usual and his eyes looked red too.

Within a week Jenna was gone. The funeral was jammed with the entire population of the Hollow, and people were impressed with the flowers. Ep busted himself on the casket. He got the best there was and nobody could talk him out of it. If his wife was going to be dead, then she was going to be dead right, he said. Florence took charge of everything. Leroy, Ted and I were banished during the preparations and that was fine with us. Everybody got all dressed up to honor the dead. Leroy wore a bow tie, Ted wore a string tie, and Daddy and Ep had long ties on and coats that didn't match their trousers, but coats just the same. Carrie rigged me in a horrible dress full of itchy crinolines and patent leather shoes. At least Jennifer was beyond being tormented by itchy dresses. I thought I was worse off than the corpse. The service went on and on, the preacher got carried away with himself over the casket as he talked about the joys of heaven. When they lowered the gleaming box into the ground Florence swooned and gasped, 'My baby.' Carl grabbed her and held her up. Ep had Ted and Leroy by the hand, and he never moved a muscle. He stared straight into that hole and never said a word. Leroy was trying hard not to start bawling again, and I stared at the cowlick on back of his slicked-down hair so as not to start crying myself and show up for a big sissy. The dress didn't help none, it's easier to

cry in a dress anyway.

~~After the casket was in the ground we all went back to the house. Neighbors and relatives from as far away as Harrisburg had come and they brought food. I don't know why, because no one felt like eating. Ep received people with a pained dignity, and Florence almost enjoyed the attention she was getting as mother of the deceased but it was mixed with sorrow. So much of what Florence did was mixed that way.~~

Once it got dark, people started to clear out and finally we were left to ourselves. Carrie set the table to try to get us kids to eat. Carl passed the fruit bread and put a hunk on my plate. 'The candied cherries are cut up in little red pieces. Take a bite, it's real good.'

'I don't wanna eat, Daddy. I'm not hungry.' I pushed the food around on my plate to make it look as though I'd had some. After a proper amount of time the table was cleared and we went off to bed.

Before going to my room I went into Leroy and Ted's room. Between their two beds, on the wall, hung an embroidered, fancy piece of satin from the casket. 'Mother' it said with red roses embroidered on it. Leroy was under the covers, his enormous eyes were all that showed. Ted was sitting up in bed.

'Hey, you guys, hey, I came on in to say goodnight. Your sign is pretty up there. Maybe tomorrow we can go down to the pond or something. Maybe the three of us can do something.'

Ted looked at me like an old man. 'Sure. They said I don't have to go to the Esso station tomorrow. I'll go down to the pond with you.'

Leroy didn't say anything and started crying again. 'I want my mother. They said God took her away. That's a crock of shit. God don't do evil things like that and if he does then I don't like him. If he's so good then let him bring my mother back.' He screeched on like that and Carrie came hustling into the room. She sat down on the bed and held Leroy to soothe him. She gave him that line of crap about God and how we don't know what his plans are because we are only people and people are morons compared to God Almighty. Leroy stopped crying. Carrie rose and told me to 'come on to bed and leave the boys alone.' Leroy gave me a look, but I could only hold up my hands because she was dead set against me staying there. Ted slouched down on his bed, closed his eyes and looked one hundred years old. Carrie switched off the naked light bulb and there wasn't another sound.

I didn't stay in bed too long. I couldn't sleep thinking about Aunt Jenna there under the ground. What would happen if she'd open her eyes and see only dark and feel satin from the coffin? That'd scare her enough to kill her all over again. How do they know dead people don't open their eyes and see? They don't know nothing about being dead. Maybe they should have sat her in a chair along with other dead people. But I'd seen a very dead cow once and that made my thoughts worse. Was Aunt Jenna gonna swell up like that cow and turn black and smell and get full of maggots? I couldn't think about that, it tore my stomach right off its moorings. That's animals, same thing doesn't happen to people does it? That's gonna happen to me someday, too? No, not me. I ain't dying. I don't care what they say, I ain't dying. I'm not lying on my back under the ground in everlasting darkness. Not me. I'm not closing my eyes. If I close my eyes, I might not open them. Carrie was asleep so I crawled out of bed and crept down the hall covered with peeling green wallpaper with white gardenias on it. I was planning to hotfoot it out on the porch and watch the stars but I never made it because Ep and Carl were in the living room and Carl was holding Ep. He had both arms around him and every now and then he'd smooth down Ep's hair or put his cheek next to his head. Ep was crying just like Leroy. I couldn't make out what they were saying to each other. A couple times I could hear Carl telling Ep he had to hang on, that's all anybody can do is hang on. I was afraid they were going to get up and see me so I hurried back to my room. I'd never seen men hold each other. I thought the only things they were allowed to do was shake hands or fight. But if Carl was holding Ep maybe it wasn't against the rules. Since I wasn't sure, I thought I'd keep it to myself and never tell. I was glad they could touch each

other. Maybe all men did that after everyone went to bed so no one would know the toughness was for show. Or maybe they only did it when someone died. I wasn't sure at all and it bothered me. —

The next morning the sky was black with thunderclouds, and we had to spend the whole day in the house. The rain poured down and the leak by the kitchen table opened up again so Ted went out with shingles to patch it. After the storm the sky stayed dark but across the horizon was a brilliant rainbow. We all stared in silence for a long time, then went back inside. Ep stayed on the porch to look at the rainbow. Leroy bet me I couldn't find a pot of gold at the end, and I told him that was a stupid bet because the rainbow was enough.

Cheryl Spiegelglass lived on the other side of the woods. Her daddy was a used car salesman and they had more money than the rest of us in the Hollow. Cheryl wore a dress, even when she didn't have to. I hated her for that, plus she was always sucking up to the adults. Carrie loved her and said she looked exactly like Shirley Temple and why didn't I look like that instead of roaming around the fields in torn pants and dirty teeshirts. Cheryl and I had been friends of a sort since first grade so sometimes we played together. Carrie squirmed like a dog with a new bone every time I'd go off to the Spiegelglass's place, partly because she thought I was moving into polite society and partly because she hoped Cheryl would influence me for the better. Leroy usually tagged along. Neither Leroy nor I could stand it when Cheryl carted out her dolls, so when she had doll days we steered clear.

One time Cheryl decided to play nurse and we put napkins on our heads. Leroy was the patient and we painted him with iodine so he'd look wounded. A nurse, I wasn't gonna be no nurse. If I was gonna be something I was gonna be the doctor and give orders. I tore off my napkin, and told Cheryl I was the new doctor in town. Her face corroded. 'You can't be a doctor. Only boys can be doctors. Leroy's got to be the doctor.'

'You're full of shit, Spiegelglass, Leroy's dumber than I am. I got to be the doctor because I'm the smart one and being a girl don't matter.'

'You'll see. You think you can do what boys do but you're going to be a nurse, no two ways about it. It doesn't matter about brains, brains don't count. What counts is whether you're a boy or a girl.'

I hauled off and belted her one. Shirley Temple Spiegelglass wasn't gonna tell me I couldn't be a doctor, nor nobody else. Course I didn't want to be a doctor. I was going to be president only I kept it a secret. But if I wanted to be a doctor I'd go be one and ain't nobody gonna tell me otherwise. So I got in trouble, of course. Cheryl went snotty-nosed into her mother and showed her the split lip I just gave her. Ethel Spiegelglass, mother hen, came flying out of that house, with the real aluminum awnings on it, and grabbed me by the teeshirt and gave me a piece of her mind, which was very uncomplimentary to me. She told me I couldn't see Cheryl for a week. That was fine with me. I didn't want to see nobody who'd tell me I couldn't be a doctor. Leroy and I started home.

'You really gonna be a doctor, Molly?'

'No, I ain't. I'm gonna be something lots better than a doctor. If you're a doctor you have to look a scabs and blood, besides only people in one place know your name. I got to be something that everybody knows my name. I'm going to be great.'

'Great what?'

'That's a secret.'

'Tell, come on, you can tell me, I'm your best friend.'

'No, but I'll tell you when you're old enough to vote.'

'When's that?'

'When you're twenty-one.'

'That's ten years from now. I might be dead. I'll be an old man. Tell me now.'

'No. Forget it. Anyway, whatever I am, I'll make sure you get some of the goodies so let me do it my own way.'

Leroy settled for that, but with rancor.

We got home and Carrie was hopping mad. Somehow, between my splitting Cheryl's lip and us walking home, she gathered the news. 'You big-mouthed brat. Can't play nice, can you? Can't act like a lady, no way. You're a heathen, that's what you are. You going up there and hitting that sweet child

How could you do such a thing? How am I gonna show my face around here? And you doing such a thing so soon after Jenna's passed away. You got no sense of respect. God knows, I've tried to bring you up right. You're not my child. You're wild, some wild animal. Your father must have been an ap or something.'

Leroy's mouth fell open. He didn't know about me yet. Damn, I could have killed Carrie for shooting her big mouth off right then. Why'd she have to lay me out in front of fat Leroy? She's the one with no respect.

She ran on and she got me for this offense and that offense as well as one hundred trespasses. She's gonna make a lady out of me that summer, a crash program. She was going to keep me in the house to teach me to act right, cook, clean, and sew and that scared me.

'I can learn them things at night, you don't have to keep me in the house during the day.'

'You're staying in this house with me, Miss Molly. No more going out with the roughhouse Hollow gang. That's one of the things wrong with you that I can fix. Your blood's another matter.' Leroy sat down quietly at the table and played with the diagonal pattern on the tablecloth. He wasn't liking this no more than I was. 'If Molly stays in then I stay in.'

Leroy, I love you.

'You ain't staying in here, Leroy Denman. You're a boy and you go out and play like boys are supposed to do. It's not right for you to learn those things.'

'I don't care. I'm going where Molly goes. She's my best friend and my cousin and we got to stick together.'

Carrie tried to reason with Leroy but he wouldn't budge until she started telling him what would happen to him if he picked up women's ways. Now old Leroy was shaking. Everybody would point at him and laugh. Nobody would play with him if he stayed in with me and soon they'd take him to the hospital and cut his thing off. Leroy sold out.

'Okay, Aunt Carrie, I won't stay in the house.' He looked at me with utter defeat and guilt.

Leroy you ain't no friend of mine.

Carrie went down into the root cellar to get jars and rubber rings. Canning was going to be my first lesson. Before she hit the last step I leaped at the door, shut it, and locked it. She didn't notice it until she was ready to come up. Then she called out, 'Molly, Leroy, door's shut, let me out.'

Leroy was scared shitless. 'Molly, let her out or they'll beat both of us good. Ep will get out the strap. You let her out.'

'You take one step toward that door Leroy Denman and I'll slit your throat.' I picked up the carving knife to make my words true. Leroy was between the devil and the deep blue sea.

'Molly, let me outa this root cellar!'

'I ain't lettin' you outa that root cellar until you promise to let me go free. Till you promise I don't have to stay in this house and learn to sew.'

'I'll promise no such thing.'

'Then you staying in that root cellar until Jesus comes back.' I walked out the door and slammed it so she could hear, dragging Leroy with me every step of the way. No one was home. Florence was down at West York Market. Ted was at the Esso station, and Carl and Ep were at work. No one could hear her pounding on that door and screaming her lungs out except Leroy and me. Her screams just scalded Leroy. 'She's dying in there. You got to let her out. She'll go blind in the dark. Molly, please let her out.'

'She ain't dying in there, she ain't going blind and I ain't lettin' her out.'

'What'd she mean about you not being her child? About you being an animal?'

'She don't know what she's talking about. Talking through her hat. Don't pay no attention to her.'

'Well, you don't look like her nor Carl neither. You don't look like any of us. Maybe you ain't her'

You're the only one in the Hollow with black hair and brown eyes. Hey, maybe she found you in the bull-rushes like Moses.'

'Shut up, Leroy.' He was on the track. He was bound to find out sooner or later, since Carrie let the cat out the bag so I guessed I'd have to tell him. 'It's true what she says. I ain't hers. I don't belong to nobody. I got no true mother nor father and I ain't your real cousin. And this ain't my home. But it don't matter. It matters to her when she gets mad at me. She says I'm a bastard then. But it don't matter to me. But we're still cousins in our own way. Blood's just something old people talk about to make you feel bad. Hey Leroy, you don't care none, do you?'

Leroy was buckling under the weight of the news. 'If we ain't true cousins then what are we? We got to be something.'

'We're friends, though we might as well be cousins cause we're together all the time.'

'What does it mean, bastard? What's the difference between you and me if you ain't Carrie and Carl's?'

'It means that your mother, Jenna, was married to Ep when she had you and my mother, whoever she is, wasn't married to my dad, whoever he is. That's exactly what it means.'

'Well hell, Molly, what's being married?'

'It's a piece of paper, that's all I can figure. Some people don't even have to stand in front of a preacher, so it ain't religion. You can go on down to the courthouse and sign up like Uncle Ep signed up for the Marine Corps. Then you hear words said over you and you both sign this piece of paper and you're married.'

'Could we get married?'

'Sure, but we got to be old, fifteen or sixteen, at least.'

'That's only four more years, Molly. Let's get married.'

'Leroy, we don't need to get married. We're together all the time. It's silly to get married. Besides I'm never gettin' married.'

'Everybody gets married. It's something you have to do, like dying.'

'I ain't doin' it.'

'I don't know, Molly, you're headin' for a hard life. You say you're gonna be a doctor or something great. Then you say you ain't gettin' married. You have to do some of the things everybody does or people don't like you.'

'I don't care whether they like me or not. Everybody's stupid, that's what I think. I care if I like me that's what I truly care about.'

'Now that's the damndest dumb thing I ever heard. Everybody likes themselves. Fact, Florence says you got to learn not to like yourself so much and like other people.'

'Since when have you started listening to Florence? I can't like anybody if I don't like myself. Period.'

'Molly, you are flat out crazy. Everybody likes themselves, I am telling you.'

'Oh yeah, smartass? Did you like yourself when you told Carrie you'd go out and play and leave me trapped inside with a sewing basket?'

Leroy's face flashed shame. Bull's eye. He switched the subject to save himself having to think on that one any more. 'If you're not gonna get married then I won't either. Why do people get married anyway?'

'So's they can fuck.'

'What?' Leroy's voice went into a high-pitched trail.

'Fuck.'

'Molly Bolt, that is a dirty word.'

'Dirty or not, that's what they do.'

‘Do you know what it means?’

‘~~Not exactly but it has something to do with taking all your clothes off and messing around.~~—

Remember how upset Florence got when those two dogs were stuck together? That’s what it is, I think. I don’t know why anyone would want to do it, because those dogs didn’t look very happy about it. I know that’s what it is, besides I seen dirty books Ted hides under his mattress and you should see them. It’d make you sick for sure.’

‘Dirty books?’

‘Yeah, Ted’s been reading them ever since his voice started cracking. You ask me, I think his mind is cracking right along with it, myself.’

‘How’d you find out he was reading them?’

‘Spied on him. After you go to sleep he turns the light back on so I knew he was up to something and I snuck out for a peek. There he was reading. Now the only books in this house are the Bible and our school books. I know he ain’t reading none of them.’

‘You are truly smart, Molly,’ Leroy said with admiration.

‘Yeah, I know.’

Carrie’s screams and poundings had died down by this time. ‘Let’s go back and see if she is ready to make a deal.’ A soft whimper came from behind the cellar door when I knocked on it. ‘Mom, you ready to come out now? You ready to make that deal?’

‘I’m ready, just let me outa this dark hole. It’s full of bugs.’

I unbolted the door and opened it. Carrie was sitting on the root cellar steps like a little girl, holding her arms and crunched over. She looked up at me with pure hate and flew out of the cellar like a jack-in-the-box. She grabbed me by the hair before I could dodge and started hitting me in the face, stomach, and when I doubled over like a porcupine, she hit me on the back with both fists at once. I could feel my eye start to close up already. I was so busy trying to get away from her that I didn’t hear what she was calling me. Leroy fled the house in total terror. He didn’t once try to gang up on her. If he’d blasted her with a couple good kicks, I might have gotten away. But Leroy never was tactical, plus he had a streak of the coward in him.

That night I was sent to bed without supper. I didn’t care because I couldn’t eat my supper anyway. My mouth was all swelled up ugly, and it hurt to talk. The whole crew got Carrie’s version of my sin and I couldn’t open my mouth in self-defense. I guess she thought she’d shame me in front of all of them, but I stared at her with real pride as I marched into the bedroom. She wasn’t going to beat me down, no how. Let’em all get mad at me, I wasn’t giving her a goddamned inch, not one. I crawled in bed but I was so sore I couldn’t sleep and late that night I heard Carrie and Carl get in a blowout. Only time I ever heard Carl raise his voice, and I bet the rest of the house heard him too. ‘Carrie, the child high-spirited and she’s smart, you got to remember that. That kid’s quicker than all of us put together. She started reading all by herself when she was three with no help from any of us. You got to treat her with some respect for her brains. She’s a good girl, just full of life and the devil, that’s all.’

‘I don’t give a goddamn how brainy she is, she don’t act natural. It ain’t right for a girl to be running all around with the boys at all hours. She climbs trees, takes cars apart, and worse, she tells them what to do and they listen to her. She don’t want to learn none of the things she has to know to get a husband. Smart as she is, a woman can’t get on in this world without a husband. We can’t be sending no girl to school as it is. It’s the boys we got to worry about. Them’s the ones will be earning livings. You make too much of her head.’

‘Molly is going to college.’

‘Big talk.’

‘My daughter is going to college.’

‘Your daughter, your daughter. That’s a laugh. That’s the first time I heard you say that. She’s Rub

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