

"Why are you sitting in the corner?" I asked. "It's so dark there."
He made no response.

"I'm six and a half. I'll be seven on my birthday."
I waited for him to say something. He didn't.

"Mama put me on the train and told the conductor to help me off at the right stop. Uncle Ed was already at the train station waiting for me. Mama says I'm a chatterbox so I can talk all day."

His head was down.

"Sometimes I don't want to answer either. Grown-ups ask me so many questions. I get tired of it. I'm going to spend the summer here."

I knelt down at his feet so he could see me. "Why don't you say something? Mama says it's impolite not to answer when someone talks to you."
His lips stayed shut.

I thought if I ask him this he will have to answer me. "What's your name?"

"Honey bun, come away from him," said Aunt Ida. She tapped her forehead with her index finger. "Simple-minded, he doesn't understand."

"Meet your cousins," said Uncle Ed. He introduced me to cousin-this and cousin-that and cousin so-and-so. There were more cousins than I could count. Everyone was glad to see me.

"I saw you when you was only 2 days old. Sweet Jesus, you was a long time coming," said Aunt Ida.

One of the cousins nodded in agreement and said, "Your Mama had you late in life."

When someone wasn't pulling my pigtails, someone else was pinching one or the other of my cheeks. The top of my head was patted a hundred times. The kisses came fast and wet. That's the part I hated the most. I wanted to run away and scrub my face. But, I was enjoying myself. I felt good inside just like when Mommy hugs me.

I kept peeking at the large man in the chair. "What's his name?" I asked, while pointing my finger at him.

"Don't point." someone said. "You can call him idiot."

I wondered which was worse pointing my finger or calling someone a bad name. The cousin that said that was a kid too but older than me and no one told him he was wrong. My Mama taught me manners and I didn't think that was a nice thing to say but I kept that thought to myself.

Cousin-so and-so pointed her finger to her temple and made a circular motion. "Crazy." she said, while holding her nose in the air as if he smelled funny. Others nodded in agreement.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Lord help me carry this cross I bear," said Aunt Ida. "He's your cousin too."

Uncle Ed kept shaking his head from side to side until he shook out, "Lord I need your blessings."

It seemed to me that the man in the chair needed them more. I closed my mouth tight so I wouldn't say it out loud.

Everyone turned away from me and talked amongst themselves. My boy cousins were older and didn't want to play with me. And I was the only girl. I was free to do what I wanted. I walked from room to room inspecting the house, upstairs and down. The only thing that was interesting was the man in the living room. I went back to where he was sitting. He hadn't changed his position at all. He looked to be so much a part of the chair that someone could probably take a seat before they knew he was there. He didn't move. He didn't look at anything. Just sat like a rock. The way my teacher wants our class to sit. Quiet and still.

"I guess you don't have a name so I'm going to give you one," I said. "Let's see." I looked up at the ceiling like I often did in class expecting the answer to magically appear. "I know. I asked my Mama for a baby brother. She said no, but when I have a baby brother I want to name him Freddy." That's it, I decided. "I'm going to call you Freddy."

I think that pleased him. He seemed to sit-up straighter in the chair. I tried to get him to talk. Every time I said something, I waited for an answer. I knew he wanted to.

So, I told him "Your pipes are rusty that's why you can't talk." I heard that somewhere about pipes being rusty. And I could just picture how someone couldn't speak with pipes like that in his throat.

"Let's go outside where it's nice and sunny," I said. You would have thought I had told Freddy, "Let's steal some cookies." He started to sweat. I tugged and tugged at Freddy to make him stand-up.

"You're afraid like I was the first time I rode my bike by myself," I said. "It's okay. You can do it."

No matter what it was, Mama always told me, "You can do it."

He looked at the front door and sank deeper into the chair so I pulled as hard as I could. He stood up. The more he wanted to follow me, the easier it was to pull him towards the front door. No one said I couldn't. I wasn't sneaking or anything but, I was glad we got outside without anybody seeing us.

The sun hit Freddy in the face and made him shut his eyes. He turned to go back into the house but I used both of my hands to pull him away.

"Open your eyes," I said. "The sunlight won't hurt you."

Before we walked about one block, a grin appeared on Freddy's face as if it had been waiting to come out. I chatted away. I was in charge. And I liked that feeling. I knew I wouldn't get any answers. I didn't mind. That's just the way he was and it was all right with me.

The first street corner that we came to, Freddy was about to step down. I pulled him back. "Mama said you have to wait for the green light. You see? It's red. Okay now it's green. Let's go."

Freddy's grin disappeared. He held my hand tight as if he was going to fall into a hole or something. He held it tight until we had crossed the street. As soon as his two feet were on the sidewalk, his hand relaxed and the grin came back. Freddy made sure to look for the green light at each corner we crossed.

I could smell sweets a mile away so I automatically turned my head as we were about to pass by something very sweet. "Freddy, I want an ice cream."

He held my hand tight again. The grin was gone too. I felt sweat on his hand. "Don't worry." I said, "It's just an ice cream store."

We went inside and Freddy grinned again. Each time he grinned, it was the same—no more grin and no less grin—showing exactly the same amount of gums and teeth.

"Two double-dip chocolate cones, please." I said.

I forgot I didn't have any money to pay. Freddy dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of money. Now, I knew nickels, dimes and quarters. I knew a one-dollar bill and a five-dollar bill, except that sometimes I got mixed-up, calling a five a two. There was no problem there because he only had change. So I counted out, "One nickel, another nickel, a dime, a quarter another quarter." The ice cream lady stepped in and finished counting out the change. When she had enough, I closed Freddy's hand around the coins and pushed his hand back towards his pocket. He dropped them in.

We sat at a table. I began to eat my cone. Freddy just watched.

"Like this," I said. I took a bite from the top and he did the same. I licked all around the ice cream and he did too. It was just like the monkey-see monkey-do game we played at school. His ice cream began to drip so I showed him how to lick around the rim of the cone so he wouldn't drip so much on himself. I imagined myself teaching my little brother just like I was teaching Freddy. We took our last bites. I wiped Freddy's face with a napkin. He had ice cream on his lips, around his lips, on his nose and on his hands. I wiped Freddy clean. He helped me find the spots I missed on my face.

I'm glad Freddy remembered the way home because I didn't. We made it past the red lights just fine. Arrived home we opened the door and a rush of bodies came towards us. Well, me in particular. There were hugs and kisses and cheek pinches to rival the ones I was given when I first arrived that morning.

"Uncle Ed, in a stern voice asked, "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yes, me and Freddy went for a walk," I said.

"Freddy?" Cousins looked past me expecting to see another person.

"I gave him a name," I said.

"What's that on your dress?" asked Uncle Ed. The sound of his voice was making me scared. I looked down and there was a huge drip of chocolate ice cream staining the front of my pretty dress.

"We had ice cream."

"Ice cream?" was shouted from somewhere behind me.

"And I helped count the money."

More than one person, almost in unison, echoed "Money?"

The questions were coming fast and I knew that the more I talked the more trouble Freddy would be in so I stayed quiet.

"She can't take anymore questions," said Aunt Ida. "Leave her be. Lord Jesus, she's been through an ordeal."

I was trying to remember the word "ordeal" so I could ask someone what

it meant. "Ordeal, ordeal." I kept looking at Freddy's chair, wondering where he was. "Orde, ordra". No, that's not it. I couldn't hold on to that word for even a few seconds. Mama said that's the way my mind worked. "You're like a little kitten running after this mouse and that one and never catching anything," she often said.

"Come on, sweetie pie, have some supper," said Aunt Ida. I was pulled to the kitchen. I took another look towards the empty chair and wished I could explain about the fun day we had in a way that they could understand.

"Where's Freddy?" I asked Uncle Ed. He didn't answer. He kept punching the fist of one hand into the other.

"Why are you mad?"

All he said was "Finish your supper."

My mind was working hard to figure out why I hadn't seen Freddy since we came home. Maybe he was being punished. I could see him in my mind, in the basement, in chains, hungry and cold. That was not right. I thought I should have been punished instead because I took Freddy out not the other way around. They had to know that it was my idea. So I told Aunt Ida, "I took Freddy out. Aunt Ida. He didn't want to go."

She hugged me, kissed me, and said, "One day you'll forget about being kidnapped."

I wasn't sure what that meant but I knew that was what strangers did to little boys and girls who talked to them. So I said, "Oh no, Aunt Ida, Freddy is not a stranger. He's my cousin and my friend."

After supper, Aunt Ida gave me a bath and examined every part of my body. I guess she thought I was hit by a car or fell down or something.

I told her, "We crossed the streets carefully." She just would not hear what I was saying but I kept talking anyway. "I was skipping and slipped. Before I could scrape my knee on the pavement Freddy pulled me up. He saved me Aunt Ida."

All Aunt Ida said was "Humph."

It was time for bed. Aunt Ida told me to get on my knees and say my prayers. Mama said I didn't have to pray unless I wanted to otherwise it didn't mean anything and God only listened when it was from your heart. Well I wanted to tonight. So I knelt and whispered one prayer and then in a loud voice I said, "God bless my good, kind friend Freddy. Amen."

Aunt Ida shook her head as if I was a silly girl; tucked me in; turned off the lights; said "Goodnight honey bun," and left the room.

I felt fuzzy in my head like when I first wake up in the morning but I'm still a little bit sleeping. So, I wasn't sure if I was awake or not when I saw Freddy standing near the head of my bed.

"Hi," I said.

He took my hand in his two and held it. But then he began to squeeze it. Even in the dark I knew there was a frown and sweat on his face.

"It's okay Freddy," I said. "Everybody is mad at you but its okay."

I almost missed hearing it, it was so low, "liii Frreeddy," he said.

This is when I thought that maybe I was asleep. Freddy took his time and said it again this time louder. "liii Frreeddy."

I jumped from under the covers and laughed as I threw my arms around Freddy's neck. "Freddy, you talked." I was gleeful. "Say it again Freddy. Say it again."

His hands were still at his side but I could feel his neck and shoulders get tight. Just as he was repeating "liii Frre...." Aunt Ida turned on the light, ran towards me, said "Lord Jesus." and pulled me from Freddy's neck.

"He talked, Aunt Ida, he talked." By then, I was using the mattress as a trampoline.

"Settle down, child," Aunt Ida said.

I sat down and saw Uncle Ed standing in the doorway. I couldn't imagine why his face looked like a mean dog. He came towards Freddy as I was saying "Uncle Ed tell him to talk. He talked. He talked to me."

Uncle Ed did not want to hear Freddy talk. He grabbed Freddy by the back of his neck and pushed him towards the door. Freddy turned and looked at me before he was all the way out of the room. This grin was wider than all the rest.

"I'm going to teach Freddy all the words I know just like I'm going to teach my little brother. That's when my Mama says yes, I can have one." ß

Aunt Ida looked a little sad, shook her head from side to side and said "Precious, precious child. Get under the covers." She kissed me on my forehead. "Time to go to sleep." She turned off the lights.

"I can't wait for tomorrow." I said.