

My Friend Etta

She had the wettest eyes I'd ever seen and at least a hundred barrettes shaped like plastic bows at the ends of all her braids. She liked dolls and I liked books; she wore dresses and white anklets, I was bare legs and rubber sandals, and we were different shades of brown.

We met out by my tree fort one October afternoon. I watched her come, swinging a stick, watched her from my perch in the branches. She scuffed her feet in the dry leaves of autumn. She told me her momma said that an angel whispered to her daddy and told him to buy that house on our street. Who was I to disbelieve an angel? I bought that story without question, for we seemed indeed connected by some universal hand.

We saw "The Sound of Music" three times with my grandmother in the rocking-chair theatre. The nights my father worked she would sleep over, and we would laugh at my stupid brother and ask impossible questions of the Magic Eight Ball and make shadow animals with a flashlight on the wall, then read under the covers until we fell asleep. I loved to touch her cheek, the skin the silk of chocolate pudding. She plaited my hair and I painted her toenails; we drew hopscotch on the sidewalk with fat colored chalk from her momma's box of little girl stuff. We painted each other like warriors once with Avon lipstick samples, and she taught me every jump rope rhyme I knew. We went on expeditions with my butterfly net and I showed her how to catch lightning bugs in a jar. We'd play school with the neighborhood's little kids, free babysitting and kool-aid and delicious authority; we made necklaces with clover blossoms in the spring and pressed leaves between waxed paper with my mother's iron in the fall.

Her mother wore high heels and pearls like mine did, and her teeth were white and straight, flashing like fireworks in her dark face when she turned her smile, full and bright, upon the face of her husband. He unflinchingly held the front door for her, and once I saw him take her face in his hands as if it were glass. On Saturdays he waxed the car, and she wore pedal-pushers and gold sandals and knelt in the dirt to love her flowers. On Sundays I'd sit on the fence and love their ritual, of hats and gloves and prayer books, Etta in stiff little dresses with ribbons laced through the hem and shiny church shoes. I'd wave until her hand in the window disappeared. Later, she'd come back, looking for me in the branches of the swinging tree. We'd talk and chew bazooka until suppertime and plan our lives: after college, we would marry at the same time and buy houses next door to each other in Savannah, where she came from, and raise our babies together.

One night, sirens split the quiet, and through the blinds I saw a miracle on her lawn, a blazing cross as tall as a man. I wondered if god put it there as a present for all their Sunday prayers. But soon there were uniforms and men with hoses and neighbors knotted on the sidewalk. My mother caught me up in her arms at the door, and would not let me go to Etta; she brushed my hair back again and again with her cool hands and told me everything was all right. Then she closed the blinds and kissed me on the forehead, and I curled up in her arms with my mystery.

When my father came into the house that night he was very ugly in his eyes and he smelled of gasoline.