

## Chapter 1 – Roots in Red Clay

The earth in Southern Georgia isn't just red from clay, it's red from history, soaked deep with stories of labor, laughter, sorrow, and secrets. The Harrison and Dinkins families had roots in this red soil, deep as any ancient pine, tangled in a legacy of pride and pain.

Gary Harrison never saw the farm as just a place to grow crops. It was the cradle of his family's existence and the stage of its struggles. Climax, Georgia, was hot, sweltering hot. The kind of heat that wrapped itself around your neck and dared you to breathe. And if the heat didn't suffocate you, the gnats would. Swarms of them like miniature shadows dancing in the sun, biting and buzzing, announcing that comfort was for city folk.

"Grandad said grits were Southern ice cream," Gary once told a Northern friend who'd wrinkled their nose at the breakfast spread. That was how it was down here. Everything had its place, its tradition, and its unspoken rules.

The Harrisons were farmers by blood. Grandad Harrison inherited a few hundred acres from his father, who'd gotten it from his own. They weren't wealthy in the bank, but they were rich in dirt, sweat, and stubbornness. Gary's memories of Grandad were of a man carved from the same clay he tilled. Short, wiry, and always working, his back bent not just from labor but from the weight of expectations.

Grandad's first wife, Betsy, died young and quietly, without much said and even less remembered. No grave, no marker, just whispers. People said she might be buried on the property,

her resting place known only to the wind and the corn rows. Grandad remarried her sister, Nellie. It was common then, a solution more practical than romantic.

Together, they raised nine children—five boys and four girls—in a house that echoed with chores and silence more than with laughter. The boys worked the fields from the moment they could walk. The girls, trained in kitchen and care, served the family until they married out.

It was a hard life, but no one called it that. It was just life. No time for books. Education came second to survival. Farming was school, discipline, and religion all in one. Grandad's motto was simple: no play, all work. And that wasn't just a saying. It was the law of the land.

The family tradition was etched in sweat and the cracking of leather belts. Gary later wondered if that tradition was just a prettier word for violence. His father, Jesse, and two uncles had reputations as brawlers, mean as snakes, quick to fists and slow to apologies. School buses turned into battlegrounds. Fights weren't just common; they were daily ritual.

"Violence was in our blood," Gary would later write. But he didn't mean it with pride.

He often asked himself whether Grandad's hand shaped his sons into the men they became. Hard men. Angry men. Men who confused fear with respect.

Despite the brutality, family gatherings were grand. The plantation of Tom's Foods, where Uncle Cecil and Uncle Glenal worked, was like a dream: lakes, horses, music echoing through open-air halls. Gary remembered ice-cold watermelon pulled from natural springs, the sweetness a balm to a bruised childhood.

But it was all surface. Behind the summer parties and Sunday suppers lay a history too heavy to be healed by biscuits and laughter.

Gary's mother, Lov Dinkins, came from a different mold. The Dinkins family was calm, quiet, educated. From Cairo, Georgia, not far from Climax but worlds away in spirit. Her father wasn't a farmer; he worked in town jobs, and while Gary never knew him, the peace of the Dinkins household told its own story.

No shouting. No bruises.

Just soft voices and sharp minds. His uncles from this side were college-educated, professionals. His aunts, kind and composed.

The contrast was jarring.

"I never saw anyone yell at anyone in the Dinkins house," Gary recalled. "It was... strange. Safe."

Yet, his mother chose Jesse. And she stayed. Through the deployments, the deaths, the dysfunction. She stayed.

That question would haunt Gary for decades: *Why?*

It began here, in the red clay, where the Harrisons planted seeds in the ground and in their children. Seeds that would grow into stories too heavy for one boy to carry. And yet, he carried them still.

## Chapter 2 – The Farm and the Fury

The fields of Climax, Georgia, were sun-scorched testaments to endurance. And in the heart of those blistering acres stood Grandad Harrison—a man who demanded obedience and offered discipline in return. He wasn't cruel by his own measure. He was fair, he said. Just like his father before him.

"Sunrise to sundown, no excuses," he'd bark, the veins in his neck taut like the rows of corn behind him. For the Harrison boys, childhood ended as soon as they could carry a bucket or push a hoe. Laughter had no place in the furrows. Play was for the soft. And Grandad wasn't raising soft.

Gary remembered the dirt more than the air. How it coated your skin, settled in your mouth, and mixed with sweat until it felt like paste. Work was endless. Horses, pigs, chickens. You fed them, cleaned them, bred them, sold them. And then you started over.

There was no negotiation. No room for protest. Even his daughters, though spared the fields, lived under Grandad's iron rules. Help your stepmother. Cook, clean, serve. A woman's duty was clear. You didn't question it. You just did it.

But beneath the surface of order, a fury brewed.

It showed first in the boys. Gary's father Jesse and uncles Jam and Glendal were hot-tempered from a young age. It wasn't just their fists that flew. It was rage. A generational anger, unnamed and unexamined.

"Bus fights were daily," Uncle Cecil once told Gary. "Sometimes two at a time. Sometimes all three. Didn't matter the reason. Somebody always had a black eye."

Gary listened, nodding. He was used to the stories by then. They weren't told with shame or regret. They were badges, worn like dusty boots.

"It was normal," Cecil added.

But Gary knew better. Normal didn't mean right. And violence wasn't strength. He was starting to see the cracks.

The family didn't just inherit land; they inherited silence. No one talked about Grandma Betsy's sudden death. No one explained why Grandad rarely bent his back unless it was to strike. Questions hung in the barn air like dust motes—visible only when the light hit right.

There was one morning Gary would never forget. He was watching the men unload supplies from the truck when he heard barking from the dog pen. Curious, he followed the sound, only to witness Grandad and his sons dragging blind, sick dogs out by the scruff.

"They can't hunt no more," Uncle Jam said casually.

And then came the bats.

Gary froze as the scene unfolded. The thuds. The yelps. The silence that followed.

He said nothing. No one did.

He would carry that silence with him for years.

Back inside, Grandma Nellie was baking biscuits. The smell wrapped around Gary like a warm blanket, trying to convince him the world was still good. Her biscuits were famous—soft, golden, brushed with butter and kindness. She didn't speak much, didn't interfere with the boys. Her way of surviving was to stay small, stay sweet, and stay out of Grandad's shadow.

One evening, as the family gathered for dinner, Gary watched how Grandad sat at the head of the table like a king. No one spoke unless spoken to. No one questioned the food or the rules. The daughters moved silently around the room. The boys ate fast, heads down. Respect was drilled in, not earned.

Later, outside, Gary and his cousin Dan found the old mule—the one notorious for tossing riders. They dared each other to climb up. It was stupid fun, the kind that carried the risk of broken bones and the reward of ten seconds of freedom.

The mule bucked. They flew.

And they laughed.

"You're gonna catch a whipping if Grandad sees you," Dan warned.

Gary shrugged. At least it was a moment. A breath.

What they didn't know was that Grandad had already heard. And later that night, the switch came out. Not just for the mule ride, but for the mud field they'd torn up in the rain. The land was sacred. You didn't ruin it with boyish games.

Gary cried. Dan didn't. Maybe Dan was used to it.

Afterward, they both sat on the porch, legs stinging, watching the stars blink through humid clouds.

"You think they ever talk about it?" Gary asked.

"Who?"

"The grown-ups. What happened to Grandma Betsy. Why Uncle Jam hits Joe. Why Grandad's so mad all the time."

Dan shook his head. "They don't talk. They work."

Gary leaned back, feeling the wood press into his spine.

"Then maybe we gotta be the ones who do."

It was a bold thought for a boy who still couldn't say the word "abuse." But it was a start.

## Chapter 3 –

### Southern Women, Silent Strength

Gary had always watched the women of his family from a curious distance. They were present in every memory, yet rarely the focus of it. They moved like shadows behind the noise of men's voices, their strength tucked into quiet corners and soft footsteps.

Grandma Nellie embodied that silence. She cooked enough food to feed armies, her hands moving with the precision of someone who'd made the same meals a thousand times before. But she never raised her voice. Never interrupted. Never stood between Grandad and whatever decision thundered from his chair. Her love was in her biscuits. Her fear was in her silence.

"Nellie never got involved," Gary's mother once whispered. "She learned early. If you stay quiet, you stay safe."

The Harrison women were molded in that same cast. They were expected to serve, obey, and bear children. No questions, no ambitions beyond the household walls. Aunt Rub, Aunt Bet, Aunt Unted, and Aunt Sincl—each had her role, each trained to be what the South called a "good woman."

"You breed and serve," Uncle Jam once said at a family reunion, laughing like it was a joke. But it wasn't. It was the rule.

Gary's mother, Lov, stood out from that mold. Born a Dinkins, she carried the calmness of her upbringing like a quiet protest. Cairo, Georgia, wasn't far from Climax, but the air felt different

there. Education mattered. Respect wasn't just demanded—it was given.

Lov had graduated high school, a rarity among her sisters. She could have gone further. Her brothers, Huge and Joker, had gone to college, taken jobs in aviation and insurance. But Lov chose love. Or what she thought was love.

She met Jesse Harrison in Cairo while working at a store. He was charming, in that rough military way. Promises of travel and adventure filled her head. Maybe she saw freedom in his uniform. Maybe she saw escape.

They married quickly. Too quickly. And then the moving began.

Bases. Deployments. Long stretches of loneliness.

She didn't know, not at first. About the temper. About the fists. About the silence that would be demanded of her.

"Did she ever think of leaving?" Gary once asked Aunt Hilda.

His aunt looked down, folding laundry that didn't need folding.

"Back then, you stayed. You made it work."

But Lov didn't just stay. She endured. Through the death of her first child, through overseas isolation, through violence no one talked about. She wore a calm face for her kids, taught them manners, kept them fed, and sang soft lullabies even when her own heart was breaking.

Gary remembered her brushing his hair once, humming under her breath. He must have been six. It was a rare moment of stillness. He looked up and saw her eyes in the mirror—red-rimmed, exhausted, but still soft.

"You okay, Mama?"

"I'm always okay, baby."

She lied with grace.

The Dinkins women, her sisters, were cut from similar threads—kind, attentive, and endlessly supportive. Aunt Hilda, Aunt Root, and their mother, Granny Dinkins, welcomed Gary with warmth. Their houses smelled like fresh soap and Sunday dinner. The men joked gently. No one raised voices. No one raised hands.

It confused Gary.

"Why don't they yell here?"

"Because they don't need to," Aunt Root answered once.

"Respect doesn't come from fear."

It was the first time Gary understood that not all families ran on fire. Some ran on faith. Some on love.

And yet, his mother had chosen a life wrapped in storms. She had six children with Jesse. She packed and unpacked for every transfer. She held the line when no one else would.

Was it love? Duty? Fear?

The older Gary got, the more he realized the answer wasn't simple. Maybe she stayed because she believed he could change. Maybe she stayed because back then, there weren't shelters or phone hotlines. Maybe she stayed because the world told her she had to.

But in that staying, she taught Gary something too.

That survival was an act of resistance.

And sometimes, silent strength was the loudest thing a woman could carry.

## Chapter 4 – City Lights and Escapes

Farming life had a rhythm—early mornings, aching backs, soil under fingernails. But that rhythm, steady and stern, wasn't enough for the Harrison boys. The call of the cities was louder than the rooster's crow.

For Gary's uncles, especially Cecil and Glenal, the dream was escape. Escape from the scorching heat of Climax, from the sweat-drenched shirts, from the backbreaking certainty of a life in rows. They wanted concrete instead of clay, buzz instead of stillness.

"City life's got lights that don't go out," Cecil once said. "And people who don't know your daddy."

That was freedom—anonymity.

Tom's Foods in Columbus, Georgia, offered more than paychecks. It offered identity. Cecil and Glenal weren't just hands on a plow anymore. They were managers. Decision-makers. They traded hay for hard floors, tractors for timecards. The factory wasn't glamorous, but it was reliable, and reliability was its own kind of luxury.

Company events became mini-reunions. Family filled the Tom's Foods plantation with laughter and music. There were horses for show, lakes that reflected moonlight, and enough food to silence any quarrel. Gary's memories of those days were tinged with a surreal peace. For a few hours, the family almost looked like those in the TV shows—smiling, dancing, together.

He remembered the chill of the spring-fed pool. Dipping a watermelon in the ice-cold water until it was the perfect

temperature. And that song—Alice Cooper's "School's Out." Blasting through the jukebox, it felt like a promise. That someday, he'd graduate not just from school, but from fear.

But not all the Harrison boys sought peace. Some took the fight with them.

Uncle Jam stayed behind, farming the ancestral land with a chip on his shoulder. He wore anger like a second skin, and discipline came with a strap, not a word. His sons walked in his shadow, heads low and fists clenched.

Gary once asked his cousin Dan if they ever thought about leaving.

"All the time," Dan whispered. "But he says someone's gotta keep it going."

The family farm had become a monument. To legacy. To burden.

Jesse Harrison, Gary's father, took a different road. Military life offered both structure and escape. Enlisting was as much rebellion as it was obligation. He wanted out, and the Army opened the door.

But the Army wasn't an eraser. It didn't scrub away the temper, the violence, the ghosts. If anything, it fed them. World War II, Korea, Vietnam—each left its mark on Jesse. Each war added a layer of silence, a deeper shade to his eyes.

And yet, when he came home, the same rules applied. He was the man. His word was law. His fists were punctuation.

Gary sometimes wondered what his dad saw when he looked at him. Did he see a son? A failure? A mirror?

"Your daddy was a good soldier," Uncle Glenal once said. "But some folks don't come back whole."

The city didn't fix everyone. It just gave them more corners to hide in.

Back on the farm, the girls married men who worked jobs—mechanics, store clerks, one even married into the military. None returned to the land. None raised their children in the red clay.

Gary's own siblings felt the pull, too. As they got older, the idea of staying put became unbearable. They dreamed of cities with bookstores, places with movie theaters that didn't have a dirt parking lot. They dreamed of sidewalks.

"I want out," Gary once muttered into his pillow.

He didn't even know where 'out' was. Just that it wasn't here.

It was in those moments—in the car rides back from the city, in the silence between cousins' conversations, in the cold water of a spring-fed pool—that Gary began to form a truth he would carry for life:

Sometimes escape isn't running away. Sometimes it's running toward who you might become.

## Chapter 5 – Echoes of Loss

There are silences that scream. Gary learned this when death first found its way into the family—not as a shadow on the edge of a dream, but as a hole in the middle of his mother’s voice.

His brother, the firstborn, didn’t make it past infancy. A fever, a mistake, a system that didn’t care enough. No one really knew, or at least, no one explained it to Gary. What he remembered was the way Lov cried, silent and unbreathing, curled on the floor with her arms wrapped around air. Jesse didn’t speak of it. He disappeared for days, perhaps into the woods, perhaps into himself.

Loss wasn’t new to the Harrisons. But this kind of loss—intimate, raw, preventable—left wounds no beating could numb.

Afterward, Lov wasn’t the same. She smiled with her lips but not her eyes. Her lullabies grew slower, less sure. Gary was born not long after, and in him she poured all the love she could no longer give the child she lost. It was a heavy gift.

"You’re my angel baby," she whispered once, brushing his cheek.

He didn’t understand then. But the weight of her love became clearer with time.

Military life meant moving. Germany became home for a season. The land of castles and cold winters. Gary was still young, but even he noticed the changes. Jesse grew quieter but no gentler. The distance from Georgia didn’t dull his edges.

If anything, the unfamiliar ground made him more paranoid, more strict.

Gary's new world was stone walls, new languages, and empty playgrounds. The other kids spoke differently. The food tasted strange. And the violence at home didn't need translation.

One night, after a beating that left him unable to sit for days, Gary sat outside under a pine tree and stared up at a moon that didn't care where it shone.

"Why don't they stop him?" he whispered to the air.

But no one answered.

In school, he learned to be invisible. Teachers smiled but didn't see. Other kids laughed, but their world was safe. Gary built walls, thick and quiet. He learned to dodge, to lie, to anticipate.

Loss followed them to Germany. A cousin died in an accident back home. Lov received the news through a letter that arrived days too late. She read it once, folded it, and placed it in the Bible on the dresser. She didn't cry in front of them. But that night, Gary heard her rocking in the kitchen chair, humming a hymn he didn't recognize.

Death taught the Harrisons to grieve in silence.

But silence doesn't heal. It festers.

Gary began to journal in secret. Scribbles at first. Then full sentences. Then stories. Not about himself—not directly. But about boys who ran away and found safety in trees. About mothers who turned into angels. About fathers who forgot how to yell.

"Writing it down makes it smaller," he wrote once.

But even as he wrote, the losses kept coming. Pets left behind in moves. Toys thrown away as punishment. Moments of joy that ended with belt snaps.

Loss came in forms too ordinary to mourn. The birthday party he never had. The friend he wasn't allowed to visit. The joke he couldn't laugh at.

In Germany, Gary discovered music. American soul and jazz records played in the PX store. He'd press his ear against the speaker wall, eyes closed, feeling the rhythm like a heartbeat he could trust. Otis Redding, Sam Cooke—they sang pain with beauty. He didn't have the words yet, but he knew they understood.

"A change is gonna come," Sam Cooke sang.

Gary wanted to believe it.

Maybe one day, loss wouldn't be the language of his family.

Maybe one day, someone would scream into the silence and break it wide open.

## Chapter 6 – A Bullhead is Born

Gary came into the world fighting.

His mother said he kicked so hard inside her belly it bruised. When the midwife saw the size of his head, she crossed herself and muttered something in Gullah. The labor was brutal, the screams louder than the Georgia cicadas outside the window.

Jesse was in the hallway, pacing.

"Boy's got a bullhead," he said when the nurse finally called him in. "Stubborn from birth."

The name stuck. "Bullhead." It wasn't affectionate. It was a forecast.

From the start, Gary's body felt too heavy, too much. He struggled to lift his head, to balance. Doctors called it a developmental delay. His mother just said he needed time.

He got time. But not patience.

Jesse didn't like slowness. He didn't like crying. He didn't like anything that looked like weakness.

Gary remembered being three, crying when he couldn't tie his shoes. Jesse's belt came off so fast it whistled. His mother tried to step in, but Jesse raised his hand at her too.

That was the first time Gary felt fear not just for himself, but for her.

He had one older brother and four sisters. The girls were quiet, careful. They knew how to avoid Jesse's anger. His brother was louder, sometimes rebellious, sometimes protective.

But Gary? He was different. He didn't learn the rules fast enough.

One night, he spilled milk at dinner.

"Useless," Jesse muttered.

Gary sat frozen. His mother reached for a rag. Jesse pushed his plate away and left the table.

That night, Gary curled under his blanket and whispered, "I'm sorry" to no one.

His mother came in after everyone slept. She ran her fingers through his hair.

"You're not the problem," she said.

He didn't believe her. Not yet.

But he remembered those words.

They would matter later.

Years later, when he'd face the worst of his father's rage, when he'd start to believe he was broken, those words would echo:

"You're not the problem."

And slowly, over time, Gary began to imagine that maybe—just maybe—he wasn't.

## Chapter 7 – Tess and the Missing Pieces

Gary's earliest memories of his sisters were of soft voices and quicker hands. They were the ones who helped tie his shoes when he was afraid to ask. The ones who sang lullabies to each other at night, pretending they didn't hear the arguments from the living room.

Tess was the second youngest after Gary. She had a laugh like a windchime and a curious habit of staring out windows as if waiting for something better.

The older sisters learned how to move silently, to avoid Jesse's gaze. His brother, though, was different. Protective. Sometimes reckless. He would step in, speak out—only to be silenced quickly, violently.

Gary watched. And remembered.

Tess was born with a heart condition. The family didn't talk much about it. Just said she was "delicate." She moved slower, but she noticed everything. She once whispered to Gary, "Why doesn't Daddy look at you when you cry?"

He had no answer.

Their mother stitched quilts from old dresses and army fatigues. Each square a piece of the family's history. Tess would sit with her and help choose the colors.

"Don't use that one," Tess said once, pointing to a torn patch. "That was the day he hit Mama."

Silence hung in the air. Their mother stitched quietly.

Gary's sisters grew around him like trees—roots deep, branches outstretched, trying to give shade where they could. They weren't safe either. But they tried to make him feel like he was.

The brother, older by three years, once took the blame when Gary broke a lamp.

"You know what he'd do to you if I didn't," he whispered later, bruised but proud.

Gary learned loyalty from that.

He also learned how protection could come at a cost.

As the family grew—each child carrying some physical trait or ailment—Gary started to wonder about curses and bloodlines. Why them? Why this pain?

One afternoon, Tess handed him a broken puzzle piece.

"It doesn't fit," she said.

Gary took it and smiled. "Maybe we just make a new picture."

Tess grinned. "Yeah. A better one."

In that moment, sitting on the floor beside his sister, surrounded by mismatched puzzle pieces and stitched fabric, Gary began to imagine something different.

Something more than survival.

Something like hope.



## Chapter 8 – Puppy and Innocence

Gary's first true friend didn't speak a word.

She was a scruffy little mutt with wiry fur and a crooked tail. They called her Puppy—not because they lacked imagination, but because no name seemed to fit her better. She followed Gary everywhere from the moment he gave her half a biscuit outside the store.

Puppy didn't flinch at loud noises. Didn't run from Jesse's boots. She'd nuzzle against Gary's side when he sat alone, arms around his knees, listening to the hush of tension in the house.

With Puppy, Gary could laugh. He could whisper secrets without fear. She'd tilt her head like she understood every word. In her eyes, he saw loyalty—the kind that didn't vanish when things got hard.

Tess adored Puppy too. They took turns feeding her scraps, sneaking her into the laundry room during storms. Their brother built her a makeshift doghouse out of wood from a broken dresser.

For a while, it felt like they had something whole.

Then one morning, Puppy didn't come when called.

Gary searched the yard, the shed, under the porch. Finally, he found her curled beside the fence. Still. Cold.

His scream brought the others.

Tess cried quietly. Their brother stood stiff, fists clenched. Gary's mother knelt beside him and pulled him close.

"No blood," she whispered. "No bite marks."

No explanation.

Gary dug the hole himself, hands raw. As he dropped dirt over Puppy's body, something inside him cracked.

"She was just a dog," Jesse muttered from the doorway.

Gary didn't look up. But he never forgot the way those words felt.

That night, Tess left her bed and lay beside him on the floor.

"She loved you most," she whispered.

"I didn't keep her safe," he said.

"You kept her happy," Tess replied. "That's more than most get."

In the months that followed, Gary stopped talking to animals in the same way. But every time he saw one wander by, he wondered if they knew about loss. If they could feel when someone needed them.

Puppy had been his first lesson in love without condition.

And his first real lesson in grief.

## Chapter 9 – Death of a Guardian

Puppy's absence hung over the house like fog.

Gary stopped running outside after school. Tess hummed less. Their brother sat quieter at dinner, as if hoping invisibility might earn peace. No one said much. But everyone felt it.

A week after Puppy's burial, their father announced a move.

"Closer to Benning," he said. "Closer to discipline."

It wasn't a conversation. It was a sentence.

The new house smelled like mildew and unfamiliar soap. The walls were thin, the floors colder. Gary found a spot under the back steps where he could sit and pretend nothing had changed.

But everything had.

At school, he stopped laughing. At home, he stopped asking questions. Nights became long stretches of silence punctuated by arguments no one dared join.

Tess stayed near their mother. Their older sisters tried to shield the younger ones. Gary and his brother shared a room but rarely talked.

Then one afternoon, Gary heard his mother on the phone.

"He's not the same since she died," she whispered. "It was just a dog, but... it mattered."

Gary froze.

It mattered.

Someone else saw it. Felt it.

That night, his mother left a folded piece of paper under his pillow. It was blank, but at the bottom, she had written: “You can write what you can’t say.”

Gary didn’t write anything that night. But he held the paper in his hand until he fell asleep.

Weeks later, Jesse brought home a new dog. Bigger. Meaner. Chained up outside.

“This one’ll protect us,” he said.

Gary didn’t touch it. Didn’t speak to it. He couldn’t.

Puppy had protected something no one else did—Gary’s sense of safety. Of joy. That kind of protection couldn’t be replaced.

One evening, he walked out to the backyard and stood near Puppy’s grave. The dirt had settled. Grass had started to grow.

He whispered, “Thank you.”

And in that moment, with the breeze lifting the edge of his shirt, Gary felt something shift.

Not healed.

But beginning.

## Chapter 10 – Farm Games and Wounds

Returning to the farm in Climax always felt like opening an old book—familiar, weathered, and filled with chapters you half remembered but never finished.

Gary and his siblings piled into the back of the family's station wagon for the trip. As always, the road stretched long, lined with red clay and memory.

Their grandfather's land still smelled of hay, sweat, and gasoline. The fields seemed smaller now, but the house looked just as stern and silent.

Gary's brother was the first to run toward the mule pen, calling out like he had never left. Tess followed close behind, holding Gary's hand. Their sisters explored the barn, chasing cats and tossing corncobs.

Somewhere between the toolshed and the fields, the mischief began.

Gary dared his brother to touch the electric fence. His brother dared him back. Eventually, both boys screamed and laughed as their hands jolted with brief, sharp pain.

"That's how you know it's real," the brother said, grinning.

They told Tess it didn't hurt and convinced her to try. Her yelp drew their grandfather from the porch.

"What the hell are y'all doing?"

The games ended quickly.

Later, Gary watched his grandfather milk a cow with silent precision. The animal stood still, as if knowing its part in the ritual. Gary tried, spilling more than he saved.

“You ain’t strong enough,” his grandfather grunted.

But he let Gary try again.

That night, Gary and his siblings sat by the fireplace. The warmth softened the house’s edges. Tess curled up with a quilt. Their brother lay flat, arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

A scream split the night.

Outside, they found the family’s old hound, lifeless. Another one missing the next morning. Gary overheard murmurs of poison or wild dogs.

But no one knew for sure.

The farm, for all its beauty and memory, had wounds too.

Some were visible—burns from the fence, cuts from barn doors. Others hid in silence, in glances exchanged but not explained.

Still, the kids laughed. They raced in the dirt. They told ghost stories under stars.

For a moment, even with bruises and secrets, it felt like a kind of peace.

Gary would remember that. How sometimes, pain and joy lived side by side.

How the farm gave both.

And how he took both with him when they left.

## Chapter 11 – Joe and the Leather Strap

The visit to Uncle Jam's house was different from the farm.

It wasn't the land—flat and sun-beaten like everywhere else. It was the air. Tighter. Like the walls themselves held their breath.

Gary walked in holding Tess's hand. His brother stayed close too, eyeing the doorway like it might turn against them.

Uncle Jam was tall, heavy in his stare more than his size. He didn't speak much, but when he did, the room listened like it had no choice.

Joe, his son, was different.

He was older than Gary but didn't speak clearly. Moved slowly. Smiled crookedly and laughed at the wrong times.

"Brain-damaged," Uncle Jam would say with a hard edge. "Didn't come out right."

But Gary saw something else. Joe liked drawing with sticks in the dirt. He'd hand Gary crooked little shapes and wait for approval like a kid handing a masterpiece to a teacher.

They played quietly while the adults drank iced tea and exchanged tight-lipped stories.

Then it happened.

Joe dropped a glass. It shattered across the floor. The room froze.

Uncle Jam stood up slow, belt already in hand.

“No,” Joe whispered. “No, Daddy, I didn’t mean—”

The strap came down hard.

Gary flinched. Tess covered her ears. Their mother stood, but Jesse’s hand on her arm held her still.

“Not our house,” he muttered.

Not our house.

But it was their world.

The sounds were sickening. Joe didn’t scream after the first. Just whimpered and curled. Uncle Jam didn’t stop until the strap split.

Gary didn’t understand how someone could hurt a child like that.

Especially one who smiled just for handing you a stick drawing.

That night, back at their house, Gary stared at the ceiling.

His brother whispered, “You okay?”

Gary shook his head. “Joe didn’t do anything.”

His brother sighed. “Doesn’t matter to some people.”

“But it should,” Gary said.

He meant it. Deep in his chest. - It should matter.

And from that night on, he promised himself he would never say “not my house” again.

He would care.

Even when others didn't.

## Chapter 12 – Shadows in the Walls

The house made sounds at night.

Not just creaks and groans, but something deeper—groans like memories trying to escape. Gary lay awake listening, memorizing each crackle of floorboard and sway of windowpane. He knew the walls had stories.

And bruises.

His mother moved like a ghost some days, her silence louder than any scream. Sometimes Gary saw faint marks on her arms. Sometimes her smile took effort, like lifting a heavy curtain.

One afternoon, Tess whispered, “Mama didn’t sleep last night.”

Gary nodded. He’d heard it too—the tension in footsteps, the quiet tears through thin walls.

The door to the back bedroom always closed slowly. Jesse came out of it looking unchanged. Their mother came out of it smaller.

Gary’s brother once punched the wall in their shared room. Left a hole the size of a fist.

“I had to do something,” he muttered, knuckles bleeding.

Gary cleaned the wound. Neither of them spoke again that night.

In the mornings, their mother cooked like nothing happened. Grits, bacon, eggs. Music sometimes hummed from the old radio.

But the shadows stayed.

One night, Gary awoke to whispering outside his door.

“Please don’t,” his mother said.

A grunt. Then footsteps.

He clutched his blanket and pretended sleep. But the fear didn’t pretend. It sat with him, heavy and real.

The walls knew. They held secrets in their plaster, pain in their studs. They sagged not from weight, but from grief.

Gary started noticing cracks forming at the baseboards.

One day, he stood by the kitchen doorway and ran his fingers over a jagged line in the drywall.

“It’s just settling,” his mother said from behind him.

Gary looked at her. Eyes tired. Arms crossed.

“No,” he said softly. “It’s breaking.”

She didn’t argue.

She just turned back to the stove.

## Chapter 13 – Cairo Calm

Cairo felt like breathing again.

After Germany, after Benning, after shadows and slammed doors—Cairo was warmth. Not because everything was perfect, but because everything wasn't breaking.

Gary stepped off the bus with the dry Georgia heat wrapping around him like a rough blanket. His grandmother—Mama Dinkins—waited with open arms. Her hugs were short but strong. Like punctuation.

Cousins ran barefoot across gravel driveways. Pork rinds snapped between teeth. The porch buzzed with stories and screen doors slapped rhythmically in the background.

Gary's siblings scattered quickly—Tess gravitated toward the older girls who wore bracelets made from gum wrappers. His brother found the boys tossing basketballs at a bent hoop nailed to a crooked shed.

Gary wandered.

He found calm in the fishing trips with Uncle Phil. Long hours of quiet water, laughter low and true. He caught catfish once and beamed like it was treasure. Uncle Phil winked and said, "Even the silent ones get lucky."

The house in Cairo smelled like sweetbread and floor polish. Gary would sit by the record player, letting Al Green and Aretha soothe the ache behind his ribs.

His cousins didn't ask why he flinched at loud voices. They just handed him popsicles and space.

One night, as cicadas droned outside, Gary sat with Tess on the back porch.

"Why's it so different here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "No yelling. No eggshells."

Tess leaned her head on his shoulder.

"I like it better," she whispered.

He didn't answer. But she already knew.

Back home, silence meant fear. Here, it meant peace.

Gary began to understand that safety wasn't about locks or walls—it was about people. Energy. Tone.

And for the first time in a long time, he imagined what it might be like to live in a place where calm wasn't a visitor.

But a resident.

## Chapter 14 – Welcome to Germany

Gary didn't know what to expect from Germany.

All he knew was the language was different, the sky felt closer, and his father seemed more unpredictable in the cold.

They arrived in winter. Snow blanketed the base like silence. The apartment was cramped and smelled of damp towels and unfamiliar spices. Military housing, his father said. Efficient.

His siblings huddled together on the first night, wide-eyed. Tess pointed to the frost on the inside of the window and whispered, "Even the walls are shivering."

School was a blur of foreign phrases and unfamiliar stares. Gary sat in the back of the classroom and drew pictures instead of listening. His teacher gave up by week two.

Outside, boys played soccer with icy precision. Gary tried joining once, but his American accent and quiet nature left him out of sync. He went back to wandering alleyways and collecting bottle caps.

Then came the peeping tom.

It started as a whisper. Neighbors spoke of a man seen lurking outside windows. Gary didn't believe it until Tess screamed one night.

Their father stomped through the house, furious—not because someone was spying, but because the noise woke him.

Gary's mother stood in front of their bedroom door that night, a broom in her hand. Shaking. But there.

Later, Gary heard Jesse laugh it off with another soldier.

“Girl probably saw her own shadow.”

But Gary knew what he saw. A shape. A face. A chill that didn't come from the snow.

He started keeping a pocketknife under his pillow. His brother whispered, “You really think that'll help?”

“No,” Gary answered. “But it makes me feel like I can do something.”

Germany wasn't just foreign. It was isolating. Cold in more ways than weather.

But in that strange stillness, Gary began to build something—a wall, yes. But also a voice.

It would take time. But it started there.

In the snow. In the dark. With eyes watching.

And a boy learning to watch back.

## Chapter 15 – Breaking Point

It happened after dinner.

Gary sat at the table tracing patterns in spilled milk with his finger. His sisters cleared plates quietly. Tess hummed under her breath. Their brother stood by the sink, eyes darting between their father and mother.

Jesse poured another drink.

Their mother's back was to him as she wiped the counter. She was too slow.

The glass hit the wall first.

Gary jumped. Milk ran off the table edge like tears.

"You don't listen," Jesse growled.

Their mother said nothing.

Gary didn't remember the swing—just the sound. A thud, a gasp, and the way his mother's knees hit the tile like surrender.

His brother stepped forward.

"Sit down," Jesse barked.

They all did.

Even their mother, who stood, face swelling, and took her seat like it was the only way to keep breathing.

Later, when the house stilled and the lights went dark, Gary sat in the hallway.

His brother joined him.

"You saw?" he asked.

Gary nodded.

"I wanted to stop him," his brother whispered.

"I know."

Neither of them spoke again. Not that night.

The next morning, their mother made breakfast. One side of her face purple, her eyes hollow.

"Eat," she said.

Gary wanted to scream. To ask why she stayed. To ask what they were supposed to learn from this.

Instead, he chewed eggs and swallowed questions.

At school, he drifted.

He stopped raising his hand. Stopped making eye contact. Started folding paper into tiny birds during math class, watching them fly nowhere.

That week, he wrote his first letter.

It said:

*Dear God,*

*If you're real, make him stop. Or make me stronger.*

He didn't sign it. Just hid it under his mattress.

And waited.

## Chapter 16 – Riverbank Intentions

The Rhine River looked peaceful.

It flowed like time itself, steady and unbothered. But Gary didn't trust water that quiet.

Their father had decided on a weekend picnic. Out of nowhere. Said it was time for family. Time to "act normal."

They packed sandwiches, apples, and soda. Gary and his siblings sat stiff in the car, unsure whether this was a reward or a trap.

The riverbank was muddy and silent. Not many others around. Just cold wind and grey skies.

Gary wandered near the edge while Jesse lit a cigarette. His mother spread a blanket. The girls opened a puzzle book. His brother kicked at rocks.

Then Jesse called him.

"Boy, come here."

Gary obeyed. Stood beside his father at the water's edge.

"See how fast that river moves?" Jesse asked.

Gary nodded.

"Could pull a body under in seconds. No one'd know."

Gary didn't answer.

Jesse flicked ash into the current.

“Bet you can’t swim it.”

Gary felt his throat close.

His brother’s voice came from behind. “He doesn’t have to.”

Jesse turned. The moment stretched.

Then he chuckled. “Just a joke.”

But it wasn’t.

Gary felt it in his bones. The cold that wasn’t from the wind.  
The sense that his father had considered something darker.  
Something final.

They left an hour later. No one spoke in the car.

That night, Gary wrote another letter.

*I don’t want to be afraid to breathe.*

He didn’t sign it either.

He just folded it small and tucked it in his shoe.

Because sometimes, hiding words was safer than speaking them.

And sometimes, silence was the only way to survive.

## Chapter 17 – Back to Benning

The return to Benning felt like stepping into a paused nightmare.

Gary had hoped the distance, the time overseas, had changed something. But the base still buzzed with commands, and their house still carried the echoes of past screams.

School was no escape. His medical issues made him a curiosity, sometimes a target. He missed days, faked illness, avoided eye contact. When teachers called on him, he stared through them.

His brother tried harder to blend in. Tess stayed close to their mother, watching, always watching.

One afternoon, Gary skipped class and walked to the woods behind the school. He found a clearing, sat against a tree, and listened to the wind.

It was quiet enough to feel like freedom.

That night, the family watched news coverage of the Kennedy assassination. His mother wept. Jesse muttered something about weakness and turned the TV off.

But Gary saw the tears in his father's eyes before he looked away.

For a moment, it confused him.

That a man so full of rage could still grieve.

He wrote it down that night:

*Even monsters cry. Doesn't mean they're not monsters.*

At the clinic, the doctor mentioned surgery again. Gary nodded, numb to it. Another hospital gown. Another scar.

His mother held his hand during the consultation. "You're stronger than you think," she said.

Gary didn't believe it. But he wanted to.

After the appointment, his brother punched a locker at school.

"I hate seeing you like that," he said.

Gary placed a hand on his shoulder. "I hate being like that."

It was the first time they'd spoken honestly in weeks.

Back at home, Gary found another note under his pillow.

*Keep going. You matter.*

It was in his mother's handwriting.

He tucked it into the pages of his math book and carried it for years.

Even when he didn't believe it.

Especially then.

## Chapter 18 – Silent Witnesses

It was the little things that made the silence scream.

A bruise hidden under makeup. A cracked plate swept away without a word. Gary watched it all from the edge of the room, never sure when to speak or what would happen if he did.

He wasn't the only one who saw. Aunts, uncles, neighbors—they visited, they glanced, they nodded. And then they left. No questions. No confrontations.

One afternoon, his mother's sleeve slipped down while handing out cookies at church. The bruise was fresh, purple and blooming.

Mrs. Langford blinked. Paused. Then complimented the cookies.

Gary wanted to scream.

Afterwards, he asked, "Why didn't she say something?"

His mother gave him the same answer she always did: "Some people don't know what to do with truth."

Tess started hiding under the dining room table during arguments. Their brother began coming home later and later. The older sisters stayed quiet, faces carved from stone.

Gary wrote in his notebook:

*Everyone sees. No one helps.*

He began noticing the patterns.

When his mother flinched, the room went still. When his father shouted, someone always turned up the TV.

Even the pastor said once, “Every family’s got its storms.”

But storms don’t leave bruises.

Gary began drawing cartoons of silent people with bandaged mouths. He showed one to Tess. She didn’t laugh. Just nodded.

One night, a neighbor came over after a loud thud. She stood on the porch, heard Jesse yelling, and walked away.

Gary watched from the window.

That was when he understood: silence could be louder than violence.

And the world outside didn’t always want to hear.

He made another note in his journal:

*When I grow up, I will listen. Even if it’s hard.*

He meant it.

And he would remember.

## Chapter 19 – A Different Kind of Home

When Jesse shipped out to Vietnam, the house changed.

Not overnight, but steadily. Like dust clearing after a storm.

His mother moved more freely. She sang sometimes while folding laundry. The bruises stopped multiplying.

Tess laughed again. The older sisters stayed in the kitchen longer, joined in more conversations. Gary's brother started coming home early, shoulders looser, jokes returning.

And Gary? He breathed.

The house wasn't perfect. The walls still creaked. Memories still lived in corners. But the tension no longer stalked every moment.

They moved to Cairo again for the duration of Jesse's deployment.

Grandma Dinkins welcomed them with open arms and open windows. The scent of cornbread filled the house. The front porch became a sanctuary.

Gary went fishing more often. Drew more. Wrote stories with happier endings.

His mother read every word.

"You've got something special," she said, tapping his notebook.

"Like what?"

"Your voice."

Gary stared at her. "It doesn't feel loud."

"Doesn't have to be loud to be strong."

The Cairo school was different too. Teachers smiled. One even complimented his essay on "home" and gave him a gold star.

Gary hid it in his shoe.

He still woke from nightmares sometimes. Still checked the locks twice. But he was learning how to live without fear running the show.

One day, he stood at the kitchen sink, helping Tess wash dishes.

"This is nice," she said.

"Yeah."

"Do you think it'll stay like this?"

Gary looked out the window.

"I hope so."

Hope was a dangerous thing. But it was growing.

And this time, Gary wasn't afraid to water it.

## Chapter 20 – Spot the Companion

Spot came from nowhere.

One morning, there he was—curled beneath the porch swing like he'd always belonged. A black-and-white stray with one ear flopped down and a tail that never stopped wagging.

Gary didn't ask where he came from. Didn't have to.

Spot just knew.

He followed Gary everywhere—school, the store, even to the creek where Gary sat to draw. Spot lay by his feet and kept watch, eyes alert, ears twitching at every bird call.

Tess adored him. Their brother fed him leftovers. Even their mother smiled when Spot curled beside her rocking chair.

"He's smart," she said.

Gary nodded. "He listens."

Spot became more than a pet. He was a shadow, a protector, a quiet presence that needed no explanation.

And he never flinched.

Not at sudden movements. Not at yelling. Not even when a storm cracked open the sky. He just stayed beside Gary, like a promise.

Gary began taking him on long walks. Sometimes they wandered through the woods until the stars blinked on. Gary

would talk about things he couldn't say to people—his fears, his hopes, the nights he still checked his window twice.

Spot never interrupted.

One evening, Gary sat on the porch, sketching Spot curled up in the grass.

Tess leaned over his shoulder. "You always draw him?"

"He's the only one I trust to stay."

She didn't say anything. Just rested her head against his and watched him draw.

Spot followed Gary to basketball games too. Sat on the sidelines and barked when Gary scored.

At school, he finally joined the team. Coach Barnes said he had "good instincts." Gary knew it came from learning how to dodge things much faster than basketballs.

After one game, Coach patted Spot's head. "He's a fine boy."

Gary grinned. "Best one I know."

Spot didn't change the past.

But he made the present safer.

And for Gary, that was enough.

## Chapter 21 – Peeping and Paranoia

The nightmares didn't stop when Jesse left.

They changed shape—less about fists and more about eyes. Watching. Waiting.

It began again in Cairo. Shadows outside the window. A creak when no one was walking. Spot growling low in his throat at nothing visible.

One night, Tess shrieked. Gary ran to her room, heart pounding. She pointed to the window.

“Someone was there.”

Their mother checked. Nothing. But the grass below was bent. Footprints where no one should've stood.

The police came. Wrote notes. Left.

“We'll patrol the area,” one officer said, but his tone felt thin. Unconvinced.

Gary didn't sleep well for weeks.

He kept a baseball bat beside his bed. Spot slept in his room now, ears perked all night.

Their brother stayed up late, staring through blinds. “Ain't nobody gonna hurt y'all,” he whispered.

But the fear wasn't just of a man.

It was of memory. Of things that come back even when they're gone.

Their mother installed new locks. Bought thicker curtains. Still, the feeling crept in.

One day, Gary found Tess cutting old sheets into strips.

"What are you doing?"

"Making traps," she said. "For the window."

He didn't laugh. Just helped.

Because that's what fear did. It taught you how to survive, creatively.

Gary started carrying a notepad again. Drew the faces from his dreams. Shadows with eyes. Rooms that stretched forever.

Mrs. Dinkins gave him an old cross on a chain. "For protection," she said.

Gary wore it. Not for faith. For memory.

He began to realize something:

Sometimes trauma wasn't an event.

It was a visitor.

And even when you changed the locks, sometimes it still found a way in.

## Chapter 22 – Ball Courts and Boils

Basketball gave Gary something to aim at that wasn't invisible.

At the Cairo courts, he found rhythm. Something about the squeak of sneakers, the echo of a bounce—it quieted everything else.

He wasn't the tallest. Or the fastest. But he moved like he had something to prove.

Because he did.

His brother cheered from the sidelines. Tess kept score with chalk and cheers. Spot lay at half-court like he owned it.

Coach Barnes liked Gary's hustle. "You don't give up," he said. "That's what makes a real player."

But Gary was hurting.

It started as a red spot on his leg. Then two. Then swelling. The clinic called them boils—stress, poor diet, maybe just bad luck.

He limped through games, hid the pain.

Until one day he collapsed mid-play.

The gym hushed.

Coach carried him to the bench. Tess ran across the court with a wet towel.

At the hospital, the doctor lanced three infections. Gary bit down on his sleeve.

“You need rest,” the nurse said.

Gary laughed. “What’s that?”

Back home, his mother made soup. His brother brought comics. Tess laid beside him with a flashlight and read aloud.

Spot never left his side.

During recovery, Gary dreamed about jumping again. About the ball in his hands and the crowd cheering.

But more than that, he dreamed about feeling normal. Feeling strong.

When he finally returned to the court, the boys clapped.

One said, “You back?”

Gary nodded. “Better than before.”

He meant it.

Because pain had taught him his limits.

And hope had taught him to keep pushing them.

## Chapter 23 – Love and Guilt

Gary sat at the kitchen table, watching his mother peel potatoes. The knife moved with a rhythm only she understood—sharp, steady, unbothered by the silence between them.

He wanted to say something. He always did. But how do you ask someone why they stayed?

His mother hummed a hymn beneath her breath.

Tess wandered in, grabbed an apple, then paused. “Need help?”

Their mother smiled. “Always.”

Gary watched them. That quiet exchange. That unspoken tenderness.

Later, in his room, he wrote:

*Love looks like staying. But sometimes, guilt does too.*

He didn’t know what kept his mother there all those years. Was it hope? Fear? Obligation?

When he asked her once—years later—she said, “I didn’t want y’all to grow up thinking broken meant abandoned.”

Gary hadn’t known what to say.

At church, she held her head high. Sang the loudest. But her hands shook when she thought no one noticed.

He noticed.

So did Tess. So did their brother.

They never said it out loud. But every kind act, every quiet moment—they were all apologies no one asked for.

Gary began writing letters he never sent. To his mother. To his father. To God.

“I love you,” he’d write. Then scratch it out. Then write it again.

He carried guilt like a shadow. For not stopping things. For not understanding sooner. For surviving.

But he also carried love.

Messy. Complicated. But real.

One night, his mother handed him a box. Inside were his childhood drawings. Dogs, trees, stick figures.

“You were always telling stories,” she said.

Gary looked up. “You kept these?”

She nodded. “I kept everything that reminded me who you are.”

He hugged her. For a long time.

Not because it fixed anything.

But because it meant something had survived.

## Chapter 24 – The Unspoken War

Jesse came home from Vietnam with the same stare—but something behind it had shifted.

He didn't speak about the war. He didn't speak much at all.

But the air changed the day he returned. It grew heavier. Slower. As if the house had been holding its breath, and now didn't know how to exhale.

Gary stood on the porch when the car pulled in. His mother wiped her hands and walked out calmly, like she'd rehearsed this.

"Welcome home," she said.

Jesse grunted.

Inside, he set his bag down like it carried ghosts.

Gary kept his distance. So did his siblings. Spot wouldn't go near him, just sat under the table with his eyes low.

Dinner that night was silent. Forks tapping plates. No music, no TV.

His father stared ahead, not angry. Just... gone.

But the tension returned quickly. It crept in through tone, through small corrections that felt like commands.

"Sit up."

"Don't slouch."

“Eat faster.”

Gary watched his mother shrink again.

And he hated it.

He began writing more often—long stories, invented worlds. Places where fathers stayed kind or didn’t stay at all.

One night, Jesse found a notebook on the couch. He read a page. Gary’s name wasn’t on it, but the words bled truth.

“You think I’m the villain?” Jesse asked.

Gary didn’t answer.

“Answer me.”

His mother stepped in. “He’s just writing.”

Jesse looked at her, then at Gary. “Words can lie.”

Gary met his gaze. “Not mine.”

Something shifted then. Not enough to fix anything. But enough to say it out loud:

There were wars fought with guns.

And there were wars fought in living rooms.

The house was no battlefield, but it carried the scars of one.

And Gary had finally chosen a side.

## Chapter 25 – A Voice Begins

Gary sat on the front porch, notebook in his lap, pencil poised.

The world had quieted. His siblings were older now, scattered between jobs and school. Spot lay at his feet, older too, but still watchful.

He wrote:

*I am not broken.*

Then he crossed it out.

*I am still healing.*

That felt better.

Inside the house, Jesse was quieter these days. Not gentler—just less loud. Like life had sanded his edges but not removed the blade.

His mother cooked more. Laughed sometimes. She had wrinkles now Gary didn't remember her earning. But her eyes were softer. Or maybe his had finally learned how to see her.

He started talking in class again. Wrote essays that got pinned to bulletin boards. Once, a teacher read one aloud.

It was about resilience. About surviving silence.

Gary watched the class listen. Really listen. And something inside him unfolded.

He started volunteering. Talking to younger kids. Telling them about Spot, about Cairo, about what fear looks like when it wears a father's face—and what courage looks like when it wears your own.

Tess called him her “gentle warrior.”

His brother just nodded. “You’ve changed,” he said.

Gary smiled. “We all did. We had to.”

He read his first story at church. His mother cried.

Afterward, she hugged him. “You’re helping people already,” she whispered. “More than you know.”

Gary kept the notebook. Filled it. Started another.

Because there was more to say.

Not just about pain—but about rising.

He knew he might never forget the bruises. The shouts. The fear. But he also knew this:

He wasn’t defined by them.

He was more.

And with every word, every story, every breath—he was proving it.

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**THE END**