



The Last Middle Dancer

Every life is a random collection of unrelated stories

stitched together with a fragile thread

called hope.

Chapter One

Father

I'm eleven. Christmas arrives in a few weeks. It doesn't concern me. I just want to survive.

Father and mother decide to sit together and share Saturday breakfast. She can't find her favorite coffee mug. I know why.

I hear Grandfather outside calling, "Jooooooooooooo Baby!" My sister hates her name. After being called Jo Baby she sometimes sulks for hours undetected in her room.

"Jooooooooooooo Baby!" Daddy Al calls again. "Time to feed the needy!"

The needy may be defined as those white people living outside Ringgold who don't even want to work, have lots of snot-nose dirty barefoot kids and are easily embarrassed and intimidated by a bunch of old bitty buzzards who have nothing better to

do with their time than wag fingers at folks getting along fine without what other people think they need. Daddy Al explained it to me.

I hear Jo Baby slam a door. Minutes later the sound of Daddy Al's grumpy red Ford pickup disappears down our long gravel driveway.

Mother's one-sided conversation centers on where we will spend the holidays; in Ringgold or in Arkansas. Mother unfolds reasons why she refuses to visit "those-back-woods-hill-billy-inbred-idiot-morons". Father drinks his coffee giving the impression he lingers someplace else. I look out the window and see a black man sitting bareback on a mule. I point, beginning to tell my father.

"There's a man ..."

My mother interrupts, "Keep your mouth closed when you have food in it," she snaps. "And chew your food before you swallow."

I wonder how many times I'm supposed to chew scrambled eggs though I know better than to ask. My father raises his hand giving the signal he doesn't want a disturbance.

A pretty dim light shines behind his eyes. No one's home between his ears. He suffers from emotional constipation, bonkers in the head, looney tunes, cracked in the filbert and he's bughouse. Guilty of these things and much more, Mother insists my father should accept blame for everything since returning to her from *The War*. Father defends himself with his eyes. His elevator doesn't go to the top floor, his engine isn't running on all cylinders, he's been in the sun too long.

Father finishes his coffee and eggs. I count how many times he chews and watch the black man dismount then stand shivering; his dirty brown felt hat in his hands.

Standing next to my father outside, I find biting cold and frost losing its grip as the sun climbs higher. No leaves have stayed behind to flutter on the branches of our oaks. The ashy smell of burning hardwood in our fireplaces floats all around. My father and the black man speak in hushed tones about Christmas and too many kids to feed. Father gives Wade - I hear his name mentioned - a few folded dollars. They shake hands. Wade replaces his hat as he walks away. He seems sad.

An old graying jenny fiddle face, the mule's hairless shoulders have turned to dark brown leather from decades harnessed to a rough unpadded wooden yoke. My father says the cantaloupe size cancer growth on its left foreleg will soon kill the beast.

I hold the animal by leather reins as Father goes to hook a trailer to his truck. Twice my height, the mule smells of barn dust and wet pig manure. One of its watery black eyes has clouded over. A thick yellowish liquid oozes from the cancer. The mule turns her goofy head toward me, causing snot to dribble onto my new black sneakers. She studies me with her one good eye.

The trailer backs near the mule. Father releases a heavy rusty chain on both sides of the trailer letting the ramp slam to the ground. He takes the reins from me, turns the mule then walks up the trailer ramp. Fiddle Face stops at the bottom.

A powerful man, my father attempts to pull the mule forward. It refuses to move.

"Grab the tail. Move her forward," my father calls. Trying, I doubt the mule knows I have its grimy tail in my hands. It feels the same as straw and smells worse than the other end. Maybe the animal knows my father plans to take it to our dog yard where its body will be sectioned and boiled for servings to the hounds. Whatever its reasons the creature refuses to enter the trailer.

Dropping the reins, my father walks to the truck bed. He takes out a boat paddle, tossing it to me. “Slap her hard on the butt,” he shouts from the trailer ramp as he leans back on the reins. “Slap her again! Harder!”

I bust the mule in the butt causing clouds of dust and clumps of hair to fly into the air. It refuses to move.

Father drops the reins. He takes from the back of his truck a heavy wooden handle about two feet long; a small circle of stainless steel chain attached to one end. He puts his left hand through the loop; the same hand pulls the mule’s bottom lip out. The loop slides over his fist. A half twist of the handle with his right hand keeps the chain in place. Using both hands he twists the handle causing the chain to squeeze so tight around her lip I think it will fall off. I’ve seen him use the handle and chain before. I’ve seen him make cows cry and horses beg. He calls it his “attention getter”.

“I’ve made mules dance with this thing,” he bragged one time when moving another mule. That mule moved. This one doesn’t.

He yanks the jenny’s head around, positioning the animal to back into the trailer. Walking to the side of the mule, he pulls down on her head. My father strains against the mule with the “attention getter”. Fiddle Face refuses to budge, except to make the fatal mistake of trying to stomp on Father’s foot.

Father’s face becomes pasty white. His lips draw thin across his mouth. His head begins to shake in tiny muscle tight tremors. A crackling moan falls from his mouth. In sudden violence he spews out a long acrid line of blasphemy, punching the mule several times in the ribs. The “attention getter” falls from her bleeding lip. Father gathers the reins, wrapping the leather straps around his left arm. He looks at the trailer chain on the

ground; grips it in his tight fist, swings it around his arm once, and with all his strength, lashes the mule across the face.

The chain dislodges her left eye. The good one. Attempting to stand on her hind legs, the creature lets loose a loud painful sounding mule-cry. My father flays the animal across its cheek. She stumbles back breaking through one side of the trailer ramp. He chain-whips the mule across the center of its face. Fiddle Face whimpers.

Father punishes the mule again and again. In blind panic the beast tries to free itself from the trailer ramp, managing to break its hind leg, causing a loud pop as it tumbles onto its left side. My father moves to the jenny, lashing wildly; tearing away part of the right ear and removing the right eye.

Flying off the chain, blood slings back over my father as he continues the beating. Blood splatters on me. I want to make him stop. I can't speak or move. The mule whines. Showing its yellow and black teeth, in mule-talk, it begs for mercy. My father cannot stop. He continues until out of breath. Fiddle Face wheezes. Blood oozes from her mouth, eye sockets and ears. In a stupid, childish way, the thought comes to me the idiot wishes it had gotten into the trailer.

Father stands silent and still for a long minute. The chain dangles – swinging back and forth in his hand dripping blood onto his boots. No sound. A silence unlike anything I have ever known hovers over us. Splattered red over his long sleeve white shirt, hands and face, he begins to tremble in brutal quakes, then lifts his head letting out a loud moaning, mooing sound causing goose bumps to rise on my arms. He drops the chain and hurries to the truck, returning with an olive drab military .45. He begins shooting the creature in the head as he walks toward it. My father continues to fire until

he holds an empty pistol. He drops the weapon and walks through the back pasture, into the woods beyond as though nothing had happened.

Chapter Two

Chain Leg Free

I attempted to avoid my grandparents.

Eight years old. I don't learn Ring Around the Rosy, Itsy Bitsy Spider or Mary Had a Little Lamb. Daddy Al decides I should start right from the beginning learning the way things happen.

"The world's a cruel and harsh place and it's a waste of time being a child," He tells me. "Best you start early and learn fast. That's why I've been singing this tune to you ever since the day you was born.

It don't matter where you been or what you done.
You ain't nothing but a son of a gun.
Life will get you, that I guarantee.
Quit your trying then you'll agree.
Ain't no point in betterin' yourself.
Leave your happy plans on a shelf.
Spend your time taking what you can.
From every darkie, woman and man.
That's the ticket to find a place so true,
Where you'll do to them 'fore they do to you.

"And don't pay no mind to what your mama says. That's another lesson you need to learn," Daddy Al reminds me.

"Don't listen to that old fool," my mother insists when she knows I've been talking to Daddy Al. "He's a lunatic, an idiot and a horse's ass."

"Respect your elders," my grandmother, Gammy Mae commands. "Except, of-

course, your mama. And on the night of the twenty first day, the Lord and maker of us all said, carry with you the respect elders deserve, except those having trashy ways, and harlot-like souls.”

They confuse me. None of them care if I survive or not. I wonder why my mother, Daddy Al and Gammy Mae call people “boy”, even though I know the person is a lot older. And why does Tupsie always call my mother and grandmother, Miss Agnes or Miss Gammy Mae, and they never call her Miss Tupsie. Why does one of them always want me to think bad thoughts about the others? They’re trying to split me right down the middle.

At every chance Mother reminds Gammy Mae and Daddy Al, “With parents like you two, it’s no wonder your son went nuts.”

“It was the war, you trash,” they always sling at her.

I don’t know why they talk that way to each other and if I ask, I’m told I’ll find out when I’m old enough. I wonder what the magic age might be. I’m sure it’s farther into the future than I care to wait. I guess that’s why I spend so much time thinking about doing something bad.

Once the target of all ill will in Bienville Parish, Gammy Mae and Daddy Al survived financial loss combined with social disgrace to become as compatible as a left shoe and a used tractor tire. The residue of their attempts to destroy each other crashes down on my family with the force found in a rain of anvils. Even so, Gammy Mae and Daddy Al hold the town of Ringgold in their greatest contempt.

Every year at Christmas my grandfather climbs the water tower to paint a large

vulgar message to the town's citizens. Allowed to do so without interference, a crowd watches. They call for him to fall, though pray he won't, because Daddy Al and Gammy Mae control something all Ringgoldians need.

Cannonball round and often as hard and explosive, dumpy Gammy Mae's pale freckled face spreads out like a full moon in front of a large, thin-haired head, supported by no neck. Due to colorblindness and illiteracy her short stubby fingers feature different colored red polishes, applied without accuracy.

When in a good mood Gammy Mae flashes a poorly fitting false-teeth smile, greeting small white children with, "Gimme some sugar"; inviting them into her home for cookies and ice cream or other sugary snacks found in abundance on her kitchen counters. My grandfather says it has been twenty years or more since she last saw her toes.

Oversized brightly colored baggy dresses have become Gammy Mae's everyday uniform in a wasted effort to conceal her great plumpness. If in her kitchen, she attempts to disguise her rotund waistline using a giant checkered blue and white apron hanging from her neck; dotted all over by tiny stain samples of meals she prepared in the past.

Gammy Mae smokes a Camel cigarette every half hour throughout the day then gargles with too much mouthwash. Next, she applies too much perfume in a vain attempt to eliminate the offensive odor. Her hair smells the same as a smoldering wet-wood campfire. Her clothes as though hung in the smoke house overnight. Everyone knows and doesn't care she both smokes cigarettes and drinks whiskey mixed with vanilla extract to mask the smell of alcohol. In face of plentiful evidence to the contrary,

Gammy Mae remains steadfast, insisting she does neither.

“If the Good Lord had intended for people to burn weeds in their mouth, he would have installed a chimney on their head,” she says. “Do you see a chimney on my head?”

“If the Almighty had intended for folks to muddle their minds with the devil’s brew, he would have built them standing on four feet so they wouldn’t topple over so easy. Do I think I’m about to topple over?”

Because she admits to being a recovering sinner, each person Gammy Mae meets receives blame for breaking most or all of the Five True and Reasonable Commandments detailed in her Bible of Many Missing Pages. There being, she claims, protection in numbers.

“God can’t smite us all. If we all sin, He can’t get everyone,” she reasons. Across the street from the Methodist Church, where she has been uninvited to attend, Gammy Mae shouts these things through a megaphone on Sunday mornings. Pastor Richard pleads for her to stop the harassment, while she quotes Book and Verse to assure him her words come from God himself.

“And on the third day the Lord said, take unto your mouth a fearful device to spread my word so sinners may hear.”

Gammy Mae teaches me there’s no such thing as a lie – if you don’t get caught. “A good, well place contribbleation of the truth can convince people of most anything, if told with sincerity and a straight face,” she instructs. “Your mama asks if you finished your chores, you look her straight in the face and say ‘Yes, Mother, I did.’ Now, that’s not a lie, son. All you did was contribble the truth a little, because chores wasn’t what you wanted to do at the time. You understand?”

Sharon Threes says there's no such word as "contribbleation". She says both Gammy Mae and Daddy Al make up words to suit themselves. If I bother to look in a dictionary, she tells me, I won't find the word "wildenfeller" either – which Gammy Mae says Daddy Al is – or "faultmatic" - which she claims my mother is. Daddy Al uses the word "beforn" when he's talking about anything that happened to him or anyone else before being born. "Blackable" means someone is very black, but none of their color will rub off, so it's OK for them to work inside the house. I don't want to get in trouble asking anyone what's right, so to be on the safe side, when I use the words, I try to say them soft so maybe no one will hear.

Always pulled into a tight bun then stuffed into a net attached to one side of her head, Gammy Mae's dyed bright fire-engine red hair stays held in place by an excess of multi-colored bobby pins. She wears gigantic rhinestone-highlighted, round, high magnification black bifocal spectacles making her corn husk green eyes appear many times larger. Gammy Mae's comic uniqueness belies her terrible temper and devotion to revenge. But, she did agree to raise Sharon Threes from birth.

Everyone calls my grandfather Daddy Al. He doesn't care who survives. I've heard him described as a large cigar with a man attached. The tallest person I know, Daddy Al signals his mood when he awakens in the morning by fashioning his straight black hair into a ponytail if in a foul frame of mind. If chipper, he wears it over his ears with a blue and white bandana around his forehead and a large duck feather fixed in back. Many call him eccentric. Few people respect my grandfather; a few wait for decades to

find the right opportunity to do him harm, though each year on the anniversary of his father's death, many forgive Daddy Al for a week.

Having instructed someone to load his grumpy red Ford pick-up with a ton of food and drink, my grandfather appears at the home of his workers. While unloading, he sings a musical rhyme letting them know their vacation time has arrived and will soon end.

“Mr. O.G. was a hell of a man, and a hell of a man was he.
Spitting and fighting and cussing and biting, he left this stuff for free.
Crying and dying and likely now frying, he screwed each one of thee.
Digging and planting and chopping and plowing, you now belong to me.
Fixing and eating and farting and belching, enjoy this food with glee.
Sleeping and waking a week and no more, or it's me you will see.
Beating and whipping and shooting and stabbing, hanging you from a tree.”

Even when he's smoking a cigar, Daddy Al chews large wads of tobacco, spitting on cats and dogs, sometimes black people or anywhere he pleases except in Gammy Mae's homes or in her presence. He delights in coaxing small children to taste his Bull-of-the-Woods.

“It'll grow hair on your chest!” he chuckles as I try to spit the foul concoction from my mouth. My sister runs crying to her mother complaining about the taste, insisting she doesn't want hair on her chest. Thinking it great fun my grandfather laughs, showing the oily black mess covering his front teeth. When Mother arrives on the scene all humor evaporates. Daddy Al retreats to the nearest safety. He avoids trifling with Agnes.

“The next time I see you talking to the crazy old coot,” Mother threatens me. “I'll tan your behind.”

Every time I see him coming, I get a hiccup feeling in my chest. Anyway, there's

no use trying to avoid Daddy Al. “Come here, boy,” he always calls to me. “Let me tell you about the time your mama ...”

Daddy Al’s long sharp nose holds great bundles of hair inside, his gray hawk’s eyes need no glasses and he often snaps his extra long fingers against his thumbs making loud popping sounds. He smells the same as tobacco smoke when scrubbed clean for Sunday services at the Methodist Church. Daddy Al can’t enter the Methodist Church either, because he too has been uninvited. For him, Sunday services begin when he secures the church doors on the outside with a chain and lock, while everyone inside sings or prays. Once he attempted to start a fire under the church while the choir sang “Nearer to Thee Oh Lord”. The rain prevented him from producing more than a harmless cloud of white smoke.

“Poor planning,” he tells Sharon Threes and me, as he laughs about the misadventure. “Poor planning and not enough matches!”

“Did you know in your befornt times, your mama married the devil? Daddy Al asks me. “She and the devil had a kid too. A boy – had horns and a tail. I seen him myself once. Don’t know whatever happened to the little devil boy. I hear tell she keeps him hidden in a hole under your house. Best you keep a sharp eye out. She’s keeping him around to put a spell on you. Tell you what. You go ask your mama about that. Maybe she ran off the little devil boy.”

Tupsie overhears Daddy Al telling me about the devil boy. She says pretty soon she’ll tell me about the real devil. Then she warns me about Daddy Al’s words.

“Don’t you say anything to Miss Agnes about any devil boy. Your granddaddy – he’s funning you.”

I’m not so sure who’s telling the truth, so I ask her, learning the hard way, keeping my mouth shut works better than contribbling the truth.

People say gambling, carousing and drinking have become Daddy Al’s pleasure and demons. “If you lived with Gammy Mae what the hell would you do?” he says to excuse everything.

Unable or unwilling to avoid the crooked dealing and distracting bar maids, he enjoys gathering with the boys for Saturday night poker around a table in back of Sootie’s Roasting Hog B-B-Q. Daddy Al considers himself an observant, skilled poker player, even if, in one year he lost over seventy five thousand dollars, six hunting dogs, a new tractor, two hundred acres, four mules and three workers; he had gobs of money then and couldn’t be bothered.

“Cards and whiskey, girlies and the boys
Ain’t nothing to me but bunches of toys.
Whining and bitching, making your noise
You ain’t Gammy Mae, so end the annoys.”

“I’ll get them next time,” he sings in the face of defeat. If Gammy Mae has anything to do with it the same words will appear on his tombstone, if, she adds, anyone finds his mangled body.

People working for Gammy Mae and Daddy Al understand what it means in Louisiana to descend from slaves purchased by my great grandfather. When the Civil War ended official slavery ended leaving no word to describe the first few generations of

a freed people. They call themselves “Chain Leg Free”. The phrase comes from the elephant chained by its leg to a tree until it learned to accept captivity. After a time, an owner needs nothing more than a chain around one leg to keep the animal in place. The people who work for Gammy Mae and Daddy Al have been free to go anywhere, anytime they choose. I’ve asked why they don’t leave in search of better lives. Most answer their lives wouldn’t improve anyplace else.

Gammy Mae and Daddy Al call all blacks “Chain Legs” and they allow no more than two in either of her homes; Wanza, who makes the beds in the mornings and sweeps out the rooms. And Hamm. To the best of Gammy Mae’s knowledge no other Chain Legs ever enter her homes. To the best of her knowledge.



Chapter Three

Hamm the Comedian

When I was young I knew people with only one name.

Everyone says Hamm is a comedian. He makes me laugh. He says that’s his job.

“Find something to laugh about everyday,” Hamm says. “That way when you’re a grown man you won’t be a sour puss. You’re just eight years old, so everything should be something to laugh about, but don’t think about yourself as being better than anyone else, because you ain’t and you never will be – better than others. No matter what you make of yourself, you’ll still be the same as everyone else.”

Being around Daddy Al so much, I know a lot of cusswords. In my mind I use most of them telling Hamm there’s little to laugh about. I know better than to be caught

saying the cusswords out loud, so I ask him why my mother is such a sour puss, and make him promise he won't tell her I called her that. I also ask him about my father. I get angry when he doesn't give me a straight answer.

“Well, that's something maybe we should put off answering until you're a bit more growned. You remember this, child, your daddy's a fine man. Yes sir, he is. And a gentle soul too. Why, I seen him myself more than once put a little baby bird back in its nest. Now you know, not many grown men will do that.

I've seen my father shoot dogs. I've seen him operate on animals with his pocketknife and pull the head off of a dozen chickens. Something makes me think he wouldn't put a baby bird back in its nest.

“You know, I remember a story about why turtles have to carry around a house on their back. I'd bet you want to hear it, don't you? It's a right interesting story. Bit of a history lesson too.”

“Father stayed in bed all day yesterday. I don't think he was sick. What's wrong with him, Hamm? And why's my mother so angry all the time?”

“Well, it happened a long time ago, when the terrible turtle toppling tragedy struck these parts. I remember my daddy telling me about it. I was a little pup about your age ...”

Pretty soon my head's going to bust wide open like a melon dropped on a blacktop road.

The most blackable and tallest person I know, with a voice as deep as a ship's horn and louder than a tuba, Hamm has a Jell-O-belly laugh. Touching his face with my

finger, I ask if the blackness hurts; how and when did it get that way? Always ready with a story he explains one of the many reasons why people have different color skin.

“I was born in the dark of night without a moon in the sky. It turned on cloudy too. Maybe raining,” he explains. “The closer to midnight as person comes into the world, the darker they’ll be. Take me for example. I showed up in the darkest part of night.”

White people, he explains, come into the world during a bright clear day, most often around noon. He has other, much more complicated stories about his blackness, though none match my mother’s version.

Daddy Al says he had to get rid of all the ginners who have skin too black to work around cotton, so Hamm, nearing complete deafness in one ear from years working in the thunderous engine room, finds no employment other than in Gammy Mae’s oversized kitchens. Arriving before sunrise on days she needs him, Hamm taps on the back porch door; a three hundred pound woodpecker, alerting everyone at home of his arrival.

“That you, Hamm?” Gammy Mae calls.

“Yes ma’am,” he booms. Anyone in the house hears him. No matter what the weather Hamm waits at the back door until told to come in. I’ve seen him standing in the rain waiting for Gammy Mae to say he may enter. When he started working for her she had the outside roof over the back porch door removed.

“Well, come on in, Hamm,” my grandmother sings. “Let’s get to work. We’ll have ten for Sunday supper. My church folks still can’t believe it’s your black hands making those pies and cakes.”

Gammy Mae tells the same contribbleation every time Hamm arrives to make

pastries and she fools no one when claiming to have played a part in making the goodies. No one from any church ever enters her homes.

Gammy Mae enjoys thumbing through magazines with lots of pictures. In one she spotted a Jamaican waiter dressed in what she considered the perfect uniform for Hamm. Finding a duplicate took a while because of his great size, however, when it arrived he almost refused to wear the degrading costume. If he hadn't performed magic making pastries she would have banished him from her kitchen and the property for his refusal.

With a giant smile, showing off his dentist-dream straight white teeth, and preparing himself to continue as the kitchen comedian, Hamm rehearses a few jokes out loud as he changes from his overalls into clothes waiting for him in the pantry; a starched white short sleeve shirt with large red buttons, red bow tie, white Bermuda shorts with two inch wide red stripes on the outside of each leg, knee high red socks, white shoes with red laces, two inch wide red suspenders, a tall white chef's hat and a red and white checkered apron covering his front.

"Four chocolate, three pecan, four lemon ice box, six dozen tea cakes, two pans of brownies with no nuts this time, two pineapple upside down, and a couple pans of fudge. Get to it," Gammy Mae instructs, issuing the order-of-the-day.

* * *

Hamm cups his hand then dips it into the wide mouth of his sugar jar. "Just the right taste of sweet," he says.

"How do you know so much about making cakes, Hamm?" I ask, my face blotched with flour; a tiny bit of egg shell stuck to my hands. I'm pretending to help, the

way I always do when he works for my grandmother. I don't care as much about helping as I do about escaping her attention, and Daddy Al's. If Hamm isn't working for Gammy Mae, I hide in the barn loft. I know if I ask Hamm about my father or mother, he'll avoid telling me anything.

"My mama taught me," he replies. "I expect your mama will teach you if you'll ask nice like." I believe Hamm already knows my response.

"No, she won't. She won't teach me anything. And you won't tell me why."

"Well, alright. I'll teach you if you want."

I'm eight years old attending the third grade yet bright enough to know he makes his pastries without using a recipe. I also know, Hamm and the others working for Daddy Al and Gammy Mae, are trying to protect me from something. I can't imagine what.

"You have hands as big as buckets, Hamm. How much sugar or flour do I mix? You don't use a measuring cup. I'm afraid to try to make a pie by myself."

Even before I finish the sentence I know he has a story ready in response. Hamm says he wants to learn to tell stories in ways to teach and tickle, in ways I will remember always, wanting to hear many times, until I understand. The way a middle dancer must tell a story.

"Well, young Mister I'm-Afraid-To-Try, if that's the way you feel about it maybe you can't make pies. Maybe you'll never know how to make them." He busies himself finishing three for the oven then turns to me smiling his special moon-face grin.

"This being afraid stuff puts me in mind of a story I heard a time ago. Maybe you'd want to hear about a group of spiders who didn't know the half of what they could do because of being too afraid to try. Let's sit ourselves over here at the table. We can

have a few tea cakes right out of the oven with cold milk while the pies cook. Maybe you'll learn a thing or two from those spiders. Maybe you'll find part of an answer to those questions about your family.”



Chapter Four

Why Some Spiders Walk On Water

Those who explained life in stories returned life to me and saved my father's.

“A long time ago, way before you came into this world, a bunch of spiders living around Lake Bistineau joined together and decided to throw themselves a party.”

Beginning his tale about spiders, Hamm escorts me to the kitchen table. “They didn't have any particular reason for a party. Most agreed the time had come they celebrated something.”

Leaving the story for a brief moment he moves to one of the three refrigerators in Gammy Mae's kitchen. “You want a glass of milk or a pop or something? I think I'll have myself a pop – keeps my mouth nice and wet while I'm telling stories.”

I ask for a glass of milk. He continues in his deep base drum voice. “Well, you have to understand spiders never have been what you'd call organized, so right off they speculated a Spider-in-Charge would help things along. You know, so things could be kept on track. And that's what they did, elected themselves a leader. Wasn't nothing fancy, you understand, just a throwing up of legs for a counting to find the one most agreeable to all. It turned out to be the biggest spider. That's how things happen sometimes. The biggest wins. You know, I have a story about the biggest winning.

Maybe you'd want to hear it sometime."

Hamm walks around the kitchen in his outrageous red and white uniform causing the worn dark hardwood floor to creak and groan everywhere he steps, as he peeks inside each oven to check his work's progress. "I think these pecans look about ready." He adjusts the oven temperature, snatches a box of Vanilla Wafers and a roll of waxed paper, places them on the table in front of me and returns to the story at the exact point where he left off.

"After they elected themselves a proper Spider-in-Charge things went pretty fast. Do you know what they decided on? Of course you don't, you didn't see it happen.

"They decided it best if the party commenced in one month when they'd have a full moon. Being as this made their first party, it needed to require the formalwear and it should be for the grown ups. Had it been me I'd said the young ones could attend, but it came together as their party, so that's the way things happened."

Moving to a counter opposite the kitchen table, Hamm returns with a large mixing bowl, two coffee cups and a basket of eggs. "Tear yourself off a couple of good sheets of waxed paper. Crush a bunch of wafers between the sheets with the rolling pin there on the table in front of you."

"How many make a bunch, Hamm?"

"You know, a bunch – couple or three big hands full. Don't worry so much about the exact measuring. Anyway, the spiders knew they could find enough food to feed a whole bunch of hungry partiers and they calculated finding a band wouldn't give them any trouble. After a little more planning they headed on back into the woods to spread the word and get themselves ready for celebrating. Enough wafers. Crush them good

then dump them in the bowl.

“Sure enough in a month the moon came out as big and pretty as any spider could hope for and the evening came on cool and clear. Yes sir, it came on a perfect night for a party. Now add butter. It’s right there on the table getting soft like. Mix it good in the bowl with the wafer crumbs.”

“How much makes ‘some’ butter, Hamm? Do I need a mixing spoon?”

“Add the butter, child. Stop worrying about the exactness. Use your hands. You washed them, didn’t you? About when a good moon came full in the sky the spiders started showing up. Enough butter.”

With his white chef’s hat billowing around, causing me to think of a tiny cloud, Hamm walks to the counter returning with a glass pie pan. “Put the crumbs and butter mixture in the pie pan. Mash it out all even like. Around the pan and on the sides. Leave a pretty good taste of the crumbs in the bowl.

“Lordy my sakes! Such a sight to see! The way those spiders duded up it would have brought a smile to your face and a tickle to your ribs. The lady spiders had their fuzz ribboned and bowed, with bitty little flowers stuck to the tops of their legs. They had on their best perfumes and lipsticks and such. Open those two cans of condensed milk sitting there on the table. Dump them in the bowl with the left-over crumb stuff.

“It made wonderment sure enough! The gentlemen spiders had themselves decked out in their Sunday best with bow ties and boutonnières. All of them had their fuzz slicked back and parted down the middle. Yes sir! They did!

“Party-minded spiders came trickling out of the woods from every direction known to exist. Groups of them showed up gabbing and laughing. Lots of them came

strolling in with their dates holding legs and smooching along the way. Yes sir, I'm telling you right now, it made a sight to see! There must have been hundreds of them, all in a celebrating party mood. Without further ado, the Spider-in-Charge boosted himself on a stone to declare the festivities official and underway!

“The band struck up a right lively tune and as soon as the singers started crooning the invited spiders started dancing. A few wanted to sing-along. Others wanted to snuggle and dance close. It made a wonderment child! I'm telling you the truth. You'd best believe me sure enough, it did! The band played fast tunes and slow tunes. The spiders waltzed and jitter-bugged. One spider in the band took to wailing away on a trumpet and another beat on the drums 'til the dogs come home!”

With surprising lightness on his huge feet Hamm dances on his tip toes away from the table to another counter. With both hands he gathers a bowl of lemons and a grater; dances back to me, embracing and planting giant kisses on the side of the container.

“Those spiders took to having a wonderful time, sure enough. Yes sir indeed! A great, wonderful party! With plenty to drink and eat and lots to gab about things turned louder and louder. The band played louder and louder to the point if you had been there you'd have to cover your ears! I'm telling you about a good time, sure enough! Separate out a couple of egg yokes. Dump them into the bowl with the condensed milk. Spill the whites into the coffee cup, we'll find a use for them later.”

Hamm tippy toes over to a drawer and pulls out a large wooden mixing spoon. He dances back to me making several dizzying elephant-like ballerina twirls, plops in a chair next to mine and drums the spoon, tap, tap, tap on the table.

With all the seriousness a man in a clown suit can muster he hands me the spoon

saying, “But, what the spiders didn’t know, not far from the party a crotchety old mama bear with a powerful bad tooth ache had holed herself up in a hollow log doing everything she could to get to sleep. Stir the egg yokes and milk good. Best use the spoon instead of your hands.

“Mama bear must have tossed and turned in the log for the most part of a couple of hours, covering her ears, doing whatever she could think of to block out the spider racket, but nothing worked.”

Jutting out his bottom lip, he pretends great sadness. “No matter what she did she couldn’t get to sleep. She crawled herself out of the log about as mad as a herd of hornets and headed on down the hill to pay those partying spiders a little visit. Squeeze yourself out lemon juice into the other cup. When you have enough, pick out the seeds, then grate off enough lemon skin into the bowl.

“Well sir, I hate to tell you. The mama bear didn’t know another tired and crotchety mama bear had headed herself to the party with the same thoughts in mind.

“You know, don’t you, bears can’t see good at night. Even with the full moon shining bright the two mama bears ran smack dab into each other.” Hamm leaps to his feet and slaps his hands together with a loud crash. “BOOM! They smacked into each other, cracking heads, raising sizeable bumps and scaring the fool out of both of them!

“They began to snarling and biting at each other trying to get away from what they’d bumped into.” Hamm wrestles with himself over the kitchen floor. “Yes sir! They did! The bears gruffled and tumbled and scratched and spit. Their fur went flying. They poked and pawed at each other, all the while tumbling down the hill toward the party-minded spiders.

“Lordy my sakes!” He lets out a loud sigh of relief, pretends to wipe away sweat from his forehead and eases himself back into his chair, wagging his finger close to my face for a sentence. “Had you been there you could have seen it coming. Those partying spiders carried on having such a time they danced themselves away into the night and never did notice the bears coming until too late. And it happened!” He throws his arms into the air. His giant eyes bulge as he moves his face closer to mine. “Yes sir! It did! Those two mama bears busted right smack dab into the middle of the party!”

Hamm stands, shaking his head side to side. He points to me then walks around the kitchen still shaking his head. “You never did see such a sight, child. The spiders fell into a mortifying fright; they commenced to shrieking and screaming and whooping and hollering and squawking and squalling and fainting and crying and most of all running! Terrified party-leaving spiders took off in every possible direction. Wads of them being so blinded scared they headed out over the lake giving no notice to being on water! Enough lemon juice. Pour it in with the eggs and milk then mix it good.

“Those spiders must have run around on the lake for the most part of an hour before they began to give out of breath and slow down. Then they first noticed they had run out over the water.”

He returns to the table calmed and sits. Looking me straight in my eyes he says with great seriousness, “Mister, you can bet the spiders found themselves plenty scared then, thinking they’d sink to the bottom of the lake. You know what, they didn’t. When they saw they could walk on water they began prancing around sassy as you please, splashing water at each other, calling for the spiders on shore to come out and join the fun. Now pour the mixture into the pie pan with the crumb crust. Line the wafers around

the edge.

“It’s strange sure enough, because the spiders on dry land didn’t put one foot on the water. They didn’t even try, being afraid they’d sink to the bottom of the lake, all the while seeing the other spiders dancing around on the water pretty as you please.

“So, that’s the way things have been ever since. Any spider wanting to can walk on water what with those tiny legs they’ve got. Besides, they don’t weigh much of anything at all.

“You know, that’s the way things sometimes happen with people. They don’t know half what they’re capable of doing because they’re afraid to try. Sometimes in life, people have to do what’s necessary and not worry about being afraid. But you didn’t need to hear this story. Look at you. You made yourself a lemon icebox pie. We need three more.”

Stories fill my life the way books and movies fill the lives of other people. Told to me by everyone working for Daddy Al and Gammy Mae, stories become my escape; my entertainment and my education. Many stories don’t have a happy ending.

