

Eva and Siblings



Margaret standing, Ken sitting on Eva's lap.

By 1920, when Ken was born, six other children had died and were buried in unmarked graves.

Eva's stories.

“We had tornadoes when I was growing up in Alabama. One Sunday morning a tornado picked up a colored church right off its foundation. It was in the middle of worship and the church was full of people all dressed up in their Sunday best with the women wearing big fancy hats and the men in suits or at least clean and starched high-back overalls and white shirts. The tornado turned the church around once and set it back down but facing the other way now with the front where the back used to be. It didn't break a thing, not even the pitcher of iced tea that the preacher kept in the pulpit for when it got hot.”

“What did the people do?”

She laughs her voice husky and soft like honey still on the comb. “They shouted hallelujah and kept on singing.”

It is the summer. The room is close and hot. She opens the top drawer of her dresser and pulls out an old cigar box. She removes a small folding fan. It is made from thin strips of carved ivory tied together with silk strings. Some of the strings are broken and some of the ivory strips hang loose. She lets her 10-year old son hold the fan. He carefully opens

and closes it a few times, then tentatively waves it in front of his face, feeling the breeze, smelling powder and perfume and the faint odor of age.

“My great uncle brought this back from Alaska after the Gold Rush.”

“Did he find any gold?”

“No. No Parris ever got rich.”

She smiles and looks at nothing. “I wanted to travel but when my mother died, I had to stay home and look after Bobby and Ken.”

She grows up in Phenix City, Alabama, which is just across the Chattahoochee River from Columbus Georgia. Phenix City has the reputation of being the most corrupt town in the United States. She talks about the reform politician, Albert Patterson, as if she knows him, as if he might have helped her with a problem. In June 1954, after being elected Alabama Attorney General, Patterson is assassinated by the Phenix City crime mob. Coincidentally, later that summer Eva is diagnosed with cancer and dies in December.

She talks about the dog, Rex.

“Rex was a big black German Sheppard. He loved your grandfather. He followed him everywhere, from the house to downtown and back. He’d wait out front when papa went inside somewhere, lying there till papa came out.”

“One day the house caught fire. Rex kept running in and out of the house, barking, and making sure that people were safe. The last time he ran in I think he was looking for Bobby, although he was already out. We tried to stop him but he went in anyway. He didn’t make it back that time. The house fell in on him.”