

Purgatory.

Tony Campolo once described the junior high years as purgatory. My “purgatory” was Palms Junior High School in Los Angeles, just north of Culver City. It was too far to walk home but we cut school anyway and did a little shop lifting downtown; not my regular friends that is. Marge, Mary, and Marian would never do anything wrong but in junior high, you meet new people and you try new things.

Ella Faye Souther came to Palms. She was a new friend of my friends – a tall gangly unassuming girl with a butch haircut. If there is anything you don’t do in junior high, you don’t call attention to yourself. Everyone knew who the new southern gals were, Ella Faye and her sister with their slow southern drawl.

“My daddy has work here for six months then we all are going back to Georgia.”

“Is your hair the style in the South?”

Ella Faye turned around to let us see her entire head, “That’s a duck tail in the back.”

Lot’s of girls have started to cut their hair. My boyfriend doesn’t care.”

“What’s your boyfriend like?”

“Well, he’s more like a very dear friend. I probably will marry him once I move back.”

“Marry him? How old is he?”

Inside I felt alone again, jealous of the nonchalance way she said she was getting married; as if it were nothing special.

“He’s quite a bit older; things are different in Georgia. We’ll probably marry soon.”

I began to suspect Ella Faye was one of those girls who told tales at noon to undo the boredom and to gain attention like Lilly Ann whose graphic description of sexual acts outdid Peyton Place; and so I didn’t put much value in her words.

“I’m countin’ days to then. Can’t stand it here. Sometimes I just want to crawl in a hole and die.”

It was that remark which endeared Ella Faye to myself. Those were my words, the words I ritually recited in my head every school day when I got on the bus. Before she left, I gave her my address and told her to write. The school year passed slowly but finally summer came.

That day, that particular day, I put on a halter top and very short, shorts. It was a bright summer day.

“Where are you going?” Mom asked.

“Marge’s.”

“Stay away from that alley. Sonny might jump out and grab you.”

Why I thought would Sonny pay any mind to me, a mere fourteen year old? Wouldn't that be interesting? He's a real cutie and he was sixteen.

Mom had developed the MO of lying to keep me “safe”. Though I knew she exaggerated and lied, over the years it had undermined my confidence.

I just passed the alley Mom told me to avoid when I crossed the street to avoid a car whose tire had gone flat. Two young men were out working to change the tire. As I crossed, they whistled at me. I felt it was going to be a good day. I continued on to Marge’s where we spent the day seeing how many fences we could jump without breaking pace. That day, we were still children.

“Look!” Marge said as she held up a jar.

The jar had a spider in it with what looked like thousands of babies.

“The babies finally hatched.”

“Do you say hatched for spiders?” I asked.

“I don’t really know but let’s go find a place to release them.”

It was late afternoon when I returned home.

“Ella Faye Souther?”

“No. I don’t think it was Souther.”

Dear Laraine,

I made it back to Georgia and am so glad to be back. I think Dad is too because he told his company he wasn’t going to California anymore. I promised to write so here I am writing. I did marry the Mister and things are going all right. I am so glad I don’t need to go to school anymore. I wanted to let you know I had my first baby and I’m real happy. Sincerely, Ella

I looked in the mirror. Slowly the words and events of the day began to come together. Why hadn’t Mom simply told me to go change my clothes? I was too old to be wearing what I did that day. I was fourteen. In three years, I might get married and have children. In three years!

I thought I would weep myself to sleep that night, but the terror of what Ella Faye did wouldn’t leave me alone. I had promised myself I would be a better wife and mother than my mother and all I had done for three years was crawl in a hole and hide. The Princess had become a bitter, angry, frightened child waiting for Prince Charming to come and for the fairy godmother to come, wave her magic wand and make it all change, make it all better. Nobody came.

I might as well end it all right now. How would I do that? God, I am even too much of a coward to do that. Well, since I am ready to die anyway, maybe I should try to live the best I can and then see what happens. If that doesn’t work, then I can still end it all. What do I do?

Hmmm, adults are confident of their own actions and they know what to do.

They are confident. They are confident. So I need to be confident. How do I get confident. I do things. I find out what there is to truly fear or not. Maybe all my fears are nothing. Maybe I need to find out what the real things are to fear. Maybe I should test things out.

“Don’t tell me you’re reading the paper, Sis? Since when do you care what’s going on?”

“Irene, I need to find a current event to report on.”

“Since when? You haven’t done one all year!”

“So!”

The following Monday, Mr. Wycoff asked who had a current event. I raised my hand, stood up and recited a thirty second summary. My heart was pounding and my knees felt like jelly. I noticed that Mr. Wycoff didn’t look surprised. He just checked my name off in his book.

“Way to go,” Phil said as he gave me a thumbs up.

Nobody laughed, nobody derided me, nobody stared at me as if I were the new kid. Okay, one thing down and a zillion to go. Now, there’s that oral report for science. Can I stand in front of people for more than thirty seconds?

Over the months I began to work through the situations I previously feared. I walked through the public housing area, the projects, to visit Mary. It wasn’t like Mom said. Nobody accosted me. I took the bus by myself to visit Kay Rundle. I went to the store and made purchases by myself. I did do that oral report. I began studying the textbooks and answering questions in class. I began to apply myself and found out I could do things I didn’t previously feel confident at. Then came the biggest test.

“Larrie, I know you don’t usually go to any get together but I thought I’d let you know that one is coming up. Your cousins will be coming from Walnut Creek. You might want to think about going. They haven’t seen you in quite a while.”

“Sure, I’ll go.”

“You sure?”

“Mom, I said okay. Okay?”

Inside, I wasn’t sure. But even if I was uncomfortable there, I was uncomfortable anyway. I knew that man might be there; that man that molested me. I didn’t know what my reaction would be to him.

We went to the gathering. All the cousins were there and we decided to play Hide-n-Seek. When it was my turn, I counted out loud, “One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven...ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one; here I come, ready or not.” Everyone was found and tagged except Irene.

The bathroom, I haven’t checked the bathroom.

I quickly opened the door and just as quickly shut it. Then I burst out laughing. Irene tagged into the safe zone and came over.

“What’s so funny?”

“He’s sitting on the toilet – reading the comics!”

“Who?”

Just then he walked out.

“Oh,” she said and for some unexplainable reason also began to giggle.

On the way home that night, two young girls sat in the back of a car tired from the day’s events. Out of the silence, they began to giggle and the giggles rose into a hearty laughter.

“What’s so funny?” asked mother.

She didn’t, in fact, expect an answer. After all, they were just girls. And girls that age just giggled, sometimes for no reason at all.

“Mom,” I tried to compose myself. “You know your friend, the one at the gathering? The cousins and Irene and I were playing Hide-N-Seek. I didn’t know he was in the bathroom and I was looking for Irene and opened the door. I saw him on the toilet.”

“What’s funny about that?”

“He was reading the comics!”

“The comics? I guess that is a bit surprising, the comics!”

The thought of seeing him with his pants down, on the toilet, again caused ripples of laughter.

The man I had so feared was human. He was comical. I caught him with his pants down. I invaded his privacy. We were even now.