



GIRLS LIKE US

GAIL GILES

Girls Like Us

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CANDLEWICK PRESS

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Always and always and always
for Jim Giles and Josh Jakubik,
my heroes*

My name is Biddy.

Some call me other names.

Granny call me Retard.

Quincy call me White Trash sometimes and Fool most of the time.

Most kids call me Speddie. That's short for Special Education.

I can't write or read. A little bit, but not good enough to matter.

There's a lots of stuff I don't know. If I could write, I could make a long list. List might reach a the way through Texas to someplace like Chicago. I don't know where Chicago is. That's another thing for the list.

But there's some things I do know. And once I know a thing, I hold it tight and don't let it stray of

Granny shouldn't call me Retard. I know that. It ain't nice. It hurts my feelings.

I know it's a wrong thing to hurt somebody's feelings. I know that I ain't White Trash. Trash is something you throw away. You don't throw nobody away. That's wrong. Even if my mama done it to me.

Most folk call me Quincy. I ain't pretty but I got me a pretty name. My whole name be Sequencia.

The one thing all us Speddies can tell you is what kind of retard we are. Ms. Evans get wadded in a knot if anybody say retarded. We be "differently abled." We be "mentally challenged," she say. I got challenged when my mama's boyfriend hit my head with a brick.

I was six and I remember being smarter. My mama and her boyfriend was fighting, and I turned the TV up so I could hear my show. The door was held open to let air in with an ole brick that had cement stuck on it. Mama's boyfriend pick up that brick and hit me. Kinda over my eye and the side of my head.

They's still a big ole dent in my head, and one of my eyes is push down. My face look like somebody put both hands on it and push up on one side and pull down on the other.

I got took away from my mama, and the doctor say that I got brain damage from that brick. I don't know. My mama was a crack ho, so I wasn't gonna be too smart no how.

People think when you in Special Ed that you s'posed to be sitting 'round drooling so they can pick you right out the crowd. That just shows they be dumber than they think we are. There's folks in Special Ed get driver's licenses. They go to school, hand you change at the store, take your order at the drive-through, and sack your groceries. We talk just like other folk. We — well, not me, but most — look just like other folk. We understand stuff. We just learn it slow. And most of what we understand is that people what ain't Speddies think we too stupid to get out our own way. And that makes me mad.

I don't know my mama's name. Granny says she don't want to hear that no-count name in her ear much less let it walk on her tongue. All she'll say is that my mama showed up one day, dirty and stinking and toting me. She told Granny she wanted to spend the night. When Granny woke up the next morning, Mama flown the coop. And I was roosting.

She said she knew something was wrong when I was a year old. I hadn't turned over by myself. A visiting nurse took me to a hospital. Doctor said I had moderate retardation. Two big words, but I don't know them. I thought they was my last name. "This is Biddy," Granny would say. "She's moderate retardation."

The doctor said that not enough oxygen got to my brain when I was being borned. And that's why I'm slow. And that means I couldn't give it to my baby. That's why Granny could give her away. If I had been a stupid child, I maybe could have kept her.

I guess I love Granny. She took me in and fed me. She tells me about it all the time. But she call me mean names. Maybe I know why my mama left Granny's place. What I can't get hold of is why. Knowing what she did, my mama didn't take me with her.

Graduation is coming up. Part of me is glad. I won't have to get on the school bus no more. I won't have to walk past boys that laugh that dirty laugh. Throw candy wrappers at me. But I been scared of that feeling. Granny said I can't live with her after graduation. She said the state don't send no more checks now. I'm past eighteen and graduating. Said I been roosting too long in her nest.

Where would I be if I wasn't at Granny's? I don't know how to be nowhere else. My stomach hurt for a whole bunch of days worrying about it.

Well, if I ain't lower than a snake's butt. I was feeling fine 'bout graduation coming up. Thinking to myself, Won't that show my ole mama? Here I am, with a dented head and still manage to graduate. Then Ms. Evans call me and that fool Biddy in her office.

"I've got terrific news for you," Ms. Evans say, all smiling and proud.

Then she slap me upside the head with news almost hard as that brick. She tole me that since I'm eighteen and graduating, I cain't stay with my foster fambly no more. Then she say that everything was fine. Since me and another girl was wards of the state, we would be took care of. I was going to live with the other girl and have a job. I had me a bad feeling then. Why ole fat Biddy in the office too?

"You and Biddy are going to be roommates," Ms. Evans say, like she'd just hand me chocolate cake with a money filling.

I look over at Biddy and she smiling so big I can practally see the inside her toes, but I cain't believe what I'm hearin'.

Biddy in my Living Skills class. That stupid cow cain't read or write. I can. I'm in Special Education like her, but I take regular reading and math classes.

One day in Living Skills, I tole Ms. Evans that in my reading class we had to keep us a journal. Write in it every day. I have myself a hard time writing, and it tire me out sumpin' awful. Ms. Evans say she can fix me right up. She go to the closet and brung out this little tape recorder and a pile of tapes.

"Ask your teacher if it's OK if you use this. Instead of writing, you can keep an oral journal."

I give her a "What that mean?" look.

She smile. I love the way that woman smile. She got the whitest, straightest teeth, and they shine out her dark face.

"'Oral' means spoken. You might tell your story out loud instead of writing it down."

Biddy, she got ears 'bout big as her buffalo butt.

"What's a journal?"

Ms. Evans turnt around and talk to that ole tub and forget clean about me. "A journal is like a diary. You write, or tell, your thoughts every day. It's a story about yourself."

I swear, Biddy don't know how to hide a thing. Everything she think just hop up and sit on that ash white face for anybody to see. Her face brighten up like somebody turnt on a lamp in front of a mirror. "Could I do that? Tell my story to the tape?"

And there she go. Elbow her way into sumpin' of mine. Now she doin' it again with this living together thing.

Then Ms. Evans tell Biddy she gonna take her to buy a dress for graduation. For a present. Biddy's face look like — I don't know — a full moon rising over a corn patch.

I don't need me no charity dresses. I got me a new pink lacy one.

But Biddy. Woo, that girl need some dressing. Seem like in middle school she dress poor, but not .

. well, not like she do now. She start that ugly thing after what happen in seventh grade. Since the shoot-a-geese, that girl a pure mess. She got this pair of navy-blue stretch pants done stretch way to far. I swear she wear 'em every day. She got three T-shirts, huge ones, maybe cover up a king-size bed. I got to say, the girl don't stink, so she must wash those things right often.

But the big deal is that coat. It's a long tan coat, and Biddy wear it all the time. All the time. We live in Texas, right on the Gulf, and it's hot, but Biddy wearing that coat summer and winter, in class and out. I never seen that girl without her coat.

One day, I found out why. Rosie DeVries is a mean ole stick that make fun of folk. She trailer trash and not much count herself, but she think 'cause she white and not a Speddie that she somebody important. Anyway, she find out a few months ago that she can make Biddy go crazy if she tease her long enough. One day, Rosie must have been in a real bad mood, 'cause she start in hard on ole Rhino Hino. Call her names — well, Rhino Hino one of them — I didn't think that up my ownself. And she ax't Biddy if she had any other pants and did her Granny feed her slops to get so fat. Biddy start wailing and crying. Lord, snot and tears running like a garden hose.

Then Biddy got mad enough to say something back. "You leave me alone, you bitch!"

Nobody ever heard Biddy say a cuss word. Everybody watching drop they mouth open, until we looked like a bunch of gasper-geese flung up on the bank.

That light a flame under Rosie. She reach out and grab Biddy's arm and yank hard. It swing Biddy around and pop the buttons on that raggedy tan coat and it fly open.

Pin to the inside of her coat was candy bars, bags of chips, packages of peanut-butter crackers, little sacks of cookies, and all kinds of stuff. The girl a vending machine with feets.

Rosie laugh so hard that she forget she was mad. "This ho's got a sto' in her coat." She laugh again. "The ho with the sto." Most everybody laugh. Biddy pull her coat up over her face and run off to the bathroom.

I didn't laugh. I know what it's like for folk to call you names.

But I didn't help neither. Besides, everybody know Biddy be a ho.

Graduation was good. I wore my new dress. I combed my hair real nice. I didn't mind looking nice at my graduation, in the light. With all those peoples watching. With Ms. Evans there — I didn't think nothing bad could happen.

Ms. Evans said that me and Quincy are the only Speddies graduating this year. I feel extra special about graduating. Like I done something good. We got in an adult program. We'll live in a little house. Maybe we will even end up being friends together. And a counselor will check us. That makes me feel all safe and good. We even got jobs! I'm gonna clean house and do for an old lady. Our house is on top of her garage. It's the best thing that ever happened to me.

Another teacher, the one across the hall from our Living Skills room, give me a watch. We lined up to walk on the football field. Ms. Evans come and handed me a rose.

I hadn't even seen that all the other girls got roses to carry. Maybe they parents give 'em to 'em. That was real nice of Ms. Evans. But it made me lonely. I don't know why.

We marched on the field, and peoples in the stands clapped. It made me smile. When my name was called, I marched right up to the stand. I got my diploma. I was so excited. I shook everybody hand. I started back down. I got a little confused. Ms. Evans came and got me back to my seat. It was OK again.

Granny didn't come. She said my paper ain't nothin' but a joke. She says that I didn't have no real classes. It ain't a real diploma.

Lordy, graduation was sumpin'. I had me a fine pink dress and a rose, and I walked myself proud and straight-backed onto that football field. Took my diploma and shake the principal's hand like we been showed, then walk back to my seat. That durned tassel thing tickle my nose, but I didn't scratch it nothing.

Biddy, I swear that girl. She smile so big, you could put her diploma in her mouth crostways. She practally run up that platform and snatch her certificate from the principal's hand. She grab his hand and pump it like she be getting water, then she shaking hands with the other folks on the platform. Just a-babbling at 'em. She shake every single person's hand — even the cop guard! Then she start back to her seat, but she turnt wrong and start loping right off the field. Ms. Evans had to get her turnt around.

And I got to live with this fool. I must've done something bad awful that I got to bear this cross. Leastwise, if I live with her, I finally be the smartest person in the house.

Quincy and me met up at the high school with Ms. Evans and our new counselor, Ms. Delamino. I liked to say her name real slow. With my nose a little bit up in the air like smart people on the TV.

Ms. Delamino rode us in her car to meet the lady that I'm going to do for. Her last name is longer than Ms. Delamino's. It's hard to get hold of, so I'm gonna call her Miss Lizzy. Ms. Delamino said Miss Lizzy was married to the mayor. But he done died a few years back. She had her a sometin housekeeper. Now she need all-the-time help.

When we got there, I couldn't believe my own eyes. Miss Lizzy live in a house that look like come straight out a storybook. Great big front porch that you got to walk up a couple of steps to get to. A door with glass in a big egg shape. Ms. Delamino tapped on the door and opened it. She called out Miss Lizzy last name. Said that we was here. I stood in the hall and look up. I never knew a ceiling in a house could be so tall up in the air. And a light with hanging-down pieces of glass that twinkled and shined was over my head. Under my feet was wood floor with a long, skinny rug covering a lots of it. That rug was thick enough to sleep on.

"Please come in." That's when I saw Miss Lizzy. She was in a room off to the side of the hall. Ms. Delamino walked into that fancy room. Shook Miss Lizzy's hand. She waved at Quincy and me to come in. She told Miss Lizzy our names.

Miss Lizzy's real little. With silver hair. Eyes so black they look shiny. She wore a dress-up suit and stood in a walker thing. She looked me over real hard and said, "Honey, you look like an angel come down to earth. Don't know why you're wearing that coat in the summer, though."

I stared at my shoes. I couldn't think if I ought to say thank you or I'm sorry.

Miss Lizzy pushed her walker to Quincy. She put her hand up to Quincy's bad cheek and said, "You poor dear. Nobody will hurt you here."

Quincy jerked away and sulled up. Sometimes I don't know about that girl.

We went with Ms. Delamino to see our house. We climb the white stairs nextside of the garage. It felt like the princess going up to the castle. We went in. It was the prettiest place I ever did see. The kitchen look like it come from a dollhouse. So cute and tidy. There's a counter that has stools at it, so we don't need a table. The furniture isn't broke down and the walls are clean. No peeling wallpaper and brown water stains nowhere. And two bedrooms! I never had me a bedroom before. Granny stored stacks of old newspaper and magazines and all her mail in the extra bedroom in her house. I slept on a pallet in the living room.

Quincy picked her room first. Mine is painted white and has a bed made of curly metal. It's painted white too. It has a pretty quilt on it. It has a table nextside of the bed with a fancy cloth on it that reaches all the way to the floor. It's got yellow and blue flowers. I never saw anything so nice. I turned myself in a circle. I put my arms out wide, just to feel the pretty. I'll work hard all the day to live in a place so nice and clean.

Our apartment/house 'bout as big as a hummingbird's nest but it ain't so bad. It only gots a shower and I like me a good soaking tub, but I can get along pretty good here, long as that stick of an old woman be leavin' me alone. Ms. D. tell us she take us to our houses to collect our things. Bidy run outside, then come back in with a paper sack. Everything that girl own in a little ole sack. I shake my head.

Bidy scoot into her room and thump her pitiful sack on her bed. She start whirling 'round like she Cinderella and babbling 'bout her "princess table." Under the raggedy flower sheet, her "table" just a turnt-over garbage can. Girl can't see past the stars in her eyes. "I'm moved in. I'm home to stay," she say, smiling so big her cheeks 'bout hide her eyes.

If I had eyes that wasn't mashed up by a brick, I sure 'nuff wouldn't hide 'em behind a bunch a fat. I guess when even ole witch ladies call her purty and say she look like a angel, Bidy got something to smile about, fat or not. It ain't like she earn being purty.

Ms. D. tole Bidy to put her stuff away and get comfortable while she take me to get my clothes. Most foster child learn to live pretty light; I had me three boxes and a suitcase, anyways. I tole my foster mama good-bye, promised I'd let her know how I was doing. She invite me to have Thanksgiving with them and such like that. She try to give me a hug and a kiss. Shoot-a-geese! I pull away fast-like. These last foster parents was good enough people, but I never felt no mush to any of my foster famblies. Ain't any use in that. Get move too often.

We get back to the garage-house, and the floor was mop and wax to a shine that made my eyes water. Bidy had all the stuff pull out the bottom cabinets and was washing the insides. Her whole head was in them cabinets, and her big butt just a-wagging out there in the breeze whilst she scrub. Fool singing 'bout the Itsy-Bitsy Spider.

I don't laugh much. Don't see much that's funny. But I sat myself down on that saggy couch and bust a gut.

I don't know about that Quincy. Here we moved to the prettiest place. It's all our own. Miss Lizzy sweet as can be. She treated us like we was somebody real important, but Quincy stayed puffed up. Then she come back with her things. Plop down on the couch. And she's cackling like a hen on a nest.

I laugh too. Just be friendly.

Ms. Delamino sat us down. Told us we had to get to business. She told me what I was to do for Miss Lizzy. Clean that big pretty house. Help Miss Lizzy do her exercises. Cook her meals. I look down at my shoes on that one. Ms. Delamino said, "What's wrong, Biddy? Can't you cook?"

" 'Course she can cook. Anybody can cook," Quincy say.

I nod my head fast. I know Quincy's smart. If she says anybody can cook, maybe it's that way.

Ms. Delamino told Quincy she got her a job in the bakery part of the Brown Cow grocery store. She started in to talking about paying bills and handling money. My mind got tired.

"Can we get us a TV?"

Ms. Delamino looked at me. Quincy flapped her hand. "Hush, we talking bidness here. Go clean the cabinet or something."

That sound OK to me.

“Can we get us a TV?” that ole fool say.

Here we be, starting our real lives, and she off woolgathering about Satiddy morning cartoons. Wha I’m going do with this girl? She white, she fat, she stupid, and she a ho. I gotta say, though, that girl clean like nobody’s bidness. I like a clean place, but I cain’t say I like sweeping and mopping. I knea when I see Biddy look down at her toes, like she waiting for ’em to do tricks, that I be free scrubbing. After Ms. D. leave, me and Biddy gonna do like I hear in the movies. Gonna have us power lunch and do us a deal.

Ms. D. and I talk bidness, and some of it I forget ’bout as soon as she say it, but she write it a down for me to study on. We get to live here, and the electricity, phone, and suchlike paid for as part of Biddy’s earnings. All we got to buy is food and clothes. And long-distance calls — like we got friends to call far away. Or close-by ones.

Ms. D. gimme a chart that show what each of us be paying for. She said to divide up the housekeeping chores our ownselfs. We can do our laundry in the ole lady’s house and eat the vegetables from the side-yard garden. My ears perk right up at that. I love fresh vegetables. Ms. D. say she gonna come check on us, and twice a month she’ll help us get our ’spenses straight.

I was sure enough ready to get her out my face when Ms. D. up and leave. She gonna take me to my job tomorrow morning. She ax to do we have a ’larm clock. Biddy say the rooster at her house always wake her up.

Ms. D. didn’t much know what to say to that. I shore did.

“Fool, you bring that rooster in your raggedy little sack?”

I ’spect Biddy to get all mad or teared up, but she get her face in a puzzle-knot. “No, Gran wouldn’t let me take nothing but my clothes.”

I had to half feel sorry for the girl then.

“I got a ’larm clock,” I say to Ms. D.

She nod and say she gonna leave us to it. I was glad enough to get shed of her. She lean down and whisper in my ear. “Try to get along. Enough people have been mean to Biddy. She doesn’t need you to start. And it’s as important to you as it is to her that this project work out.”

I felt a little shamed, like I’d step on a new-laid egg. But the next thing I know, I hear Biddy singing “Itsy-Bitsy Spider,” and I look ’round to see that big ole butt waggling out the cabinet again.

Quincy said, "Let's us go down and see that garden."

I wanted to finish up scrubbing. But I wanted to be nice to Quincy too. So I follow her downstairs.

It sure was a pretty garden. Vegetables growing in nice straight rows. Things that are tidy and straight make me feel good. That's why I know how to clean. And I had lots of practice scrubbing up after Granny.

There was scrawny green things growing in a by-itself place.

"I can clear those weeds," I told Quincy.

"Them ain't no weeds; them is herbs."

"What that?" I ask her.

Quincy rolled her eyes. "Make food taste good. Don't you fret 'bout that. Just don't go pulling 'em up when you gets a cleaning fit."

She told me to pick three big tomatoes. She went to plucking some of the herb-weeds. She pulled something she called spring onions and a skinny lettuce plant.

I know what vegetables are. But Granny didn't never buy any. I guess we was about to eat a few now. I'm starting my brand-new life.

That garden nice as the one Mr. Hallis had. He was one of my foster daddies. Biddy and me got some stuff together and went on upstairs. This was the first part of my plan not be doing no housework.

I pull out a can of chicken. I'd rather use fresh, but this be fine for today. I wash the tomatoes and cut 'em open. I mix the chicken up with a little mayo and my secret weapon — blue cheese dressing. Then I mince some basil up 'long with those green onions. I spoon the chicken into the tomatoes and sprinkle the basil and onion on the top. I put a couple sprigs of parsley into the chicken to purty it up.

Biddy look at those plates. "I never did eat nothing like that."

That ain't a surprise. All I ever see Biddy eat at school was potato chips and candy bars. She didn't get to be no Buffalo Butt from snackin' on lettuce and carrots.

"Well, this here is Quincy's Special Chicken Salad. Not many people have eat this before."

"Why'd you make three plates?"

"You don't know how to cook nothing at all, do you, Biddy?"

Biddy look shamed and started pondering her toes again. "I didn't lie," she say.

"I ain't saying you a liar. I'm saying you ain't no cook."

She shrug and shake her head.

"How you think you gonna cook for that ole lady?"

Her eyes fill up with tears. I sure didn't want her to go into one of her crying, snot-nose jags.

"I got me an idea," I say.

That stop them tears.

"What?"

"We split up our chores, just like Ms. D. say. I'm gonna cook and you gonna clean."

Biddy get all bright and happy for 'bout a minute. "But what about Miss Lizzy?"

"I'm gonna cook for her too — she just ain't gonna know 'bout it." I get the plastic wrap and put it over one of the stuff tomatoes and wrap it 'round the plate tight.

Biddy wad her face in a knot again. "But . . ."

"You gonna tell her you like to cook in your own kitchen and you'll bring food to her."

"But . . ."

"But what?"

"I can't do that. It would be a wrong thing. Like a lie."

"Biddy, it ain't a lie. It's more like our secret."

I give her a hard look until she look down. I'm not going to let this fool girl mess things up for us.

Quincy grabbed that plate with one hand. She grabbed my arm with the other. Tugged me down the steps fast as I could go. Quincy was squawking about me doing 'zactly what she told me to do. She hushed up when we got to the back porch. Made like she was knocking. I tapped on the door. "Miss Lizzy?"

She answered quick. "Is that you, Biddy?" Quincy poked me in the back.

"Yes, 'um. I got lunch for you."

She told me to come in. Quincy let go my wrist. She whispered, "Just follow along and let me do most of the talkin'."

Miss Lizzy set at her kitchen table with a cup of tea. I put the plate in front of her.

"That looks wonderful," Miss Lizzy said. "I didn't expect you to start until tomorrow. I wanted you to have time to get settled in."

"We ready for you to taste Biddy's good cooking," Quincy say.

"Well, then, let's see just how well Biddy cooks," Miss Lizzy said. She pulled off the wrapping. "Looks delicious, Biddy. How did you ever learn to cook like this?"

"Her granny taught her," Quincy said quick-like.

My eyes flew open and my mouth jumped open. I knew I looked a fool standing there. I started crying. We wasn't keeping no secret now. We was telling a bald-face lie. "Miss Lizzy, I got to tell you something." Quincy made a snort sound. "Miss Lizzy, if I try cooking for you, you die of the tomato mane. I didn't lie none about cooking. It was a . . ." I didn't know a right word.

"Misunderstanding?" Miss Lizzy said.

"That's it." My stomach feel better, 'cause Miss Lizzy didn't look mad. "But Quincy here, she can cook. She made this." I pointed down to her pretty tomato-flower.

"Well, then, let's see how it tastes," Miss Lizzy said.

Quincy glare at me, but I don't care. I'm glad we don't have to start things off with a lie. "Ain't nobody gonna eat my food off no bare table," Quincy said. She had her puff-up-chicken-snake face on. "Where you keep place mats and silverware?"

Miss Lizzy pointed and Quincy went to digging. She got a white square of material with scooped kind of edges. It had a napkin that matched. Quincy spread it out on the table. She folded the napkin on the side. She set a knife and fork nextside the plate. "Wait just a minute," she said, then run out the door.

She come back in with a pink flower.

"You got a vase?"

Miss Lizzy smiled. I don't think I ever saw an old lady smile before. She pointed to a cabinet. I looked over where she pointed. The cabinet had a glass front. A little vase that had designs cut in it was in front.

"That one?" I asked.

Miss Lizzy nodded.

I got it out and wiped it with the dishrag. Filled it up with water, then hand it to Quincy.

Quincy stuck her flower in the glass vase. She put it on the table. “That plate don’t quite go with that place mat, but I’m gonna call it good for now.”

Miss Lizzy said Quincy was a wonder and we should drink tea while she sampled the salad.

We shook our heads no. Quincy chewed on her bottom lip. Like she was worried as me to see Miss Lizzy liked her food. I tug the buttons on my coat.

Miss Lizzy got her fork and smiled. Then dip it lady-style in the chicken. We watched her nibble. We watched while she put her fork in the tomato. She got her a big forkful. She ate more. We watched when she closed her eyes, like to say “Amen.”

“Quincy, do I taste blue cheese in here?”

Quincy nodded.

I didn’t see nothing blue.

“And basil?” Miss Lizzy asked.

Quincy nodded again.

Miss Lizzy said Quincy was “a find,” and whoever taught her cooking should be “claimed a saint.”

I didn’t understand. I could see Quincy didn’t either.

“This is the best, most original chicken salad I’ve ever had the pleasure of tasting.”

That’s ’zactly what Miss Lizzy said.

I thought that fool had done it for sure. Gonna get us flung right out that 'partment by telling she couldn't cook. But my chicken salad done won the day. Don't know why I got edgy 'bout it.

“Did someone teach you to cook?”

I nod at the ole lady. “In the foster home before last. My foster father did sumpin' with computer. He stay home and did housework and cooking. He taught me.” I took a pause. “I'm mixed race, in case you wonderin', but I live with white peoples before. You ain't the only one.” I said it like a dare. Like she shouldn't expect me to be treat her special.

She nod and use her knife to cut up the tomato.

Ole lady didn't take my dare, and I easy myself down a little. “My foster father taught me all the words in recipes and show me what herbs to use when. He even made up his own recipes. This one 'em.”

“Tell me more,” she say.

“Not much more,” I said. “My foster mama got a big job in Washington, DC, and they move. I went to another home. Mr. Hallis made me a cookbook of his recipes. I did all the cooking in my last house too. Neither one of them foster parents could cook a lick.”

The ole lady finish her lunch and lay her knife 'crosst the edge of her plate. “If you girls are happy with the arrangement, I'm glad to have Quincy cook instead of Bidy.” She crook up the corners of her mouth. “I think I'd like to avoid ptomaine.” She pet Bidy's hand, so I guess she was funning with her. “Please feel free to use the garden for yourselves, as I've offered before, and, Quincy, please use whatever you need in the kitchen.”

I didn't like the idea of being in that ole woman's house, but the idea of cooking in that kitchen sure was fine.

“I ain't calling you Miss Lizzy,” I say, the dare back on my tongue.

“Ah,” she says. “Makes you feel subservient?”

I don't know what that mean for nothing.

“Slaves called their owners Miss, did they not?” she say.

That ole lady smart.

“I think you could call me Liz. My friends do.”

I make my eyes slitty.

She smile, almost sad-like. “Oh, I see. Well, then, would Elizabeth do?”

I nod. She nod back. I guess we done us a deal.

I always pondered 'bout Quincy. What color she was. She got real light skin and green eyes. She to
Miss Lizzy she was mix-up race.

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