

Part I

The hospital grounds lay on the direct route of migrating geese heading north. Every spring they flew above rows of houses, over streets framed with lawns until the earth abruptly cleared to offer acres of freshly cut grass. After climbing again and again far above the highest leaves, catching winds for thousands of miles across the sky, their strong beating wings descended by the hundreds to a small pond for days of verdant nourishment. Too few knew about the ones left behind, those with a defect making such a flight impossible. The spectacle of the geese taking off to northern skies eclipsed any thought of the fragile ones, with damaged wing or foot that could not manage another sixteen hour flight, at speeds as fast as cars, thousands of feet in the sky, day and night. Hardly a soul thought about the ones left behind along the great journey.

Monday, March 19, 1990, around 10:00 am
The Disturbance

Some flinched at the sight of the N25 pulling up to the curb for it would soon be time to face the pain they tried to evade. Stretching out their arms, they stepped up, resigned to whatever would happen. As the bus pulled away they lurched about and grabbed the handrails making their way to a seat.

A young African-American woman seated in the back was barely aware of the fumes she breathed. The rear engine rattled beneath her, relentlessly powering the bus forward. Whenever someone approached she pulled closer a worn shopping bag that she clutched to her chest. Outside the window, cars passed in the next lane. She didn't see them. Would her older sister even remember she was coming to visit on her day off? Her brow creased deeply as she tried to figure how Keisha had ever wound up there. She doubted her sister would get out of that awful place – away from those people and she wondered what her niece, Stephanie, would ask when she got home. Daudi's hands wrung tighter as block after block whizzed past; her face was too young for such sadness.

Daudi felt guilty thinking of how much fun they had last evening. Coming home from work Daudi had heard the music pounding as she climbed the stairs. Why hadn't she gone to the neighbors at the end of her fifth grade classes? She reached for her keys and opened the door to bright sun pouring through their big window. Her niece danced towards her, jumping in the light to run and hug her. "I was afraid you weren't coming," Stephanie squealed. Daudi had dissolved into Stephanie's embrace. She felt her niece's shoulder blades rise up and her heart pound wildly. Exhaling the worries of the day she knew she was wanted and needed like never before. Kissing the top of Stephanie's head she hugged the collection of young bones in the sweaty body that had folded into her.

Abruptly, Stephanie pulled Daudi by the hand to a new drawing she had taped to the wall having added it to a line of others around the room. Stephanie's smile broadened as Daudi admired her art. She pulled Daudi then to a trunk belonging to Keisha which stood open, filled with a tangled rainbow of scarves that flowed out onto the floor. Stephanie had one around her neck and let Daudi finger the sheer silky scarf before she pulled away, dancing to Madonna as it trailed

behind her. Stephie lifted her arms high and said, "I always wanted to play like this." Stephie tied a scarf to each of her wrists and waved them up and down and floated breathlessly through their studio apartment singing along to the Madonna album until she tripped. Daudi held her breath waiting for her niece to pick herself up. As the sun set Stephie twirled about the room to put on all the lights.

Daudi lifted her head from the stove to watch Stephie pose and point as Madonna sang, "Who's that girl." The smell of fried chicken mixed with the melodies and heat rose from the pan over Daudi's face. Dinner finished and chores done, she tucked Stephie in her foldout bed. Bending to kiss her niece she asked, "Why didn't you stay with our neighbor till I got home?" "I did, but I was worried about you and wanted to be here when you came home." Daudi quieted her with promises never to go away.

A honking horn interrupted Daudi's thoughts. The bus driver announced, "Clearwater County Medical Center, last stop." Daudi watched the passengers rush onto the grounds for the beginning of visiting hours while she slipped her thin arms into a crumpled cardigan she'd been sitting on. Last off the bus, the pale underbellies of squawking geese overhead glided down; the air was filled with the scent of fresh cut grass. Daudi jolted when the lobby's glass doors swung open responding to her light step. Daudi squeezed into the back of the elevator as a bell signaled: 3 Surgery, 4 Cardiac Care, 6 Vascular Therapy, 9 Orthopedics. These visitors with flowers and gifts would know what to do, she thought. Comforting words were beyond her.

Daudi stood alone when the bell sounded for 18 Psychiatry, the top floor. She rang the buzzer for a nurse with jangling keys to come unlock the inner door, then the gate and ask through the bars, "Who are you here to see?"

"I'm Daudi Williams. My sister is Keisha." She felt she was swimming out at sea, her sense of direction failing as the nurse waved her in and closed the door. The nurse's sharp eyes checked out her short tight afro and boots that needed polishing. Daudi held out her shopping bag, "These are just some of my sister's clothes,"

"I still need to look through them. We have to do this. You wouldn't believe what we've found; someone even tried to smuggle in an old revolver."

The inner door had scarcely shut when a number of patients talking all at once surrounded Daudi.

"Hey good lookin' you bring me somethin'?"

"How would you like to go out with me?"

Daudi backed away as a patient reached to put his arm around her.

"Leave her alone. She's not here to see you," the nurse called out.

A female patient shyly told her, "You're pretty. You sure you're old enough to come here?"

"You want to come visit me?" a chubby little patient asked as he blocked her next step.

"That's enough. Stop bothering the visitor." The nurse returned Daudi's shopping bag and shooed them away. She gave directions as though she were dispensing pills, one by one, all the while nodding blankly. Before taking leave the nurse told Daudi that Dr. Close, the psychologist, wanted to speak with her and her sister.

Daudi regretted not bringing flowers like the other visitors. But vases were a problem; no glass was allowed on psychiatry, and the plastic ones toppled over. As she headed to her sister's room the nurse called out, "Dr. Close will stop by before lunch."

The locked unit was designed like ripples that spread as a rock struck a pond. That rock,

at its core, was the nursing station. Further out hallways encircled the station and outermost were the bedrooms whose windows looked onto the day's sunny grounds. Oddly enough, for a space that did its best to eliminate any pointed edges, nothing from the roughly encased plastic barriers around the nursing station to the chipped bars on the windows, seemed smooth.

Daudi passed the hall exit that was lit in red and rigged with an alarm. She continued to walk past a long line of bedrooms, choosing not to glance beyond the open doors, until she reached at the far corner, a shoebox sized room with only one bed. Inside, Keisha lay in the same position as she had on her last visit. Daudi knocked then stepped inside resting the shopping bag against her sister's back.

Looking down on her sister strewn across the bed, Daudi thought of that awful night her frightened niece cried over the phone that her mother wouldn't get off the floor. It was dark by the time Daudi got to their apartment and found Keisha collapsed on the living room rug. When Daudi asked if she'd called an ambulance Stephanie shook her head.

The EMTs had to wait while Keisha pushed them away and insisted on getting up by herself. She refused their offer of a stretcher, "I don't want no man's hands near me." Finally Keisha permitted the one female aide to steady her arm so she could stand, all the while wiping her hot wet face with the back of her hand. She begged them, "Don't make me go."

"You're scaring me, Mom." Stephanie said. "Let them take you to the hospital."

Daudi whispered to her sister before the ambulance pulled away, "I'll take care of Stephanie. I promise." Then she slipped their Grandma's old mohair coat over Keisha's shoulders.

Keisha choked with tears on their first visits; she pleaded to see her daughter. Stephanie was only eleven, too young to be allowed on a psychiatric ward, but Keisha rejected all logic. Daudi tried to find out what had upset her sister so that night and offered to call her boss and let him know where she was, but Keisha warned her, "Don't."

"What's got you this way?" Daudi had asked and waited for an answer that never came. Daudi brought Keisha her niece's Dance Magic Barbie, a doll Stephanie had begged for. It eventually discolored on the window sill. After the first month Keisha began to slip out of reach. Daudi had watched Keisha's eyes die first. By now, she knew, there would be no pleas to go home. She looked down at her sister's once smooth face now pimpled, devoid of expression. The hair Keisha always kept in neat cornrows was unraveled and tattered. Keisha lay on her bed like a car totaled and abandoned on the side of the road. She was broken inside. Daudi tried to remember the last time her sister's beautiful dark face shined back at her. Daudi reached for the shopping bag.

"I brought you some clean tops." With effort she put cheer and hope in her voice.

"Put them in the drawer." Keisha's harsh voice numbed Daudi inside.

Determined not to give up, Daudi asked, "Would you like to slip into a fresh one?"

"Later."

"How about a warm washcloth?" Daudi longed to rub a wet cloth over her sister's sour-smelling skin.

Daudi pulled out a nightgown. "Stephie picked this for you."

"What is it?"

Encouraged by her sister's interest, Daudi answered, "Got a bit a lace round the neck and bows. Stephanie said it's your favorite."

Keisha stretched back an arm that had begun to thicken. She extended her arm from her

left shoulder and grabbed it forward with force as if she were serving at tennis. Her jiggling skin surrounded the nightgown which she tucked under her full bosom.

“Should I have brought you something else?” Daudi asked. Something in her too was dying out.

“No, you did fine.” Keisha’s voice sounded far away and Daudi no longer knew how to reach her sister. She emptied the bag of clean clothes into the drawer beside the bed. All through school Keisha had praised and assured her that she was doing fine. She wanted her sister back. The difference of eight years always made Keisha seem so much older. Daudi felt strange taking care of her now.

She wished they could talk the way they used to in the fields of Alabama. They’d climb down by the stream in back of Grandma’s house, sharing secrets. Daudi traced her sister’s steps, measuring the length of her stride as she paced behind her. Keisha would cup her hands so Daudi could sip cool water that had the taste of her sister’s palms. When Keisha stood to go she’d plead with her, “Let’s stay here.”

But Keisha would shout, “Come on, will yuh!” while she hopped across. Keisha’s dark eyes waited for her sister to cross the moss covered rocks and stood with her hand on her hip as Daudi’s body lurched to and fro, her bare feet pausing, her arms stretched out to steady herself. They’d run through tall grasses and sweat made their tops become transparent. Maybe they shouldn’t have left home, she thought. All the ways they used to have fun were gone when they moved up north.

Daudi pulled a sheet over her sister’s arm still wrapped in the nightgown. She sat nearby expecting empty hours of waiting till visiting hours were over. Light shined through the window from the far side – a bright hard light that ignited the air over the motionless body spread across a gray metal slab of a bed. She smoothed out the crumpled shopping bag, and as she sat back, tears brimmed in her eyes as if they’d been waiting for that moment.

From behind the nursing station the ward psychologist, Dr. Close, swung open the low barrier. Her brisk steps headed towards Keisha’s room before the meal cart began its rounds. All morning the nurses had dispensed meds around her, repeatedly announcing the names of patients whose doses still waited in one of the thirty-four labeled drawers. Patient after patient had come to the counter to toss back with tepid water their prescribed pills. Away from all the chatter her heels clicked down the hall. She appeared intent on the floor tiles or was it the heavy traffic still in her mind. A fair, faintly freckled face, a body round, but not fat, encased the mature woman within. Never any makeup; her golden, gray hair was cropped short. It would surprise no one she was considered smart in school. The pond of her mind stayed placid. It would shock if she cursed. Some wondered whether she was still a virgin. If she allowed dark thoughts, few knew them. She paused before knocking; Daudi stared off in space.

“I’m Dr. Close. Would you have a few minutes?” She smiled at the fragile-looking young woman coming towards her. “I wanted to speak with you about the new treatment we hope will lift your sister’s depression. We need Keisha’s consent.”

Keisha lurched up in her bed.

“What can I do?” Daudi’s child-like manner melted into helplessness.

“Our psychiatrist can give you more details. He’s trying to get Keisha consent for ECT, electric shock therapy.”

Keisha called out, “Tell them I don’t want it.”

Daudi sat down by her sister and reached for her hand. “You want to shock her?” Daudi tightening her grip on Keisha.

“Don’t think the worst. Actually, it is quite safe. The patients say it’s painless. We use shock therapy quite effectively when a patient’s depression shows little improvement. I’ve seen it work many times.” Alarm spread across the sisters’ faces.

“You ever had it?” Regret flashed in Daudi’s eyes as soon as the question passed her lips. She settled down and asked, “Why now? Why do they want to do that to my sister?”

“Keisha, let your sister come talk with me,” the doctor said.

In the hall with the door closed behind them Dr. Close said, “Two full trials of medication have had poor results. We may start another, but your sister remains seriously depressed. For nearly three months I’ve come to bring Keisha to therapy, but she refuses to talk. We can’t keep her much longer. There’s something terrifying your sister; she’s convinced a man is searching for her. I believe there’s some truth in her fears. Do you know what might have happened to her?”

Exhausted, Daudi shook her head.

“Did your sister ever try to hurt herself?” Dr. Close asked.

“No, she wouldn’t do that. I know she gets real sad when she loses a job, but she’s never been in the hospital like this. I took her to the emergency room when she wouldn’t eat or couldn’t sleep and they gave her pills.”

“Therapy can help her. Would you encourage her? We have a group of patients like your sister who are preparing to leave the hospital. It is essential that she attend that group.” Daudi bit her upper lip and moved closer. Her slow steps appeared to support a heavy weight on her shoulders. She clasped the doctor’s outstretched hands and let herself be gathered into the doctor’s arms. Daudi wept.

They stood clasped together before the doctor said, “Keisha needs to begin while she’s in the hospital and continue when she’s dis—”

A loud crash resounded throughout the ward. Screams filled their hall.

Dr. Close pulled Daudi by the elbow back into Keisha’s room. “Will you excuse me?” she asked as she shut Keisha’s door. After the doctor hurried off, more screams and the pounding of running feet sounded through the closed door.

“Look outside. See what’s going on.” Keisha pushed her sister from the chair.

Daudi cracked the door open, but all she could see were lots of nurses near the entrance.

“It’s like every time I come,” she said sitting back down, “There’s always some big commotion. Don’t you want to get out of this place? I’d be frightened here.”

“Help me up.” Keisha placed her bare feet on the cold tiles just as a deep male voice rang over the loud speaker. “Stay in your rooms. Close your doors.”

“Why won’t you talk to that doctor, Keisha? She’s trying to help you,” Daudi said.

Withdrawing onto her bed, Keisha’s mood changed. She jammed her arms against Daudi to make her get up. “Don’t let anyone in. Stand by the door.” Her eyes shot open wide and stopped blinking as she crumpled in the far corner of her tiny bed. “He’s looking for me.”

“Who’s looking for you, Keisha?” Daudi’s drained body dropped back.

“Go check outside. See if he’s coming.”

Her sister’s frenzied state frightened Daudi. “No one’s coming! It’s just the nurses.”

“He told me he’d find me,” Keisha whispered

“Who’s gonna find you, Keisha? Who’s searching for you?”

When there was no answer Daudi moved to the edge of her sister’s bed. Footsteps

stopped outside the door. The room seemed to close in on them. Seconds passed. Daudi felt her heart race. Whomever it was, moved on.

Keisha leaned against her sister, "I can hear him." She turned into someone Daudi hardly knew. Even though Daudi's heart ached for her she said, "You lay here for months, but you don't get any better. They're gonna make you have shock therapy. You want that? At least talk to Dr. Close. I can tell she wants to help."

"I can't." Keisha mumbled.

"Can you tell me who you're afraid of? I won't tell anybody."

Keisha's frightened eyes looked into her sister's and for a moment it seemed she'd say something then her head dropped. Daudi reached to gently re-braid her sister's cornrows. The ear-piercing screams from the woman down the hall died down. The crashes, of what sounded like dishes, stopped. After what seemed like forever, Dr. Close appeared. "You can keep the door open now. All the commotion is over. The nurse is on her way with Keisha's medication. They'll bring new lunches. Would you like something to eat, Daudi?"

Grateful for the offer she smiled, "Yes. Thank you."

Just as the doctor said, "I'll see what I can do," the loud speaker announced, "Dr. Close, please come to the nursing station."

"Daudi, I don't know if I'll be back before you leave, but I promise we'll talk soon." Dr. Close turned to Keisha, "Your sister knows you well. I hope you listen to her." The doctor's hair reflected the overhead lamps as she doubled back to the nursing station.

"Keisha, how come you won't talk to her?" Daudi knew how the doctor felt, sitting there while her sister wouldn't even look back at her.

Lunch, enough for both of them, was placed on the bed tray that was swung between them. Matching dishes of apple sauce and cups of hot tea were set on the bed tray facing each of the sisters. Unsure, Daudi waited for her sister then picked up a tuna sandwich as her sister bit into hers. It evoked for the sisters a welcomed ordinariness. Keisha's eyes brightened and she said, "Thank you for coming."

After minutes of harmonized munching Daudi pulled out a surprise she'd slipped into the drawer.

"I brought Stephie's painting." Painstaking shades of soft greens for grass and blues that blurred together where the lawn met the sky surrounded a girl about Stephie's age, spread out under white clouds drifting overhead. There were paintings scattered about her and the child's head was bowed down intent on her work.

"She's good, isn't she?" Keisha asked.

"Yes, I think she wanted her picture to show she's doing well. She doesn't want you to worry."

"Do you tell her that I love her?" Keisha's crestfallen eyes searched Daudi's face.

"Yes and I want to tell her you're getting better."

Keisha's turned her sad face, putting down her hot tea to look away.

"Are you going to let them give you those shocks?" Daudi asked.

Keisha shook her head.

A spider crawled over the bedsheet and Keisha pounced an empty cup on top of it, "Thought I wasn't looking!" Keisha said. Daudi stared at her sister while her sister said, "You're still afraid of bugs." Keisha went back to her lunch with new energy.

After the aides collected the trays Daudi checked Keisha's clothes. Back home an outfit

Keisha brought for Daudi's graduation hung in the closet. In that dress Daudi felt confident and grown up. Her classmates had admired her soft knit dress. She asked Keisha, "How about I bring something nice to wear for one of those therapy meetings?"

Keisha agreed and Daudi felt her load lighten. "You'll look beautiful," she said as Keisha pressed grateful hands on her sister's cheeks and they rocked together.

The loud speaker announced the end of visiting hours. "I've got to go, Keisha."

"Can't you stay?" Daudi remained in Keisha's arms until they began to slip.

"I'll be back." She watched the spirit drain from Keisha's face. "Stephie will be home from school, and you know how she'll ask about you as soon as she sees me. Can I tell her you'll be coming home?"

Keisha cried, "Tell her I love her."

"For Stephie's sake, try to do what the doctors want." Giving advice to her older sister left Daudi feeling unsure of what she said. She bent to kiss the top of her sister's head and heaved a sigh as she stepped into the hall. The crowd of nurses by the entrance had gone.

Outside, the declining sun gave little comfort as strong winds slowed Daudi's steps. Waiting to board the bus she exhaled the hours at long last over. Over her head she saw balloons blowing like leaves over the emptying parking lot. A little girl ran with a whole cluster of pink balloons floating into the distances of the afternoon then screamed as the balloons blew away; she had let them slip out of her hand, but was running after them at full speed. The balloons quickly gained height and it was obvious she wouldn't catch them. She ran in a field of sunlight until she could run no more and the balloons were small above the skyline. Daudi keenly grasped leaving her sister.