

DAY SCHOOL

Excerpt from *Where's the Moon?*

*A Memoir of the Space Coast and the Florida Dream*

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*Self-consciousness – the realization that one is alone and distinct in the universe – often blooms at about age 5, and the environment in which it occurs will cling to it always, whether or not one is fully aware of it. For in that mystical moment of recognition, one's surroundings become a kind of portal to secret, or secreted, treasure – to who one is. One reason I've returned to Florida may be to remind myself that I still know that original portal and possess that treasure, as surely I carry the palm frond's persistent flap in my inner ear.*

Shortly after we moved from Washington D.C. to Ft. Lauderdale, in 1956, my mother, knowing I missed my kindergarten in Bethesda, and wanting to ensure an easy transition for me, arranged a tour of several schools, from which she invited me to choose. After visiting just two, I insisted on the least likely candidate for an upwardly mobile family: Calvin Christian Day School -- a modest, certainly unaccredited little place housed in the cinder block annex of a homely white clapboard church set on a weedy, chain-linked acre.

I might have selected the progressive school we had just seen, in a modern building that felt like a doctor's office inside, with carefully organized blocks, finger paints lined up chromatically in clear glass jars, and neatly dressed children moving from one circumscribed play area to another. But I liked the cheerful disarray at Calvin Christian, where the kids in homemade cotton hand-me-downs chattered noisily among themselves and the lids on tubs of cheap library paste weren't screwed on tight. Mrs. Winkelman, the elderly teacher, bird-thin, slow, and gentle, didn't try to recruit me like the brisk progressive school lady had, on the basis of a long questionnaire my mother had to fill out in a vestibule, before we were allowed

entrance to the perfect classroom. At Calvin Christian, the two of us just walked in, sat down on a pair of unoccupied carpet scraps, and joined the group. At once, a dark-haired boy, his white shirttail flying, ran up and kissed me on the cheek, a completely spontaneous act that delighted me in a way no other kiss could, or has, since. What kind of world was this, that a child, a person, could be so taken by another at first sight and embrace them directly without thinking about it?

The dark-haired boy, whose name was Johnny, became my friend for a time; once, my mother and I visited his home, an old Florida bungalow with a dirt yard where he lived with his father, a quiet Italian man whose wife had died or left. Even in my nascence, I understood why Johnny was so puppyish. Something was missing, he knew it, and he was looking for it.

The rest of that year remains for me a wash of naïve group activity centered on crayons, jump rope, and cupcakes: bright and pleasing, but lacking memorable texture. In the June class photo, I stand back row center, a full head taller than the others, having undergone a sudden growth spurt -- expressionless, heavy-lidded, dumbstruck. Johnny, who would move at the end of the year, sits cross-legged in front, eyes shining, grinning for the camera.

Yet I enjoyed Calvin Christian so much my parents allowed me to stay on for first grade before the inevitable transfer to a more competitive public elementary school and the climb toward higher education. My mother had already shown me her University of Maine yearbook, signaling the joys ahead, though to me, the book's fixed headshots of Depression-era jocks and coeds exuded the creepy unreality of the stuffed wildlife we'd seen in museum dioramas, no assurance I would be as happy as she had been. Neither did I imagine I would ever, as she had, earn a title like "All-Maine Woman," the Pine Tree State's version of "Best All-Round Girl." Still, on rainy afternoons, I was drawn to the yearbook's preserved countenances, noting the other students' hometowns and majors, wondering what had happened to them after graduation, and haunted by a bespectacled, buck-toothed girl from Massachusetts named Stacia V. Kufel, as plain and awkward as my mother was handsome and confident. What ever happened to *her*, I wondered. What would happen to me?

Shifting from Calvin Christian's kindergarten to the other side of the accordion-fold divider, I discovered a one-room school with sturdy wooden desks filled by 30 children, grades 1-6; that year, there happened to be no third-graders. The teacher, Miss Honnadale, a pretty woman of about twenty-five who wore her chestnut hair in a bun, and dressed in full, calf-length skirts of navy blue or black with white roll-sleeve blouses, began each day with a prayer, and then sat down to the piano, leading all of us in song from a red book containing hymns I hadn't encountered in the rote-taught children's choir of the downtown Methodist church our family attended at first. Miss Honnadale always chose the opening hymn, pounding out the introduction so firmly we all vibrated to the proper key before opening our mouths. Often we started with a familiar children's song, like *Jesus Loves Me*, which seemed cloying to me even then, or the military rouser *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, with the bewildering line: "trampling down the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." A vintage, I thought, must be an overgrown forest path, leading to a closet of angry fruit.

After that, we children got to choose, and nearly every hand shot up, even those of the sixth-grade boys in the back, who pitched forward at their desks, waving to be recognized over the little heads bobbing in front. The older ones always lobbied vociferously for a gospel hymn called *Peace, Be Still*, a story, really, a dramatic dialogue between Jesus and the disciples, out in a boat on the "storm tossed sea." In the song, the disciples are frightened, requiring a great rumbling in the piano and eliciting a hearty outcry from the boys, especially the fellow whose voice was already starting to change. Then, with an abrupt switch to a tinkly accompaniment, Jesus reassures the disciples -- and here, the girls shone like angels -- "They all shall sweetly obey my will, peace be still -- peace, be still."

Hymn-singing at Calvin Christian provided a delectable feast of language -- how many six year-olds read sentences like "Master, the tempest is raging, the billows are tossing high"? -- and introduced me to music notation, which I perceived first as gestural: when the black dots on the staff ascended, the music swept up, and when they descended, the music swooped down. It was spatial, too: a note drawn hollow in the middle could command a whole measure of linear space, all by itself, which pointed to the temporal: a hollow note took more time than a black one -- you held it out several beats. Soon I could read step-wise motion -- that is, notes in sequence: A, B, C, because the

pitches were close together on the staff: space-line-space, and on up the ladder. And then, I could read and sound out triads, or a skip from one note over the next note, to the one after that, like so: A to C, B to D. I didn't know the names of the notes -- that would come a few years later -- but after I got a melody down, by scanning the score and catching it by ear from kids who already knew it, I sang it passionately by heart, reading the hymn book for the words, which fascinated me.

This was not Mother Goose, Andersen, or Seuss. This was the sound, the vocabulary, of the King James Bible, from which my mother had taught me the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. In Washington, at bedtime, as I turned on my feather pillow and snuggled into her waist, she read one or the other to me, encouraging me to memorize them. "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." she began, and I repeated: "The Lord is my shepherd . . ." And when I was four or five, she and Dad gave me my own Bible, the cover featuring handsome long-haired Jesus sitting on a rock beneath a blinding blue sky, arms outstretched, speaking to muslin-robed children of all ages: toddlers, youngsters, a few taller kids in the back, one holding to a tethered goat or sheep, another grasping a sheaf of wheat. I was discouraged by the tiny printing inside, and didn't attempt reading from this Bible for years. But I remember the sharp, lavender smell of that book: the acrid ink, the tissuey leaves, the stiff buckram binding. Ancient poets lived inside that smell; they were indigo, pulp, and fiber. And alongside, the lilt of my mother's voice: pleasant, firm, a little distant, yet reassuring, because I'd known her measured sonorities from the womb. "Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life," I chanted after her.

During recess at Calvin Christian, we children played in a large portion of the weedy lot containing a tetherball pole, a green wooden sandbox, and space to run and play tag or Red Rover. I would build volcanoes and castles in the sandbox if someone asked me, but preferred tetherball, which was active, required skill, and occasionally involved someone getting bonked on the head and everyone laughing. I also took to walking alone at the perimeter of the playground, which was overhung by drowsy coconut palms, long fronds leaning in, rustling, as if to gossip. My favorite tree was a spectacular Traveler's Palm, its trunk a great, scored handle, its greenery a wide, glossy fan, teasing the sky. Along the fence, scruffy lantana grew wild, its flower heads of elfin

white, orange, and yellow bloomlets nodding among toothed leaves, which released a cloud of cinnamon when I crushed them underfoot. And within the fence links, garlands of honeysuckle arced and twisted, their feathered trumpets quivering in the breeze.

Content along this fence, which seemed not to be a fence, but an invitation, and inspired by the stories my first-grade classmates and I whispered in single-grade groups, or by the stories read to all of us, grades together, I began narrating silently what I observed, telling the tale of the moment, like a voice-over: "Sam and Tommy ran to the tetherball pole. Sam arrived first. He grabbed the ball and swung it." Soon, in a move toward self-consciousness, I narrated my own actions as if I were composing a children's book: "First, Ann walked up to the Poinciana tree. She liked its fuzzy pink flowers. She picked one and sniffed it. It smelled sweet. Then she walked to the fence and looked out at the street. She looked up at the sky."

And when I looked up at the sky, past the honeysuckle, the palms, the Poinciana, I began to envision a larger world of my own making, because it seemed, in the eggy Florida sun, that my own spirit, entwined with something holy, had been bestowed on me here, had taken root, and would surely put forth a green shoot, and another, and another, and one day, flower.

My private stories might take all recess. No one ever singled me out for unsocial behavior; I could be a whole note, containing my silent beats, alone. And then, just as the desire to read or sing with the others began to well up in me, Miss Honnadale appeared in the yard with a brass ding-dong bell and rang us all back into the classroom, like a frontier schoolmarm.

When a child experiences the wholeness of silence, the beats known only to her, she has passed into grace, and despite distractions, will continue to seek that sublimity, return to it, cultivate it by hook or crook, for it is nothing less than her soul. So, Florida, because you were my encompassment, I cannot help it, you lie within me, as surely as silence, music, words, and my parents do.