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I CALLED HIM POP

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PRELUDE

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, *"You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face."*

It is far easier for me to write about the good times in my life than to face the fear of dealing with the moments that changed who I became.

A sage wrote, *"Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies in us while we live."*

So today, I'm going to deal with the shadows of the memories of my earliest best friend. I call him Pop.

FOR THOSE WHO CAME IN LATE

My earliest memories are of the orphanage where I really grew up.

It was the Children's Home somewhere in Dade County, Florida. The campus was beautiful and the dormitories separated by distance and beautiful oak trees draped in Spanish moss.

As inmates, we were told what to do and only as much as we needed to know. As a matter of fact, I wasn't even aware I had a brother and a sister until someone picked us up at that orphanage.

THIS CHAPTER

It was Nettie Hood who came to get us.

As best I can tell, I was 10-years-old at this point in my life.

One day, for whatever reason, Nettie Hood brought us together and told that we were related and headed for a home together. I don't think she ever adopted us; her's was a foster home. (A foster home is a household in which

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an orphaned or delinquent child is placed, usually by a social-service agency of the state.)

When we arrived at her home, in Hialeah, Florida, she announced that we would be staying with her (whom we called “Aunt Nettie”)— and her husband, Frank (whom we called “Pop”) until we were reunited with our mother. That was the first time I was even aware that I had a mother.

(Years later, I would discover that my mother was a prisoner at the Florida State Prison, in Raiford, Florida, having been convicted of embezzlement and grand theft.)

Aunt Nettie was a kind, Christian lady who had a tender heart for all things broken. She stood about 5 feet, dressed plainly and wore inexpensive glasses. She dressed up only on Sundays when she went to church with her sister, Edith.

She had a black, scruffy multi-breed dog who had only one eye. The dog had appeared at her door one day and she had adopted it. I loved that dog and he took a liking to me as well. I would pet that dog for hours and he would beg for more.

She had a parakeet with a broken, left wing. Unless it’s cage was covered, it was noisy and arrogant, but Aunt Nettie loved that bird. The bird hated me. When I came near, she’d go wild, kicking seeds on the floor and flapping its wings. Nothing I could do would cause that bird to settle down.

When things broke, Aunt Nettie did her best to mend them and find some use for them. The best I could tell, her whole life had been spent fixing broken things, pets and people.

Her home was full of old, mended things that others might have discarded, but not Aunt Nettie.

But this story is not about Aunt Nettie; it’s about Uncle Pop.

Pop had undergone an routine operation for some kind of pain he was experiencing. However, something went wrong in the operating room and he as left partially paralyzed along the entire left side of his body.

Pop had no vision from his left eye. In fact, over time, its pupil turned a ghostly white and grey swirl.

He could not use his left hand although Aunt Nettie kept encouraging him to do so. She insisted that if he exercised, he could gain some use of that crippled paw; but, he never did.

When he walked — which was seldom — he dragged his left leg. He would lean on Aunt Nettie whenever he wanted to move from the lean-back chair in which he sat hour-after-hour, day-after-day waiting to die.

He only left that chair to go to the bathroom and to bed.

Pop had a crewcut haircut, just like mine — or, more accurately, mine was just like his. Aunt Nettie gave him a haircut every two weeks.

In those days, we did not have a television. Whatever entertainment we enjoyed, we had to generate.

I would sit with Pop by the hour and regale him with stories of all the stuff I was doing outside the house.

I'd tell him about running over to the Hialeah Race Track and sneaking in to see the horses. My brother, Durant, and I almost got caught a time or two; but, we were fleet of foot and could outrun any worker at that race track. I'd tell him about taking my scooter around the block.

(A scooter was a two-wheeled vehicle that one controlled with the handlebars and moved by placing one foot on the ramp between the two wheels and pushing it with the other foot.)

I'd tell him about all the things I had learned in school. For whatever reason, I have no recollection of what school I attended nor of any of the friends I may — or may not — have had there.

The more outrageous the tales, the more pleasure Pop seemed to take in listening to them.

Pop and I played checkers by the hour. He was a good player but admitted that he had been much better in his younger days. I lost every game of checkers in those days. I longed for the day that I could actually win a game; but, Pop was a very good player — at least, compared to me.

Pop's routine seldom changed.

He would get up in the morning and Aunt Nettie would help him go to the bathroom.



Then he would sit in his chair where Aunt Nettie would bring him breakfast.

I would sit at the table with Aunt Nettie to eat; but, once finished, I would wash the dishes as quickly as possible so that I could go and sit with Pop again.

She would feed him lunch about noon and then help him to the restroom again.

Then came one of my favorite parts of the day.

Pop and I would take our afternoon nap. They had a twin-sized bed.

We would take our nap with all our clothes on. Pop would lay facing the door and I would lay — with my back to his — facing the window. Within minutes, I would be asleep and, according Aunt Nettie, he would be asleep as well.

There was no clock in the bedroom so I have no idea how long we slept, but he'd cry out to her when he woke up and she'd let him lean upon her so that he could get to the restroom.

Then he'd return to his chair in the living room.

The stroke had taken a lot from him and he seemed to resent that he was confined to that chair.

Aunt Nettie insisted that he was self-confined and she was willing to take him anywhere, any time. Sometimes, in response to that offer, he would say rather hateful things. I, always, tried to make light of such talk either because I did not know what else to do or because I just wanted my "home" to be a happy one.

This was the only home I had ever known and anything that threatened it had to be attacked or made to be too funny to even be considered seriously.

Over time, Pop began to change — and not for the better.

He began to say really hateful things to Aunt Nettie. He blamed her for not cooking his meals right, for his chair not being comfortable enough and for the light in the room being too bright.

He became more critical of all things — including me. Sometimes, he would belittle how I played checkers. One day, he claimed he didn't enjoy playing checkers any more because "I played like a girl."

I remember running out of the house into the back yard and crying under the large guava tree. I had been doing my best to win, but my best was not good enough for Pop.

The guava tree had widespread limbs and provided quite a bit of shade. (A guava is a sweet, fragrant tropical fruit. Guavas are oval, about 2 inches in diameter, and color ranges from yellow to bright red. Nanny used the ripe fruit in jams, juices, and sauces.

There was no grass growing under that tree; but, I found comfort leaning against its trunk. I would dream of being somewhere else — anywhere else — for the longest time. But, when it was over, there I was still under the guava tree in Nanny's backyard.

It seemed like hours before I could compose myself enough to come back into the house.

When I sat in my chair, next to Pop, it was as if he had no idea what had happened. He never apologized and I never mentioned it either.

I began to memorize his checker moves. After what must have been a hundred games, I was ready to try to win — and I did. For that split second, I was King of the Checker Board. It was my first victory and I wanted to savor it.

Pop became belligerent. He railed that I had cheated and moved his checkers when he wasn't looking. He yelled that he was ashamed of me. I not only played like a girl; I cheated like one — and he was ashamed of me.

So, again, I found myself under the guava tree.

I continued to play checkers with Pop but my heart was not longer in it. I would make obvious mistakes so he could win. Each time he crowed about his prowess as if he had beaten the world's champion. I would sit in silence.

I still took naps with Pop, but our playing days were behind us.

I'd find any excuse to escape outdoors and run around the neighborhood. I had no friends except Pop so I wandered alone and very lonely.

Pearl S. Buck wrote, "*Inside myself is a place where I live all alone, and that's where you renew your springs that never dry up.*"

I learned to enjoy my own company. I learned to observe others, but always from a distance.

Pop acted as if he could not understand what was the matter with me.

It was as if he wasn't even aware that he had destroyed my one victory in hundreds of games.

Pop became more and more belligerent toward Aunt Nettie.

Nothing she could do was good enough.

She didn't come to him quickly enough when he called her.

She spent too much time on the phone.

Her cooking was inferior. There was too much salt on his food — or too little. His scrambled eggs were not “well done” — like he liked them — or they were too well done.

She didn't spend enough time with him. Moments later, he's complain that she hovered over him like an old hen and he needed more breathing room.

Aunt Nettie spent more and more time crying and praying; praying and crying. Yet, it was to no avail. Nothing she did was good enough for him.

Her sister, Edith, told her time and time again to dump him into a “home” where “they” could manage him; but Aunt Nettie was not one to give up on broken things. Everything, she was determined, could be mended with a little more love and care.

She was wrong.

One day, Pop was particularly irritable.

After complaining all morning, about everything that was done or said, he announced that we were going to take a nap. There was something in his demeanor that scared me; but, I hoped that a nap would change his outlook on the day so I joined him.

I don't think we slept very long. He woke up with a roar, calling Aunt Nettie to the bedside.

She helped him to his feet.

All of the sudden, he screamed at her and said she was the cause of all his problems and that she had conspired with the doctors to make him a retard.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, she protested that she loved him and would never — ever — do anything to hurt him.

Then, it happened.

He slapped her with his right hand. He hit her so hard that she was propelled out the bedroom, smashing her back into the wall with enough force to throw her ever-present glasses from her face. She collapsed to the floor momentarily, but tried to get up.

Pop moved quickly toward her, dragging his left leg behind him like a lead weight tied to a ball and chain. He raised his right arm as if to strike her again.

I bounded over the bed and raced between them.

At 10 years of age, I must have weighed about 90 pounds and I was no match for his anger and the weight he carried. I reached up, with both hands, to block his swinging arm.

He looked at me with an anger I had never seen before. His face was contorted like he was totally out of control. He hit me in the face, knocking me to the floor. The force was such that I had a reddened, black-and-blue face for hours afterward.

I jumped up from the floor ready to do all that I could, but I realized there was little I could do. He was too big and I was far too little.

I can tell you, honestly, that moment marked the last time any man or boy ever hit me — in anger — whom I did not kill or make him wish I had.

I've killed a lot of men. It might have been one more when I grabbed the handle of that broom. But, at that very moment, I felt Aunt Nettie's tender, strong hand on my shoulder. I heard her soft words, "No, Darry D. That's not right."

I looked at this saint. She was struggling with her one hand to put her glasses back into place while gently stopping me from doing something really stupid with her other hand.

She told me quietly but firmly to go to my room. And I did.

She helped Pop struggle to his chair. He was cursing all the way.

Nobody ever cursed in Aunt Nettie's home. Decades before, she had come to know Christ her King, and would not tolerate such behavior. Yet today, she said nothing.

After she placed him gently into his chair, she stood behind him, lowered her head and — with tears streaming down her cheeks — prayed.

I closed the door to my room and cried.

The next morning, her sister, Edith came by. She had to go to store and insisted that she would need a big, strong boy to carry those boxes.

I kissed Aunt Nettie goodbye and headed for the door.

Pop called out, "What? No kiss for your Uncle Pop?"

The expression on his face was as if nothing had ever happened between us the day before. There was that look of pride in his eye just like the first time I had asked if I could play checkers with him.

I hugged his neck, kissed his cheek, and ran out the door. He never saw my tears.

The drive to store was in silence. Edith tried to strike up several conversations, but I was lost in a world of wondering what was going on at home.

At the store, the boxes weren't very big at all, but I enjoyed looking at all the stuff. For that hour or so, I was lost in a world of possibilities. There were so many things that I would have liked to have gotten for Aunt Nettie, but I couldn't afford any of them. If it took a nickle to sing, I'd have to hum — and I had learned to hum many years before.

The ride home was equally silent. I stared out the window and wished things could be as they once had been. Yet, somewhere in the unlighted caverns of my imagination, I knew that my world would never be the same again.

When we got home, Pop was gone.

I never saw him again.

Aunt Nettie said he had gone to a "home" where they could better care for him.

She visited him, faithfully, every day. She never asked me to go along and I never volunteered.

I loved my Pop.

I loved the joking, the checkers, the naps and the hugs.

I did not recognize that man who hit me.

I have never missed the man who left my life that day.

My Pop had disappeared long before.