

A War Of Her Own

By Sylvia Dickey Smith

Chapter 1

Orange, Texas. 1924.

It was early Sunday morning and the sparrows were beginning to flitter across the backyard, stopping to peck and scratch for the slightest morsel of food. Marie stuck her head out the screen door and looked cautiously around. Overnight, a light snow had fallen. It wouldn't last long, though. No one who lived in Orange, Texas expected snow to stay on the ground for more than a few hours. By noon, it would all be gone. A brown rabbit hopped across the backyard, stopped to wriggle its nose, then continued its journey, leaving a trail of tiny footprints in the snow.

Mama was over near the barn tossing dried corn to a flock of clucking hens, while Ivan and Robert, Marie's good-for-nothing older brothers, hunkered around the pot-bellied stove inside, laughing and talking ugly. Papa'd chopped the wood and built the fire before leaving for the creosote plant. He'd come home that evening smelling like old coffee brewed in oil. No telling where her younger sister Edith had gone.

But the morning's peaceful calm belied the panic Marie felt as trickles of warm blood ran down the inside of her thighs. Clutching a gray wool sweater tighter against the cold air, she fled down the back steps of the old homestead toward the outhouse, ducking behind a large bush when Mama grabbed a chicken, skillfully wrung its neck, and headed back to the house. Hopefully, she wouldn't notice the once virgin snow now stained with Marie's tainted blood. If Mama saw it, maybe she'd think the red drops came from the sacrificial chicken. For Mama, a devout Pentecostal, it wasn't Sunday without church and a fried chicken dinner.

Soon as Marie heard the backdoor slam, she ran farther down the path, breathing hard, each quick breath visible in the cold air.

She reached the toilet in the nick of time, for the blood flowed heavier now, down her legs, into her shoes, and onto the ground. She grabbed the rough-hewn door handle and pulled, but it was latched from the inside. Probably Edith had gone in and locked it so Mama wouldn't make her come kill chickens.

Edith couldn't kill a chicken. Edith couldn't kill anything. She even rescued crickets when they got inside the house. She'd cup them in the palm of her hands, carry them outdoors and let them go. "Play your fiddle," she'd say as they hopped off and struck a chord for freedom.

Marie tapped on the weather-beaten door. "Okay, Edith," she whispered. "I know it's you in there. Open the door. Hurry, I need to get in before Mama sees me."

Edith raised the latch, stuck her head out and grinned, dimples shining. "What's your hurry, Toots? You don't want to kill chickens, either?" Then she looked down at Marie's feet. "Good lord, Marie, is that chicken blood? Or is all that coming out of you? You're not dying are you?"

"Shh, no, I'm not dying, honey, but don't be so loud. I don't want anyone to hear us. Can you run fetch me a pile of rags while I get out of these bloody clothes?"

“Sure, come on in.” Edith sniffed away her tears as she swung the door wide, grabbed Marie’s arm and helped her up. “I’ll go get the rags and be back in a hurry, just hang on.”

“Also, wet a couple of the rags, okay? But be sure Mama doesn’t see you. Oh, and on the way to the barn, can you cover up those drops of blood?”

“Sure. And don’t worry, I’m good at hiding,” Edith giggled and darted off toward the barn.

Marie couldn’t keep from smiling at the biggest understatement she’d ever heard. Edith vacated the area when it came time to do chores. That’s when she got the urge to visit Miss Jones—the outhouse—and stayed until the dishes were washed, wiped, and put away. Uncanny timing that girl had.

While Marie waited for the rags, she pulled down her blood-soaked underwear for inspection. She felt guilty when she saw the tiny mass Madam Tousant said to look for, but she also felt relieved.

Then again, it just didn’t seem right to put it in the toilet like it was shit. But since she knew of no other place to dispose of it that the dogs wouldn’t dig up or the chickens peck, she dumped it into the rank pit below—along with a piece of her heart.

Backed to the rough bench, she hiked her nightgown and sat on the hole. She smelled and felt the blood as it dripped into the foul-smelling cesspit below. Her stomach cramped something awful. She wrapped her arms around her middle glad for the pain, because it told her she’d been successful. Her life hadn’t come to an end like she thought it would when her monthly curse didn’t come. She hoped it also meant Sol would appreciate her sacrifice and wouldn’t leave her now that she’d rid herself of the problem.

The door opened and Edith stepped up into the outhouse, her arms full of rags, and one by one handed them to Marie, who commenced cleaning herself. Once finished, she tossed the bloody rags, along with her step-ins, into the pit.

As if Edith read her mind, the younger girl said, “We both need to take a big shit to cover up the bloody rags, or when Papa or Mama see them, they’ll ask questions.” She pulled down her own drawers and plopped on the other hole. “Now, tell me what you did to yourself, Marie. I hadn’t seen that much blood since Ivan stabbed Mama’s hand with a kitchen knife.”

“Keep your voice down, Edith,” she said, putting a finger to her lips. “I’ll explain it all to you one of these days.”

Innocent so far, Edith left no doubt in anyone’s mind that she wouldn’t stay that way for long. The baby of the family, two years younger than Marie, she tested every rule given by Mama and Papa. Not a bad kid, Edith simply loved life—a life without rules. Rules seemed of no consequence to her. Nor did any standards set for young ladies.

Marie loved her little sister, but alongside the love, she harbored resentment that Edith got away with things she never dared test. To add insult to injury, Edith’s hair, the color of the darkest of midnights, hung down her back in long radiant curls, while Marie’s dull dishwater blonde hair refused to even grow, let alone curl.

That day, Marie hadn’t a clue what Edith knew about how babies were made—or not, as the case may be—but Marie certainly didn’t plan to be the one to hand her that information on a silver platter.

Besides, she doubted she’d ever need to teach her rebellious little sister anything about the birds and the bees. She’d learn soon enough without Marie’s help.

Weak with blood loss, Marie grabbed Edith’s elbow and they marched together up the path to the house. “And if you tell anyone about this, I’ll wring your neck.” Marie warned.

“Cross my heart and hope to die. Besides, I’ll even keep Mama busy till you get to the bedroom.”

* * *

Life went a little smoother for several weeks, although Marie wondered why the smell of coffee still made her sick in the mornings.

When her monthly bleeding didn’t return and people started talking about her getting fat, Marie gathered her courage and prepared to tell Sol. Sol had demanded that she end the pregnancy, and she’d learned from Madam Tousant which herbs would do what was needed.

She’d thought she’d taken care of the situation without anyone finding out she’d lost her cherry to Sol, and Marie had hoped to resume her good girl status in the community. She kept Sol at arm’s length, still hurt he’d wanted to end it all. But something was still growing inside her.

The next evening, she ran into him downtown in Orange, in the middle of a group of girls and a blond-headed boy in a sailor suit.

When Sol saw her coming, he turned around and walked briskly the opposite way. Marie hurried to catch up. When she did, she grabbed his arm, bringing him to a stop. The rest of his companions had turned the corner and were out of sight.

Trying not to let the tears come, she begged, “I know I lost the baby. I saw it. I held it in my hands. But I swear I still have another one growing inside me. Feel my belly.” She pulled his hand to her stomach.

He looked startled.

She held his hand there. “I must’ve been carrying twins and lost only one. But it’s too late to take the herbs again. You have to marry me, Sol. People are already starting to talk.”

Sol, several years older than Marie, jerked his arm away and spat out, “I don’t give a good goddamn, Marie, whether they talk about you or not, or how many babies you have. I’m not marrying you. I told you I still love Irene Meade. If I can’t marry her, I won’t marry anyone.”

He spoke so loudly, passersby paused to look at the tall, thin young man with dark eyes and dimpled chin. Not handsome by any means, but with an ego that attracted attention—and had convinced Marie he was as great as he thought he was.

“But Sol, Irene broke your heart, and now she’s engaged to someone else.”

“It’s her or no one.” He leaned down to Marie and at first she expected a kiss, but instead, he whispered in her ear. “Besides, how do I know you haven’t slept with some other guy since I got in your pants?”

Without stopping to think, Marie popped him in the mouth, as hard as she could. Then she turned, fearful he’d return the blow, and walked away as fast as she could.

She held the panic inside all the way home, and then threw herself across the bed and cried. Edith, awakened by the sobs, put her arm around Marie and rubbed her back, but never asked why she cried. Although Edith had a devil-may-care attitude about society’s expectations of her, at the same time she held maturity beyond her years. And her love and loyalty to family and especially to her older sister Marie knew no bounds.

By the time the early-morning sun slanted through their window the next morning, Marie had a plan.

If people at Mama’s church found out about the baby, Mama would never be able to hold her head up there again, and that would kill her. But Marie knew that Papa had been worried

about his old aunt Gertie, who lived alone in Hartburg, a rural community outside town. Marie would tell them she'd go take care of the old lady for a few months. That's what she'd do.

When she told Mama and Papa, they couldn't have been more pleased. Mama even helped Marie pack.

"This is the nicest thing you've ever done, Marie. You've made your papa very happy." Mama carefully folded the last dress and tucked it in the suitcase. "Who's going to take you?"

"Sol will. I know he won't mind." Truth was, she hadn't asked him yet, but didn't dare admit it.

"That's nice of him. Here, here's a nickel to help pay for the trip."

Mama pulled the coin from her apron pocket.

Marie knew just how few nickels Mama possessed and hated to take it, but did anyway, not knowing what she faced.

"How long you plan on staying?" Toothless gums showed through Mama's smile.

Marie counted six months forward in her head. "I'll see how it goes. Don't worry. I'll be fine. If I need anything, I'll write." She walked out the door, holding her head up with a confidence that was the opposite of how she felt inside.

Sol must have seen her coming down the road, for no sooner was she inside the picket fence of his mama's big white, two-story house on Border Street than he stepped onto the wide front porch. The screen door slammed behind him. If she hadn't known better, she'd have sworn steam rose from the top of his head.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" He pointed at the tan suitcase in her hand. "You sure as hell aren't moving in here with me and Mama."

"I didn't come to move in with you. I came to ask if you'd take me out to Hartburg so I can stay with my aunt until after the baby comes. That way, folks won't know my shame, and afterwards, I can still hold my head up in this town. At least you can do that much."

Sol had enough chivalry left in him to hitch Old Molly to the wagon and do what she asked.

They rode the twelve miles in silence except for the clip clop of horse hooves on the roadbed, and the occasional plop, plop of horse dung as it fell under the wagon wheels. The foul stench lingered in her nostrils and churned her stomach, but pride forced her to swallow whatever came up in her throat.

When they finally arrived in Hartburg, Sol followed directions as told, but stopped the wagon a good quarter mile from the house.

He sat on the driver's bench like a puffed-up toad frog, waiting for her to get down.

"You're not taking me all the way?"

"This is as far as I go. You're lucky I brought you this far. I almost stopped a few miles back."

"I can't believe you'd make me walk that far carrying a suitcase, not to mention your baby."

"Believe it or not, this is as far as I go." He clicked his tongue at the horse and pulled the reins as if to turn around.

"Okay. Wait. I'll go." She threw him a disgusted look, but with little choice, eased herself down to the ground. "I made a mistake."

"You're no gentleman. You're nothing but a bastard." She grabbed her suitcase, spun around and headed up the long path to the house. The sound of the horse-drawn wagon echoed in her ears, grew faint, and then, nothing.

Hartburg was country. And Blind Aunt Gertie's house was country country, and even older than Aunt Gertie. Marie had visited a number of times over the years with her family. The well-worn floors creaked every time anyone took a step, and sometimes at night, when no one did. The place had been modernized with electricity and running water, but other than that, the house looked its age—old. Since she had been a little girl, Marie's favorite spot had always been the swing on the front porch.

Everyone had started calling the old woman Blind Aunt Gertie since cataracts had stolen her eyesight years ago. Now she was ninety years old. And although age had also taken its toll on her hearing, Marie had noticed that Aunt Gertie heard what she wanted to. She existed day-to-day, barely aware the world turned around her, stubbornly insisting no one would ever force her out of her own home.

She'd been born there, she'd die there, and she dang well better be buried in the yard behind the house.

Marie looked back at the road. No sign of Sol or the wagon. She looked around, happy to see the porch swing still there, swaying slightly in the breeze like ghosts were relaxing on it. She went inside.

But the minute the screen door slammed behind Marie, the musty smell of an old person too feeble to bathe, and certainly unconcerned with dust and mold, made her dart back outside and lose what food she'd kept down so far that day.

It had been a while since she'd visited, and now that she saw the condition of the house, she felt ashamed she hadn't come sooner. The place looked like one abandoned for decades—dust, clutter, threadbare curtains covered in cobwebs, rat droppings everywhere.

She found Aunt Gertie sitting in her rocking chair near the big picture window in the living room. Cloudy eyes stared out as if she could see the trees bursting open with new growth, excited that winter had eased into spring. Her thin, unwashed white hair straggled down her back, and she wore a dingy nightgown she must have had on for days, weeks perhaps.

"Aunt Gertie," Marie called out, unsure whether or not her aunt could hear her, but not wanting to frighten her either. She stepped closer, tapped her aunt on the shoulder and helped the gnarled fingers find Marie's eyes, nose, mouth, and chin, until, at last, recognition set in. The toothless old woman smiled and clapped her hands with delight.

Sitting beside Gertie's rocker was the cherry lamp table with its large brass claw-and-ball feet Marie had always loved. Every time she visited she'd ask where it came from. Gertie would only smile and say a secret lover no one ever knew about gave it to her years ago. Marie reached over and flipped on the Tiffany lamp, wishing she knew the story behind the table. She nudged the wiry hair off her aunt's face and pinned it back up into the topknot from which it strayed. "I'll make us a cup of hot tea, okay?" she asked quietly, happy to see Gertie nod. The old lady's hearing was still good.

The small unkempt kitchen held a dilapidated table and two chairs, kerosene stove, and a cabinet with two gray enamel dishpans full of dirty dishes on top. Marie found enough water to prime the pump, then pushed and pulled the rust-colored handle until she'd collected a bucketful of fresh water. After ladling enough water into a blue-and-white granite teakettle, she struck a match and lit the stove. Waiting for it to boil, she scrounged around inside the cabinet until she

found a tin of stale tea leaves. Soon, she carried two cups of the steaming hot, dark liquid into the sitting room.

When Gertie raised the cup to her lips and sipped, sheer delight flashed behind her sightless eyes. A spot of color flushed her ghost-white cheeks. "Ohh, that's good," she said, with a sigh. "It's been a long time since anyone made me hot tea. Thanky, sweetheart. You're a good girl."

They sipped slowly, reveling in the drink and the company of the other. When their cups were both empty, Marie set them aside, took her aunt's hand and rested it on Marie's growing belly.

"I'm having a baby," she said, trying to sound firm, but her voice broke a little. "I need somewhere to stay until it's born."

Aunt Gertie folded her arms and rocked an imaginary child left and right, back and forth, humming a lullaby as she did so. "Baby?" She uttered the word as if describing a first-time miracle, but Marie knew this pregnancy was no immaculate conception.

Delight in the sightless eyes of her aunt made Marie want to cry.

"You stay here as long as you like, sweetheart." Aunt Gertie glowed with the idea of a baby in the house, and looked as if she grew younger by the minute.

Bless her heart. She had always been a strong woman, never married, never wanted to marry, an independent cuss who swore she didn't need a man. Marie never had understood that, but a new regard for the old aunt formed in Marie's heart.

The two settled into a routine. Over the next few months, Marie cleaned both the house and Aunt Gertie, and did the cooking. At night, they'd sit side by side in the porch swing, Gertie's crooked fingers resting on the growing belly of her great niece, alert for any movement inside the womb. Each time the baby kicked, Gertie laughed, clapped her hands and hummed a tune.

In time, Marie met a few neighbors on her way down to the corner store where she picked up a few groceries with her aunt's meager pension check. Likely the folks guessed Marie's predicament, but were too polite to ask. She wondered what they said behind her back.

One day, the preacher from a nearby Baptist church came to call at the house. After brief formalities, he grabbed Marie's hands and looked her in the eye, but his gaze kept straying to her belly.

"Jesus gave his life on the cross for your sins, you know," he said, as if telling her something she hadn't heard every day of her life. "Here, let me read you what the Bible says about it here in John Chapter Three." He read a passage familiar to Marie, and then looked to see if she'd been swayed.

She hadn't.

"If you confess your sins before God and ask Jesus to forgive you and come into your heart as your personal lord and savior, He will."

Marie just looked at him.

"If you do, you will spend eternity in a heaven where the streets are paved with gold," he explained, his eyes sparkling with the gold of which he spoke. Before he left, he shared plans for a new church building in case she wanted to make a donation.

She didn't.

The days grew longer and her days of confinement grew shorter.

On one particularly hot summer day, wilted and weary, she sat on the front porch in the dilapidated swing and nursed an ache in her lower back. The pain had started the night before

and still hadn't eased. Mindlessly, her bare, puffy feet nudged against the porch each time the swing went back, and then she lifted her legs and let the momentum carry her forward. The unwelcome visitor inside her womb seemed to find comfort in the peaceful, hypnotic movement. Either that or the baby slept, for the kicking had slowed and finally stopped a couple of days ago.

She rubbed her belly with one hand and with the other, fanned herself with an old newspaper. Her half-empty glass of lemonade rested on the porch railing, within easy reach. Condensation pooled around the bottom of the glass and dripped off the railing to the porch, below. Listless, she stuck her finger under the flow, caught a drip and put it in her mouth.

Her mind wandered to Sol. She hadn't heard a word since he'd dropped her off months ago. She wondered if he and Irene had gotten together, and if not, would she still stand a chance with him after this?

Heavy and lethargic, she'd sat and swung and stared off into space for most of the afternoon when, down the road, a movement—something red—caught her eye. Someone headed their way.

Marie stopped the swing with her foot, and sat motionless, holding her breath, hearing only the sound of her pulse in her ears. Maybe Sol came with a marriage proposal.

As the figure drew closer, she realized instead of a man, it was a girl dressed in a red blouse and brown trousers. She carried a small suitcase in one hand and seemed to hold a cigarette in the other.

Marie shielded her eyes with her hands and squinted harder.

Oh lord, she'd recognize that blouse anywhere, the same one she had outgrown several years ago and passed down to Edith.

A speck on the shoulder of the blouse sealed the deal. The visitor coming down the road was indeed her little sister, Edith. The object on the girl's shoulder could be nothing other than the heart-shaped mother-of-pearl brooch she'd handed down to Edith last year on her birthday.

The girl never went anywhere without that infernal cheap pin. She'd told Edith the tiny red stone set in the middle was mere colored glass, but the way Edith acted, an expensive, perfectly cut ruby adorned the center.

The closer Edith got to the house, the easier Marie could see what else the girl wore—a big impish smile.

Marie eased her awkward, lumbering body up out of the swing, one hand on the chain, the other supporting her back. A twinge grabbed her around the middle as she straightened to a standing position. She stopped to catch her breath, then moved to the edge of the porch and waited, watching.

Marie knew the exact second Edith saw her belly and the realization hit. Edith's jaw lost its hinge and fell open. By the time she stepped up on the porch, her eyes looked as big as her mouth.

"How come you didn't tell me you were having a baby? If I'd a known, I would've come out here with you."

"Mama doesn't suspect, does she?"

"She doesn't know what to think since you didn't write. She's worried sick, told me to come find out what's going on."

"You better keep your mouth shut about this," she said, rubbing her belly. Her own sarcastic, hateful voice startled her. Up until now, she'd spent the last few months convincing herself this was all an unfortunate accident. Once she had the baby and gave it away, she'd resume her rightful domain as the good sister. At night, when she tossed and turned to find relief

from the weight of the baby stretched from bladder to rib cage, she reminded herself of her good-girl status, that she didn't deserve this. People like Edith, who never played by the rules, and their no-good brothers, Ivan and Robert, who were just plain lazy and mean were the ones who deserved to pay for their sins. Not someone like her who never even talked back to Mama or went to bed without her face washed or her teeth brushed. She had complied with every rule ever given her, so she must be more worthy than the rest.

But all that had changed that afternoon upstairs at Sol's mama's house when he sweet-talked her into sleeping with him. He said if she would, he'd be able to get over Irene, and she'd been dumb enough to believe him. Afterwards, the whole thing left her repulsed, so full of shame she'd run all the way home and locked herself in her room. Now, she was paying the price for her one and only sin.

She looked at Edith and put her hands on her hips. "And tell me, just who do you think you are, smoking cigarettes? You're too young to smoke."

Edith ignored the question and blew the smoke in the direction of Marie's face. "For your information, smarty pants, I'm just two years younger than you. I can smoke if I want to. Anyway, that's beside the point. What I want to know is why you didn't tell me you were having a baby? I'd have come with you."

"And gotten you in trouble with Mama? No, thank you. You do well enough all on your own, sweetie. Besides, I didn't want you here."

Marie looked down at the suitcase still in Edith's hand. "Well, now that you're here you might as well come inside and put away your things." She opened the screen for Edith. "How long did Mama say you could stay?"

Edith ignored the question and headed inside, but before Marie could follow, another cramp caught her in the back, took her breath away. A tiny trickle of water rolled down the insides of her thighs.

She stopped outside the doorway, afraid to move.

There went another trickle.

Edith came out, pitched her half-smoked cigarette off the porch and grabbed Marie's arm as a gush of fluid washed down her legs, dripped through the cracks and onto the ground below.

"Uh oh, your water broke. That means the baby's on the way. Here, let me help you inside."

Annoyance rumbled inside Marie. "Listen to Miss Know It All," she said. Then the realization hit. Rather than annoyance, it was pure terror she felt. She also realized how grateful she was Edith had come.

Meanwhile, Edith grabbed her by the arm, helped her inside and over to a daybed by the window. She yanked off the covers as Marie crawled in, then Edith reached over and pulled the threadbare curtains closed.

"Thanks," Marie muttered. "No sense in the whole world witnessing the price I have to pay for my sin."

"Oh, Marie, don't be so dramatic," Edith laughed. "Shoot, you just got caught, that's the only difference between you and most other girls."

Blind Aunt Gertie sat across the room looking out a window, seeing nothing. Her hands lay in her lap squeezed into tight balls.

"Take care of my girl, take care of my girl," she whispered over and over, as if God needed reminding. The creaking chair rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

“Don’t you have a midwife or someone who can come help?” Panic coated Edith’s voice. “We need someone who knows what they’re doing. I sure don’t know how to deliver a baby.”

“An old man, a Doctor Mosquito, lives next door. He said he’d come deliver the baby.

Run over and tell him to hurry.” Marie clenched the sheets and squeezed tight. “Hurry, I said. Another pain’s coming. Tell him to come quick.”

“I’m going, I’m going. Don’t do anything until I get back with the doctor.” Edith darted out, letting the screen door slam behind her.

Not doing anything until the doctor arrived sounded like a good idea to Marie, but she doubted her ability to comply, as another contraction tore through her gut. She grabbed the sheet and clenched it tighter.

God, no one told her it hurt like this. Poor Mama came to mind, she’d been through the same thing seven times. Marie wished now she’d have listened to Mama and kept her legs together.

The next contraction came at the same moment Edith darted back in. Out of breath, she squeaked, “The doctor’s on his way. He just had to put on his shoes.”

“I don’t care if the doctor has his damn shoes on or not. Tell him to just get here.”

“He’s coming, Toots. Hang on.” Edith wiped the sweat off of Marie’s forehead.

The contraction soon passed, but another sensation took its place. “Look, Edith, down between my legs. It’s like . . . like I feel something sticking out of me. Now it’s moving, Edith, it’s moving.

What is it? Look?”

“Moving? It can’t be the baby. They don’t come that fast.”

Surprised that Edith sounded as if she knew so much, Marie felt even more surprised when her younger sister reached over and yanked the sheet up, spread Marie’s legs wide and looked. If Marie hadn’t been in such pain, she’d have been embarrassed to death.

For the second time that day Edith’s mouth dropped open.

“There’s a tiny blue leg sticking out,” she yelled. “Babies aren’t supposed to come that way. Now what do I do?”

She dropped the sheet and sprinted to almost collide with the doctor who was just entering the room, bag in hand. “Get over here, Doctor, quick. Something’s wrong, bad wrong. I thought the head came out first.”

The bald, potbellied man rushed to the bedside, his loose shirttail flapping. “It should. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is the baby’s leg is sticking out of my sister,” Edith bellowed, her face redder than her blouse.

“It’s a footling breach,” he said after he checked under the sheet, “and the baby’s other leg is caught up inside her. We could’ve turned the baby earlier, but it’s too late now. All I can do is try and work the other leg free. Hold on, this will be a tough ride, honey. I’ll do the best I can.”

Marie opened her eyes long enough to see the doctor shake his head with concern, then he set his bag on a nearby table, rolled up his sleeves, and bent to his task.

Lost in a fabric of pain that went on forever, time became one long thread for Marie that led nowhere except deeper into a bearing down, unfruitful force that ripped her apart. In between contractions, the doctor reached up inside her and pushed, turned, pushed again, further each time until from somewhere far away, he said, “There, I’ve got the other leg out. Good work, Marie, just a little bit longer. Now push, hard.”

How the hell did he expect her to push harder when she lacked the strength to even breathe? Drenched in sweat, she heard herself scream, and wondered where the energy came from to do even that. She writhed, yelled how she'd kill Sol, adding a string of profanity ugly enough to bring pink to a sailor's cheeks.

She tried to push, but her body refused to follow what her brain and the doctor told her to do. Exhaustion took control. Unable to follow his order, she tried to hold back the pain. Going into it felt like more than she could bear. Still she tensed, pulled back, tried, hoped, and prayed the pain to go away.

It only grew stronger.

In an instant, her body made a decision all its own. It took control over her as if to say, what the hell, go into it. What you've done hasn't worked, so now I'm in charge. Hold on. Here we go.

She—it—they—whatever the gender—plunged her headlong into a bottomless pit of red pain. It grew darker, more intense than before, more than she ever thought possible. Nothing existed but pain—not even sound. From a place so deep inside her she didn't know it existed, the urge to push grew, took control and defiantly ordered the pain to hurt more and her to push harder. Somewhere in the back of her brain, she knew she squeezed Edith's hand and somewhere even further back, feared she crushed the bones in those slender fingers. But try as she wished, her vise-like fist refused to release the hand of her little sister.

In the pain-induced fog, she saw Edith who stared, hollow-eyed, from Marie's vagina to her face and back again. The doctor stopped to blink away salty tears, and then resumed his work.

After an eternity—no, more than an eternity—even in the midst of the pain, Marie felt a shift inside her and knew the child came out. But she heard no cry. Newborn babies always cried, at least those born alive did. Shameful hope took shape and grew by the second. Maybe the baby hadn't survived the birth, which resolved the whole issue. She could go on with her life like all this never happened. Unable to resist, she rose up on her elbow to look.

"The little tyke's too exhausted to cry," the doctor said as he wiped out the bloody infant's eyes and mouth. "The heartbeat and breathing are strong though. The good Lord helped us. We got us a healthy baby."

Marie couldn't imagine the good Lord had anything to do with the baby's health. If He had, the infant would've come out head first, like they were supposed to. Retribution's what it was, plain and simple—God's way of getting back at her.

"Look, Marie, it's a girl," Edith said as she clapped her hands and jumped with joy.

"I don't want to see her," Marie cried and turned her face to the wall. "I can't keep her."

