*STONE HARBOR*

*A Short Story*

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STONE HAROBOR is a short story from the GHETTO FLOWERS collection of stories that comprise three novels. Stone Harbor is from the book: Ghetto Flowers I: The Early Years, and can be purchased at:

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This story is based on actual events and characters, but has been fictionalized to enhance its educational and entertainment value, and to protect the innocent and guilty, but mostly to keep people from yelling at me. None of the characters as they are represented in this book are real living persons, with the exception of the author, and a couple of his cousins who said they didn’t mind.

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Stone Harbor is dedicated to the Ghetto Flowers who have sprouted and bloomed in the inner city streets through out the world; defying all odds and finding nourishment for their souls from the infinite reservoir of love deep within their hearts.

It is also dedicated to those of us who were fortunate to have childhood adventures along the New Jersey Shore; a saving grace for many inner city kids.

The past isn’t what it used to be, never was and never will be, so as we learn to let it go, perhaps we can see life as it truly is in the present moment – and begin to heal, turning ancient wounds into sacred loves.

Francis Oliver Lynn

STONE HARBOR

*A few days after I was born, my mother, assisted by my Grandma Ann Moss – who was taking care of my one and a half year old brother - left the hospital carrying me in her arms wrapped snug in a blanket. She walked across the street to a bus depot and bought tickets to Stone Harbor, New Jersey, where all of my extended family were summer vacationing. The families collectively saved money throughout the year and rented a large house on a cove along Stone Harbor’s bay. They did this every year throughout my childhood. The women and children of the families stayed at the seashore for the entire vacation, while the men rotated visits based on their hard-earned annual vacations and on weekends, if they could afford the bus fare and weren’t working overtime. The bus we boarded left Philadelphia sometime before midnight (bus tickets were cheaper at that late hour) and made multiple stops in towns throughout South Jersey before arriving in Stone Harbor shortly before sunrise. My mother walked the one-half block trek to the ocean and just as the sun was rising from the sea, she lifted me into the air and whispered a blessing in thanks for my creation. She told this story to me many times; reminding me that it was one of the most joyful moments of her life*

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*The most nurturing times of my youth were during summer vacations in Stone Harbor. Children were free to roam the sand dunes, building castles several feet high, playing chasing games, collecting shells, burying each other in the sand, and of course swimming - morning, noon, and night. We learned to fish in the bay, catching dozens of sea bass, flounder, blowfish, sea robins, croakers, blues and kingfish. We explored the salty marshes while catching bushels of crabs for the dinner table. The women spent their days on the beach as well, relaxing and engaging in idle chatter about their lives. It was a time for them to spend every day together, sharing the responsibilities of child rearing and preparing food. The cove of the bay is where the children learned to swim, for it was a sanctuary of calm waters. And the men - they were all amateur fisherman - spent their days and nights primarily engaged in three activities: fishing, drinking beer, and playing cards. For the most part, everyone was happy and this is how it was every summer throughout my early childhood.*

“JK, ask Grandpa if we can take out the boat this afternoon about an hour or so before sunset. We can crab, swim and explore the back marshland of the bay.”

“Great idea! The men can save the heads from the fish they catch and we can use them for crab bait,” he replied with enthusiasm.

The powerful and compassionate personality of my grandfather was the central male role model in our extended family. He was the strong silent type, a man of few words whose communication was his charismatic presence. His spirit kept our family close and guided us every year to Stone Harbor. My grandfather was a fisherman and he taught all of his grandchildren how to fish and made sure we became strong swimmers as well. He loved and respected the ocean and desired to share this passion with his offspring. He had Popeye arms, complete with tattoos, powerful muscles and protruding elbows. He had a clipper ship tattooed on his chest and an angel on each shoulder blade. He always ran the motor and steered our little fishing boat. In like manner, he was the captain of our family. Whenever there was a fraternal dispute it was my grandfather, if necessary, who settled the issue. He was incredibly compassionate and had a reputation throughout the community for his generosity toward the less fortunate. The number of homeless people he took into his home during the years of the Great Depression is legendary. We truly loved our grandfather, and it was his ability to win our affection and admiration that made him the family leader.

I shared with James Kilpatrick, my younger cousin, a love for crabbing and exploring the bay. We knew every channel, cove, bridge and basin in the intra-coastal waterway extending north from Stone Harbor through Avalon and Sea Isle City and south to the open ocean where the Wildwood Boardwalk and its amusement piers with Ferris wheels, roller coasters and a myriad of stomach-churning rides drew lines on the southern horizon.

“Grandpa, can we use the boat, please?” asked JK. Grandpa was fond of Jimmy K, they shared a strong personality and physical resemblance, as if they were genetic replicas – it was obvious to the rest of us that JK was Grandpa’s favorite among his fifteen grandchildren.

“Depends!” said Grandpa in his low baritone voice. “The men will be fishing in the morning; we’ll come in for lunch and go back out again. You boys clean the fish from the morning catch and you can use the boat after dinner – but you need to bring back a bushel of crabs for our evening snack and be sure to keep the boat clean.”

“Thanks Grandpa!” we said simultaneously. Crabbing after dinner, just an hour or more before sunset, would be perfect because the tide would be at its highest flow. The men liked to fish as the tide was coming in because the advance of the ocean brought lots of fish into the bay.

“Let’s not forget the nets and an extra bushel basket in case we get lucky. We should take along some minnows and cast out a few lines for fish.” I was excited! This was the first time since September of the summer before that I’d been out on the bay - I was hungry for it. Grandpa had taught me how to use the motor, observe the tides, steer clear of sailboats – of which there were often too many - and most importantly he taught us the art of crabbing.

We cleaned the fish for the men during the early afternoon, which was a big chore: sea bass, flounder and a few blowfish adding up to 23 fish exactly, took some time to clean – but we had more than enough fish heads for crabbing. After we finished, JK and I spent the rest of the afternoon swimming around Pirate Cove, one of seven small basins along Stone Harbor’s bay where houses were set at the edge of the bulkheads and boats were moored on the docks. Pirate Cove is where we learned to swim – all the kids knew how to swim and fish, but JK and I were the masters at the art of crabbing.

The men, and grandma, came in from their afternoon fishing trip and we helped unload the boat. It was 4:30pm in the afternoon, earlier than we had anticipated. Dinner was usually around 6:00pm so we told our mothers not to expect us back until slightly after sunset. This gave us plenty of time for crabbing and exploring the bay. We stocked the boat with everything we needed and shoved off. The boat was twelve feet long and about three-and-a half feet wide at the center and came equipped with oars and a 25 horsepower Johnson outboard motor. Uncle Joe was the mechanic of the family, and he made sure the motor was in top running condition – the motor never failed any of the fishermen – it ran smoothly and had just enough power for our purpose. JK had not yet learned to operate the motor, which suited me just fine. I pulled the cord on the top of the engine and she fired up with a roar that wasn’t matched by its speed. We went through the mouth of Pirate Cove and out into the open bay.

The main channel of the bay was wide and deep and there were large creosoted poles strategically placed as channel markers so bigger boats could avoid shallow waters. There was a maze of channels flowing through the marshland. Most were too shallow for the larger boats but posed no problems for the lighter craft. Our favorite spot to crab was underneath the 96th Street Bridge. The huge lattice of columns and crossbeams was an attractive gathering place for crabs, providing them with lots of marine plants and smaller animals to feed upon, as well as something to cling to as the tide made its twice-daily advance and retreat. I steered the boat toward one of the trusses and cut the engine about 20 feet away, allowing us to drift slowly toward one of the huge poles. JK grabbed the pole and looped a rope around it, securing our position.

There were those who used the most recently developed metal cage crab traps, which worked quite well, but to use them instead of the traditional method was like an artist painting by numbers instead of relying on his own sense of beauty and talent. We used strong string, a stick to wrap it around, and a four-ounce sinker tied to the end of the string, which we inserted through the mouth and gills of a fish head. We lowered the first line into the water until the vibration of the sinker hitting the murky bottom was felt and then we attached the stick firmly to the side of the boat by wrapping it around a stationary object - like an oarlock. JK and I proceeded to put out six lines and then we sat patiently, allowing time for the crabs to ‘smell’ the fish head and begin feeding.

There is no magic to knowing how long to wait before slowly pulling in the line; it is by sensing the crabs clawing at the fish head through a slight vibration on the line that we determine when to check the bait. When ready, the line is drawn up very smoothly and very slowly so as not to alarm the crabs of danger – they are not very smart but they are fearful and extremely defensive in nature. One only has to have a quick glance to realize that their anatomy is designed for self protection: an oblong hard green shell with pointy spines on the edges, two claws with sharp pincers and multiple legs for scurrying from side to side like a boxer dancing to and fro, and eyes that appear to dangle and bob in all directions. They are built for protection and it is essential to stay out of the reach of their jagged pliers-like claws – they hurt and draw blood!

As JK pulled up the first line, I stood ready with the net (attached to a long pole) to scoop up the unsuspecting prey. It is important to pull the line even slower as the fish head comes within a few feet of the surface; the key is to net the crabs before they realize that they are near the water’s surface, otherwise they will let go of the fish and glide away into the dark green water.

There they were, several crabs dangling on the fish head and a few attached to each other, waiting for their chance to pinch away a piece of flesh. I carefully lowered the net in the water a few feet to the side of the unsuspecting crabs and gradually slid the net underneath them and then with a quick even motion I scooped up our first catch of the day – seven crabs in all and tossed them into the basket. Two were pregnant females with their bulging orange underside filled with eggs; we threw them back. The rest were over 5 ½ inches and definite keepers. We proceeded from line to line, scooping up crabs, and in the first hour we had a full bushel, and soon filled the second. We could have caught twice as many if we had had more baskets to hold them. There were still more than an hour before the sun would set over the bay, and JK and I discussed what we wanted to do with the remainder of our time.

“We could go back and head down to the beach for a swim in the ocean. The lifeguards are off duty so we don’t have to deal with them calling us in all the time – which means we could catch the big waves and body surf them all the way to the beach.” JK was a pro body surfer, the best among all the cousins, even better than his brother Johnny Boy, who was the best swimmer and all around athlete.

“By the time we clean out the boat and bring the crabs into the kitchen for Grandma to cook, we’ll only have around half an hour to swim and that’s hardly worth the rush,” I replied.

“So, we’ll swim in the dark.” JK said with a little dare in his voice.

“We’re not allowed to swim in the ocean at night, Grandpa says it’s dangerous,” I said sternly.

“He doesn’t have to know.” This was new coming from JK. He was not the mischievous type, and certainly not one to go against Grandpa’s rules.

“So what makes you so daring all of a sudden?” I asked.

“Well, you’re always having cool adventures back home and I never seem to get the chance to do any of the stuff you do,” he replied.

“It’s different here, Jimmy K. We can have all the fun we want and never get into any trouble, while in the neighborhood it seems that trouble is what we do for fun.”

“It’s what you and your friends do for fun, not me – my father keeps me in the house all the time reading and doing homework.”

“That’s because your father is smart – and so are you – heck, you’ll probably even graduate from high school – that’ll be a first.”

“Nah, my brother Johnny will be the first in the family to graduate, unless my sister Marge or cousin Butch decides to stay in school. And besides, if my father is so smart, why the heck is he drunk all the time?” Jim sounded more like he was wondering out loud with his thoughts than asking a question.

“Whose father isn’t drunk most of the time? And don’t talk about Butch, its better to not think about him since we’re likely to never see him again.” I was still hurting from Butch’s sudden disappearance when Aunt Helen decided to divorce Uncle Ike. Thinking of Butch reminded me of White Shepherd, which was a sting in my heart. If Butch had gone to the camp with us things would have turned out differently: we might even have stayed there the whole time and avoided causing so much trouble, although what happened was exciting even though it was somewhat stupid.

“We brought the fishing rods, let’s use them and try our luck, maybe we’ll catch a flounder or two.” I suggested. JK agreed and we began putting tackle on the fishing lines.

“Francis, the lid to the minnow box is off. Look! The minnows are gone. Grandpa won’t like that; he may not let us use the boat again. We forgot to bring in the minnow box when we headed out from Pirate Cove; it’s our fault.”

“I guess we’ll just have to restock the box. There are a lot of minnows in the marsh channels, especially along the sandy edges when the tide goes out. Let’s check it out.”

This wasn’t the first time we went searching for minnows. We did it last year and learned the best areas to catch them, and we developed a method that worked rather well. Using a fine meshed net would have been best but we never did buy one and besides, we had fun doing it our own way. I started the motor and headed for the marshland channels.

“Over there, I see a white line of sand developing; that’ll be a good spot in another half hour or so.”

“Good eyes JK, we can toss over the anchor and go swimming while we wait for the tide to go down further.”

The marshland grasses were tall this time of year and swayed in a wave-like motion as the summer breeze moved across the bay. The air carried the familiar smell of salt and marsh gases, and seagulls and snowy white egrets glided along the air currents in search of food. The sun was getting lower, and the scattered wispy feather-like clouds reflected red, orange and pink pastel colors in a background of changing hues of blue light. Sun beams danced on ripples across the water as we slowed our boat, stopped the engine and tossed the anchor overboard. Barefoot and shirtless, dressed only in our cut off jeans, we dove into the warm July water, taking with us the minnow box. We pretended we were pirates looking for treasure as we swam in the channel, keeping our eyes open for schools of minnows. We swam to the sandy edge, a rarity in the otherwise black muck that supported the reeds. Along the water’s edge we could see groups of minnows swimming about. Our strategy was to splash the water up onto the sand, causing minnows to flop about on the shore, and then we quickly picked up the minnows and deposited them in the wooden box. It didn’t take long to fill the box with fat relatively large minnows. We reattached the box to the side of the boat and continued to swim about.

JK noticed a boat drifting in our direction. There was a boy with an oar unsuccessfully attempting to control the movement of the boat. As his boat approached our location, he called out: “Help, our motor isn’t working, we lost one of our oars and we don’t have an anchor – we can’t get home,” he shouted in desperation.

“We’ll help, just try to use your oar to push your boat toward the marsh grasses,” I called back. There were two boys in the boat and they looked similar in age to JK and me. We swam to our boat and pulled ourselves on board. They were not successful in beaching themselves in the marsh grasses, so we started the motor and in a jiffy we were alongside them.

“Catch this rope!” JK commanded as he tossed our rope to their boat. The smaller boy caught the looped end. Jimmy K pulled their boat next to ours. The two boys looked relieved.

“Thanks guys, that was scary. The tides going out and we thought we might end up in the ocean. I’m Kevin and this is Frederick, we’re brothers.” We introduced ourselves and asked them what happened.

“Our motor just quit running and I tried to use the oars to get us back to our dock, but one of the oar locks broke and we lost the oar,” Kevin explained. Frederick was quiet and had a nervous look in his eyes – he was obviously the younger of the two.

“Tell us where you need to go and we’ll tow you there.” I offered.

“Our dock is at the 86th Street Basin,” piped Kevin.

“You boys live in Pirate Cove! So do we,” said JK, “how come we never saw you before?”

“This is our first time to Stone Harbor since we were babies and we just arrived this afternoon. Our mother and father bought a house on 86th Street. Mom grew up here along with her younger sister and father.” Frederick finally spoke. I was impressed with the clarity and tone of his voice, which didn’t match his nervous out-of-place facial expression.

“Do your grandparents still live here?” I asked.

“Just our grandfather, everyone calls him Captain Tom. Do you know him?” asked Kevin.

“Yes! He’s a friend of our family. He owns the only remaining open space on Pirate Cove, right next to the house we rent. Captain Tom allows us to keep our boat on his land. He lives across the street. I wonder why he never built a house on his land.” JK was very fond of Captain Tom and was excited to hear that these boys were his grandchildren.

“Welcome to Stone Harbor and Pirate Cove. Let’s get going before it gets dark. The sun has set and neither of us have lights on our boats.” I was eager to get home and eat crabs.

We attached our anchor to their boat’s bow, let the line out six feet or more and started towing. It didn’t take long to get to the cove. Kevin pointed out the house and we guided the boat safely to the dock. They got out of their boat and invited us to meet their parents. We agreed and followed them up the dock and to the house. The parents and other family members came out on the patio to greet us. Kevin and Frederick immediately launched into telling the rescue story. The parents were very friendly and lavished us with praise and thanksgiving. Another woman entered the patio from the house and introduced herself as Ellen Sullivan, Frederick and Kevin’s aunt. I immediately recognized her.

“You’re Ellen, the one that taught me to swim when I was seven years old, right here in Pirate Cove.” I was very excited because I hadn’t seen Ellen since that summer so long ago when she taught me how to swim and dive.

“Well, haven’t you grown into a handsome young lad and you added a few more freckles. How’s your swimming coming along, Francis?” I loved the sound of her voice and she was even more beautiful than I remembered; and she remembered my name.

“I competed in city tournaments and claimed third place in the medley race last year.” I spoke excitedly and a little too fast. I was mesmerized by Ellen’s beauty. I had had a crush on her since the time we first met, and I had even entertained the fantasy that one day we would marry and live in Stone Harbor. Ellen had long brunette hair with glistening red highlights, emerald green eyes, skin bronzed by the sun and her dainty nose and cheeks were dusted lightly with freckles. She was tall with long shapely legs and a figure that was so perfect I imagined that God himself took a paint brush and drew her right into existence. “The neighborhood pool is closed for this summer, though, for repairs. I never swim for our team in the summers because most of the time our family is living in Stone Harbor.”

“As I recall, your family stays well into September. Is that going to happen this year?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to stay for almost three weeks after Labor Day.”

“Well, I hope it doesn’t hurt your academic career missing all that school.” She chuckled and then told me she received her teaching license and had moved to Stone Harbor and would begin teaching in the local elementary school.

It was time for us to get home so we shook hands with the brothers and promised to meet up soon. As our boat headed across the basin to our house, I felt giddy with delight at having seen Ellen again. I guessed that she was almost twice my age, and here I was having romantic feelings, then I thought of Sandy and a pang of guilt hit my gut. I felt confused.

That night we feasted on crabs. Grandma cooked them in a very large pot of scalding hot water seasoned with Old Bay. It was a form of entertainment to allow a few crabs to escape while being dumped in the pot, falling to the floor and scurrying about the children’s bare feet. After eating crabs the men played penny ante poker and drank beer while the kids watched and learned and the women sat on the back porch and looked out over the moonlit basin. I went outside to sit on the bulkhead on Captain Tom’s property and gaze at the night sky. As I was sitting there I heard the sound of a flute – beautiful music drifted across the bay as if each note was a star twinkling upon the water. I could see a silhouette of a person playing the flute on Kevin and Frederick’s patio. It was too far away to make out who it was. I thought of the flute Liam had given me just a few days before and realized that I had not assembled it, let alone tried to play it – everything had happened so fast since the Philadelphia 4th of July celebration that I didn’t even think about it. After the person stopped playing I went inside to my bedroom and took out the flute and after a few tries, I figured out the proper way of putting the three pieces together. I blew in the hole and only a high-pitched screech came out, causing my mother to investigate the sound source. She came in my room, saw the flute and asked where I got it. I told her it was a gift from Liam and she sarcastically said that it was probably stolen and if she heard of a missing flute she would return it. She told me not to play it around the house, especially at night, at least until I learned how to play it properly.

I was eager to play, so I took it outside. I looked around and decided that since I couldn’t get a single note to play clearly, it wasn’t a good idea to play where the sound could disturb the people who lived around the Pirate Cove basin. I decided to take it to the beach, just a few blocks away. The lifeguard stand looked like a good place to perch myself and to try playing the flute. I climbed the stand, assembled the flute and began blowing away. The sound was horrible but I didn’t care – I just kept blowing until I was dizzy, took a break and tried again. I imagined that the sound of the ocean waves crashing and the gentle blowing breeze were nature’s orchestra and I was playing the flute part – the imagery didn’t help my playing much, though. Eventually I was able to play a single clear note. I had no idea what note it was and I didn’t care, I just kept playing the same note over and over again and then I was able to play a second note clearly. These two notes and the various sound patterns that I created became my signature melody contribution to nature’s orchestra. I experienced my first ‘high’ feeling from producing music. I went home and decided to put a cot on the back screened-in porch. I fell asleep to the sound of the water lapping against the bulkhead and dreamed of music.

For the next several days we settled into our Stone Harbor lifestyle routine: swimming in the bay and ocean, crabbing, and fishing both from our boat and in the ocean surf. We ran along the multiple paths in the sand dunes of Avalon and used our imaginations while playing a variety of games as well as building sandcastles and digging tunnels and small caverns in the dunes. We did whatever our hearts desired – we were truly free without fear for safety – there was no curfew and we showed up for meals as we wished. Our parents never concerned themselves with where we were or what activities we were engaged in.

One afternoon upon arriving at the beach, I was surprised and pleased to see Ellen on the lifeguard stand. She explained that she was recently hired as a guard on the Stone Harbor Beach Patrol and that she was on the waiting list since the beginning of summer and when someone had to leave early she got the job. Ellen was the first female lifeguard in the history of Stone Harbor. I told her that I came out to the beach every night to sit in the stand and play the flute.

“I can’t believe you play the flute, Francis. That’s my instrument too.” She went on to tell me that she had been playing since she was 5 years old and that she played in a quartet throughout college. She told me that she received her graduate degree in education from Indiana University last spring and that Indiana has a very reputable music school so she also studied music.

“Would you like to take flute lessons from me, Francis?”

“Yes! When can we begin?”

“Tonight?”

“Definitely!” Wow, taking lessons from Ellen, a goddess in real life; I was thrilled.

And so it came to pass that the person who taught me how to swim became my music teacher as well. She advised me not to play on the beach when it was windy because it interferes with the quality of sound and that sand could get into the delicate key mechanisms. Ellen taught me to play long tones as well as the proper fingering for each note. After I was able to develop a good embouchure, she began teaching me scales and how to read music. We practiced in Captain Tom’s garage almost every night; the only exception was when she was on a date with another lifeguard, which made me very jealous. On the nights when I wasn’t taking lessons from Ellen and if the wind wasn’t blowing strongly, I took my flute to the beach pavilion on 89th street where there was protection from blowing sand, and continued playing notes to the sound of the wind and surf, creating melodies that I imagined helped the stars dance their cosmic circles through the night.

One evening I went to Ellen’s house to see if she was available to give me a flute lesson. I knocked on the door and Captain Tom, Ellen’s father answered.

“Hello, Captain Tom, you’re back? It’s good to see you again. It seems like forever.” This was the first time I had seen the Captain this summer. I learned that he had attended a conference on physics in California; Captain Tom was a physicist.

“Well, it’s the red-headed, freckle-speckled Irish lad from Philadelphia. I haven’t seen you since last September. You’ve grown a few inches. Come on in. What can I do for you, lad?” Captain Tom was in his early 60’s, a big man, tall and robust with long white hair and a beard to match – he was the only man I knew who had long hair, which I thought was really cool. He wore a sailor cap with a Captain insignia in the front.

“Is Ellen home?” I asked.

“Afraid she’s out with the crowd, chasing the boys away like gnats in June, I suspect. Come on in and sit for a spell. I heard about you and James Kilpatrick rescuing my grandchildren. That was mighty thoughtful and courageous. Thank you kindly!”

“You’re welcome, Captain.”

“Ellen says you’re coming along quite nicely with the flute.”

“She’s a good teacher. I am very lucky.”

“That you are, and so am I. Both my daughters have moved back to Stone Harbor. It’s where they belong.”

“Captain, how did you come to live in Stone Harbor?”

“Well, to answer that question properly, you need a history lesson on the origins of Stone Harbor, my boy. Tomorrow morning, before sunrise, I’ll be taking Old Betsy on the ocean to sail – row – motor – drift my way along the Seven Mile Beach while hauling in some stripped bass and blues and whatever else sister luck will bring. It’s been a while since I salted my beard with sea spray. You and your cousin James Kilpatrick are welcome to come along – my way of saying thanks for rescuing my grandsons. So my young mate, think you’re up for an adventure?”

“It’d be a dream come true Captain!”

Captain Tom told me to be at his boat by 5:30am. There were no alarm clocks in the house and I was worried that JK and I would oversleep. I remembered that Grandpa got up before 5 religiously, I asked and he agreed to wake us, especially when I told him why – he liked Captain Tom. JK and I slept on our cots on the back porch, which was becoming our permanent sleeping space.

“Francis, JK, get up! There’s donuts and milk waitin’ for yas. Captain Tom and I loaded his boat with the fishin’ gear. We’re headin’ out to sea shortly so yas gotta get movin.”

We hopped off our cots and slipped on our shoes – didn’t need to dress ‘cause we slept in our clothes. We quickly ate breakfast. Grandpa made a boat snack for us – and on our way to the boat we learned that he was going too.

“Captain Tom came over the house last night and told me about your ocean fishin’ trip and invited me to come along. Haven’t been fishin’ on the open sea for a few years, it’ll feel good gettin’ out where I can see the sky meet the sea and get a view of the seven mile stretch, and maybe we’ll catch some fish.” Grandpa rarely expressed enthusiasm.

“Have you ever fished with the Captain, Grandpa?” asked JK.

“A few times over the years. Let’s get goin’, the Captain is waitin’ on us. He’s down at the boat.”

It was still dark as we headed out of Pirate Cove. The stars were bright and there was a hint of light in the eastern sky. Captain Tom’s boat was much bigger than ours; 22ft bow to stern, with a steering wheel, a big motor and a mast for setting sail when the wind was right. JK and I had never been on Old Betsy before.

“Captain, why did you name your boat Old Betsy?” I asked.

“It was my mother’s name. This boat was given to me by my father. Not many boats like ‘er either. She’s all wood and I take better care of ‘er than I do my house. My pa spent a lot of time on this boat – took me fishin’ just about every day when I was a young lad, when the weather was right – even in the winter. Speaking of weather, there’s a storm advisory warning for late tonight. A hurricane is movin’ along the coast of North Carolina and we’re supposed to get the tail end of ‘er. They’re calling ‘er Hurricane Eleanor and she’s a whopper! Won’t affect us much though, perhaps a little choppy early in the afternoon, but the sea’s looking calm at the moment, and I plan on being back by noontime.”

We passed under the 96th Street Bridge. The bridge had to open because the boat’s mast was too high to pass under. This was my first experience having the bridge open for a boat I was on. We were approaching the open ocean. I could see the edge where the waters of the bay and the ocean merge. The waves were a little choppy as the more forceful motion of the tides and wind in the open sea clashed with the calmer bay waters of Hereford Inlet. The eastern horizon was becoming increasingly bright with color – orange, red and gold – and there were only a few stars still visible high above the horizon, overhead and in the western sky. There was a light breeze blowing, and I deeply inhaled the sea salt air. Seagulls trailed along the boat, hoping for scraps of bait or fish heads, tails and guts. I liked watching them, hearing their cries, a familiar sound. Like all the sounds of the seashore, they were imprinted in my soul, like an ancient song stirring feelings of comfort, like being home. I love the sea and Stone Harbor – everything about it resonates with the very heart of my being – I felt free and safe and adventurous.

“We’re going off shore about 500 yards where the water is deep and there are plenty of nutrients and prey from the bay to attract schools of fish. If we’re lucky we’ll catch striped sea bass, flounder, blue fish and maybe a kingfish or two. The hurricane is pushing the Gulf Stream closer to the Continental Shelf, and that means the fish that are running are going to move with it.”

As I listened to Captain Tom and Grandpa talk about the fish we might catch, my eyes scanned the eastern horizon. Rays of golden light appeared as the sun rose out of the sea like a giant golden egg. I was mesmerized and speechless as I stood up and pointed – everyone turned their heads and a worshipful silence fell upon the boat as we watched the sun quickly emerge, majestically crowning the earth. Captain Tom whispered, “Let there be light and the firmament of heaven opened and darkness dispelled – and bring on the fish!” He let out a hearty laugh as the boat rose and fell with a thunderous splash and we all got soaked.

We caught lots of fish that morning, far more than we could eat or freeze for future use. Captain Tom told JK and me that we could make a hefty profit by selling them to local restaurants. He suggested that we keep what we couldn’t eat or use for bait, but that we had to sell them that afternoon while they were still fresh. We sailed along the seven mile stretch of coast that connected Avalon and Stone Harbor and Jim and I enjoyed watching the people along the beach; they looked quite small from out at sea but the Captain pointed out 86th street and the lifeguard stand that Ellen was sitting in. The Captain gave JK and me some responsibility with hoisting and lowering the sails as needed and taught us how to tie a few rope knots. Our Grandpa was mostly silent with a slight smile and a twinkle in his eyes as he contentedly fished and looked at the panorama of sea, sky and shoreline.

“Well lads, I promised a history lesson and bit of folklore. Whether fact or fish tale, I leave that up to your own sensibilities.” So, as we sailed along Seven Mile Beach and made our way back to Pirate Cove, Captain Tom told us this story:

*Sometime in the late 1700’s, the merchant ship, Sea Crest, sailed by Captain Jonathan Stone, was commissioned by the newly formed US government to chase down and capture pirates that were preying on ships sailing in and out of the Delaware River. Philadelphia was a major seaport, and the new nation didn’t have much of a navy at the time, so merchant ships were easy targets for pirates. Captain Stone had once sailed for the British Navy, but after the revolutionary war, he was offered a job by a small shipping company out of Philadelphia to sail goods from the colonies to markets in Europe. The pirate problem was hurting the industry and since Captain Stone had battle experience, he accepted the challenge offered to him by the government. His ship was outfitted with cannons and some strong young men from Philadelphia who had seen some action in the War for Independence. This was a strange position for the Captain, mind you, having been an officer in the Royal Navy and now commanding a ship manned by Americans, but he managed to get along quite well thanks to the help of his first mate, William Bristow, a young Philadelphian whose family came from England. He was born in the states and was just in his teens at the time.*

*William was a strong lad and an excellent sailor, and he proved to be popular among the men; he had masculine charisma, a good sense of humor and he was the best boxer and swordsman on the ship. When the first conflict between the hotheaded revolutionary sailors and the Captain erupted, William stepped in on the Captain’s behalf and challenged the mutinous ringleader to a boxing match. The leader, whose name escaped the annals of time, weighed 50 pounds more than William, was very muscular and several inches taller. This was no problem to the young William because he had lightning quick feet, strong hands and a keen intellect to match; and his arms were strong with a punch like a sledge hammer. The fight was over in 30 seconds and order was restored. William was made first mate.*

*Captain Stone and his crew were successful in protecting merchant ships from pirates; they engaged in cannon fire exchanges with pirate ships, scaring them off, but never captured any nor were they ever involved in an all out sea battle; the pirate ships always fled quickly out to sea, except on one occasion. It was a misty October morning and there were rumors of a pirate ship sailing along the coast heading north toward the Delaware Bay. The ship was spotted off Cape Henlopen, Delaware, by the lighthouse keeper, who sent warning to the Cape May lighthouse keeper through a series of light flashes, and the word was finally received by Captain Stone. The fog made it dangerous for ships not familiar with the Delaware and Jersey coastline. The pirate ship was looking for a safe harbor to wait out the coming storm. The sea was getting angry and the pirate ship was desperately seeking refuge. Captain Stone spotted the pirate ship and moved quickly towards her in hopes of firing his cannons. The winds were strong and so the pirate ship was able to move quickly out toward sea and the chase went on. The Captain of the pirate ship was clever and used the fog and winds to his advantage; he sailed due east into the winds, tacking as he went along. The pirate ship was lighter and swifter than the Sea Crest, so Captain Stone soon lost sight of her and gave up the chase, for he did not want to get caught in the storm. What he didn’t know was that the pirate ship turned northward and then back west toward the coast, once again in search of a safe harbor to wait out the storm. The pirate captain entered Hereford Sound and before his ship slipped safely out of sight of the ocean coastline, first mate William Bristow spotted him from his spy glass and shouted warning to Captain Stone, who immediately took pursuit.*

*The Sea Crest was as far North as Sea Isle City, so they were nearly 9 miles distance from the pirates, and it was a fortuitous break in the fog that allowed William Bristow to spot the pirates from such a distance. The Sea Crest entered Hereford Sound just as the big storm hit the coast hard with heavy rains driven by sixty-mile an hour winds. Luckily she made it safely into the harbor, not certain where or when he would come upon the pirates. There are seven basins in Hereford Sound, but none were explored by big ships and there were no settlements in the area at that time. There were no people living along this stretch of the Jersey Shore, except for Cape May and the whaling fleet. The Captain was nervous about sailing too far into the bay, so he laid anchor at what is now 110th street, not very far in from the open ocean, but far enough for protection from the high wind and waves of the raging storm. He figured if the pirate captain had indeed committed himself to holding up in Hereford Sound, he would meet with the cannons of the Sea Crest, for the Captain had positioned his boat broadside to the channel, ready to blast the pirate ship and send her down to Davy Jones’ locker.*

*The strong winds of the storm had died down after six hours although the rain continued. William Bristow suggested to the Captain that he take a small boat and explore the inlet for the pirates, thereby gaining further advantage. The Captain at first was hesitant to allow William Bristow and four of his sailors to go, but William assured him that he would be careful not to be caught by the pirates and that he could gain valuable information on their position. William Bristow also informed the Captain that the inlet had an outlet up by what later became known as Ocean City, and that the depth of the waters of these inlets had never been measured. Perhaps it would be possible for the pirates to escape northward. The Captain relented and so William Bristow and his men rowed deeper into the inlet. They rowed into what is currently the 101st street basin, and saw no signs of pirates. You need to know lads that back then this land was covered with virgin trees, not as tall as the virgin forest inland, but tall enough to hide the most of the mast of a ship, especially since the rain made it difficult to see and it was nighttime. Then William Bristow continued rowing into the channel and up to the currently named 86th Street basin, and there he saw the pirate ship – laid on its side and taking in water; she had run aground for the basin was too shallow. The pirates had two choices: escape to land or drown. William was in no hurry to feel the sting of pirate bullets or to clash steel with men known to be ruthless fighters; besides, his mission was only to spot their location and this he did, so he returned to the Sea Crest.*

*The next morning the storm had passed and Captain Stone, William Bristow and the men of Sea Crest boarded small boats; two were positioned as a block at the entrance of the basin and the others went on land both north and south of the basin. William Bristow led the group from the north while the Captain approached from the south. What they found surprised them; a small group of women and children – three women and five children. The pirates had fled in the night, certain of their capture had they remained with their broken ship. Several fled in the few small boats escaping through the inner coastal waterway while others went by foot northward and into the Pine Barrens. It is said that the descendents of these pirates live in the Jersey Pine Barrens to this day. William Bristow and Captain Stone brought the women and children safely to the Sea Crest and learned that they had been taken during a pirate raid from a small village called Cedar Island along the coast of Maryland. The men were all killed and what the pirates wanted with the women and their children was not made known to them; other than the killing of their men, they were unharmed. Perhaps they were to be sold into slavery. William Bristow took particular interest in a young women and her infant child. Her name was Ann Moss and she was still in her teens; young to have a child and to have lost her husband. William took Ann Moss and her son to Philadelphia and there they married and settled; Ann renamed her child William but she had him keep the last name Moss, in honor of his true father. She took the name Bristow upon marrying William. The basin became known as Pirate Cove, and this barrier island was called Stone Harbor. My ancestry can be traced back to Captain Stone; his off-spring settled the area, and this is why I make Stone Harbor my home, and why your family comes here every summer.*

I was stunned by what I had just heard and could only stare at Captain Tom with a stupid expression of awe on my face. JK was less gullible.

“No disrespect Captain, but do you mean to say that our Grandpa here is a descendant of William Bristow and Anne Moss?” JK’s response surprised me and shook me out of my shock. Before Captain Tom could speak, Grandpa spoke.

“It’s all true. Our ancestry goes back to Ann Moss and William Bristow. Ann Moss’s son, who was renamed William, kept the last name Moss, as his mother insisted, in honor of her killed husband, and William Bristow gave no objection to this. I don’t know how many generations that is, but I am a direct descendant of William Moss.” My grandfather rarely spoke more than a sentence fragment at a time, let alone spilling out an explanation like that. JK and I were now both staring at our grandfather with a look of awe and reverence – even though a twinge of disbelief still lingered in the back of JK’s mind.

“Grandpa, how come no one ever told us this story before? We’ve been coming to Stone Harbor all our lives and you’ve been coming here all your life – that’s a long time and who knows how far back it goes; it’s an incredible story, too incredible for us to have never heard and to believe.” The words fired out of JK like water from a fire hose. Grandpa smiled and simply said: “No one ever asked.” As I listened to Grandpa say those words my eyes were focused upon his chest.

“Of course, it makes sense; the clipper ship tattooed on your chest, that’s the Sea Crest isn’t it?” Grandpa didn’t say a word. He just smiled and nodded his head.

Suddenly, Captain Tom gave us orders to grab the lines and prepare to slip them over the moorings as we approached his dock; we were so captivated by the story that we hadn’t noticed we had entered the cove. We unloaded the fish and, just as he had promised, Captain Tom gave us what couldn’t be frozen or eaten to sell to local restaurants. For the rest of the afternoon we used our bicycles to go from Stone Harbor all the way up to Sea Isle City, selling our fish to restaurants and small stores, and even to people on the street. When we exhausted those possibilities, we walked along the beach and sold the remaining few. In all we earned $72.00.

“Francis, do you believe that story or are they pulling our leg?”

“Well, if they are pulling our leg, that’s one heck of a conspiracy, and if not, wow, our roots run far deeper into Stone Harbor than anyone else living today, with the possible exception of Captain Tom and his family,” I replied.

“Yeah, that means our ancestors were among the first people to set foot on Stone Harbor and Pirate Cove. And here we are a couple of hundred years later and Stone Harbor and Pirate Cove is our summer playground.” JK shook his head in disbelief.

“Francis, do you think we should talk to the rest of the family about this story?”

“Of course, it’s too cool not to share. I can’t get over the fact that we never heard it before. That fact alone tips me off that Captain Tom and Grandpa made it up last night while we were sleeping. And it seems a bit too coincidental that Grandpa’s name is William Moss and Grandma’s name is Ann. Not to mention that famous tattoo on his chest that we admired all our lives. It’s kind of freaky.”

“Well, I’d rather believe it than not believe it.”

“Yeah, me too, Jim, and if it’s not true, you have to admit it’s an incredible fish tale.” I laughed and JK joined in and we didn’t stop for what seemed like five minutes. Tears of laughter streamed down our faces.

That night a big storm blew in and woke us up from our sleep. The lightening flashes lit up Pirate Cove for split seconds and the thunder shook our house. JK and I were sleeping on the back porch. The rain was pouring in through the screens.

“Wow! It must be raining sideways.” I yelled above the sound of the rain. My father came on to the porch yelling, “Kids, come with me. The ropes keeping the boats moored need to be checked along the cove to keep the wind and high tide from pulling them loose. Quick.”

I wondered how my dad got here and I didn’t have time to ask. I figured he must have come in late last night by bus. JK and I followed my father’s instructions as we walked along the bulkhead that lined the entire cove in a distorted U shape, checking the lines that secured the boats. I wondered where the owners of these boats were, and then I remembered it was mid week and most of the people who owned these homes were what we called weekend warriors. It was fortunate that we were there providing this service, because at least half of the boats were not properly secured. One had broken free and was smashing up against the huge creosote poles, doing some serious damage. We were able to secure it before it was completely destroyed. The lightning flashed and I saw the body outlines of Grandpa and Captain Tom on the other side of the cove securing boats and checking lines. There were a few residents staying in their vacation homes during the mid-week, so they secured their own lines and then proceeded to help us. They expressed gratitude for our work, saying it made them feel safer being away knowing my family was there looking out for things.

We went to bed, feeling tired and exhilarated from our adventurous good deed. I felt proud of my father for taking the initiative and enlisting my help. The storm had passed during the night as we slept. JK and I slept-in later than usual. We were wakened by the sound of my mother’s voice: “Help! Help! Lenny is sinking in the sand! Dad, Joe, everyone, help! We got up and ran outside and there we saw a very strange sight: my father was waste high in sand and gravel; a sink hole had formed at the end of 86th Street where the street dead ended into a bulkhead that serves as a barrier to the bay. Apparently my father was fishing from the bulkhead when the ground began to sink. Grandpa called to Uncle Joe to pull up his 1956 Chevrolet Bellaire station wagon, and so he did. Grandpa then tied a rope to the bumper (all the while calling out to my father to stop screaming and not to move, or else he would sink faster). He made a loop on the other end of the rope and tossed it to my father, instructing him to tie it around his waist and to hold on tight. He then told Uncle Joe to slowly inch the Chevy forward. The strategy was successful; my father was pulled from the ‘quicksand’, which was really a sink hole that formed from all the water brought up by the storm surge.

I hugged my father as my mother anxiously brushed the sand off his body.

“Hey, look, there’s an old bottle in the center of the sand hole.” JK shouted.

I walked to the edge of the hole and there lying a few feet down was an old bottle. I ran to the boat and grabbed the crabbing net and quickly brought it to the sink hole. I carefully extended the net and scooped up the bottle. JK took it from the net.

“Whoa, Jamaican Rum – it’s a bottle of Jamaican Rum.” JK‘s eyes were bulging out of his head. There was no label, just a clear glass bottle with Jamaican Rum spelled out in raised glass. I took the bottle from Jim and turned it over in my hands, along the bottom in smaller letters it read: West Indies Trading Company, England 1789.

“1789. How did it get here?” I thought out loud. “Pirates!” JK and I shouted in unison. Our excitement was shared by everyone in the family. We took the bottle inside the house; everyone forgot about my father’s near brush with death. The family sat around the kitchen table staring at the bottle.

“Let’s open it,” said JK’s dad, known to me as Uncle John.

“No way, it’s a relic, a real piece of history. It has to be worth a lot of money,” JK nervously responded to his father.

“History won’t mind if I take a good long swig of that stuff. I bet they made some potent rum back then,” responded Uncle John.

“It just might kill you too. No one touches the rum.” Grandpa decreed. Grandpa took the bottle away after allowing everyone to hold it carefully.

Captain Tom tried convincing Grandpa to donate the bottle to the Stone Harbor Chamber of Commerce. Grandpa said he’d take it under advisement. I knew if there was a chance that the bottle came from the pirate ship that once held Ann Moss captive; the progenitor of our entire family, there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in Hades that Grandpa would ever let that bottle out of his possession.

We ate a hearty breakfast, and then went to the beach. The evening storm had brought the ocean over the dunes and into the streets, but by morning the water had receded. It was low tide when we arrived, but the water level was where it usually is during high tide. There was only a light breeze blowing so the ocean looked fairly calm except for the waves breaking on the shore; they were huge. The energy from the storm was still moving through the sea, which made perfect body surfing conditions – and we were a family of body surfers. It was still early morning and the lifeguards were just coming on duty. We spent all morning swimming and riding waves. I hung around Ellen’s lifeguard stand when not in the water; I told the story of my good deed in the middle of the night and the rescue of my father and the finding of the bottle of rum. She simply smiled and nodded her head as I chatted away, careful to keep her eyes on the swimmers, occasionally blowing her whistle to signal a swimmer to come closer to shore. In addition to the high waves, the storm must have brought in schools of fish because we saw more dolphins in one day than I had seen in my entire lifetime. We were even able to swim within twenty feet of them; we could have gotten closer if the lifeguards hadn’t kept calling us in. It was a great day at the beach; we stayed until sunset because Aunt Sis, JK’s mom, had brought us a lunch basket so we didn’t need to go home for food and water. We explored the dunes of Avalon and found an entire set of beach furniture that the storm had carried up the beach. Later that day we found the owners, and they rewarded us with an ice cream treat at Springer’s Ice Cream Parlor on 96th Street (my favorite flavor combination is vanilla and black raspberry, the store is family owned and they make the ice cream right on the premises).

The rest of the summer went by fast; Labor Day came and went and 90% of the vacationers went home. Our family remained for another two weeks. This was a special treat for the children because we missed the hoopla of the first two weeks of school, and the entire barrier island was ours to explore. There weren’t even lifeguards on the beach, so we swam whenever, wherever we wanted to; we were safe of course, and our Grandfather warned us to watch for rip tides and never to go out too far. He also instructed us on how to swim out of a rip current; fortunately there was never a swimming accident. Ellen and Captain Tom would occasionally join us for a sunset swim; Ellen was used to swimming without lifeguard protection and was well aware of the risk involved and she never tired of warning us to exercise caution and never to swim alone.

Ellen began teaching school. She invited me to visit her classroom and prepared me to play a flute duet of the tune, *Simple Gifts,* the first melody she taught me to play. Her 3rd grade class lavished appreciation upon us with loud applause; I was very nervous and didn’t get enough air to make the notes come out clearly but at least I got through the song.

The last night in Stone Harbor before returning to Philadelphia I had my final flute lesson with Ellen. We met in Captain Tom’s garage and she had me practice playing each note slowly, carefully emphasizing obtaining the clearest sound possible. She told me to begin each day’s practice session in this manner, explaining that it would teach me to make the flute sing like the voice of an angel. During our lessons throughout the summer vacation she taught me how to play every note over three octaves, although I continued to struggle with playing the highest and lowest notes clearly. After our practice session she asked if I would like to take a walk on the beach, which made my heart pound rapidly with excitement. The night sky was moonless with billions of stars scattered like diamonds in patterns that Ellen recognized with ease.

“Over there is Orion and there’s the Big Dipper. If you follow the two stars off the end of the dipper it will lead you directly to the North Star.”

“The North Star isn’t very bright,” I added showing interest and trying to hide my sense of feeling overwhelmed – not by the enormity of the night sky, but by being alone with Ellen. The tide was still coming in and it was almost at its highest flow. We walked along the waters edge, allowing the water to wash over our feet; then I noticed a trail of green light as we swished through the water.

“That’s phosphorescence,” explained Ellen, “living light produced by very tiny jelly fish and other organisms as our feet touches them. Step over here on the sand and we should be able to see our footprints glow.” As we walked along we could see the impression of our feet glow an eerie green for a second and then disappear.

“How do you know so much?” I asked, truly fascinated by her knowledge.

“Well, I guess most of what I know I picked up along the path of life from lots of people and of course from school. What is your school like, Francis?” I thought about her question for a very long moment because it brought back to my awareness that this was my last night in Stone Harbor and I hadn’t thought much about my friends back in the neighborhood, let alone school.

“School is okay as long as I can keep from getting beat up.” I replied.

“Beat up? That sounds horrible! Are their lots of bullies in your school?” she was obviously surprised.

“I guess you could call them bullies, but really it’s the kids from different neighborhoods that give me trouble. There’s only one other kid in my school from my neighborhood and he’s Italian and he’s not a Catholic either.”

“Francis that must be really difficult going to a school outside of your neighborhood and away from your friends; I have visited city neighborhoods but I really don’t know much about what life is like for the people living in them. I grew up in Stone Harbor and went to college in a small university town in Indiana. Tell me what it’s like for you in Philadelphia.”

No one had ever asked me anything about my life in Philly, not even the people who lived there, not even my family or my friends so I had to think for a really long time before answering.

“I have to walk ten blocks to get to Vare middle school; it only has 7th and 8th grades; I’m going into the eighth grade this year. School started two weeks ago but my family stays longer in Stone Harbor because we get a special deal on the rent since it’s off season.”

“Won’t you fall behind in your studies starting school so late?” she asked.

“Not really. The classes are pretty easy since most of the kids don’t do their homework. The teachers have to go over the material several times; I get bored a lot.”

“That’s too bad. I know you’re a smart kid; you learn quickly and you speak well for your age, although I have heard you use curse words and I find your unique South Philly accent interesting. Tell me more about your school and friends.”

“The school is big with lots of kids in each class. The work is easy. Like I said the hard part is to keep from getting beat up.”

“Who tries beating you up?” she asked with a tone of alarm.

“The kids from the other neighborhoods are enemies to me and my friends. They can’t walk in our neighborhood and we can’t walk in theirs. We are mostly Irish with some Germans and Italians; our neighborhood is bordered on two sides by black neighborhoods, and Italians on the other sides.”

“Do the kids in your neighborhood fight with them?” she asked.

“Yeah, ever since I was a little kid I watched gang fights. It’s mostly the older kids who fight and the younger ones help out. Since I’ve just turned thirteen I’m going to have to fight more often. The older kids try to keep us away from the fights until we become teenagers; then we too have to protect the neighborhood.” Ellen stared at me with a look of concern. I could tell she was puzzled and worried. “It’s just the way it is, Ellen. We can’t let the black people move into our neighborhood because it makes people want to move out and that’s not good. Just this summer I was beat up by a group of boys I’ve known all my life, I went to school with them since kindergarten, but now that we’re teenagers we’ve become enemies.”

“Racism, aggression and competition for territory are universal diseases, Francis. People have been fighting wars and enslaving each other because of skin color, religious differences, land and its wealth and politics for hundreds of thousands of years. But it is my personal belief that these social diseases are brought about by the human species’ innate animal fear associated with the quest for basic survival. The moral and ethical consciousness of our species has not kept pace with our technology, so human beings have become super killers – we need to become super lovers!”

“I think I understand some of what you just said. I just know that because I have white skin, red hair, freckles and come from an Irish-German neighborhood the blacks and sometimes the Italians want to beat me up.”

“Do you know what a tribe is, Francis?”

“Yeah, like the Comanche Indians. I went to a camp this summer and was in the Comanche cabin; it didn’t work out.”

“The kids in your neighborhoods behave like they are tribes in separate villages protecting their territory. It reminds me of my studies in cultural anthropology at Indiana University.”

“Cool, I’m a member of a tribe.” Ellen laughed at my comment.

“How does your family feel about you going to an unsafe school?”

“My father doesn’t really care if I go to school but the law makes me go, and my mother wants to see me graduate from high school. No one in my family graduated from high school.” Again Ellen looked at me with an expression of disbelief.

“Didn’t your parents go to school?’ she asked.

“My father was the eleventh and youngest child in his family, and his parents had a hard time keeping them all fed and clothed. Education wasn’t that important, so my father never learned to read or write.”

“Were your father’s parents immigrants?”

“They came from Ireland when they were young, and most of their children were born in America. The entire family lived in a small house with just two bedrooms.”

“I think that I understand; simply having a roof over your head and food to eat was the priority; education took a back seat,” she said thoughtfully, “and what about your mother?”

“It was a little different for her. She finished third grade and then she just stopped going. I’m not sure why but I know back then the government didn’t make people go to school. My mom can sign her name and she pays the bills.”

“How well do you read?”

“I do okay I guess.”

“You picked up reading music quickly. What novels have you read?”

“I read one novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; I found it on the sidewalk in downtown Philadelphia when I was shopping with my mom. I liked the book a lot but I didn’t understand all of it. Mostly I read the assignments in the textbooks they give us at school, but that’s boring stuff. I like to read my grandfather’s cowboy comic books and I buy my own comic books. I especially like “Archie” and “Spiderman.”

“They don’t require you to read novels in your school?”

“No. The kids don’t take good care of books, so we aren’t allowed to take them home. Everything we read is read in class. I had English classes where teachers tried reading novels in class out loud with each student taking a turn to read, but too many students were absent on any given day and lots of kids can’t read very well - and some can’t read at all. Teachers just give up even though I can tell that some of them really do care.”

“Why don’t you use the library in your community?”

“Are you kidding? A library in my neighborhood, that sounds funny. All we have is churches, bars and corner convenient stores, and the stores only sell magazines and comic books.”

“There must be a library somewhere near your neighborhood.”

“Yeah, there is one downtown. I guess I can find out how to use it. I tried taking books out of the school library, but they will only let us use them in school; too many books didn’t return so they had to stop lending them. Most of the textbooks we use have to be shared in classes and they won’t let us take them home either. The teachers complain that there aren’t enough textbooks for all the students and the ones we have are outdated.”

“Your school is very poor. Most schools are funded by property taxes, and you live in a poor area. The government should spend more money on education and less on the art of war, that’s the only way to stop the cycle of poverty and bring peace into the world.” Ellen sounded very serious, almost angry. We left the water’s edge and walked up to the dunes and sat down among the dune grasses. I looked around and noticed lots of small violet colored flowers.

“These flowers are very pretty. I never noticed flowers on the beach before. How can flowers grow in sand?” I asked.

“Flowers can grow just about anywhere Francis; even in the ghetto. These flowers open only at night because it is too hot during the day. Life has amazing versatility and takes on whatever form necessary to survive, this is especially true for human beings – the most adaptable animal on the planet.” Ellen continued to speak in a serious tone and her face wore an expression of concern.

“What’s a ghetto?” I asked.

“A ghetto is what people call areas of cities where the conditions are overcrowded, the people are poor, the schools are not very good and the people lack education and proper health care. And it is where most of the poor immigrants from Europe live when they first come to America. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South looking for work in the industries of the big cities. Immigrants provide the cheap labor needed for many industries; and the ethnic groups compete with each other for jobs. Usually, after a generation or two, families are able to improve their lives. It is just a matter of time before your family will live somewhere else. From what I’ve heard you say, most of the German immigrants have left South Philadelphia already, and many of the Irish have moved out. I believe trying to keep the African Americans from moving into your neighborhood will eventually fail because of economics.”

Again, I only understood part of what Ellen was saying, she used big words and expressed even bigger ideas. “Hey, maybe we could move to Stone Harbor. Has your father told you that my family goes all the way back to the founding of Stone Harbor?”

“I vaguely remember hearing my father tell a story about my family origins when I was a little girl. My father claims to be a direct descended of Captain Jonathan Stone, but there’s no evidence to support his claim to fame – but at the very least, it is a fascinating legend.”

“You should ask him to tell you the story again; it is very interesting and we found an old bottle of rum that proves the story is true. I live in a ghetto don’t I, Ellen. Is that a bad thing?” I asked.

“Yes, you do, Francis, and that doesn’t make you good or bad; it’s just the circumstances of your life. It is a good idea for you to get an education and improve your life. Every child should have the opportunity to develop their potential; especially someone with your chutzpa and smarts. I wish there was a way I could help.” She continued to sound increasingly more serious.

“I’m okay Ellen. I like my neighborhood.”

“Do you feel safe there?” she asked.

“Most of the time; I’m usually scared when I’m in school, though. As long as I stay in the boundaries of the neighborhood I am safe, but there are places that are dangerous for me to walk in and that includes walking to school.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Fear prevents people from learning and cripples the mind and I don’t want that to happen to you, Francis!”

“I’m okay Ellen, really. You don’t have to worry about me. I’m not crippled at all. I like my family and friends.”

“Do you ever feel like you’re different than other people?” she asked. I thought for a long time and strange feelings began to stir inside of me rising up from somewhere deep in my gut; and then I began speaking without fully realizing all that I was saying; the words simply gushed out of my mouth like a fire hydrant turned on to full force.

“I have lots of friends but most of the time, deep down inside, I feel scared and alone and that no one really knows me, not even my parents. Liam is my best friend: he gave me my flute; actually he stole it from my old elementary school music room, which I feel bad about. My brother, he can’t read or write just like my father. His teachers put him in some kind of special learning classes called the OB classes – and everyone thinks that means out-of -brains and that he can’t learn anything. I guess they didn’t know how to teach him so he didn’t learn. Ever since we were kids my brother got teased because he is different and I always got in fights protecting him even though he’s older than me. When I see people get beat up or when kids are chasing me I get really scared and sometimes people get seriously hurt. My friends are okay, I guess, but they too are always acting tough and so I act tough too, even though deep down inside I don’t feel tough. It’s just the way I have to be sometimes to protect myself and to keep my friends; they tease my brother and so he chooses not to hang out with us, and I feel ashamed of myself for spending more time with my friends than with my brother. My mother has been ill with severe arthritis since she was in her early twenties; her hands and feet are swollen and twisted and I hear her cry out in pain every night. I try to help her by lifting the iron skillet frying pans when she cooks because it is too painful for her to hold them. She has trouble in lots of other ways and I do my best to help her, but it is so hard. My father drinks too much and is often drunk, especially on the weekends. He isn’t a bad man; he just enjoys drinking beer. His parents were Irish Catholic immigrants. They had eleven children, my father being the youngest and only boy. I guess they couldn’t give him much attention and he avoided going to school. My parents argue a lot and sometimes I’m afraid my father is going to hurt my mother. I often think it would be better if they weren’t married, and I feel guilty for having those thoughts.” I began to cry really hard and loud. Ellen put her arms around me and pulled me close to her. She felt warm and my body felt tingly all over and began to relax. I cried for a long time and then I began to feel better. “I’m sorry I cried. It’s embarrassing.”

“Francis, tears are the healing waters of the soul and flowers bloom in the ghetto too; shedding your tears will help you to grow. You are my *Young Ghetto Flower* and I know that one day you will blossom into a wonderful young man. You have love in your heart and you are very sensitive and intelligent. Love is the universal nutrient for all life and the more you give to others, the more you give to yourself. Don’t let the toughness of your neighborhood destroy that. Try your best to get a good education and to stay out of trouble.” She wiped the tears from my cheeks and kissed me on the forehead.

“I’ll do my best Ellen. I promise!” During our walk home we were mostly silent. She held my hand all the way back to 86th Street, right up to the front door of my porch.

“What time do you leave tomorrow?” she asked.

“Some of my family left today. The rest of them will take buses that leave at different times tomorrow. My mom likes to get up early and my father and brother rather take a later bus. My mom and I are taking the earliest bus which is about an hour after the sun rises. She likes to avoid the confusion of our family and all the equipment we take back with us.” I replied.

“Tomorrow is Sunday and my father and I plan on watching the sunrise on the beach as we worship. Would you and your mom like to join us?”

“My mother and I always watch the sunrise on the day we leave Stone Harbor, it will be nice to see you there. Do you mean worship like they do in the Catholic Church?” I asked.

“I guess you could say that, but we do it very differently. My father and I are Quakers. We worship God in silence and we only speak when the Spirit moves us.”

“I don’t understand what that means. My mother and I like to watch the sunrise. I’ll ask her and maybe we’ll meet you and Captain Tom on the beach tomorrow. Good night Ellen, and thanks for listening to me; I didn’t know I had so many feelings and no one has ever asked me about my life before.”

“You’re very welcome, Francis, and I do hope to see you and your mom tomorrow.”

The time had arrived for our return home to South Philadelphia; another season of freedom in Stone Harbor had come to an end. The morning of our family’s mass exodus I walked with my mother to the ocean to watch the sunrise, a ritual she and I followed every year as a way to say goodbye to this wonderful place. On the beach were Captain Tom and Ellen sitting quietly looking out at sea. We approached them and they motioned for us to sit beside them. Captain Tom then said that he and Ellen were there to worship in silence in the manner of Friends (Quakers), this being their religious tradition and that we were invited to participate with them. The only things I knew about Quakers was the man on the oatmeal box with the black hat and white hair and the TV advertisement that had the Quaker on the box saying: “Nothing is better for thee than me.” And there’s the giant statue of William Penn on the top of city hall because he was the original owner of all of Pennsylvania. He was a Quaker and he started the city of Philadelphia and it was known as the City of Brotherly Love; it was supposed to be a holy experiment – whatever that means. I learned about William Penn and the origins of Philadelphia in school.

We sat in silence as the sun rose from the sea forming a crown made of light rays on the horizon, adorning the earth and bringing a new day. There was a light breeze blowing off the ocean – I breathed the salt laced air deeply into my lungs. I felt calm and the thoughts in my mind were still – as though I wasn’t thinking at all.

After a half hour or more I looked upon the face of my mother and saw tears on her cheeks and a sparkle of light in her familiarly beautiful hazel green eyes. She gently took my hand and nodding in silent appreciation to Ellen and Captain Tom, we rose to leave the place where sand meets sea and sea meets sky and the sun radiates its life shedding beauty upon all things. Ellen got up and walked over to my mother and gently took her swollen hands and smiled. “Francis is a special boy, Mrs. Lynn. I have enjoyed his company a great deal, thank you.” My mom smiled and nodded her appreciation. Then Ellen turned to me and said, “I have gifts for you.” She walked to where she had been sitting and reached into a bag and took out some items. She handed me a small blue book with the picture of a seagull on the front and the title said: *Jonathan Livingston Seagull, by Richard Bach.* “Read this book Francis, I think it speaks to your condition, and remember to read as much as possible for reading is the gateway to knowledge; and you might consider writing down your thoughts in a journal. Take this notebook and put your thoughts and feelings into words, it helps one to become clear in heart and mind.” The notebook was bound in blue leather and was thick with cream colored pages. She then handed me a black flute case with the word *Buescher* in gold lettering etched into the leather. “This was my very first flute,” she said fondly as her hands stroked the case. “Open it Francis,” she said excitedly. The silver flute was brightly polished and appeared brand new – as if it were never played before.

“It’s beautiful!”

“It is not an expensive flute but it plays as well as any flute I’ve ever played or heard; it was my first flute.” She leaned close and whispered in my ear, “Take the flute your friend gave to you and return it to the school.” I hugged her and thanked her as my eyes began to water. She affectionately said, “You will forever be my *Young Ghetto Flower.”* She kissed me lightly on the cheek and without thinking I gave her a quick light kiss on her lips. At first she looked startled, took a small step back as she softly touched her fingers to her mouth, and then she smiled.

Captain Tom rose from his comfortable spot in the sand and took my mother’s hands and gently held them for a few moments as he gazed into her eyes and said nothing. He then turned to be and extended his large right hand, swallowing my hand, we shook and he said, “Remember what I told you about your family and how you ended up here in Stone Harbor. You may not fully believe my story, but does it really matter how much of the legend is fact or fantasy? Your family vacations in Stone Harbor, my daughter has become your teacher, we spent time together on my boat and today we shared communal worship; these things don’t happen by mere coincidence my little friend.” And then he laughed his familiar deep hearty laughter.

In this final precious moment as I gazed upon the ocean’s horizon with my mother’s hand placed affectionately in mine, I looked out at sea one more time and waves of thoughts flowed through my mind:

*‘Stone Harbor, New Jersey! The enchanted land where my spirit is free and I dwell in a sanctuary from the worries of the world; a place where I experience parts of my personality that are mostly hidden when roaming the streets of South Philadelphia. Looking out upon the vastness of the ocean is like looking into the mind of creation; it is infinite, beautiful and mysterious. And now it is time to return to Philadelphia, which I anticipate with both dread and excitement. I am aware of a difference in how I feel at this moment and the way I am in Philadelphia; although I have had many adventures in the South Philly neighborhood, deep down inside I often feel scared and alone. I don’t have that feeling while in Stone Harbor. I am nervous about returning to an unfriendly public school and meeting up again with my neighborhood friends; in fact I feel uncertain about what friendship truly is, or at least, my friendship with Ellen has taught me much about myself and the world – and playing the flute. Ah, and then there is my beautiful Italian-Irish Sandy - my half & half - and soon I will be playing my flute for her and perhaps she’ll reward me with a kiss.’*

***Sun, Sky, Sand & Sea***

*Dreams and emotions placed upon the water’s edge*

*Breezes move across the surface and sweep through my mind*

*Carrying each thought as grains of sand to be taken to another shore*

*Leaving this one empty to be filled with the horizon’s expansiveness*

*And the beauty before me whispers of Nature’s eternal embrace*

*My heart opens with the wideness of the sea and in its depths*

*The mysteries of life are there to be explored*

*The yesterdays*

*The today*

*The tomorrows*

*All converge on the ebb and flow of time forever present*

*On the edge of mind, the ever changing line*

*Where sky meets sea and sea caresses land*

*And life’s transitions spiral and ascend to continual new beginnings*

*Endless change while the basic elements remain the same*

*Do I make myself?*

*Anymore than sun, sky, sand & sea*

*For I am the same as these elements, perhaps more*

*Ever changing – ever changeless – for*

*I am as Nature created me*

*I am the sun*

*I am the sky*

*I am the sand*

*I am the sea*

*I am in Nature*

*Nature is in me*

*I am the mystery*

*Inseparable, like the lines*

*Between the Sun, Sky, Sand & Sea*

**GHETTO FLOWERS I: The Early Years**, is the novel from which **Stone Harbor** and other short stories originated from. The novel and other short stories by the author can be purchased at:

[http://stores.lulu.com/francislynn](about:blank)