

CHAPTER 1

A Good White-Collar Job

RELIGIOUS PEOPLE SAY THAT WHEN God closes one door, He opens another. People also say that if something doesn't kill you, it will make you stronger. I believe both of these statements, maybe because my parents took me to church from the time I was born, to the "little buds" choir, the junior choir, and to more sermons than I care to remember. To this day, my extended family still attends the quaint red-brick Russell Temple Methodist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, on South Alfred Street, with its twelve white steps and twelve windows tinted with heavenly symbols open to the sky. I used to daydream about my books, my life, and what I would be when I grew up while the pastor preached in the stuffy crowded house of worship. It was only when Willie James died that I stopped going to church and stopped daydreaming.

The hospital waiting room felt cold and sterile. *It's raining like cats and dogs and that's probably why I'm alone in this huge room*, I thought. *Only fools and drunk drivers would be out on a night like this! That's right, fools, including me. Why in God's name did I agree to attend class, especially tonight?* The morning had been disastrous. Our car keys were missing. *I know I hung them by the kitchen door!* This morning they were gone. We tore the house up, took dishes from cupboards, dish towels from drawers, and even emptied the silverware tray. We looked under and behind everything, threw clothes on the floor in every bedroom, but we ran out

of time. The kids had to get to Holy Name Catholic School; we had to catch the bus. I was mad.

At the bus stop, my husband Willie James quizzed our middle daughter, Catrina, on her upcoming spelling test. I continued to fume. When I heard Willie James correct a word Catrina misspelled, I knew he was wrong, and we discussed the word all the way to the babysitter, where we dropped off the kids and caught the bus to downtown Washington, DC. It was September 1981; Willie James was a cement foreman for HHS Construction Company, and they were putting up a Marriott Hotel two blocks from the White House.

We got off at the same bus stop, and I walked up to Fourteenth and Independence, where the United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS) headquarters stood. The historic Romanesque-style building rose four stories high between two of the busiest streets in DC, Twelfth and Fourteenth. Its dark gray bricks, sterile and lifeless, made it look like a prison without barbed-wire fences, guards, and guns, but formidable nonetheless. I worked for the US Department of Agriculture in the Forest Service Office of Information and Education (I&E). I took calls from all over the United States and even overseas, on the main line for this government agency that managed the nation's 193 million acres of public forests and grasslands. That fated morning, I went straight to my desk, where I cheerfully answered, "Hello, Forest Service, Information and Publications. This is Gloria Brown. May I help you?" People called to ask for all kinds of things: the brochure, whether Smokey the Bear could visit a school, or whether they could ski in the Mount Hood National Forest or go whitewater rafting in a national forest. It was 1981, and my office was on the third floor, the same level as the chief of the Forest Service, the engineer Max Peterson.

My first job with USFS was as a GS-4 dictating machine transcriber, a DMT.¹ I had passed the civil service exam and could have worked in any of several agencies: Forest Service, Department of Housing and Urban Development, or the Civil Service Commission. I picked Forest Service because my cousin worked for the Department of Agriculture, which manages the Forest Service. I never meant for it to be a career; it was just a job, a way for us to support our family. I wasn't ever planning to stay. It was just a good government job that paid well and that I needed while attending night school to become a reporter. That was my real goal. It was

very obvious to me in those early days that only men reached the management level at Forest Service. You would see them in a room or around a table, and they were all white. They were all white men, and I knew they were making decisions about how to manage people and places I had never seen.

I don't remember the word Willie James and I argued about, but I know I looked it up as soon as I got to work. I was right. Willie James was wrong. My day looked better. After work, I headed back down to Willie James's job site so we could catch the bus together to pick up the kids. As I ambled past some of the capital's icons, I admired the green lawns and saw four of the eighteen national museums on the Mall. I reflected on how close USFS was to the White House and other tourist attractions. *I should bring the kids down to the Air and Space Museum this weekend*, I thought. I kept going and passed the National Post Office and other government buildings with their great classic architecture, just like any other day. As I neared Willie James's job site to meet and take the bus home, I was startled out of my internal stupor by the sound of traffic, car horns, and people talking and walking or running for buses, all trying to get home from a long day's work.

Our babysitter was Ellen, the wife of Lee, who was one—in a group of six—of Willie James's North Carolina childhood friends. These guys all came to DC together in the 1960s seeking work. They married, had families, and socialized together regularly. When we arrived to pick up the kids, Willie James told Lee about our morning. He was upset that I would have to miss my first class of the semester that evening because we couldn't find the car keys. My getting to school was more important to my husband than it was to me. I knew I could make the class up next week. Lee said not to worry; Willie James could take his car and bring it back tomorrow. So, even though I usually drove myself, Willie James dropped me off that night at the University of Maryland, College Park, a scenic campus with the eastern university look of red brick and white columns. The university hosts thousands of trees on a four-hundred-acre urban forest in the midst of a huge campus, the kind of place a Forest Service employee pays attention to. It is like a beautiful park, even in the rain.

We were caught in one of the worst storms in a long time, a torrent that came down in sheets that cooled the air and chilled you to the bone.

To make matters worse, the professor let us out early, and I did not have a car. I went to the public phone booth in Russell Hall to call Willie James, but the kids answered and said that their dad had already left. He was coming to pick me up early. I thought, *Isn't that just like Willie James?*

I told the kids, "Say your prayers and go to bed. We will be home soon." When I came back to the vestibule, there he sat. Willie James knew I'd had a bad day, and he didn't want me to have to wait. That's how he took care of me. *My thoughtful, sweet husband.* The car was double-parked right outside the hall, but the rain came down so hard we still got soaked as we ran to it.

The University of Maryland's 1,250-acre campus had several exits, and instead of leaving by a direct route, Willie James went "around Dick's barn," taking the long way out of campus, which added fifteen minutes of driving. I still have no idea why he did that, but life would have been entirely different had we taken the regular straight route. I remember asking him, "Why are you going this way?"

"Are you paying attention?" he asked.

"No."

"Honey," he said, "You should always pay attention to where you are, in case you ever have to come back by yourself."

"Fine," I told him, "but I'm with you. I don't need to pay attention because you always know which way to go."

He said it again, "Honey, you should always pay attention to where you are, in case you have to come back by yourself." Then Willie James drove from the campus out onto to the main highway in College Park, Maryland.

We were still talking as the car pulled up to the first stoplight. "Okay, I'll start paying attention," I told him. "And by the way, the word you were going over with Catrina this morning is actually spelled—"

At that moment, there was a loud crash, steel on steel, a grinding noise. My head flew forward and time slowed. I knew I had to look up, to move my heavy head, but it was hard. Finally, I looked over at Willie James, and my entire body shivered. His head lay against the steering wheel. He had passed out, and I had no idea how badly he was hurt. I trembled. I didn't know it at that moment, but my world had changed forever. Suddenly, people were opening my door. They had umbrellas. They were talking, asking me how I was. "I'm fine," I said, "but someone needs

to see about my husband.” My head throbbed and I could hear sirens. I remembered Leland Hospital was only six blocks away. *They got to us fast. Everything will be okay*, I thought.

Home alone. That’s all I could think about. *The kids are home alone and this is going to take some time.* I called my mom. “Mom, there’s been an accident and the kids are home alone. Will you pick them up and take them to your house? Willie James and I will be there after we get out of here.” I hung up quickly without mentioning the drunk driver down the hall, the same one who ran into us and three other cars before he crashed into a tree. I wondered, *Why am I in this room all by myself? Where is everybody?* I went into the hall but came right back. I could hear the drunk driver singing “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall.” *He better hope Willie James don’t find out who he is or his ass is grass*, I thought. *He doesn’t know my Willie James!*

I heard the bells and whistles of a trauma cart and my body trembled again. I thought to myself, *There is some kind of emergency out there, no reason for me to check out the commotion.* I figured this was probably why the doctor could not get away to tell me when Willie James and I could go home. I began to walk out the door to check, just as the doctor came in. *It’s about time!* In retrospect, it seemed time stopped again. I never got his name. He said, “Mrs. Brown?” I nodded, yes. He said, “Gloria Brown?”

I said, “Yes I’m Gloria Brown.”

He said, “Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

He shook his head, “I’m so, so sorry.” He probably said more, but suddenly I understood, and I fell, unconscious, to the floor.

When I woke up people were all around: my daddy, my aunt and uncle, Willie James’s aunt and uncle, and the doctor all hovered over me. At first, I didn’t understand. Daddy said the kids were with Mom and they were fine. He was here to take me home. I thought, *Me? Home? Me, home without Willie James?* “How can I go home without Willie James?” I said.

“Baby, Willie James is gone, he’s dead,” said Daddy.

“No, no!” I cried. “Where is he? I want to see my husband!” The doctor took my hand and led me to the room where Willie James was lying, broken glass still on his face. I tried to clean it off. He seemed to sleep peacefully, and I quietly bled tears as my daddy led me away.

I was thirty years old and suddenly a widow with three children: two girls, ages twelve and eleven, and one son, age nine. *Now what? What do I do? Where do I go? How do I go on? Why go on?* My forty-year-old husband was dead, and I had no clue what to do. Willie James took care of the money. He paid all the bills, rent, insurance, groceries. Both our names were on the checking account, but he earned the big family paycheck. As I'd headed toward my thirtieth birthday on May 7, 1981, I'd had a premonition, a foreboding, as though awaiting the perfect storm, but there was nothing perfect about the squall that hit that night. Everything was wrong. We lost our keys. Rain came down in buckets. It took an extra fifteen minutes to get out of the campus. The light turned red at the wrong time. One small change and my husband would have lived. The only thing perfect was the tempest of destruction that hit our family that night. My life was destroyed. That gloomy year ended for me on September 17, 1981. I was a GS-6 in the Forest Service national office, a rank just above the national average for women and nearly three grades below that of men service-wide.²

What a difference a day made. I felt like I never wanted to see another dawn.

My Origins

When I returned to work after Willie James died, I still asked the public, "May I help you?" But the words seemed empty. I was the one who needed help. I guess life-changing events happen all the time. My first big change came at age seven. My mom and dad were great parents, and I was their only child, their firstborn. I came into the world at DC General Hospital, just across the bridge from Alexandria, Virginia, where we lived, not too far from the docks that ran along the Potomac River. I was a happy, smart child, with two proud parents delighting in everything I did.

My early years were filled with good memories. After work in the summertime, Mommy and Daddy would pick me up from the babysitter and we would walk to the docks. I can picture myself then, a plump, round-faced, dark-brown girl, with curly, nappy hair that Mom plaited into big braids. My 6-foot-7-inch dad would put me up on his shoulders, and I felt like I was on top of the world. I always hoped we would end up at the Tastee-Freez, where I would get a vanilla chocolate swirl ice cream

cone. Sometimes Dad would pretend to pass right by Tastee-Freez, and I would kick my little feet and slap his gigantic head with my chubby hands. Daddy would stop, turn, and grin: “Ice cream for my two favorite girls?” We were close. We were happy.

My parents, Ruby Baldwin and Harry Foster, met after World War II. I can picture them from photographs: a typical young African American couple, Mom shy and light-skinned, her demeanor reflecting the gentility of the South, Dad a northerner with chocolate brown skin standing confidently in his military uniform. Dad had been a supplies clerk in the US Army Quartermaster Department, a job that led him to work for the General Services Administration after the war. Mom and her three sisters had left home as part of the post-World War II wave of the Second Great Migration, during which millions of African Americans sought jobs, education, and better lives in the North. The young women moved to Virginia, where Mom cleaned houses as she worked on her LPN (licensed practical nurse) degree. When the sisters wanted some fun, they dressed up and went dancing at the Quantico Noncommissioned Officer’s Club, where my parents met.

The two of them dated for a while, but when my mother had trouble finding work, she decided to return to Georgia. Dad had a steady job, and he knew how to spend money, so when they were dating, instead of going out she would ask him to just give her the money to put away for him. The story they told is that, while getting ready to leave, my mother gave my father his passbook savings; he looked at it and said there was no way she was going back to my grandmother’s! This girl had to be his wife—he couldn’t let go of a woman who could save up money like that! And they did very well together. They did so well, in fact, that when I was six years old, they decided to have another baby and moved us away from the river, to 5104 Third Street NW in Washington, DC. And I hated it.

It was a better house and a better neighborhood, but there were no more trips to Tastee-Freez. They also sent for my mother’s daughter, the baby she’d had before moving to DC to learn nursing, the sister who was three years older than me. JoAnn had lived with my grandmother in Georgia, but she was not alone. Four other cousins from the other three daughters also lived there. Grandma and Grandpa were sharecroppers. Granddaddy worked in other people’s fields, and my grandmother worked in white people’s homes cleaning and ironing, and sometimes cooking.

All the girls had left their children with Grandma when they went north, and they sent money to her. It had been a family decision.

We visited my grandparents every summer, but I never liked it. It was the Jim Crow South in the 1950s and the rules were clear, ugly, and demoralizing. Grandma lived on the south side of town, in the Blacks-only neighborhood where the streets were made of dirt, and dust covered everything. The homes there stood on wooden stilts, with just enough space between the bare earth and the house for me to chase chickens underneath. It was different on the other side of town. I realized this as a child when Grandma took me to visit Miss Adelaide, where the white people lived. I saw and felt the centuries-old, southern division between Blacks and Whites that day. Two-to-three-story brick houses lined both sides of the paved road, and white columns marked formal entryways. Grandma wanted to introduce me to Miss Adelaide. "This is my granddaughter from the North," she told her. "She's really smart because they have good schools up there. Say something to Miss Adelaide, Gloria," my grandmomma said. "Recite that poem you memorized." And I did, feeling sick inside the whole time. I still remember Grandma's tone, deferential and meek, nothing like the strong, proud woman I knew. And there stood Miss Adelaide, commanding and condescending, calling me "a cute little pickaninny" from the North. My grandmomma was pleased that I made Miss Adelaide happy. I wanted to run and hide.

I knew even then that the South wasn't for me! I detested the mandatory Bible school demanded by Grandma, and I loathed picking cotton on Uncle Leroy's farm, where unending rows of bushes twice my size held pods of cotton, the sticky white fibers clinging to my fingers as I plucked and the pods pricking me. I couldn't pick as much cotton as my cousins, so they always made more money than I did, and I hated them for it. Worse yet, my cousins and sister teased me for being a city girl. I'm sure they knew that I saw them as "country," and not very smart.

I *knew* I was smart. I loved to read and write and planned for a different kind of future. But I was not happy with my life, and I could only blame my once-wonderful parents. We'd had a perfect little family, so good together, and then along came the others. My mom and dad had turned all their attention to my fat big sister, JoAnn, and my very light-skinned straight-haired baby sister, Lisa. I was dark like my dad. In the African American community, skin tone matters. It mattered on

television. It mattered in school. It mattered in daily life. Light-skinned Blacks faced less racism than those of us with darker skin, even from each other. Many darker-skinned people also thought light-skinned people were better looking, and more desirable, capable, and worthwhile. I was just a little girl, so I didn't know how to say this, but I did know that skin color counted. I would tell Dad, "Lisa's not ours, she doesn't look like us." But he adored Lisa and wanted to make sure JoAnn felt loved. It seemed like the only time they paid me attention anymore was when I did something wrong.

A Troubled Past

I first started getting into trouble when Lisa was about three months old. Mommy and Daddy were having one of their monthly dinner parties in our new house. The music was going, people were dancing. I could see them laughing and swaying, Mom with her shoulder-length hair, nicely straightened and pulled into a neat ponytail, Dad tall and handsome. Mom had grown up wearing burlap-sack dresses, but in the North, she and Dad dressed like white people. My parents and their friends took great pride in their dress and style, even for a house party. That night, the men wore trousers and dress shirts, the women blouses and skirts, their crinkled slips flaring as they twirled. Someone was singing along with the Supremes, a song about a lover who left behind a lot of memories.³ So, when Lisa started crying, I tried to stop her.

I wrapped Lisa in her blankie, went downstairs to the kitchen, and put her in the oven because I remembered Mom saying we had to be quiet when her cakes were in there. Then I called my dad in to show him how I had saved the party. My parents and their guests were horrified. Everyone agreed that I had done a very bad thing, but I knew better. I could have reached the buttons to turn the oven on if I had gotten on my special chair. I wasn't trying to hurt her, just shut her up. The bad news was that my baby sister got me into trouble. The good news was that I got my parents undivided attention for days.

The year after Lisa's birth, my mom began delivering more children, three sons in eighteen-month increments each: Michael, Anthony, and Larry. Michael was cute and light-skinned with good hair, just like Lisa. Anthony, who came next, looked like me and Daddy. So did the last

brother, Larry. Mom and Dad took lots of pictures of them. A picture of me is much harder to find. With every baby that arrived, I felt more and more like Mom and Dad ignored me. Before long, I upped the ante to get a response. When I was nine, I stole a bunch of lunches from my fourth-grade schoolmates and threw them in the trash. When the teacher asked me why I'd done it, I said I was hungry, that Mommy and Daddy didn't always feed me. That day, the principal called my parents in to talk. When he explained that they might qualify for food programs, I thought my mother's head would explode. She told the principal, "Gloria Dean lives in a beautiful brick house on Third and Gallatin! We both have good jobs! Why in God's name would we need information on food programs or public assistance?"

That's when I got my first beating from Mom. Dad never beat me, but also never tried to stop her. As I grew older, I continued doing bad things to get my parents' attention, and it worked. Mom responded with angry reprimands and leather belt beatings that left welts on my back and legs. I became convinced I was a bad person. By age twelve, I started running away. I don't remember why that first time, but I knew I would get a beating, so I left. As a teenager, I met Lucy, whose mother was an alcoholic, but very nice to me. Miss Amy didn't care that the kids came to her house, danced, hung out, and slept there. We thought she was a good mother because her household felt free. She fed us, didn't holler, didn't beat people, and she didn't judge. I ran away about fifteen times, always to Lucy's house. My parents never knew where I was.

Even though I was in trouble most of the time and disliked school, I still loved to read and to learn. In fact, I visited the public library two miles from my house every chance I got. I went there to escape, to make up my own perfect world. It was my haven; that is, until one day when I stayed long past my twilight curfew. I remember rushing out the door on the wrong side of the library and thinking, *Okay, you gotta get home, you gotta get home!* I worried that it was dark, but didn't even consider the vulgar, ugly scene that would soon unfold. I simply didn't want to be in trouble with Mommy and Daddy. Never again would I have such innocent fears. As I trudged across the field, suddenly someone grabbed me from behind, threw me to the ground, and put his hand over my mouth. Three teenage boys held me down, one on each side and another at my feet—that's the one who stole my virginity. I know I fought, but I can't

recall if I scratched or punched somebody. I just know that everything moved in slow motion.

The rape ended as quickly as it started. When a car came up on that side of the library, its lights shining, one of them yelled, “We gotta go!” They ran off and left me lying there. All I could think about was pulling up my panties and going back into the world without looking like someone who had just been raped. I went home that night and took a very long bath. Everything hurt, especially “down there.” And I never told my parents. I never told anyone about it until many, many years later.

Even after the rape, I loved the library. In fact, I went every day for the following week, instead of school, and read about child abuse and rape. I don’t remember the numbers now, but I recall that the statistics were high. I was shocked. I know now that reports of forcible rape in DC increased dramatically in the 1960s, nearly a hundred rapes for every hundred thousand women.⁴ I also knew from what I read that most women, including me, did not report. As I read, I realized that I was now a statistic, and I increased all the numbers I found by one. I used a pencil to record the stats. If it was five thousand, I wrote 5,001. Later I realized that pencil could be erased. But the rape was real. I cannot forget it. I should have written in ink.

Being bad took on a whole new meaning. Now I was *really* bad, “damaged” goods. *I shouldn’t have been walking alone. I should not have stayed out so late. I should have been more modest. I should have fought harder. I should not have allowed those boys to touch me. People will say it was my own fault.* That’s how folks talked about rape in those days. I’d heard them and didn’t know what to think. I only knew that I hurt deep down inside, and I could not tell anyone. I also thought I would never have a good life like Mom and Dad. Men only married good girls. I had heard this in church, which we went to every Sunday to supposedly commune with God. Instead, we faced the hypocrisy of the preacher and the congregation. Bad things happened to bad people—that’s what the church people said. If you are good and godly, nothing happens. Mom and Dad had even taken me to our pastor to discuss my behavior. I never asked them if they knew that Reverend Taylor would brush his arm across women’s breasts as though no one could see him.

I didn’t know it then, but what happened gave me the sense that I could come back from anything. I became more daring. I had survived

rape. What could be worse for a child? I knew how to compartmentalize, how to move forward with strength, how to keep things to myself. I became even more willing to challenge my parents and myself. I learned that even when the worst thing happens to you, you can survive. And, you can do it by yourself. I figured out how to live the life that I wanted. Rape is never good. The outcome is always very bad. But I also learned that fending for myself was more important to me than my virginity. I started taking a switchblade to the library in case that ever happened again, and I never stayed till dark.

Finding Home

I decided that something needed to change. I had taken every opportunity to draw attention to myself at school and at home, but always in the wrong way. My parents were not bad people, just so wrapped up with my siblings that they did not recognize my pain. Even if they had known, I thought they would see me as the culprit. So when I turned sixteen in 1967, I got a job at Miles Long Sandwich Shop near Twelfth and H Streets NE in Washington, DC. And when I saved up enough money, I moved into my own studio apartment two blocks away. I was in the twelfth grade when I dropped out of Calvin Coolidge High School and took the GED. I always told people I had graduated.

I was seventeen when I met Willie James Brown, a twenty-six-year-old Vietnam veteran. When Willie James came into the shop, we'd talk for hours. Before long, he started walking me home, telling me about the war and his "boys," everyday stories about soldiers, rather than the horrors of war. The young men would trade cigarettes and other goodies that arrived in their care packages. They all knew the fear that each of them shared, but nobody showed it. Sometimes I cried at these powerful stories, especially when Willie James talked about the pain of losing men from his platoon. He also told me you have to go on anyway. You don't get time to grieve. Little did he know how those words would haunt me, and help me.

Willie James made me happy. He took me to all the places I'd spoken of while he ate his sandwiches. I was surprised that he remembered my stories and found ways to recreate the experiences or make new memories. On my days off the two of us played in the city, visiting sites like the Smithsonian museums and the Lincoln Memorial. Twice we toured

Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's primary plantation. We even went to the Washington Monument and the White House. But our favorite place was the Washington National Zoo and the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus, the last place I remembered being close with my parents before my siblings came along. I had finally found someone I loved and who loved me back—without my being bad: Willie James Brown, the preacher's grandson.

We married at my parents' house and went straight to having a family. Camille (who we call Nicki) and Catrina were only eleven months apart. We waited a couple of years and then we had Andre. "Finally, a son," Willie James said.

"Yes," I said, "and your son convinced me we will not have any more babies." The girls were a little over seven pounds when they were born; Andre was well over nine pounds! Ouch!

Losing Home

Willie James Brown was Mrs. Gloria Brown's bridge over troubled water, a really good dad and involved. We had thirteen years of smooth sailing. Willie James had picked up where Mommy and Daddy stopped. He had taken care of me, and losing him left me as emotionally destroyed at thirty years old as I had been after the rape at age twelve. I was bereft, devastated, living in a daze. I started drinking too much, and every day was a struggle; yet, I continued to work. Nobody knew about my drinking, and I remained the voice of the Forest Service. I took the calls and answered the letters that came in to the national information office. If you needed a more detailed answer, I forwarded the query to the appropriate department or specialist. If you wanted material about Smokey the Bear or Woodsy the Owl for your classroom, I sent it to you. I would make your requests come true.

After Willie James died, I guess you could say that the Forest Service became my family and support system, but not right away. First, I had to let go of Willie James. We never did go back to our house. The night of the accident, we went straight to my mom's and stayed for a couple of months. Then we moved to a three-bedroom apartment, with enough space for Andre and me to each have our own rooms and for the girls to share the master, but you could hear people going back and forth,

elevators running up and down day and night. Our home had been in a middle-class neighborhood. The apartment was a real contrast; people hanging out, break-ins, people without jobs—a low-income neighborhood, which was all I could afford.

I grieved hard. My family took care of my husband's body and of getting me and the kids to North Carolina. I know Willie James had a military funeral with an honor guard and a volley of rifle shots. I know they folded a flag and gave it to me, and that each of the kids dropped a rose on his casket. That's all I remember. I was physically present, but mentally vacant. That state of mind continued for a long time. The pain was so wretched that I would come home, get a drink, take my prescription drugs, pore over a box of pictures of him and the family, and wait. I clung to that box of pictures as though I could will him back through his image. Every night I put the kids to bed and sat in the living room in agony and hope, waiting for the drugs to numb the pain as I anticipated Willie James's return. I could not, would not let him go. I even took the box of pictures to work with me every day. And then one day, somehow, I left the picture box on the train. I was devastated. I called Metro every day and returned to that train daily for several weeks, but they never showed up. Losing those pictures was like having Willie James taken all over again, this time for good. But somehow that loss disconnected me from my husband and sent me a message: Get your act together. Get on with life, if not for yourself, for his kids.

Strategizing the Future

That's when I began to see the Forest Service as my salvation. I didn't know a lot about the Forest Service from the ground up then, except that I worked in the Washington office (WO). Before Willie James died, I had planned to become a television reporter, a choice he supported. Now I could not afford to start at the bottom of print or a live medium and decided, instead, to work myself up through the ranks of the Forest Service. My children had entered the public school system where we lived, which was motivation enough for change: How could I get them out of that school, out of the neighborhood, and into a safe environment, conducive to learning and living? I decided to become a survivor, not a victim. First goal, finish my degree in journalism. Next, figure out how

to get from A to B to C in an organization that had been predominantly white and male for three-quarters of a century.

While I finished my degree at night, during the day I worked for Bill Hamilton, who was under the director of information, Bob Lake. Across the hall was the Resources Planning Act (RPA) assessment office, directed by Lamar Beasley, a forester by training, an administrator by talent. RPA dealt with planning, assessing, and implementing environmental laws, areas that became more and more important in the 1970s and 1980s. Lamar came into my office now and then to get information and publications; while there he'd talk to me in his smooth, calm southern drawl about family, the day, and agency issues. No one engaged me like Lamar, though other directors visited with me too: Wendell Jones, director of timber management; Mike Barton, director of watershed and soils; the Fish and Wildlife director; and the recreation director, Lyle Laverty, to name a few. For them, the conversation was light chatter while waiting for materials. For me, it provided opportunity to understand the agency and what happened in the "field." I didn't stop learning after a few conversations. I listened harder and became more determined to advance. When I didn't have evening classes, I volunteered to staff the chief's office after his secretary went home. It was not unusual for Chief Max Peterson and Associate Chief Dale Robertson to stay late for meetings with members of Congress or the public. This gave me the opportunity to greet those individuals and dignitaries. I took their coats, made them drinks, and kept on smiling even though I made barely enough money to feed my kids. In the midst of the pleasantries, I strategized about how to move up.

I'm sure I was invisible to the chief and deputy chief, and to directors and members from Congress. But if the chief left his door open, I eavesdropped. I listened and I learned. I met leading political figures from Oregon, like Senator Mark Hatfield and Congressman Peter DeFazio, who talked about the far-off Pacific Northwest and its timber. This was the 1980s, and the Northwest and Alaska remained front-runners in an emerging crisis over old-growth forests, the spotted owl, the marbled murrelet, and other natural resource debates. How could there be a balance between environment and economy? How could the Forest Service achieve its multiple-use mission, while contending with environmental mandates? Congress expected the Forest Service to support itself. Northwest communities expected jobs. That meant high

timber harvests. Scientists and environmentalists expected the Forest Service to adhere to environmental laws and to protect habitat. That meant reducing timber harvests. The agency was being sued left and right. Some Northwest protesters even chained themselves to or placed spikes in old-growth trees to prevent loggers from cutting them down. A woman named Julia Butterfly Hill lived for two years in one of Northern California's ancient redwoods to effectively stop harvests. It was a rough period for the Forest Service.

At the time, the Department of Agriculture took a hands-off approach. The chief handled our business in Washington and in the field, with a clear line through the regional foresters to national forest supervisors and district rangers. While the WO made policy, employees worked "on the ground" and "in the field," cruising timber, managing sales, clearing trails, cutting hazardous trees, fighting fire, and writing environmental assessments (EAs) for fish and wildlife projects. If you worked in Washington, and paid attention, you learned about who was who, agency problems, and how politics worked. If you wanted to move up in the Forest Service hierarchy, you had to know how DC operated and who had the power. If you were not interested, you just did your job.

I had just done my job until Willie James died. Now, as I tried to figure out how to enter the Forest Service chain of command, I assessed my performance. I was good at my job and could answer nearly any question or address any issue posed by the public, whether on the telephone or in the chief's office. I interacted as comfortably with national figures as I did with employees in the basement. I knew how to take initiative and get things done. I also knew that I needed champions if I wanted to move up.

One high-level administrator who stood out for me was Lamar Beasley. He was different. When Lamar spoke, he talked *to* me, not at me. I watched how Lamar treated his employees and liked what I saw. He was kind, respectful, and made time for conversations. I also noticed that the individuals who worked in his department on short-term details typically served for three to six months and were then promoted out of the Washington office. I began to see that Lamar created a breeding ground for future rangers, regional office staff, and others developing their careers. Departments like timber and recreation also produced rangers, but more advancement seemed to come through Lamar's RPA office than through any other. So, one day I asked, "Lamar, I see people coming through your

office and getting promoted to offices in the field. How can I come work for you?”

Lamar flashed his million-dollar smile and said, “That’s easy Gloria. The next position you qualify for, just apply.”

And that is exactly what I did. The next position that came available was secretary for RPA. No one understood why I would leave I&E to take a job as a secretary when I had a degree in journalism. But I didn’t see movement in I&E like I saw in RPA. You know the saying, “the best laid plans often go awry”? Well, I got the job, but the same week I started, Lamar was promoted to deputy chief for legislative affairs. I remember wondering, *Now what do I do?* I would not give up! *My plan to advance should still work, but I need new supporters*, I thought. I quickly targeted my bosses, the new director of RPA, Tom Hamilton, and assistant RPA director John Butruille. Little did I know that this relationship would matter even more later on. Meanwhile, when I started asking questions about how to advance, Tom and John made it clear that the best way would be to leave the Washington office.

Meeting My Destiny

I needed to understand how a region works “in the field.” So, Tom and John facilitated a two-week detail to the information office in Region 6, in Oregon, on the other side of the country. This was my first plane ride ever, and it exposed me to an entirely new world. As the plane circled to land at the Portland International Airport, I was struck by the brilliant white-topped peaks of Mount Hood. I had seen the Smoky Mountains, but never anything like this! I also quickly realized that Oregon’s population was as white as the mountain’s peaks. I had worked with Caucasians for a long time, but never before had I seen a place with no African Americans. Yes, I learned there were a few in the state—about 37,000 in a population of 2.5 million—but they were not very visible in the Portland Regional Office (RO), the city’s downtown area, and especially not on the Forest Service districts I visited.⁵ The most diversity I saw in Portland was in the personnel office, the mailroom, and the civil rights office; when I visited the Willamette National Forest, I saw no people of color. There were women, but at the forest and district levels, no one looked like me.

What I did see everywhere I looked was Northwest green, the color of money in the Forest Service, and the hue of deliverance for me. Oregon's lush Willamette Valley took my breath away as an employee named Jerry Mason drove me to the Willamette National Forest supervisor's office in Eugene. The Willamette National Forest stretches more than a hundred miles along the western slope of the Cascade Range, extending from Mount Jefferson east of Salem to the Calapooya Mountains northeast of Roseburg. Mount Hood dominates the Portland landscape, while Mount Jefferson looms above the crystal-clear lakes, cascading waterfalls, and vibrant plant life of the Willamette Valley and its national forest. To me, these were some of the prettiest landscapes in the country. Of course, I hadn't seen a lot. Although I had been with the Forest Service for nearly ten years, I had never been in a national forest.

When I saw the massive trees, bigger than any living thing I had ever seen, soaring hundreds of feet into the air, a million fragrant needles sending oxygen into the atmosphere, I felt that I was in a cathedral, a church more powerful than any other. The Douglas-firs, true firs, and pines towered over me. Brilliant shades of green and gold moss and lichen brought the forest to life, while the flaming red of Indian fireweed burned into my consciousness, and the solitude of the trails calmed my soul. There were no cars, no streetlights, and very few people; just trees, rivers, and wildlife. I had never known solitude like that, even in a park. At a cookout in DC, there were people everywhere. This was different. People walked the trails, but the forest enclosed you in solitude. I had sent out pamphlets about forest ecology but had never walked in the forest. I had provided schools with educational materials about the environment, but had never seen old growth. For me, visiting the Willamette forest was like going into a darkroom and having the light come on slowly to reveal a new world. I had so many firsts, my parents didn't believe my stories. I decided then to one day work on the Willamette. Daddy did say that if I ever got to live in Oregon, he would love to visit and fish for some salmon. I eventually got to Oregon, but Dad died before he could catch that fish.

I had never eaten salmon before my detail to Oregon. I eat it all the time now. The food was good, the scenery fantastic, and it was the cleanest place I had ever been. The highlight of my trip was a black bear running across Highway 101 near Cape Perpetua. I had never seen a wild

animal outside of the National Zoo. That did it. I went home determined to get out of Washington, DC. I also decided that Oregon might be a little too wild and was definitely way too white for us. I hoped to make my next detail to Region 8, Atlanta, Georgia.

When I returned, Tom, John, and I had several meetings about my long-term goals. I wanted to eventually be a forest information officer, and someday direct one of our nine regional information offices. Later, I realized what I really wanted was to be one of the decision makers, a line officer. In the meantime, Tom, John and I decided the first step was to change my position series. Each job title came with a number, a pay scale, and a particular fit in the agency. And only foresters—not secretaries—could become line officers. Because of my journalism degree, the agency could classify me as a 1035 Information Specialist, a move away from the clerical (318) category I'd had for nearly a decade, the classification of most women in the WO Forest Service. I applied for an RPA Information Specialist (GS-1035-7). As an information specialist I could work with detailers who came to the WO to get their tickets stamped while working on the national RPA program, then engaged in evaluating the nation's forests. My duties included some writing, proofreading, and editing, a step up from secretarial work and a great way to learn about national issues and meet important individuals. I got to work with people like Beth Horn (later director of information, R-1) and many others who became agency leaders—district rangers, forest supervisors, and regional directors. Some became my supporters, mentors, and advisers.

By 1986, the time had come for me to depart the WO, where I had worked for more than a decade—to leave my family, friends, and the church I had stopped attending. I had spent the previous three years gaining the knowledge and skills to advance in the agency. Tom and John agreed that I was ready and started making calls to get me a job in one of the nine regional offices of the Forest Service. I thought I would be most comfortable in the South. Region 8 could provide new friends, a new church, and a new beginning for me and the kids. But I was only a GS-7, so when Beth Horn answered the call with a GS-9/11 public affairs position in her information office, I applied. I got the job—in Missoula, Montana, a state with more mountains, more forests, and more white people than most places in the country.