



## Setting

Shawn Patrick's dream has come true; he is a professional baseball player. It is the evening of his first professional game. His friends and family are lined throughout the stadium to watch him play.

*"Leading off and playing second base, #20, Shawn Patrick,"* the announcer says over the stadium intercom as Patrick darts onto the field. Two players later, *"Batting third and playing centerfield, #24, Ken Griffey, Juuunioooooor,"* is announced as Griffey sprints out to centerfield.

After both starting lineups are called out, a young woman wearing a black dress walks onto the field and begins singing the National Anthem. Shawn removes his hat, gazes at the flag hovering just beyond the centerfield wall and mouths the words of the National Anthem.

As the Anthem plays, he reflects on how his life began and what he overcame in order to wear a professional baseball uniform. Tears spill from his eyes as memories race through his mind, taking him back to the day he first held a baseball. That is where his journey began.



# I



## *The Pearl*

What was it about that old raggedy baseball that made it so special? It had long been retired from its glory days of being tossed back and forth among friends and smacked around by neighborhood kids during sandlot baseball games. Over the years it had spent entire fall and winter seasons in my backyard, covered with wet leaves and snow, so it was waterlogged and as heavy as a ripe melon. For six months out of each year that tattered ball would vanish, like a hibernating bear, but magically emerge in the spring, just in time for baseball season. It had once been a pearl with vibrant red seams meticulously woven through glowing white leather, but the remains of the ball looked more like something used to teach a dog to play fetch. The bright seams had faded to a mucky orange and had worn down so low that they blended flush with the soggy leather, making it impossible to get a firm grip. To the naked eye it had become nothing more than shredded red string and torn dingy leather, but to me it was still a pearl.

The value of that ball was not its usefulness or its cosmetic appeal. It was in the memories embedded deeply into its corked center. I was six years old when Carol, my caseworker, gave me that ball. "Shawn, I bought you this baseball," she said that day, handing it to me. I gawked over the pearly white ball as it rolled off her fingertips into my palm. Something had gone wrong! Carol was a genuinely sweet woman, so I wasn't surprised she'd bought me a brand new baseball.

It's just she'd never bought gifts before when we were moved to a different foster home. She handed Michelle, my four-year-old sister, a black doll that peed all over the place when its stomach was squeezed; Darnel, my five-year-old brother, a Jackson Five T-shirt that had Michael doing the splits; and me, a baseball.

For Darnel and Michelle this day rivaled any Christmas morning we'd ever had. They leaped into Carol's arms, showering her with zealous hugs and kisses. Without delay Darnel tore off the cheerless white T-shirt he'd slept in, replacing it with the colorful Jackson Five tee, changing his mood from melancholy to joyful. Michelle raced through Carol's office, finding the nearest water fountain. I clinched my baseball, watching as Michelle filled the belly of her doll with tap water. I sat wondering about the consequences of the gifts we were receiving. We'd done nothing extraordinary, so why was this instance any different from the past two years? The moment I realized the significance of Michelle's black doll, Darnel's Jackson Five t-shirt, and my brand new baseball was engraved on the walls of my memory, like the carved initials of lovers on a tree. It was the day a baseball replaced my family. Something had gone wrong!



It was a Saturday morning. I remember because my favorite Saturday morning cartoons were on television. My grandmother had given Darnel, Michelle and me baths and dressed us in our finest Sunday clothes. I knew this day was abnormal because Sunday church clothes and Saturday morning cartoons never went together. It was like a *One of These Things Doesn't Belong* segment on Sesame Street; it just didn't fit. Plus, I always felt nauseated when we were about to be taken from our grandmother.

My aunts Jewel, Amanda and Cammille, and cousins Curtis, Bobby and Danielle huddled near us in my grandmother's living room as if they were anticipating a knock on the front door. I remembered looking for my mother and father, but they were never around when my stomach felt queasy, so they most likely wouldn't be arriving anytime soon.

Darnel, Michelle and I sat on the couch, watching as our family wept over us.

"I love you sweet babies. Shawn, you watch after your little brother and sister, okay? I love you," Aunt Jewel said, rubbing my back.

"God is watching over you children. He loves you and He will never leave your side, always remember that. Auntie loves you," Aunt Camille whispered, fighting back tears.

"Shawn, listen to me. Don't ever think that we don't love y'all. I love you from the bottom of my heart. I will never let y'all kids out of my heart," Aunt Amanda sniffled, kissing Michelle and Darnel.

The atmosphere was so somber it felt like a funeral. I sensed this was not like other times; their hugs were tighter, their tears were larger and the pain in their voices was immense. I tried not to cry. After the first few times I had become almost immune to it. I swallowed my tears, which was probably why I always got so squeamish when this happened. I closed my eyes tightly, fighting back tears, but when I noticed my grandmother weeping I could no longer hold it in.

"Gramma, why are you crying?" I asked, as large tears glazed over my eyes. I knew why she was crying, but I didn't want her to know I was aware of it. "What's wrong, Gramma? We will be back tomorrow for Sunday morning breakfast and church, won't we? Don't cry, Gramma, I'll see you in the morning," I said. Her tears confirmed the feeling in my stomach and her silence spoke directly to my soul. I knew this would be the last time I would see her. She flung her arms around me, pulling me so close that I could feel her tears as they rolled off her cheek, trickled through my hair and splashed onto my scalp. I glanced at Darnel and Michelle, but they seemed undisturbed by what was going on.

After about ten minutes, I heard the honking of a horn. My aunts fell to their knees and began weeping out loud. I knew the horn was for us.

"C'mon, you guys, grab your stuff, let's go," I said, heading toward the front door. I walked slowly, waiting for Grandma to say the horn was not for us, but she said nothing. "Darnel, Michelle, c'mon, let's go," I repeated, opening the front door. As I stepped onto the porch, I saw a yellow cab parked outside the house. The driver was a middle-aged White man with a dingy gray and black beard. I noticed smoke from his cigarette circulating around in the cab. As we walked down the front stairs and out of the gate, my grandmother broke her silence.

"Shawn, come here, baby," she whispered. I turned but didn't walk towards her. I knew this was tearing apart her soul and it would be more difficult if I cried or begged her to stay, so I stood in the gateway, trying not to cry. The cab driver got out of the car, placed Michelle and Darnel in the back seat and put all of our bags in the trunk. Grandma walked towards me, slowly, forcing one foot in front of the other, and knelt down to my eye level.

"Listen, Suga! Mamma loves ya mo' than I loves my own-self. I couldn' stop 'em this time, Baby. Mamma tried wit' evraythang I had in ma soul, but I couldn' stop 'em this time. Shawn, you 'membra what I tole ya, 1107 East Jefferson Street, thas Mamma's address, don't evah fo'get that, Son, 1107 East Jefferson. Mamma will always be here, 1107 East Jefferson, you find me, honey, 'cuz they won' let me know where they takin' y'all kids. I loves ya, Boy, I know you know I loves ya," she said as tears streamed from her eyes. "Repeat Mamma's address, Son. I needs ta know that ya know where I will always be," she sobbed. She had drilled her address into my mind long ago, so I already had it memorized.

"11-0-7 East Jefferson," I whispered with a lumpy voice as waves of salty tears leveled my eyelids.

"Good, Baby! Mamma ain' neva leavin' here, so you come find me. I love you, precious," she said, leading me to the cab. I looked inside and saw Darnel and Michelle were thumb-wrestling. They seemed to have no idea we were not coming back the next day, but I knew we weren't going to see Grandma, or the rest of our family, for a long time.

I climbed into the smoke-filled cab and Grandma shut the door behind me.

"Buckle up," the driver barked in a scratchy voice. As I clamped the seat belt, she walked over to the window. Her usually peaceful face was now a mask of frustration and she was visibly scared. I had never seen her like this. She placed both hands on the window and brought her face within inches from the glass. The next thirty seconds seemed as if the world moved in slow motion. I placed my hands against the inside of the window, but it offered her no relief. She pulled her hands away, collapsed to her knees and burst into sobs. As she peered up at me, I saw the anguish in her eyes. I could hear her

crying and calling my name. She rose to her feet and took one step towards the cab. Just then, the driver pulled the gear down into drive, put on his left turn signal and merged into traffic. I glanced back at my grandma and she was still standing on the sidewalk, sobbing, waving with both hands. The cab drove down the street, stopping at a red light, but I hadn't taken my eyes off of her. The light turned green, and as the cab began to turn left I waved goodbye. She placed both hands over her mouth and blew a kiss. The cab turned left, and that was the last time I saw my family.

Where now? I thought. We had already lived in seven different foster homes, so what would this one be like? How many other kids were going to be there? Would there be a mother and a father? Would they have a dog? What school were we going to go to? Did they know Darnel still wet his bed and Michelle never took her thumb out of her mouth? What color were they going to be? The hardest part was meeting a new family and trying to figure out if they liked us. Carol Chipley, our caseworker, didn't tell us anything about this new family when we went to her office to make our adoption tape.

"Hi, my name is Shawn, I'm six and a half years old and I like baseball," I said, peering into the camera, grasping the brand new baseball Carol had just given me.

"My name is Darnel, I'm five years old and I like the Jackson Five," he said, showing off the Jackson Five T-shirt he'd received.

"It's your turn, Michelle. Look into the camera and say something about yourself," Carol said. Michelle said nothing. She sat sucking her thumb, staring blankly into the camera.

"This is my sister. Her name is Michelle. She's four years old and as you can see, she likes dolls," I said in her place as she sat sucking her thumb, clenching her new black doll. That tape was probably the only information this new family knew about us. I didn't know exactly why we were receiving gifts and making the tape, but I knew we weren't going to see our family for a long time.

Darnel and Michelle laughed and played patty-cake hand games the entire cab ride. I listened to them and occasionally smiled, but I was more concerned with meeting our new family. The ride was long and boring and the driver inhaled at least four cigarettes. He didn't say a word to us the whole time, but he'd look over his right shoulder

every few minutes, flashing a half-hearted smile. His teeth were crooked and mossy yellow, and the cigarette dangled from his lips as if he were trying to balance it. The only noise he made was a few grumpy coughs that sounded more like hacks.

After what seemed like forever, I sensed we were getting close to our new home. I could tell we were almost there because he kept turning his blinker on and off. Right turn, left turn, left turn, right turn; that always meant we were zeroing in on a location. I knew we were only a few minutes away.

As he took a right turn, I looked up at the street sign: 85th Street. He drove along slowly, looking at all the houses on the right side of the street. I was looking at the houses as well as the kids playing and adults lounging around their yards. This was like no other neighborhood I had been in. Every house was neat and clean; the yards were nicely mowed and had sprinklers watering the grass. I'd heard about middle-class neighborhoods in school but I'd never seen one before. This was the precise image I had, except in my account all the people were Black, but everyone in this neighborhood was White. There wasn't a single Black person in sight, just White kids laughing and running through sprinklers. I nudged Michelle and Darnel to look outside at the White kids playing and running around. They finally stopped amusing each other and got a glimpse at where we were. They still had no idea that these people were going to be our new neighbors. I looked to see if there were any kids my age and I smiled when I saw a whole block full of kids who seemed to be six to ten years old.

The cab came to a halt in front of the only house on the block that didn't have a sprinkler. It was a medium-sized, turquoise blue home with white trim and a small white picket fence that encased a well-manicured front yard. Inside the yard was a yellowish-brown, German Shepherd-Golden Lab-looking thing. Whatever type of dog it was, it seemed excited.

The driver eased his way out of the cab and removed our bags from the trunk. As we hesitantly got out, the dog ran to the gate and began barking. The front door opened and out walked a beautiful, light-skinned Black woman. She was petite, about five-foot, two-inches tall and appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked the cab driver in a sweet voice. She looked different from the other women that we'd lived with. She had an upper-class aura about her, as if she'd been to college or came from a wealthy family. Her hair was light brown with a reddish tint and it was picked into a perfectly-shaped afro. She was wearing tan silky pants and a black and tan blouse that was buttoned to the top. Her black moccasins looked comfortable and she seemed peaceful, as though she expected us and wanted us to be there.

"Twenty-two dollars even, ma'am," the cab driver mumbled. She pulled out a pocketbook and handed the cab driver some money. I don't know how much she gave him, but it was enough for her to tell him to keep the change. He hacked out a "thank you" and went back to his job.

"Hello, children, my name is Sylvia Jackson," she said, calming the dog and opening the front gate. "Come on in. This is our dog, Kenny. Don't worry, he won't bite you. He just likes to jump on people. Come on in, this is your home now, too," she said, motioning for us to enter the yard. I knew if I didn't go first, Darnel and Michelle surely wouldn't budge. I entered the gate and could feel them practically standing on my heels. I knew they were afraid of the dog and somehow they thought I would do the, "*I'll protect you, go on without me,*" hero thing. I was just as afraid as they were, but my fears were far greater than the dog. I already liked this woman and the neighborhood, even if the kids were all White. It seemed as if I could rest at this place and I really didn't want to move anymore. "*God, please let this be the last home, please,*" I whispered under my breath. I really couldn't care less about the dog; I just wanted to stay.

"Let's see. You must be Michelle. Look at you, just as pretty as can be. You sho love that thumb, don't ya. I used to suck my thumb when I was a little girl, just like you, and this must be Darnel," she said, turning to Darnel. "You have a new brother and his name is Darnel, too, so it looks like you will be Darnel-2. You sure are a big boy for five years old. That leaves only one more, and that's you. Hello, Shawn, nice to meet you," she said, extending her hand to me. "You have the most beautiful big brown eyes. You're a charmer, I can tell. Are you children ready to meet your new brothers and sister?" she asked. She moved with energy and her voice was pleasant

and youthful. She didn't sound burdened, as if the state had accidentally placed us with the wrong family. Sylvia was different; I liked the way she talked to us. It wasn't as though we were foster kids or wards of the state. She talked to us as though we were good kids who had no problems and no history.

"Hi, Sylvia, my name is Shawn. You were right, that is Darnel and this is my little sister, Michelle." I spoke up right away because I knew they were too afraid of the dog to hear a word she said.

"I knew you were a charmer," she replied, taking my hand, leading us into the house. Darnel and Michelle were so close to me it felt as if I were giving them a piggyback ride.

"This is the living room. Y'all have a seat on the sofa and I will go get your new brothers and sister," she said, disappearing around the corner.

As she left the room, I glanced at all the pictures on the walls and plants and flowers in every corner. The tan shag rug was spotless, and the couches were soft and wooly. I peeked through the shutters that separated the living room from the kitchen and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Sitting on top of the refrigerator were five boxes of brand named cereals: *Fruity Pebbles*, *Lucky Charms*, *Cocoa Puffs*, *Cookie Crisp*, and *Apple Jacks* and I knew, at that moment, I wanted to stay. All the other homes had generic cereals like Puffed Wheats that came in see-through bags instead of boxes, or the knock-off brands like Pebble-Fruities-Crunchies, Choco-Puffies-Flakes or Crispy-Chunky-Cookies. I hated that stuff. It was enough to make a kid want to call in sick for breakfast. I used to listen to kids at school brag about all the name-brand cereals that their parents bought; now I had those same bragging rights. I wanted to sit in class and say something like, "Jeez, I am so full. I shouldn't have eaten all those *LUCKY CHARMS* for breakfast." If there was one thing that warmed my heart, it was cereal. Sylvia had already won me over with her bubbly personality and her sweet voice, and now the cereal was all I needed to see. This was my home!

She returned shortly with three freshly-bathed kids. It was their home, but they seemed more nervous than we were. There were two boys and a girl. The girl was pretty and looked like a miniature ver-

sion of Sylvia. The younger boy appeared shy, while the older boy seemed as if this was cutting into his personal time.

"Come on, children. Come on into the living room and meet your new foster brothers and sister." They entered the living room, but their body language spoke through their silence. Withdrawn, uncomfortable, distant and invaded is what they were saying without opening their mouths. "Introduce yourself," Sylvia said, pointing to the older boy.

"My name is Calvin. I'm fourteen," he mumbled. This kid didn't have much of a personality or maybe he just didn't have much to say to us. He had the biggest afro I'd ever seen. I mean, there were the Jackson Five afros and then there was Calvin's. Wow! How could he comb that thing out? I thought. I wondered if he played baseball; if so, how did he stuff all that hair into his hat?

"Hi, I'm Deana. I'm eleven and I just finished the sixth grade." These kids were different. They weren't wild and loud like kids from the other foster homes. They seemed calm—domesticated.

"I'm Darnel. I'm four years ode," he said, holding up four fingers. My brother squirmed as the other Darnel stated his name. He knew that he would now be referred to as Darnel number two. I could tell he was uncomfortable with this home already.

So here it was, a new family, strange-looking dog and White neighbors. It wasn't all that bad. I had forgotten about most of the things that had transpired earlier that morning, but the image of tears racing from my grandmother's eyes was unshakable. I could hear her whispering, "*Be strong, Baby. Mamma's with you.*"



Each night I would lie in bed, gripping that ball as if it were a permanent extension of my hand, trying to recreate a memory of what life was like when we lived with our grandmother. Sometimes I squeezed so tightly that I could feel the imprints of my thumb, index and middle fingers fusing into the ball. It had been eight years since I first held that ball, and eight years since the day I last saw my family. I was now fourteen years old and questions that I had never asked about my life encompassed my every thought. Where were my parents? Were they

still alive? What became of my father that night after the fire? What happened to my mother the day I found her lying unconscious on her bedroom floor? If they were still alive, had they tried to find us?

My only tie to love and serenity was my grandmother. I remembered how everything changed when I entered her home. How she pranced through her kitchen on Sunday mornings, listening to gospel music, preparing my special "Sunday School Breakfasts." How her kisses were wet, like raindrops, and her hugs engulfed my body and eased my soul. She was the link to my life before foster homes, but where was she?

As I lay in bed on this night, I drifted off to sleep dreaming about the comfort of my grandmother's hugs and the tranquility of my grandfather's voice, but this dream was simply a page ripped from my book of memories.



On Sunday mornings my grandmother transformed her kitchen into an orchestra. The soul-pleasing sounds of the refrigerator opening and shutting, eggs being cracked and beaten, bacon frying and pancakes being flipped, melted together to create a symphony Beethoven himself could not emulate. This was the music of my grandmother's Sunday morning orchestra and I was always given red carpet service.

I would stand in my bedroom doorway waiting for Grandma to give the three signs that breakfast was ready. I was like a sprinter at the starting line anxiously anticipating the starter to say "*Runners take your mark, get set, go.*" She had her own version of "*take your mark, get set, go.*" First, the sound of water rinsing off the utensils along with eggshells being tossed into the garbage was "*Runners take your mark.*" Next, I listened for the clanging of dishes and silverware as she removed them from the cupboard and set them on the table. That was, "*Get set.*" I was ready then, fingers on the chalk line, head up, back straight and feet on starting blocks, waiting for the gun to sound. I would hear her walk into the dining room and say to my grandfather, with her Louisiana accent, "Baby, breakfas' ready." That was "*Go,*" and I was off and sprinting. Out of my bedroom, over the living room couch, around the dining room table, down the long hall that led to the kitchen, I would leap onto my chair, fold my hands,

place them on the table and scream, “*I want two, two, two, two and one.*” Two pancakes, two eggs, two pieces of bacon, two biscuits, and one glass of milk. That’s how I ordered my special “Sunday School Breakfast,” but I could not do it until she gave her three signs.

Upon finishing breakfast Grandma would wipe all the syrup and butter off my face and hands.

“There, Mamma’s baby is all stuffed an’ clean. I gotchya chuch clothes picked out an’ ya bath wata runnin’. Go on in the bathroom an’ take off ya jammies so Mamma can give you a bath. Daddy got a beautiful sermon planned fo’ today’s service,” she would say. My grandfather was the pastor of First Love Christian Church, a church he and my grandmother had built. He bragged he’d constructed over a hundred churches in his lifetime, but none was as special as First Love. His dream was for First Love to be a church where children had a voice.

“The Bible say you must enter the Kingdom of Heaven with the heart of a child,” he would always say. “Most chuches keeps they chil’ren quiet, but not at First Love. We gowne let the voices of our chil’ren be heard. Chil’ren bring life to the chuch and this chuch is full of life.”

After taking a bath, I would get dressed in my Sunday outfit and sit in the living room watching my grandfather prepare his sermons. One day, I remember, the sermon was about the importance of having good intentions in the things we do and how God knows whether our motives are pure.

“Son, God is more than human. Humans can be lied to and led by false motives, but tha Lawd knows ya heart. He knows why we do the things we do. We can’t fool God. We can fool each other, but we can’t fool God.” Every time he finished preparing his sermons he let out a tumultuous laugh as if his lesson rivaled Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*.

I would watch every move my grandfather made: the way he held and baited his fishing pole when he took me fishing on Saturday mornings. The way he played his harmonica when we walked home after church, as if he were a one-man Southern band. The way how, on Sunday evenings, he’d tell colorful stories of growing up in the South during the early 30’s and sang old Negro folk songs. “*Liiiil piece*

*a pie and a lil piece a puddin'—Gonna give it all away to see ole Sally Goodin—I'm doooooown—On my way—ta Arkansas—I crack my whip and my lead mule spun—And the old man spit on my wagon tong—Aaaaaaint gonna work no moe,*" he would sing while relaxing in his tattered arm chair. He was both amiable and powerful, but always looked serene. I never heard him raise his voice, but he spoke with the command of a Southern king.

If Grandpa was said to have a true southern flavor, then Grandma was the barometer by which he was measured. From the black-eyed peas and honey cornbread, to Mahalia Jackson gospel records on Sunday mornings, she was tastefully soulful from head to toe. I would watch as she'd play the piano for the church choir and listen while she sang spirited solos. If there was one thing that defined her life, it was Jesus. Sometimes before church it seemed as if she was glowing, as though an angel followed her around wherever she went.

"Baby, is ya ready ta go?" she would ask Grandpa.

"I'm ready, Baby. I'm just goin' over my sermon with lil Shawn," he would reply. I never understood why Grandpa read his sermon to me as if my six-year-old input made any difference.

Just before we'd walk out of the door, headed for service, Grandpa would put on his long, purple and white robe that he and two other ministers wore. The moment that robe draped his shoulders a transformation took place; he was no longer Grandpa, he became *pastor*. Grandpa's demeanor was tranquil and placid but the *pastor* was charismatic and energetic. Grandpa was humble and reserved but the *pastor* was loud and boisterous and could lead two hundred people to sit, stand, pray and shout out "Amen," "Halleluya" or "Praise God."



I fell asleep that night, clutching my pearl, wondering if my grandmother still loved us. Memories buried since the day I last saw her were awakened as I dreamt about Sundays at her home. Eight years had past since we'd been taken from our family. Had they forgotten us? Did they still care? I needed to find out! My grandmother held the answers to those questions and I had to find her. I was prepared to take that journey!