

Tookie Before Tim

by

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“An imaginative, entertaining, fascinating read from beginning to end, George Kaplan's *Only Tim Sent Flowers* is an extraordinary novel by a writer with a genuine flair for novelty and narrative driven storytelling complete with unexpected twists and turns. While unreservedly recommended, especially for community library Contemporary General Fiction collections, it should be noted for personal reading lists that *Only Tim Sent Flowers* is also available in a digital book format.”

Midwest Book Review

“I was frankly amazed that Kaplan was able to pen such a realistic, flawed, human, and three dimensional character who is a female, as that kind of depth in female characters is rare in male authors. You can't help but empathize with this poor mixed-up girl, who is really very sweet.” Taylor Jones

Chapter One

Tookie

Ann Woodstream still loved her husband Robert when she gave birth to their second daughter, only fifteen months after the first. She counted the baby's fingers and toes, holding her breath while inspecting for birth defects. Finding none, she gave a sigh of relief and relaxed. Smiling, she pulled the little bundle to her chest.

Robert burst into the room, bouquet in hand, spreading sunshine with his exuberance.

"Isn't she beautiful?" asked Ann, not looking her best after an extended labor.

He nodded. "Almost as beautiful as her mother." He gave his wife a big smooch.

"I must look a fright." She ran her fingers through her dark tresses.

He beamed. "Her hair's as red as mine, not strawberry blonde like Beth's."

"I think our mothers' names used together would be pretty."

He picked up the baby and looked her all over. "Louise Mary? No, I think Mary Louise works better."

“That’ll make both grandmas happy,” said Ann.

It wasn’t clear if her avuncular father, who was still healthy when Tookie was born, made all his children feel like they were his favorite, but Mary Louise felt she was from the moment of her birth. She loved him so much she even forgave him for dubbing her Tookie, a nickname she despised.

Life was perfect until her brother Daniel was about to be born. Ann pulled a handful of Tookie’s clothes out of a drawer and walked her two-year-old by the hand to older sister Beth’s room.

“Beth, we’re going to need Mary Louise’s room for a nursery. The new baby is coming soon and Mary Louise will be sleeping in here with you.”

Beth looked at her sister as if she was ruining her young life. “Tookie’s stupid and she smells.”

Hypersensitive to criticism almost from birth, Tookie grasped her mother’s legs, sobbing.

Ann stroked Tookie’s head. “Don’t say that. It’s not nice. Not everyone begins

speaking at the same time. Mary Louise will start talking when she's ready."

Beth pointed at her youth bed. "It's not big enough for two."

"Daddy and I will be setting up a new twin bed for you after he gets home from work. Now I'm going to put her clothes in the empty drawers in the dresser."

Thus started a seldom-honored armed truce that would end only when one of the girls moved out of their parents' house. That their parents had little money and the sisters were so close in age forced them to share everything from toys to clothing to hair dryer. Beth, being older and a little larger, got the new outfits. Tookie got hand-me-downs when Beth outgrew them. Perhaps that was why Tookie developed little interest in style or fashion. But she did have a favorite color. She loved green because she thought it contrasted best with her hair.

Tookie developed differently from other children. She avoided her older sister and ignored her younger brother, preferring to play by herself. She never seemed bored and was always absorbed in what she was doing. Her favorite playthings were a set of

colored pencils. She kept them sharpened but seldom drew with them. She mostly arranged and rearranged them into an order that made sense to no one other than herself. Beth delighted in messing them up, causing Tookie great consternation.

She loved being read to, especially sitting on her father's lap. She hadn't started talking long after her contemporaries were blabbering away but understood everything she heard. Asperger's Syndrome was not yet discovered in the early 1950s and wouldn't be known by the general public until long after Tookie reached adulthood. She asked him to read her the same stories over and over until she had them memorized.

Ann first heard Tookie talking when she heard sounds coming from the girls' room and found her telling a doll a story her father had read to her.

The crew Robert Woodstream worked on finished a project and started a new one in a distant town every two to three years. He had job security as an on-site bookkeeper but no possibility of advancement. Being shy, this nomadic life

limited Tookie's opportunities to bond with children her age and she had not learned how to interact with others before she started school. She had no memory of the place where she was born or where she had lived the years that followed. Later, she only had vague memories of the house in which she'd lived when she first started school.

Beth's kindergarten year was the happiest of Tookie's young life. Beth was out of the house half days, leaving Tookie to play without being teased and ridiculed. The next year, when she went to kindergarten and Beth to first grade, was almost as good because she still had her afternoons to herself without Beth harassing her.

Kindergarten was fun for Tookie because she excelled at schoolwork and wasn't pressured to socialize with the other children. It was also the first time she came into contact with the mystical creatures her age called boys. She was drawn to them upon first sight, but didn't know why or what she would do with a boyfriend if she had one. The latter issue would remain theoretical for a decade.

Elementary school was more problematic. She felt a need to socialize with the other girls because she wanted to have at least one friend. The few times she tried didn't work out well. Early that fall, she approached a group of girls jumping rope.

"Can I join in?" she asked.

The leader, who was holding one end of the rope, looked her up and down and pointed. "Go to the back of the line."

Tookie got behind the last girl waiting her turn and watched as the leader and another girl swung the rope for the girl at the front to jump. When a girl failed to make a jump, usually after three or four successes, she would go to the back of the line to wait for another turn while the next girl took her place. Tookie waited and watched until it was her turn. Although nervous and afraid she wouldn't do well, she stepped up to give it a try. At home jumping by herself, she'd built up some confidence by succeeding in making two jumps in a row and one time did four. Jumping with other girls swinging the rope was a different matter. She almost fell on her first try. The other girls giggled.

Embarrassed, she raced away hiding her tears and didn't try again.

After that disaster, Tookie kept to herself and read while the other girls played together. Books took her to beautiful and mysterious places she could only hope to visit. Soon, she exhausted the school's limited library of picture books with large print and nagged her mother to take her to the town library that had what seemed to her to be an unlimited supply of stories to explore.

When teacher asked a question, Tookie gave the correct answer with a minimum of words. She led her class until they shifted to chapter books. Her eyes hurt from focusing hard on the small, fuzzy letters, so she quit trying. Puzzled at how such a bright child's performance could plummet, her teacher suggested that Tookie's vision be tested. Mrs. Woodstream made an appointment the next day.

The optometrist's assistant ushered Tookie and her mother into the examination room. She looked at Tookie and at what looked to the girl like a barber chair. "You'll need this." She placed a thick cushion on the seat and helped Tookie

climb up. The lady flipped a switch, illuminating a light box on the wall far from Tookie. Various objects a child would recognize appeared.

The assistant handed Tookie a plastic stick with a flat cup on one end. "Cover your left eye with this and tell me what you see."

"I see those things okay. It's letters I can't see."

The woman changed the eye charts. "What do you see now?"

"That's better. C...O...H."

"What's on the next row?"

"It's too blurry."

The vision in her left eye was no better.

"Don't be too concerned. We can fix that." She swung an apparatus in front of Tookie's face. "Now look through this."

"C-O-H-S-Z. The rest are blurry."

The lady turned and flipped some things. "What is the lowest row you can read now?"

"K...C...R...H...N." Tookie grinned.

"We can do even better than that." She flipped some more lenses and Tookie read some lower rows. When she was finished with both eyes, the optometrist came in.

“Mrs. Woodstream, as you suspected, Mary Louise has poor vision. The good news is that it’s easily corrected.”

Tookie feared that glasses would make her look geeky but she had no choice if she was going to be able to read.

Glasses changed everything. Now able to decipher the blurred marks, she devoured books and shot back to the head of her class. Girls continued to ignore her, except to make snide comments about her clothes and lack of social skills. Boys called her “Four Eyes.”

Around the time she was in fifth grade, she started getting lectures.

“Mary Louise, sit up properly,” said her mother when she saw Tookie sprawled across the couch with her legs and skirt askew. “You’re not being ladylike.”

“Why’s everybody always after me about how I sit?”

“You don’t want boys looking up your dress do you?”

“What’s it matter? They’d see the same thing when I’m in my swimming suit.”

Her mother sighed. “That’s going to change soon. Now put your feet on the floor.”

Brothers Mike and Jake arrived while Tookie was in elementary school. She treated them as if they were her dolls and spent her out-of-school time mothering them. She carried one or the other of them so much her mother told her she could affect the development of her hip bones. Neighbors noticed how good she was with small children when their sons and daughters flocked to her and hired her to babysit for them. They often overlooked her age because Tookie's tortoiseshell glasses made her look studious, she got good grades and had earned a reputation for being responsible. She saved up the money she earned (50 cents an hour in those days) to pay for a bicycle.

Puberty presented special problems for Tookie. She discovered boys her first day of kindergarten but almost a teenager still had no idea how to interact with them.

"Mother, Bobby is so annoying."

Ann gave her daughter a knowing look.
"What does he do?"

"He teases me and bumps his bicycle into mine."

“It might be his way of showing that he likes you.”

“I think he’s stupid.”

Her mother sighed. “We need to have a talk about the birds and bees soon.”

A move to a distant town in eighth grade presented Tookie with more challenges than had previous relocations. In addition to starting over making friends yet again and joining a new class after the school year had started, Tookie dreamt of becoming a femme fatale (although she hadn’t yet heard the term) watching a Rita Hayworth movie while the children she was babysitting slept. But since none of the glamorous women on TV or in the movies wore glasses, she feared boys would never consider her. None did.

Something happened one evening that shook her entire being. Tookie sat at the kitchen table doing homework when she heard her mother shout, “Call 9-1-1.” The panic in her mother’s voice scared Tookie so much she raced to the living room to see what was wrong.

Her mother blocked her at the doorway. “Call 9-1-1 and tell them Daddy is having a

heart attack. I'll help him while you do that."

Tookie dashed back to the kitchen and called the emergency number on the wall phone just as she had been taught to do. "Come quick," she shouted when the dispatcher answered. "My father is having a heart attack."

Staying calm, she provided him their address and other information he requested. Finished with the call, she zipped back to see how her father was doing. She found him sitting in his easy chair with her mother holding his hand. "What have you done for him?"

Her mother looked at her. "I've gotten him up and seated."

"I'll be right back." Tookie darted off to the bathroom where she grabbed the bottle of baby aspirins and ran back. "Here," she said as she opened the bottle and handed her mother a pill, "have him chew and swallow this."

Her mother gave her a skeptical look.

"Just do it," Tookie said in a panic.

"They told us to do that in health class."

Her mother complied and not long after he finished chewing it the ambulance

arrived. When the ambulance attendants came in, Tookie's mother shooed her out of the room. "Look after the boys. I'm going to follow the ambulance to the hospital."

Her father was released the next day but was never the same after that. He was always preoccupied about having a larger, fatal attack.

Ann Woodstream began to withdraw. Whether it was from having little income, five children to take care of, her husband's heart attack or something else isn't known. She continued to do all the tasks a wife and mother was supposed to do, but she started to drink. Not long after the children got off their buses and had their milk and cookies, she opened her first of several beers for the evening.

The highlight of the day for the children was their father's return from work. The youngest boys climbed on him, something Tookie no longer did. She felt that, as someone who cared for other families' children as well as her brothers, she had become too mature to act so childish. But she did bask in his joyful greetings. She never doubted her father's great love for her mother but sensed her mother was

unhappy but didn't know why. She later shared with a friend, "I tried everything I could to make Mom happy. I made myself the model daughter by helping around the house, being cheerful and never talking back. I failed miserably. She just drank more."

Tookie didn't pick up social clues or read body language well. She found following conversations especially problematic. Humor and sarcasm escaped her. She preferred to read books because she didn't have to worry about interacting with people and escaped in them as often as possible.

Tookie's communication style put off other girls. She'd answer questions with terse but complete answers and wouldn't follow up with more information or a question. She forced the other person to carry the entire burden of any conversation. Other girls found talking with her exhausting and stopped trying. Boys didn't bother to try.

In the fall of the year, 1963, Tookie overheard her parents talk about something in the news.

Her father lowered the newspaper.
“Ann, a couple of young men at work are rushing out to get married.”

“Is it to avoid the draft? I read where JFK just gave married men a deferment.”

“Probably. He’s sending more ‘advisors’ to Vietnam, too, and they’re worried about that.”

“The Democrats always get us into wars. I hope this is over soon so Daniel doesn’t get drawn into it.”

Tookie thought the women – still in their teens in some cases – were making terrible mistakes. *I can’t imagine marrying someone just to keep him from being drafted. Mother is so unhappy and Daddy loves her dearly. These women are going to regret marrying men who wouldn’t be doing this if they weren’t afraid of being sent off to war.*

Tookie dreamt of kissing certain boys at school but was unable to get the least bit of attention from any of them. She continued to outshine the other students in eighth and ninth grades. She looked forward to high school, thinking she would have a better social life when her breasts developed more fully.

In the September after her fifteenth birthday, Tookie’s father walked into the

house with a long face. "Mother, could you gather the children? We have to talk."

Ann's face told the story and the kids knew what was coming. It had happened so many times before, they recognized from his expression that they were about to move again. When they were assembled in the living room, the kids peppered him with questions.

"Do we have to go?"

"Can't we wait until the school year's over?"

"Do we get a vacation this time?"

"Can't you get a job here?"

He raised his hands for quiet. After the children settled down, he began. "The project I've been working on is finished and there's no further work here for me. The movers come to pack on Thursday, so we need to have everything ready for them on Wednesday. We leave after school on Friday and I have until the Monday after next to start work at the new place. The company found us a house to live in. It's in a small town near the new project, a place called Milltown. We'll be living in a brand-new ranch house with an attached garage and a basement for you kids to play in

when it's raining outside. Mother, could you get out the atlas? We need to plan what we're going to do on the drive."

Tookie muttered, "Oh no, not again," but later thought, "I might finally find a boyfriend there. I'm old enough to go on car dates now."

Chapter Two

Milltown

Tookie looked out her window from the backseat of her family's old Ford station wagon as they pulled off the highway into the subdivision that would be their neighborhood for the duration of her father's current project. A minute later they pulled into the driveway of a new nondescript, red-brick-faced house the mirror image of the one next to it. The grass in the yard was brown from the hot, dry summer but the concrete driveway and sidewalk would be ideal for roller skating. That was an improvement over the last two places they had lived.

Peering between the houses, she saw a field of ripening corn two short blocks away. Toward the back of the field was what appeared to be a deserted farm house. If she found a boyfriend, she could walk with him back to it and get her first kiss in privacy. She was unsure about how good a kisser she was, not having done it before. Tookie didn't want to be humiliated in public in case he didn't like how she kissed him. She would be too embarrassed.

“Mary Louise,” called her mother, “stop daydreaming and come inside to see your new room.”

The front door of the ranch house opened into the living room. From there, she could see straight back into the kitchen and out its wide window into the backyard, the yards of other houses, and the backs of them. No fences separated the properties because the development was too new for people to have had then installed and too little time had elapsed for grudges between neighbors to develop. She imagined that the boys would play football and other games out there with children who lived in the other houses. Tookie would not be playing games back there with other girls. She was too mature for that. She would be sixteen on her next birthday, after all. She was becoming a woman, even if her parents wouldn't admit it.

“Tookie,” bellowed her father in the tone he used when he wanted to show or tell her something special.

Her thoughts jolted back to the living room.

“Don't you want to see your bedroom?” He led her down the hallway.

The youngest boys were wrestling on the carpet floor of the first room on the left.

No need to ask whose it was. Across from it was the bathroom.

He stopped at the end of the hall and pointed to his left. "This is our room. You and Beth have the other one. We want to be able to keep an eye on you two."

"Like any boys want to have anything to do with me." A tear came to her eye.

"They will soon enough." He hugged her and wiped her tears away.

Tookie frowned as she forced herself to explore the room she'd have to share with her older sister. Again. When would she ever have a room of her own? The one nice thing was the window that looked out onto the street. She'd claim the place by it for her bed. Beth always wanted to be closest to the door anyway.

"Children," called her Mother, "it's time for lunch. What would you like today?"

Racing out of the bedroom, Tookie said, "Pizza." She had heard older girls at her last school talk about going out for pizza with boys after football and basketball games and wondered what it would be like. Her mother never cooked anything unusual and the family seldom went out to eat. Whenever they did, it had to be a place that served booze.

Tookie discovered a telephone book in the kitchen and flipped to the yellow pages. She found three Italian restaurants located in nearby towns. She held the book to her mother, "How about one of these?"

Ann sighed, then looked at the ads. "Luigi's shouldn't be too far away."

Tookie noticed the mention of a full bar in the ad and responded with lowered expectations, "Okay."

"Let's get going, then. The movers will be here this afternoon and we have a house to organize."

Tookie enjoyed the pizza, especially the cheese, and her parents limited their intake for once. Her mother had a single beer, her father a shot and a beer. Neither showed any obvious effects. For that she was grateful.

The movers setup the furniture in all the rooms and left cartons of clothing and other effects where they belonged. Over the next two hours, Beth and Tookie unpacked boxes and put their room in order. Daniel arranged his things in the boys' room while Ann took care of her bedroom. Robert played traffic cop, directing the movers where to put everything. After their rooms

were in order, the girls helped their mother with the kitchen.

When the moving men left, Ann called to Robert. "Here's what we need for breakfast. We'll eat out tonight. I'm too tired to cook."

He took the list. "I saw a supermarket on the highway not far from here."

"Better hurry before they close."

He left and work organizing the kitchen continued.

When he returned, Tookie shuddered when she heard the unmistakable sound of beer bottles clanking against a fifth of Wild Turkey.

She scrunched her face and said to Beth, "They've got booze tonight."

Beth shrugged. "I'm tired and am going to bed right after dinner."

After dinner, Ann guzzled two more beers but they were giant, forty-ounce Falstaffs. Robert didn't pop the cork on his Wild Turkey, probably because he had to go to work early in the morning.

Starting at a new school wasn't new for Tookie. This time she tried to go by her given name but other students heard Beth call her by her hated nickname. After that, she was only Mary Louise when a teacher

called on her. Being in high school was a new experience for her. Ninth graders were in junior high in her previous school. Now, she was a sophomore in a four-year high school. Her classmates had a year of high school experience on her. The boys didn't seem much different from her former classmates but the girls were more worldly. Several had even dated high school boys the year before.

Even though she'd missed the almost a month of class, academics were no problem. Each teacher said the same things, "With your strong record, you won't have any trouble catching up. Read the first two chapters and be ready for a quiz next week." Except for her geometry instructor, "Geometry causes any strong students difficulty because it's more about logic than equations. It requires a different way of thinking. Be prepared to spend a good amount of time on homework."

The other students paid her little attention when she took an open seat in the back of each class. They ignored her until the first test results were returned, that is. After that, the smarter girls sneered at Tookie when her top marks pushed them down the academic totem pole. Even though the smart boys didn't seem to mind

her getting good grades, they didn't consider her dating material. Them ignoring her pained Tookie because her dream boyfriend would be as intelligent as she was.

She considered wearing falsies, like some girls did – she had observed that in gym class – to attract their attention but there was no place to buy them within bicycle distance. Buying them would require getting her mother to drive her somewhere. Past experiences, such as when she asked for ruffled panties around the time boys started looking up girls' – other girls' – skirts, told her that her mother would ridicule the idea. She would probably say something like, "Let nature take its course, Mary Louise. Don't rush things."

One day after gym class, Tookie noticed that several of the older boys huddled at the bottom of the up stairway, reacting excitedly as certain girls passed them on their way to the second floor. Curious about what they were doing, she stopped and waited behind them where they couldn't see her but she could hear them. Mostly, they told off-color jokes she sometimes didn't get. But as one particular girl approached, they nudged each other

and made grunting noises. Gloria wasn't particularly attractive but had large breasts and a walk only less suggestive than Tina Turner's. Where the more popular girls wore straight skirts like the ones Jackie Kennedy had made popular, Gloria still wore flouncy ones like those from the 1950s.

The boys' reactions confused Tookie. Gloria wasn't pretty and wore clothes that even she knew were out of style. So, she continued to watch the boys as if she was an anthropologist observing aborigines. That her subjects' eyes were glued on Gloria as she sashayed up the stairs made it easy for Tookie to slide in close to see what they were seeing.

"She's got on yellow ones today," said the shortest boy.

As she reached the next step, another boy said, "And they're like cellophane."

"You can see everything she's got," said a third boy.

"Whatta bush," said the dorkiest one, "and it's trying to get out."

"Boys! Move away from here," shouted the spinster Latin teacher reputed to have helped Caesar put chains on his chariot in the winter. "Get to class." She waved her arms for them to disperse and they did.

That evening at home, she went through the multi-color assortment of full-cover panties her mother bought her at a discount store. Holding each up to the light to see which pair was the most transparent, she took three pairs to the bathroom with her. She needed privacy for her test and Beth could wander into the bedroom at any time. She took her jeans off and looked in the mirror to see what boys could see. Unable to see much, she stood on the commode to get a better view. She tried on each pair twice and concluded that the white ones revealed the most.

The next day, she wore the white ones under her widest skirt and made a practice run up the stairs before school started to give her more confidence. After gym class, she took a deep breath before walking down the long hallway to the up staircase. From ten yards away, she could see the boys assembled for the prurient viewing. About then, she realized she had a special treat for them. The other girls had black hair down there but hers were a deep red, something else that made her special beside her red hair and green eyes. The boys would surely enjoy seeing what she had.

She began swishing her hips in imitation of Gloria but looked an felt

awkward doing it. Too self-conscious to look at her audience, she kept her eyes focused on the steps immediately above her. Silence. All she could hear was the sound of her fellow students climbing the stairs. She sensed and heard no reaction from the boys. If they had bothered to look, they would have said something. If they hadn't liked what they saw, they would have made rude remarks. But they didn't. She was still invisible to them. She would have to try something different to get them to take notice of her.

Even some plain girls in her classes got asked out. She overheard them talking to their friends about the boys who had called them for dates. Her number wasn't in the book and the boys might not know to ask the operator for new numbers. She would have to do something drastic or she would end up an old maid.

The next week, a simple idea came to her when she saw an old photograph of Marilyn Monroe walking over a grate. In the locker room after gym class while changing out of the one-piece gym suit that was designed to be as effective as saltpeter in cooling boys' desires, she decided to go for broke. She would give them the show of their lives. She pulled her skirt on and

stuffed her panties into her purse. Tookie didn't usually spend much time in front of the mirror but this day she wanted to have every hair in her pageboy in place. She was still fiddling when the bell rang. She had to go or she'd miss her opportunity.

Half the way down the hall, she saw Gloria just a few feet in front of her. What luck. She sped up enough to get right behind Gloria and follow her. She would be the main event of a double feature. Those who saw them would have something to brag to their friends about for years.

She stayed as close to Gloria as she could to ensure that she was right behind her all the way up. As expected, she saw the boys poke each other out of the corner of her eye as they approached. She blocked out all the sounds except for those coming from her audience and caught snippets of their reactions to the girl in front of her. When it was her turn for applause, she heard nothing. Silence. She had taken a bold step and failed. Tookie accepted that she would remain invisible.

Although her social life was nonexistent, her professional life — as a babysitter — was a resounding success. Ann was still unpacking when the next door

neighbor knocked on her door looking for a babysitter.

"My husband is the oboe professor at the university and I am working on my master's degree. We have daycare for Cathy until two-thirty weekdays and need someone for after school."

"How old is she?"

"Three. I noticed that you have a daughter who could babysit."

"I have two daughters in high school, Beth and Mary Louise."

"I want the one who plays with the boys after school."

"That would be Mary Louise."

"She has a knack with children. She will make a good mother."

"How often will you need her?"

"Two hours after school each day."

"I'll tell her."

Tookie liked earning money. It felt good having something in her purse should she need to buy something. It would also allow her to do social things that, not having a boyfriend, she would have to pay for. Should she ever be invited.

On nice days, she would play with Cathy outdoors. Other children would see them and join them. Jealous of the attention Cathy was getting, Tookie's youngest

brother, Jake, would glue himself to her like a leech. The youngest boy from a family on the corner that had a bunch of kids, mostly boys, often came over. It wasn't always play, she often taught the children things, like the rules for games and how to clamp roller skates onto their shoes and to skate on the sidewalk.

Word about her babysitting skills spread. Soon, she was asked to look after people's children at night on weekends. Working strengthened Tookie's ego. Teenage boys might not see anything in her but adults considered her worthy of their trust and gladly paid her to work for them. Responsibility gave her a sense of purpose but she still felt left out on Friday and Saturday nights, even though she was earning money.

When the weather allowed on Saturdays, she would ride her bike. A favorite destination was the deserted farmhouse behind her development. The bumpy ride on the dirt road back to it wasn't ideal but, once back there by herself, she would fantasize about being there alone with a boy. She gathered the straw she found in the old barn and made a bed she could lounge on in privacy. There, she could kiss and make out without anyone

seeing her, if she had the chance. As much as she enjoyed going on bike rides, she always missed not having a boyfriend more afterwards.

Although the girls at school ignored her, they didn't stop speaking in her presence, sometimes shocking her. Hers, like many families of the time, rarely spoke of sex. When she and her sister starting having periods, the task of educating them about the changes their bodies were undergoing was left entirely to their mother. Their father entire contribution was to relate a story about a man who committed suicide when both of his daughters turned up pregnant. The experience of living in a crowded house with little income was probably a greater deterrent against taking risks that could result in an unwanted pregnancy than any preaching from their parents could hope to achieve.

One Monday morning, the girl sitting in front of Tookie in home room carried on a conversation with the girl next to her before school started. Both whispered so loudly Tookie could hardly miss hearing them.

"It's too bad you couldn't come to Sammy's party," said the girl in front of Tookie to her friend.

"What'd I miss?"

"His parents were away..."

"Oh oh."

"Everybody coupled up in the family room and somebody turned out the lights."

"What'd you do?"

"What do you think I did?"

"You didn't!"

"Not that! But I did let Jim feel me up."

"Did you like it?"

"I think I would've liked it even more if he sucked on them but I wasn't about to take my blouse off there."

Brrring. The bell rang and the girls stopped taking.

That night in bed Tookie rubbed her breasts in an attempt to determine how it would feel for a boy to feel her up. She liked how it felt, especially when she flicked her nipples. She figured she'd enjoy it even more if a boyfriend did it but worried that no boy would bother with breasts so small.

Later that week, the girls sitting in front of her in home room were at it again.

"Did you hear about Velva?"

"She think she's pregnant again?" Her friend sounded dismissive.

"Why'd you say that?"

“This’s the third month in a row I’ve heard this. She’s either too stupid to make him wear rubbers or is showing off that she’s getting laid regularly.”

“Doesn’t she want to finish her senior year?”

The friend shrugged. “She says she does.”

“She sure doesn’t act like it.”

Holy shit. Tookie couldn’t believe her ears. It made no sense to her for a girl to risk having to drop out of school and get married just to have sex. *It must feel awfully good to jeopardize her future and gamble with getting in trouble.*

Chastened by her mother from exploring her body when she was about to start school, Tookie had refrained from experimenting more than necessary for hygiene, even after puberty. She now thought her mother had reasons she hadn’t given her for not touching herself in those places. It was clear to her that at least some women got pleasure from having a man’s penis inside them. Living in such close quarters with so many people made exploration difficult. When she next showered she simulated with her fingers what she thought Velva was doing but found it only mildly pleasurable. A

different time, when drying off, she was surprised how nice it felt when she pulled a towel between the tops of her legs. Fearful of being caught, she was far from ready to take steps to find out what exactly having sex might feel like. Yet.

On a gray afternoon in late November while babysitting, Tookie was bored after being cooped up inside on several successive days.

“Cathy, get your coat. We’re going for a walk.”

The little girl raced to her room and returned with her winter coat, which she spread out on the living room floor. She positioned herself at the top and slid her arms into the sleeves, then flipped it over her head, ending up with it on her perfectly. “See, I can do it myself now.”

Tookie knelt on the floor. “Come over here so I can zip you up.”

Cathy toddled up to her, grinning at her success in learning how to put on her coat.

Tookie zipped it up. “Put on your mittens.” She put on her coat and gloves and let her ward out the door. Outside, she checked to see if she needed earmuffs. Satisfied that she could do without them,

she gave a little smile because she wouldn't have to cover her gorgeous hair. She flipped up the girl's hood and led her by the hand down the driveway to the street.

The walk took much longer than if she had gone by herself because Cathy took such short steps, slowing her down. The block itself was unusual in that it was shaped like a boat with the house the family with all the boys at the point and her house at the middle of the port side. She sensed something happening when she walked past the house on the point but had no idea what it was. Her life was about to be changed forever.

Chapter Three

Tim

Late-November 1965

Depressed and listless after work on a dreary afternoon, Tim Burgess stared out the picture window of his parents' home across a vacant lot at the broken stalks of the picked cornfield bordering the housing development. He'd just returned home from his shift at the munition factory locals called "The Bullet Works." With his friends away at college or in the service, Tim had neither a social life nor hope of prospects for one. Lonely, bored and not expecting to see anything of interest, something in his peripheral vision caught his attention. He shifted his focus to his right to discover a redhead he'd never seen before. A bolt of electricity surged through him when she strolled by, locking his eyes onto her. *I've just got to meet this beautiful girl.*

Tim's early family life had approached normalcy but, as the brood grew, so did his parents' alcoholism, on weekends at first then every night. What little parenting they had been giving their progeny diminished

to a negligible amount, leaving it to the children to raise themselves. Years later, when a friend discussed how she guided and molded her children, Tim was floored at learning of what was a foreign concept to him. "We grew up like weeds," he said, referring to himself and his nine siblings.

He was in eighth grade when the family's nosedive started. To make it worse for him, his school shifted to a tracked system in which the smartest kids were put in the same home room. Tim became discouraged when, due to the intense competition, he received lower marks than he'd earned previously. The high point of the year was being invited by a couple of girls he knew only by sight to a dance they were sponsoring at the country club.

Having no idea why he was included and, never having been to a dance before, he slouched around the walls, not knowing what to do. When the theme from *A Summer Place* started to play, a girl from his homeroom came up to him. "Georgia wants to dance with you," she said, pointing across the room to a pretty girl with dark hair Tim had never seen before.

Elated that such a girl would be interested in him, but embarrassed, he said, "I don't know how to dance."

Apparently expecting that response, she said, "I'll show you," and reached out to him.

This girl must have been a good friend of Georgia's because she exhibited great patience in teaching the awkward boy the box step. At the end of the song, she said, "Now ask Georgia," and gave him a gentle push in her co-conspirator's direction.

The girl who was selecting the 45s that night put on a fast song next. Tim stopped dead in his tracks not knowing what to do. He eventually retreated to the sidelines and waited until he heard the theme from *A Summer Place*, the only slow song the DJs played that night, start again. Georgia smiled but said little while they waltzed. Her silence made dancing easier for Tim because he might have lost count if he had to focus on something she said. Besides that, he had no idea of what to say to her. She danced every slow song with him and, although he'd never thought he'd ever have a girlfriend, he liked the idea of Georgia being his.

When the dance was over, the eighth graders' parents picked them up and drove off in different directions.

The next week at school, he learned that Georgia, like so many of his classmates, lived in the county seat twelve miles and a toll call from where he lived. Before Tim could figure out how to see her again—their school schedules were so different they rarely crossed paths—she had a new boyfriend. This one lived in her town. On those few times they bumped into each other, Georgia was friendly, causing Tim to think fondly of her even though he'd given up hope for them ever having a relationship.

Near the end of the school year, his mother accompanied him to a meeting to learn about what to expect from the high school courses he'd be taking in ninth grade. Several cute girls from his class said, "Hi Tim," just to be polite, he guessed. Few were friendly to him otherwise. At home, his mother ridiculed him in front of his siblings by mimicking how the girls said, "Hi Tim."

Tim looked away, hoping she'd change the subject.

“You’re too much like your father. You should be more manly, like Ted.”

“I don’t exactly look like Ricky Nelson, like he does.”

“Sandra Dee is more like it,” said older brother Ted.

In the spring of his ninth-grade year, his mother and brother opened Ted’s Bike Shop in a town near their home. Ted, soon to be a high school senior, ran the shop. Their parents roped Tim into working there doing repair work and selling bikes, parts and accessories. At summer’s end, his parents made a decision catastrophic for the entire family and especially so for Tim. Milltown, where the business was located, was in a different school district although it was only two miles from where they lived. The boys’ school bus ride home from the consolidated school made working after school impossible. So, Tim’s mother and brother browbeat his father into moving the family into an old house near the shop within walking distance from the schools and a short walk to two bars.

The only schoolmates Tim knew were the ones who ventured into the shop over the summer. Cliques had long been

established and he wasn't welcomed into any of them. High school was a lonely time for him. He didn't even have any regular friends to eat lunch with. After school, he couldn't dawdle with his classmates at the malt shop as he hurried past them to get to work.

Competition at Milltown was much easier than at the consolidated school. Tim was soon unpopular for "busting the curve." He made friends with some of the nerdier boys, but that was about it. No girl gave him a glance. So, he was stunned when, after a school dance the Saturday night before Easter his sophomore year, a freckled-faced brunette with a winning smile approached him after he exited the building.

"Would you like to go for a ride, Tim?" Her wide eyes told him she was serious.

He froze speechless because no girl had paid him any attention. "Sure." *Wow. She's cute and wants to be with me. I like her perky nose and freckles.*

She took his hand and led him to a 1959 Chevy and stopped by the rear fender. "I'm Connie Black, in case you didn't know." She cocked her head and gave him a lips-closed smile, a come-hither look.

“I didn’t.” He opened the back door for her, paying no attention to the couple occupying the front seat. She slid across, perched in the middle and patted the seat next to her.

Tim hopped in beside her, knowing he wanted to be with her but clueless to how he should proceed.

Meanwhile, Lothario brother Ted saw them while talking with Diane, the younger sister of one of his friends. Surprised by what he’d seen, he said, “Tim doesn’t know anything about girls.”

Diane smirked. “He will by the time he returns.”

They chuckled as the car drove away.

Tim’s head swam. He’d longed to have a girlfriend for years but didn’t have a clue as how to act with one. On some level, he understood that this cute girl wanted to make out with him, but he’d never so much as kissed a girl before, not even a little peck. His previous fantasies had involved the sex act, not necking.

Connie put an abrupt end to his confusion by kissing him.

Her soft, moist lips felt so good against his he didn't want to stop kissing her. *I can't believe it. I never imagined kissing would be so exciting. Here I am necking up a storm with a girl I'd like to date – if I had a driver's license and some money.* Tim was too overwhelmed by the experience to keep a clear memory of what they did. He enjoyed her kisses so much, he didn't even consider trying to feel her up. One thing he knew was that he liked what they were doing and wanted to see her again, often. He wasn't about to try something she might object to him doing.

They necked for an hour or two – Tim didn't wear a watch and didn't care what time it was – before the driver dropped him off at the school in a state of arousal more intense than he'd ever imagined possible.

He walked the half-mile home, savoring this new experience every step of the way. When he arrived there, Ted cornered him. "Connie's pretty fast, don't you think?"

"I think she's nice."

Ted shook his head. "You'll learn."

Tim pored over the phone book for Connie's number, even though he knew it was far too late to call her that night.

The next evening, he called her from the bike shop, the only place he could get any privacy.

"Hi Connie, it's Tim. I'd like to see you again."

"Lolita is playing at the Bijou next weekend. Do you have a car?"

"No."

"Can you get your parents' car?"

"I don't have a license."

"Call me when you can take me on a proper date."

Shit. I'll never have a girlfriend. I can't get a license before my birthday in the fall and don't have a car to drive even if I had one. I've got no chance for ever having a girlfriend.

A month after graduation in the summer of 1962, Ted joined the Air Force to get away from his alcoholic parents, the bicycle shop, and a girlfriend he'd been screwing who was pressuring him to get married. Their parents reacted by dumping complete responsibility for operating the business onto Tim. He worked hard all summer and, in the fall of his junior year, dashed back to the shop to open it after school, cutting his last-period study hall, as well as all day Saturdays. He skipped school every other

day the month leading up to Christmas to make sales and to rebuild bikes for Christmas presents. He avoided the chaos at home by staying at the shop after it closed, ostensibly to do his homework in peace and quiet. For supper, he took a dollar bill out of the cash register to pay for the blue-plate special and a tip for the waitress at the restaurant next door. These meals, and the Orange Crushes from the shop's Pepsi machine, were his only pay.

His parents were oblivious to what their children were up to, unless they got a call from school or the police. Their routine was to eat an early supper and head off to a bar, leaving the clean up to the older children. Since Tim was never a problem, he was out of their minds. He assumed the only time his mother thought about him was when one of his achievements gave her something to brag about to her barfly friends. Indelible in his mind was hearing her slur her words as she changed the subject when he tried to drag her out of a bar. "Trudy, this is Tim, my smartest son."

Tim avoided his family as much as he could because being around them was mortifying. Hearing people refer to his

parents as “the town drunks” was especially hurtful.

Explorer Scouts were Tim’s refuge throughout his high school years. The other nerdy boys elected him Treasurer because he had earned a reputation for being smart at school and a good businessman at the bike shop. Under his fiscal leadership, the post’s coffers overflowed. One of their major moneymakers was the egg-throwing stand at the annual town picnic over the Labor Day celebration. The scouts roped off an area and hung a large tarp at the back of the space. They piled sawdust on the tarp where it met the ground and cut a slit in it for boys to stick their heads through. Passersby paid a quarter to throw three cull eggs at the boy whose head protruded out of the sole.

Tim closed the egg-throwing stand on Labor Day night, sad the uneventful summer before his senior year had ended but encouraged by the weekend’s success. *Clearing \$300 ain’t hay.*

He flinched when a girl he didn’t know approached him from out of the shadows with a toothy smile. “Hi, Tim. Like to walk me home?” she asked in a voice he thought matched her flaming hair.

Her hair's curly like Connie's but long enough to lay on her shoulders. Whew. She can't be more than five-four. Tall girls have no use for short boys like me.

"Sure. Where do you live?" *I'm not about to pass up the opportunity to be with such a cute girl. She sure has a pretty face.*

"It's not far." She took his hand. "Let's go this way." She guided him toward a street leading away from the park.

"What's your name?"

"Don't you know me? Everybody does." She didn't sound like she believed him.

"I don't get out much. I'm stuck at the bike shop most of the time."

"Nancy Lewis. I'm a junior." She straightened her trim frame, arching her back to present her not overly ample chest to best advantage.

They walked the three short blocks to her house with Nancy doing most of the talking and Tim hanging on every word. At her house, they climbed the few steps to her front porch. There, she moved into the shadows away from the porch light and waited.

Nancy looks like she wants to be kissed, sort of like Connie did. Here goes. She kissed back, not as passionately as Connie, but with

enthusiasm. He floated home filled with the limerence of a new romance.

He next saw her on Sunday evening at her house. They watched the Miss America Pageant on television with her parents and younger siblings. Even though he had little time alone with her, Tim enjoyed just being with Nancy. He figured he'd get to be alone with her so they could neck soon. Early in the week feeling confident, he phoned her.

"Hi Nancy, would you like to go to the football game Friday?"

"I'd really like to, Tim," she said in a wistful voice, "but I have to play in the band. Maybe some other time."

Tim thought he still had a chance. That is, until he went to the game. Walking across the parking lot after a merciful end to the usual thrashing their team endured, he saw Nancy get into Jim Jones' '53 Chevy. The way she snuggled against him made clear to Tim he had been dumped. His stomach knotted in a sickening way he'd never felt before. He skipped the sock hop after the game and staggered away hurting. By the time he got home, Tim had accepted, without a car, girls weren't going to go out with him, so he put aside hopes of having a

girlfriend any time soon. The pain subsided after a few weeks, but he decided not to risk getting hurt again by a lousy girl from this miserable school in this pathetic town.

Tim focused on graduating and shaking off the dust from despised Milltown. The one thing his mother did was to help him fill out college applications for schools that offered engineering degrees. He thought a degree in that major would be his ticket to a good life. He was accepted by all of the random assortment of schools to which he applied. His SATs, GPA and class rank were high enough for most schools, including some elite universities. A large, private research university offered him an academic scholarship largely based on financial need and he took it. He visited the campus in the spring for orientation, returning home in time to attend the Senior Prom that evening.

He had taken a risk and asked a smart girl in his class he thought would be a good match, although she was religious and proper. She turned him down saying, "I won't be attending the prom this year."

Tim dropped by the gym hoping to see some of his friends. The first thing he

noticed was the girl who wasn't going playing the piano while wearing a prom dress. Another kick in the gut. He left without finding out if she had a date or not.

A week after graduation the local newspaper ran an article in which the Secretary of the Army reported that the U.S. had 10,000 soldiers in Vietnam. If Tim had read it, he wouldn't have thought much about it. Although uninterested in world events, he was aware, possibly because Ted was then in the Air Force, that the U. S. had troops stationed across the globe, including many still in Korea. He did know several older schoolmates were then serving in various branches of the military, some overseas.

Although Tim looked forward to attending the exclusive college with great expectations, it turned out to be a huge mistake. The largest problem was with Tim's assigned counselor, such as he was. He didn't take important factors into consideration when he arranged Tim's schedule. As the first member of his family to attend college, he got no useful advice from his parents. To make matters worse, he attended an academically weak high

school that didn't prepare him for the rigor of an institution with such high standards. He didn't know not to load up on lab courses or to request specific sections, such as "bonehead" calculus, which provided students needing help with more class time and assistance. He was overwhelmed both academically and socially.

Living among prep school grads in the dorm made Tim aware of being the hayseed he was. Working a board job at a sorority house to cover the cost of his meals removed any remaining doubts he had. On his first day, he was guided through the tasks he was to perform every day on his own. One of his assignments pertained to a girl who thought whole milk gave her pimples.

Jim, who was an old hand, opened the door of a large cooler holding a variety of things including milk containers. Taking a small carton in hand, Jim said, "Pour a glass of skim milk for Zit-Milk-Girl and place it by the empty ones in the dining room."

Tim poured the milk into the glass and carried it out, placing it in its proper place. Everything that day went off without a

hitch. The next day, only his second on the job, he opened the cooler and found only one smallish carton. It was labeled "Half and Half." Not seeing other options, he used it.

Shortly after lunch started, Zit-Milk-Girl burst through the swinging door into the kitchen and exploded, "Someone gave me half-and-half!"

The other boys looked at Tim.

He responded, "It was all that was in the cooler."

Jim addressed the irate girl, "I'll get some for you. Go back and I'll bring it out."

"You damned well better."

She stormed out of the kitchen and all the other boys broke out in laughter. Tim became a mini-cult hero because the boys working board found Zit-Milk-Girl disagreeable and nasty.

Tim soon learned the ropes and became invisible. The job brought him into contact with the 60 girls who lived and took their meals at the house, but he was too intimidated to ask any of them out. And not a girl in any of his classes seemed approachable. He had no social life and

didn't have the money for one if it had been available.

In the spring term, he was forced to face the fact he'd been avoiding for years. The son of his parents' bar friends, the Topers, married a woman from the town adjacent to Tim's college. His parents arrived a day early and stayed a day after the wedding but didn't visit him. No longer could he deny that they didn't love him. Accepting the reality put him in a deeper funk.

Tim's grades suffered. They were high enough to remain enrolled but too low to keep his scholarship. When he told his rich roommate he wouldn't be back in the fall, the roommate responded, "Can't your dad loan you a couple thou?"

"Are you kidding? My parents don't have two nickels to rub together."

With finals over and feeling defeated, Tim caught the train home unsure about his future. He saw no one from his family waiting for him at the station.

Dave, a friend from scouts Ted's age, approached him. "Your dad's on day shift this week and your mother has some sort of appointment. So, I told them I'd pick you up."

“Thanks. It’s good to see you again.”
Tim was really glad to see someone he liked.

“It won’t be for long. I’m going into the Marines.”

“Y-you’re what?”

“I’m about to be drafted. I figure I’ll be safer with the training the Marines give me than if I let them draft me into the Army.”

“If you say so.”

Dave pulled into a new development that had been carved out of a cornfield on the edge of Milltown.

“Where are we going?” Tim asked, surprised.

Dave did a doubletake. “To your house, of course.”

“This isn’t where I live.”

“Your parents moved. Didn’t they tell you?”

Tim shook his head.

Dave dropped him off at a new ranch house with a newly-started lawn and a single tree with a trunk the diameter no larger than a man’s thumb.

Tim partitioned off a corner of the basement to use as a bedroom and toiled as a clean-up boy on a summer job where his

father worked. Not having had a sex life, he received an unwanted education by being the butt of jokes for the cruder element in the plant. For the first time in his life, Tim had some money jingling in his pocket. He was even able to save a good bit of it. The job ended with the summer but Tim hadn't formulated a plan for his future. Lacking any better options, he took a production line job at a manufacturer of ammunition for pistols, rifles, shotguns and machine guns.

At first, he rode to work with a high school classmate. One morning, his friend made him an offer.

"Want to go with me tomorrow, Tim? I'm signing up with the National Guard."

"That's a weekend a month and two weeks of boy scout camp in summer – for six years."

"It's better than dying in Vietnam."

"Why don't you marry Sue?"

"Why buy the cow when the milk's free?" He winked.

Tim nodded. "I guess six years is better than a lifetime if you're not dying to marry her."

“Are you coming with me? They don’t have many more slots to fill.”

“I’ll pass. Two years’d be better than six.”

“If you live through it.”

Directionless, Tim bought a classic Thunderbird, a car he’d dreamt of owning for years, after saving up enough for a sizeable down payment. Knowing little about automobile construction, he got taken. He soon learned he had bought a rust bucket. Even though it used more oil than it should have, it ran well. Unable to process more bad news, he ignored the Vietnam build-up, even as the boys he graduated with were being drafted left and right. Being the youngest in his class, he hadn’t even been called for a draft physical yet.

Gazing out his parents’ picture window that gray late-November day, Tim saw a vision that energized him out of this lethargy. *I just have to meet her, but I don’t even know her name.*

THE END

To see what happens next with Tookie and Tim, check out the trailer and first chapter of *Only Tim Sent Flowers*:

<https://blackopalbooks.com/only-tim-sent-flowers-revised/>

If you've already read it, see what Tookie does after that in: *Finding Mr. Wrong* at:

<https://blackopalbooks.com/finding-mr-wrong/>

If you've read both of them, be on the lookout for her third adventure, *Tookie Goes Undercover*. It will be released on May 18, 2019, again by Black Opal Books.