

DEBORAH WILLES

SCHOLASTIC INC.

REVOLU

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**THE
SIXTIES
TRILOGY**

BOOK TWO

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Saturday, June 20, 1964

The first thing we do, me and Gillette, is make sure everybody is asleep. Daddy and Annabelle (I still can't call her Mama) go to bed after watching *The Lawrence Welk Show* on television. Parnell will be home at midnight, after he sweeps the floors and locks the doors at the Leflore Theater on the corner of Fulton and West Washington Streets. Little Audrey — champion sleeper — has been snoring for hours, so we don't worry about her.

We know what time Deputy Davis drives by our house in his black-and-white cruiser, making his rounds, and we know his route by heart, which means we know what time he passes the city pool. We've got it all figured out — *yeah, yeah, yeah*.

In the bathroom, I yank on my bathing suit, which is still stretchy-cold and clammy-wet from this afternoon's swim. Gillette hisses from the hallway, "Hurry up, Sunny!"

"Hold your horses!" I hiss back. "This ain't easy!" I pull my blue sundress with the daisies on it over my bathing suit, grab my pool towel, and sneak open the bathroom door. And here is what I say then, in my most angelic whisper: "But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing." James 1:4. *Patience*, big brother."

Gillette rolls his eyes at me. "Patience, your big behind!" he says. "Let's go!"

"Shame on you!" I fling at him, and we are off. I said I wanted an adventure, and now I've got one.

Gillette is a nut. A nut like one of the Three Stooges, but not really, because Gillette is smart, real smart, even though he's my stepbrother, and I've only known him for two years — twice times 365 days of my whole life. Tonight we are celebrating two years of knowing each other and one year of being brother and sister. *Yeah, yeah, yeah.*

We tiptoe into the summer night, careful not to let the screen door slam behind us. The heat covers us like a warm velvet blanket. We are swallowed up in the muddy smell of the lazy Yazoo River just on the other side of the earthen levee. The golden glow from the streetlights lining River Road sifts through the trees and sprinkles us like glitter. Our bare feet slap the sidewalk as we race each other the six blocks to the pool.

"My behind's not big," I huff.

"I know that," says Gillette.

"Just because you're eight months older . . ."

"I know! I said I'm sorry!"

"No, you didn't," I tell him as we slow to a walk and turn onto Dewey Street. I have a sudden thought and blurt it out. "What if the invaders are already here?" I cast a quick look behind me. "What if they see us?"

Gillette looks at me like I've just started talking backward. "What invaders?"

"Didn't you see the paper?"

"Do I read the paper? No. What's happening?" Gillette doesn't seem bothered by this news, which makes me feel braver.

"I saw it when I was at Meemaw's this week. She was taking her nap and fell asleep with the newspaper over her face. I couldn't stand it, how she was snoring in all that newspaper smell, so I tried to pick it off her face, and that's when I read it, clear as day. We're being *invaded*."

"What did it say exactly?" Gillette is a facts-and-statistics

man. He has everything about his favorite baseball players memorized. He can tell you how they do, from week to week during baseball season. He keeps track like that.

“I don’t know!” I tell him. “It just said ‘invasion of Mississippi’. . . .”

“Well, I don’t see any invaders, and it looks like any other night in Greenwood. Nothing is happening. You watch too many monster movies.” Gillette takes off his baseball cap — he’s a Giants fan — and runs his fingers in his hair like he’s combing it, but he’s really getting the sweat out — I’ve seen him do it a hundred times.

“Do not,” I say. But I do. Parnell lets me in for free at the Leflore, and I saw *The Creeping Terror* and *Beginning of the End* last Saturday at the horror-movie day double feature.

We swing left onto West Church Street. “What if Old Miss Bishop’s out on her porch?” I ask.

“She won’t be. Everybody’s asleep.”

He’s right. Nary a car, bicycle, or body moves at this hour. A hound bellows with desperation from the direction of Mr. Delay Beckwith’s house — one of his hunting dogs. The sound makes me shudder.

“Hurry!” I call to Gillette. We dash across the empty playground behind Jefferson Davis Elementary School, where the merry-go-round squats near the swings and watches us steal our way behind the music building to where the Greenwood City Pool lies glistening in the half-dark, its tall fence protecting it from prowlers. Then we look around to make sure we aren’t spotted.

Yesterday, Gillette figured out how to jiggle the chain-link just so, so we can get in through the back gate, lock and all. Without a word, we sneak through, drop our towels, and strip to our suits. Then, smooth as seals in a calm sea, we slip into that cool, colorless water without a sound and begin to execute

perfect breaststrokes, side by side, across the 200-foot length of the pool, accompanied by a chorus of crickets, the light from a cantaloupe moon, and the burble of the chlorinated water we gently shove out of our way as it ripples around our arms in the moonlight. We keep our heads above the water and take our time. That's just the way we do it.

Gillette, who delivered groceries on his bike all day, finally breaks the silence. "God, this feels great."

"Don't say *God*," I snap.

"Since when did you get religious?"

"As you can see, I'm not," I tell him, "since I'm here, breaking the law with you. Happy anniversary!"

"So what gives?"

"I dunno. Vacation Bible School. There's a prize every year for whoever memorizes the most Bible verses. I want to beat Polly."

"I'll never go to Bible School," says Gillette.

"You're lucky your mama doesn't make you."

"Did she make you?"

"No, but Daddy did." I stop talking for a moment, to catch my breath. Then I puff, "He always makes me go, every summer. He says it keeps me out of trouble."

Gillette has no answer for that. We stroke in silence. There is no relentless, steaming sun to burn us, no little kids to scream our ears off, and it amazes me how a place I know like the back of my hand in the daylight is so different in the dark. I want to ask Gillette — Mr. Personality — about Mary Margaret Fitzgerald Carr, who I think is in love with him, and I wonder if he is in love with her. But then I know Gillette saves all his love for Willie Mays, and besides, Mary Margaret is Catholic and would never be allowed to love a Methodist.

So instead of asking him about Mary Margaret, I say, "Did

you know I once rode an elephant in the parking lot at Fairchild's Grocery?"

"You never did!" says Gillette.

"Did too," I tell him. "The circus came to town, and Daddy bought tickets for the whole first grade. Me and Polly sat right up on that elephant together, just as tall as you please, like Toomai, the elephant boy."

Gillette considers this news. "What was it like?"

"High and wobbly," I say, and Gillette laughs. I love it when I can make Gillette laugh. On a night like this, it's hard to remember how much I hated him when his mama moved with him and little Audrey into our house on River Road after she married Daddy last summer. I didn't realize then how much I missed having a brother. I'd never had one.

"Backstroke," says Gillette, as we finally reach the opposite end of the pool. "Do it the way I taught you, Sunny."

The way he taught me means my arms never break the water's surface, and they move with my legs, *up-open-shut, up-open-shut*, in an underwater frog ballet.

It's a long pool, and it's hard to swim in a straight line when I'm on my back. I stare at the heavens and fixate on one "twinkle twinkle little star." Daddy told me my real mama sang that song to me when she first met me, twelve years ago. But I wouldn't know. I never knew her. Now I have Annabelle, but she's not my mama. My mama is tall and beautiful, with soft, golden hair and big, white teeth inside a lopsided smile.

When I bump into Gillette, he pushes me out of his way but he's nice about it. Gillette is nothing if not nice. "Five more minutes," he says. *Up-open-shut*.

I don't have to follow any rules in the dark, so of course I didn't walk through the showers, and I'm not wearing a bathing cap, which feels as delicious as getting out of school early

on the last day. My hair floats all over the place and so does my mind.

There is nothing on this earth as good as summer. I bounce like a Ping-Pong ball with Laura Mae, between our house and Meemaw's. Daddy stocks up on Dr Pepper at the store because he knows how much I love it, especially with salted peanuts sprinkled into the bottle. Miss Cantrell makes stacks of books for me to read at the library and knows just what I like. I can spend all afternoon there reading if I want to, and the library is air-conditioned.

There's hand-cranked ice cream and all afternoon at the pool with Polly and Mary Margaret, and this year there's Gillette and baseball and always there are the scary movies that come back to the Leflore. The Man with the X-Ray Eyes is this week's scary movie and I know Parnell will let me in free; he always does. Polly and I made him a chocolate cream pie with Laura Mae's help this morning. We're gonna have to make Parnell a hundred pies this summer because A Hard Day's Night is coming! Yeah, yeah, yeah!

The paper said the “invaders” are coming, too — I don't care what Gillette says.

I lay in bed last night thinking about *The Giant Claw* and *The Mole People* and who might be clawing up out of the earth, coming for us. I never slept a wink, and then Meemaw wondered why I conked out for three hours on the floor, under the attic fan this afternoon. I told her that pie-making had worn me to a frazzle.

But I don't see a thing, right here, right now, so I start my backstroke again and I tell myself that Gillette is right, so I won't believe in invaders. *Up-open-shut. How many weeks until school starts again? How many more weeks of freedom?*

I hear the water sluice off Gillette as he climbs the ladder. I quicken my froggy pace. “You're going to hit the side,” he warns.

But I don't hit the side. I don't hit the end, either. I reach behind me and touch something in the water, something soft and warm pressed into the dark corner of the pool.

Something *alive*.

And that's when I scream.