

## Chapter 3 - Ralph Waugh

"One day after I was still in the Army, I was visiting in Ashland, so I took my girlfriend down to the Airport at Worthington for an airplane ride. Purposely I drove by the Fields place. There, they sat on the front porch. I stopped, got out and stepped gingerly upon the old wood porch as I offered my hand, but neither one took it. Nor did they not invite me to sit down.

Mr. Fields did all the talking. When I glanced over at Mrs. Fields, she sat, her eyes closed, with her arms folded across her chest. She did not look at me during my visit, nor say a word. I stood poised with one foot on the porch and one on the steps. I was still ready to run, I felt afraid and I think she did too. I guess she thought I was going to say something about her raping me, but I didn't. I don't know why I even stopped. Maybe it was unfinished business then and it still is.

A decade had passed since Virginia and I ran away. I was astonished at how old they looked that day I came back. Gertrude Fields with her gray hair, was now a heavy-set woman with dentures. She looked different. Not threatening at all, but pathetic. He was tall, still lean and now bald. They say he'd been a hobo until they married and came there to live. One day when I was still living on their place, he and I were out walking in a field and he found a bottle of whiskey. He opened it up and took a drink, just like that. It could have contained anything. I guess he really had been a hobo, or maybe he'd hidden the bottle there for us to find. A short time after she raped me, I heard Mrs. Fields tell him she wanted to get rid of us. It was summer of 1946, I was nearly 12 years old, soon after that I grasped Virginia by the hand; pulling her along by the big Pond Run gravel pit. It was full of water, and I was careful as we scrambled over the rocks, to a house where we were picked up. All I could think of was that at last we had escaped them."

Ralph continued, "From Worthington, Virginia and I went to Ashland to live with our mother. There we met her new husband, Forest Roberts. Our lives did improve, but underlying, I felt that old anxiety returning. Our reunion was not easy. The breach of our separation was destructive.

I had not heard from our mother nor my sisters for two years, and Ronnie now age four, had grown up with the Walker family on Wheatley Road in Westwood, the only parents he knew. Bewildered by the abrupt changes, we were mostly silent. But for my sisters, I found out after we were grown, how their young lives took on a new purpose in the household of Forest Roberts. At first, we children were reunited at the home of Alice Scott, Forest's mother where we began to get reacquainted. Her large house generously accommodated us all, until Forest and Mother moved us into a separate house on Donta Road near our Skaggs grandparents.

The Hub was both a pool hall and a sandwich restaurant on Greenup avenue in Ashland. Every day Forest walked from Donta Road to his job at the Hub as the cook, and back again. He didn't own a car, nor did he ever learn to drive. We children were a new experience for him; a man who'd never married, to decide to provide for eight people instead of just himself, to be responsible for a large family might have been daunting, but he worked hard at it. He was getting used to being married to our mother, and to know us his new, already troubled children, and we were getting acquainted with our Mother again. She soon reverted to her former habits and left us to our devices. Her anxiety over bringing us home

was evident to us. Overpowered only by her husband's will and his determination to establish a home for us all, emotionally she kept her distance.

We knew she really didn't want us, but he'd made it clear to her, the only way he would marry her, was to gather all her children, so we acquiesced. What else could we do? As ill advised as his plan was, he believed in it. For us, we were taking care of each other again, as we had learned to do at Avondale, except we did not scrounge for food. For me, it was like living in a boarding house as an outsider with strangers or as I had lived at the Fields home, but without the intense fear. At other times, I felt joyful to be with my sisters and Ronnie. I think I even felt safe for the first time in my life. The two year separation in our familial relationship mended somewhat, because my sisters and my brother remain close today, but my mother was a mystery to me then just as my memory of her today remains shrouded. She never explained anything. From Donta road, I attended Coles Jr., High on a regular basis for a short time before Forrest moved us all to Baltimore.

Before he married our mother in 1946, Forest served four years in the Army during WWII. With seven new dependents to manage, before very long, living on a cook's pay proved bleak. His option to sign up for another four year tour at last tempted him. His cooking skills, he said guaranteed a good job in the service. By 1948 when I was age 14, we all moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where Forest was needed at Fort Mead to cook for the 2nd Army relocation. Uncle Ollie Skaggs drove us up there and dropped us at his brother's house, our Uncle Buehl Skaggs; where we lived for a short time until mother and Forest found a house for us. We moved around a lot after that from one apartment to another until we landed on Baltimore street near Broadway. Mother liked Baltimore, where at last, she had bright lights and nightlife she craved without scrutiny of her family. While Forest was gentle with my sisters, in fact too gentle as they later told me, he was rough with Ronnie and me. I was growing up, and life with our mother and Forest was never good, so in 1952, I too signed up for the Army at Fort Meade just in time for the Korean conflict. I was nearly age 18."

Ralph continued, "I still shudder about living in Avondale. The storefront had large glass windows with no blinds or curtains of any kind except for layers of dust. Every car that drove down 13th street at the bottom of that hill, flashed sweeping lights over us as we slept in our one bed drawn into the corner. By street light, a large Smoot billboard across the street perched high on the 13th street hill was our reading lesson when we woke up of a morning. By day, drivers looked right in on us, but nobody asked about six little children living there, not even our grandparents. The stench was terrible. Our toilet didn't work at all. I don't see how anyone could miss our situation, but they did."

I said, "Perhaps your mother was gone out trying to make some money for food for you children?"

Ralph said quickly, "If she did, I never saw any of it. She used it for something else." His voice stretched, "One day mother's older brother, Uncle Malcolm came by, he was returning to his home in Florida. When he started to leave, I begged to go with him, begged for him to take me with him. I felt overwhelmed. When I began to cry, feeling desperate to get away, he laughed and drove off."

"Sometimes I worked for a man who lived there in Avondale. He cut lawns to earn a little money for his family, and he hired me to push one of his lawnmowers. I was skinny, between nine and ten years old, and the lawnmower was one of those manual types. He paid me some little amount so I bought bologna and bread and milk for us. I scrounged at the dump because it was situated near our storefront and one time I found some cookies for us to eat. Our mother was often gone for days. They say she went to the

bars at Ironton. When I went out to search for food or to work, Darlene and Marjorie looked after Virginia, and baby Ronnie was a few months old," Ralph's voice tapered off as he recited attempts to care for his five little siblings.

"As the only person in charge, living in that old abandoned store building, right on 13th street, I came to recognize dangers beyond our lack of food. The day the strangers came for us at Avondale we ran to hide wherever we could. My sister Marjorie hid the little ones under the bed. But, after awhile I was convinced these strangers had come to help me, and I gathered up my sisters and brothers. They were kind and brought food right away, when I told them our tale; they said they were from Welfare. At the Ramey Home, we were bathed and given food. They cut our hair to get rid of lice. After a week, Miss Ramey asked me whether I would like to go live on a farm where they had a cow and I could play outside. I said, "Yes."

"At the time, I believed my sisters were safe; Baby Ronnie had gone to live with a family, Ralph's voice softened as he spoke. "Still, in retrospect, my leaving the Ramey Home for the Fields farm, may have been my most unfortunate decision. At the time, I didn't know the Ramey Home was primarily equipped for girls. So, moving me, the only boy to another place was probably Miss Ramey's policy. The reason is lost to my memory today, if I ever was told the reason, but not long after I arrived at the Fields farm, my little sister Virginia came to live there too. This caused me worry, because she too began to learn about a new kind of fear. One day I came in and Mrs. Fields was holding Virginia's head under the pump. She was gasping for breath, nearly drowned. When Virginia raised her head, her face was covered with scratches."

"There were other Ramey Home children living with the Fields. There was Tommy, Charlotte, Barbara and Patricia Damron, but they didn't stay long. Virginia and I stayed there nearly two years. Once in awhile, when I felt lonely, I wondered whatever happened to our mother, and whether the kind lady, Miss Ramey had forgotten about us."

Ralph jumped ahead to one of the most disturbing aspects of his young life, he said,

"At the Fields place, their daughter Sarah Blankenship brought her sons, Jack and Don on weekends to visit. They lived in Ashland, somewhere. Jack and Don tracked me like an animal. It was their entertainment. Mrs. Fields put them up to it because she'd laugh," his voice surged then he said, "I tried to hide from them in the barn loft."

"I can still see those boys, Jack with pale skin and blonde hair and Don's red hair. That hot anger of frustration I felt then from their brutish behavior has re visited me many times since 1946. I still have flashbacks of anxiety and helplessness" his voice trailed off, "I wonder whatever happened to them. As for me, I've survived," Ralph's voice caught.

"Sarah and Hobart Blankenship drank a lot, and they'd get into fights right there in front of us. Gertrude and Clifford Fields drank too and it may account for their erratic behavior towards me. Later, I understand Sarah and Hobart got religious. They began to play musical instruments and sing in the churches. That was a drastic change from how I remember them at Worthington. After I left the Fields place, I was living on Donta road when one day Don and Jack rode up on their bicycles, to see me. More than that, I thought they wanted to show off their bicycles because they knew I didn't have one. Perhaps I am wrong about their intentions. I am puzzled by it still today."

Ralph's two year exile in Worthington conjures clear memories of the daily routine. "Mr. Fields worked at the C&O railroad at night, so he was gone a lot and mostly he slept during the day," he paused. "It was then, when he was gone, Mrs. Fields stalked me. I'd be standing someplace, and she'd jerk down my pants and spank my bare bottom. I didn't understand," his voice trailed off, "Later, I came to know I was being introduced to her perversion. I was about age 11 when one night she pulled me into her bed."

"Scrounging for food in Avondale had been almost unbearable, and my senses were on high alert from those dangers of trying to survive in a slum, but Mrs. Fields gave birth to a new kind of dread for me. The uncertainty of her mood, mostly from drinking came from both of them, though. I was a good worker, and at age ten, I could do some things to help Mr. Fields, but he was often unreasonable. Part of my daily work was to bring in the cows from grazing, but one day a particularly wild cow would not follow my lead. At last Mr. Fields had to pull her into the shed. Then he turned and gave me a whipping with a limb off a bush."

"I still have one pleasant memory when I was six years old of clutching my little lunch box and walking to first grade at Bayless school in Ashland, Kentucky. Our father hadn't deserted us yet, and things worked the way they ought to." Charles Ralph Waugh. January, 2006.

September, 2006 Ashland, Kentucky