

*CeeGee's Gift*

*a novel*

*Joy H. Selak*

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*For my mother Charlotte Ann Agee Hubbard*

*She awakened each day to a brand-new world,  
and took me along on her journey of discovery.*

*And for my Auntie Leone Hubbard Jackson*

*Like every child who knew her,  
I was sure I was her favorite.*

The Great Tide Pool...is a fabulous place:  
when the tide is in, a wave churned basin,  
creamy with foam, whipped by the combers  
that roll in from the whistling buoy on the reef.  
But when the tide goes out  
the little water world becomes quiet and lovely.

The smells of life and richness, of death and digestion,  
of decay and birth, burden the air.  
And salt spray blows in from the barrier where the ocean waits  
for its rising tide strength to permit it back into the Great Tide Pool again.

John Steinbeck, *Cannery Row*, 1945



## Chapter One

Mr. Tindale lived in an old wooden one-story house with three broad steps up to a wide covered porch. The newer houses on Magdalena Island, especially the ones close to the beach, were built up high on stilts and people parked their cars in the shady spaces underneath. That way when the hurricanes roared in from the Gulf of Mexico and flood tides washed over the island, only people's cars would drown, instead of whole houses and families. Everyone in town figured the Tindales must have Divine Storm Protection because no matter how hard the storms hit, their house always stayed high and dry—even without the stilts.

CeeGee arrived on Friday after school let out and found Mr. Tindale sitting in his front porch rocker, as usual, with Mrs. Tindale's rocker looking sad and empty beside him. Spunk the cat was asleep on top of the porch rail. CeeGee left her bike at the end of the drive, opened the mailbox on top of the post and took out the mail. Then she crossed the sand-spattered yard and climbed the steps, "So, how are you this afternoon, Mr. Tindale?" she asked as she handed him the mail.

"I'm all right," he said, taking the envelopes. "You know, Celia Gene, it's not so easy for me to get down those steps, what with my bad leg and all, so it's kind of you to bring up my mail. How 'bout you, missy?"

"I'm okay," CeeGee pushed her glasses up on her nose and got right to it. "Listen, I was wondering, you need some help with your garden here?" She pointed at the bed below the porch, a tangle of dry, top-heavy perennials scattered among a variety of weeds.

"What?" He glanced down, "You sayin' my garden's a mess?"

"Well, yes sir. Besides, I have to do fifteen hours of community service for seventh grade and my mom says you might be the person I should help."

"How long you got?"

"Till the end of school."

"That ain't long, is it?"

"No, sir, I only have two weeks left."

He shook his head and gave her a once-over. "Hmmm, in that case, you better get to work." He looked down at the flower bed. "Now that I'm looking at it, this garden is a mess."

"That's just what I was thinking." CeeGee grinned up at him. "Is it okay if I start tomorrow morning?"

"Saturday, that will be just fine. All right, I'll be waitin' for ya."

CeeGee rode her bike six blocks to the Southport Public Library, which was on the same street as the Magdalena Island Public Schools—elementary, junior high and high school—all in a row with the ball fields in the open space behind them. She parked her bike in the rack, pulled open the big wooden door and went straight to the main desk. Miss McGuire ignored her, as usual, so CeeGee busied herself looking through the returned book cart. The librarian did some filing, straightened a few stacks of papers and fussed with her hair.

"Your hair looks real nice today, Miss McGuire," CeeGee finally said to end the standoff.

Miss McGuire looked up, eyes wide with fake surprise, and patted at her hair. "Why, thank you, Celia Gene, I do try to keep myself looking nice."

"In case your Knight in Shining Armor comes, right?"

"Precisely. One never knows when one's knight might appear. Why, he might come right through that door at any moment," Miss McGuire got a moony look on her face and stared at the front entrance, "and sweep me off my feet." She turned back to CeeGee, "And then I will live happily ever after."

"That would be real nice, Miss McGuire."

"I do try to keep myself ready—every moment, for that perfect man to come into my life." She brushed at some imaginary lint on her skirt. "It's not an easy task, let me tell you, not an easy task whatsoever."

CeeGee had been listening to Miss McGuire talk about her knight for as far back as she could remember, long enough to figure out all this waiting and primping and staring across the room made no sense at all. CeeGee even read some books about knights to see if there could be any truth to Miss McGuire's story, but it didn't take a child genius to figure out there were no knights in shining armor, not in this day and age. And even if there were, one wasn't likely to come busting into the Southport Public Library on a white horse, so he could sweep Miss McGuire off her feet and gallop away to live happily ever after. CeeGee thought Miss McGuire spent way too much time with her nose stuck in old-timey books.

"Celia Gene, how are you coming with my list?"

"I quit reading from the list since you wouldn't let me check out *The Great Gatsby*, Miss McGuire."

"I told you child, F. Scott Fitzgerald is not an appropriate author for your age group. I did not compile 'Miss McGuire's Personal List of the Best Books by American Authors' specifically for twelve-year-old children."

"I'm nearly thirteen."

"Nearly thirteen then, Celia Gene." Miss McGuire raised her hand and swept the air as if to reveal a banner floating in the sky

and recited, "I am just doing my duty to protect island youth from nefarious literature."

CeeGee knew what nefarious meant because she had looked it up in the library's big dictionary the first time Miss McGuire said it. It meant 'evil' and 'wicked' and naturally made CeeGee want to read all the books Miss McGuire wouldn't let her check out, especially *The Great Gatsby*. "Miss McGuire, my dad says if I am able to read a book, I should be allowed to read the book. And besides, like I said, I'm nearly thirteen, and my dad says I'm old enough to read whatever I want."

Miss McGuire harrumphed before she replied, "Your father is not the head librarian of the Southport Public Library, now is he? I do not tell him how to run his pharmacy, so he can just keep his nose out of my library business. There is much going on in *The Great Gatsby* that you do not yet need to know about, young lady. I will allow you to check it out when you are sufficiently mature."

CeeGee decided not to tell Miss McGuire her dad also said he had half a mind to go down to the library and give the old bat a piece of his mind. Or that her mom invited her to skip ahead to the S's on Miss McGuire's list and read John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* along with the sophomore English class she taught at the high school. CeeGee knew Miss McGuire wouldn't approve of reading books out of order, or all the parties and drinking that went on in *Cannery Row*. "I'm here for books on gardening today," CeeGee said. "I'm going to be a volunteer gardener."

Miss McGuire also harrumphed at that, as if she didn't approve of CeeGee reading any books that weren't on her list, but she grudgingly took her over to the gardening section. CeeGee leafed through every single book on the shelves. One was about zone gardening. She looked at the map in the front of the book where it showed all the zones for the whole United States. CeeGee knew that Magdalena Island, Texas, was on the Texas

Coastal Bend. It was easy to find the bend on the map. It was the long arc of coastline that stretched from the southern tip of Texas all the way to the Louisiana border, but tiny Magdalena Island was just a dot near the middle and her town of Southport wasn't on the map at all. Still, CeeGee could tell Magdalena was in Zone 9, so she figured she'd only have to read that one part of the book. Another book was called *Flowering Plants of Texas*. CeeGee hoped this one might help her recognize the most important plants, so she wouldn't yank something special out of Mr. Tindale's garden thinking it was just a weed. CeeGee took the books to the checkout counter.

"So," Miss McGuire asked, "what, may I ask, has brought on this interest in gardening, Celia Gene?"

"I have to do a community service project before school lets out and my mom thought helping Mr. Tindale with his flower bed might be good."

"And how is that kind old man?"

"He seems a little sad to me. A little lonely."

"That is not surprising, not in the slightest. He and his dear wife, Maggie May, were two peas in a pod, that they were. It must be hard on him, all alone, now that she has passed."

"Spunk helps some, but I'm hoping maybe I can help out too, at least that's what my mom thinks."

"Well, I do understand, Celia Gene," Miss McGuire reached out and patted CeeGee's hand. "The Tindales, while having no offspring of their own, always took care to be kind to children, so it's only fitting that you offer some kindness to him in return on these sorrowful days. In spite of your rebellious spirit about adhering to my list, Celia Gene, you do have a kind and generous heart."

"Gee, thanks for saying that." Celia looked down at her feet for a moment while she flushed pink among her freckles, then looked up and added, "You remember how the Tindales always sat

on the porch and waved to all the kids when we rode by on our bicycles? They liked it when we stopped and talked to them. And they had the best Halloween treats—and they never got mad, even when we kicked a ball into the flower bed.”

“Exactly right, that was the two of them in a nutshell. Together, smiling and waving, accepting of children, who I might add, aren’t always so easy to tolerate. Well then, child, you best be on your way, so you can study up and make Maggie May’s old flower bed shiny bright.” She stamped the books and handed them to CeeGee. “But don’t forget my list, as soon as possible, you must get back to your serious reading.”

“Yes, ma’am.” CeeGee took both books from the library, loaded them into her bicycle basket, rode home and read them through before dinner.

The next morning, CeeGee put on her work clothes and rode her bike back over to Mr. Tindale’s. He took her to the garage behind the house, pulled open the big double doors and helped her find Mrs. Tindale’s old garden tools stuck in a bucket of sand. This made him so sad he had to go indoors for a while, but he soon came back out to the porch with two glasses of sweet tea. He put one on the wicker table beside his rocker and one on the porch rail, then sat down to watch as CeeGee began to weed, prune, stake and water. Every once in a while, CeeGee would reach up to take a sip of tea. Pretty soon they were chatting like old friends. After that weekend, CeeGee brought Mr. Tindale’s mail to him every day on her way home from school and stayed on an hour or so to do a little work and visit. After she finished her gardening, she’d hose off the tools, stick them in the bucket of sand and go sit on the top porch step. Spunk would rub against her leg while Mr. Tindale used his special pocket knife to peel them an apple in one long spiral. He’d cut the apple into sections and pass one over to her, eat the next one himself, give one to her—back and forth until the apple was gone. Sometimes they’d eat two apples.

While he was peeling and eating, he'd talk about what he read in the newspaper that morning and ask CeeGee what she learned at school that day. He asked her about her friends and her teachers and all that she was learning. CeeGee didn't have much to say about friends, because she really didn't have any, but she told him all the rest. In no time at all the colorful perennials—purple sage and hyssop, rusty orange butterfly weed and all the pinks of the phlox—began to perk up on their stalks. Their blossomed heads tilted toward the porch as if listening to what the two were saying.

One of the things Mr. Tindale liked to talk about most, naturally, was his dear wife Maggie May, silver-haired, but still spry and full of life when she suddenly up and died a few months before. Mr. Tindale told CeeGee that for a while after Maggie died, he could still feel her with him, right there by his side. He said they wandered around the house and yard together, sharing their memories. In time, Maggie May paled and moved on. Mr. Tindale said he had no idea where the dead went, but he was sure it was more interesting than hanging around with him doing nothing, so he didn't blame her for leaving. Still, the loss changed him. "There's no good reason for me to be here on this earth with my dear, dear Maggie May gone from it," he said, shaking his head.

It didn't come as any surprise to CeeGee that Mr. Tindale spent some time with his wife even after she passed on. When CeeGee was little, she could see a light shimmering around Mr. Tindale's head, like a rainbow. She tried to tell her parents about it, "Momma, Daddy, look! Pretty colors!" But they couldn't see Mr. Tindale's light, any more than they could see CeeGee's own light when it came down from above and entered her. CeeGee wondered if Mr. Tindale's light had brought him nothing but trouble like hers had, and if he snuffed it out the same way she did. Then she thought that maybe his light was still there, but she just couldn't see it anymore. Or maybe, when Maggie May left this earth, Mr. Tindale

was just too sad to have that rainbow around his head. She didn't ask him any questions about his light though, because the last thing in this world she wanted was to talk about hers. She'd managed to keep her light from coming for three years, and she wasn't going to ruin everything now.



One day, Mr. Tindale brought their tea out to the porch, like usual, and looked down over the rail at CeeGee hard at work in the flowerbed. He eased himself into his rocker, propped his cane against the railing and began to brood. "You know," he finally said, "I always figured I was pretty good at doing stuff, but since Maggie's gone I'm all thumbs. I can't iron worth a fiddle, so now I just put on old wrinkled shirts. I must look a sight. My Maggie would roll over in her grave, she would." The rocker treads whacked louder and louder as he pushed back and forth. "And I'm no good at all in the kitchen. Yesterday when I took a glass out of the dishwasher it slipped out of my hand and broke. Then, when I reached in after it, I cut my thumb." He held up his right hand for CeeGee to see the bandage. "Now I only got one thumb left to be clumsy with." He took a drink of his tea and banged the glass back down on the wicker table. "And laundry! Maggie May used to fold up those fitted bed sheets so's they sat on the shelf in neat little squares, straight as you please. Can you do that? I can't do that to save my life."

CeeGee got up from where she'd been weeding the bed, brushed the dirt off her knees and glanced skyward. She swatted at a brief flash of light. "None of that stuff matters, Mr. Tindale," she announced.

"Course it matters. These are everyday chores, have to be done."

"What I mean is..." she paused a moment as the beam from above pulsed into her, then said in a rush, "What I mean is, if you have something you need to do, well, you'd best do it—and soon."

"What in heaven's name are you rambling on about, child?" He looked impatient.

"I just have a feeling..."

"If you have something to say, speak up." Mr. Tindale leaned forward, put his hands on his knees and waited.

CeeGee wiped her forehead with the back of her hand and pushed her glasses up on her nose. "Fact is you don't have much time, Mr. Tindale. So, you best get yourself ready. Your time is real short."

"What would you know about my time?"

"I know you don't have much."

"Of course, I don't have much, I'm an old man! And you can just keep your facts and feelings to yourself, young lady, because I ain't leaving this here earth until I'm good and ready." Mr. Tindale had been telling CeeGee for days on end that he wanted nothing more than to join Maggie May wherever she was, but now that his wish was about to come true, he'd have none of it. "And who do you think you are anyway, some kind of soothsayer?"

"What's a soothsayer?"

"Some fool who thinks he can tell the future."

"Well then, I'm a soothsayer, sure enough."

"Hogwash. You ain't no such thing." He used his cane to push himself out of the rocker and glared down at her.

He was getting red in the face and CeeGee was afraid if he got too mad he'd keel over right in front of her. "I... I'm sorry, Mr. Tindale, maybe I'd better just hush up and get on home."

"Maybe you better." He turned and started for the door, muttering, "My time is short, what kind of foolish talk is that?"

CeeGee left without another word, her dirt-caked tools scattered all over the flowerbed. Behind her, she could hear the angry rap, rap, rap of Mr. Tindale's cane as he walked across the wooden porch. She heard him yank open his creaky screen door and

heard it slam it shut behind him. Then she was alone in the terrible silence. CeeGee knew what just happened was all her fault. She'd let the light come in and told a Knowing. Now another person in Southport, someone she truly cared for, was bound to die.



## Chapter Two

The first week of summer should be the best time of all, but for CeeGee it was an agony of waiting. Every day, CeeGee went straight to her dad’s drugstore and grabbed a newspaper off the rack to see if there was any news of Mr. Tindale. There wasn’t. Then she went home and positioned herself by the front window in the living room, so she could see both the street and the kitchen where the phone hung on the wall above the counter. She listened for sirens and eavesdropped when her mother was talking on the phone. Any day now, she knew, the news would come. But after a whole week—nothing.

On Saturday morning, CeeGee sat at the kitchen table, checking to see if Mr. Tindale’s obituary was in the weekend paper that got delivered to their house. Bobbie turned from the stove where she was making a late breakfast, pointed at her daughter with the spatula and said, “Celia Gene, what in heaven’s name is the matter with you?”

CeeGee looked up, startled, and quickly closed the paper. “Why nothin’, Momma.”

“It is the first week of summer and you are sitting here at home. You’re making me nervous. I want you to get on outside today and get some fresh air, you hear?” She turned to the stove and flipped the eggs, “Thirteen years old and sitting around the house reading the paper. I never.”

“I’m not thirteen till next week, Momma.”

Bobbie turned back to her daughter, “I know that, Celia Gene. But when you are thirteen you will still be too young to spend a beautiful day sitting indoors reading the paper. You’re turning into your father. Why don’t you go over and visit Mr. Tindale? He’d probably like some company. You can go to the Triple S and get some ice cream, or go to the beach, or the marsh. Just get out and do something.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After breakfast, CeeGee got dressed in shorts and a sleeveless cotton shirt and put on the sneakers she wore for bike riding. She felt nervous about leaving, in case the news finally came, but she knew she’d feel even worse if she disobeyed her mother. Bobbie Williamson was feisty and strong, and taught English at the high school. She was petite, with tiny hands and perfect pale skin, but she also had hair the color of a polished copper penny, pinned up on top of her head like a shining crown. CeeGee always figured it was the hair that gave her mother her power. That, and being whip smart, like English teachers ought to be. Everyone, including CeeGee, took care not to get into trouble with Bobbie Williamson.

CeeGee had red hair too, but it definitely did not make her feel feisty and strong, just awkward and different. It was a thick, dull, rust-colored mop and CeeGee thought it made her look like an oversized doll wearing an old, worn-out wig. In addition to the hair, CeeGee was extra tall like her dad, taller than any boy in her whole junior high school, with skinny long legs and a full constellation of freckles scattered across her nose. Plus, she wore glasses. People said she was smart, but she wasn’t so sure that was true because only grownups said it, not kids. Her big brothers, Danny and Davey, had special names for her like Four Eyes and Bird Legs and Stick Doll, which didn’t help. Plus, they were twins which made it easier for them to gang up.

CeeGee said goodbye to her mother in the kitchen, who gave her that look, a combination of tough and soft, as only she could do. CeeGee went down the stairs to the carport and got her bike, pedaled two blocks down to the end of Seaward Street, took a left on Beach, rode another three blocks to the top of Beacon and took a right. About three thousand people lived in Southport year-round and Beacon Street, five blocks long, was what they called Town. Beacon was mostly a street of ones: one grocery store, one liquor store, one movie theater, one bank, one bakery and, right in the middle, the one drugstore and soda shop that her dad owned. Southport hadn't changed in forever—the people, the town, even the stores. It was like it was set in the pages of a book written long ago and everybody was fine with the story that it told—especially all the tourists who came every summer.

Southport was on the southeast end of Magdalena Island and separated from the mainland by a narrow shipping channel. People came and left the island either on the two ferries that crossed the channel every five minutes to the mainland, or drove over one long causeway on the western side. In summer, tourists poured off the ferries to visit the island's beaches and, because of them, some things in Southport came in dozens—like beach cottages, bars and fish houses, boat and bicycle rentals and especially souvenir shops, which the locals called Tacky Stores.

Once inside a tacky store it was easy to see how they got the nickname, as every single one had rows and rows of cheap products for sale, most of them made of shells. There were shell necklaces and bracelets, shell-covered boxes, shell wind chimes hanging from the ceiling, and bins filled with all different kinds of shells, each with a handwritten label stuck on the front. The tacky stores also had rows of items with *Southport, Texas*, or *Magdalena Island* printed on them, some with a map of Texas and a big star at the bottom for Southport. There were hanging racks of T-shirts and

beach cover-ups, and shelves of beach towels. There were refrigerator magnets, key chains, ashtrays, shot glasses, placemats and glass globes with sand in them, all heralding this tiny dot in the great, big Lone Star State.

On top of that the tacky stores were engaged in an ages-old competition that made Southport famous all up and down the coast. Every store had its own outrageous, gigantic model of a sea creature out in front, or four or five, to draw in the shoppers. CeeGee rode by one store with just the huge head of a shark in front, its wide-open jaw showing rows and rows of fearsome teeth. The shark's mouth was so big an entire family could stand inside for a vacation photo, which they did. CeeGee's twin brothers, Danny and Davey, could not go past the shark without leaping into its gaping mouth and pretending to die a violent death, until her parents told them to 'get out of that shark's mouth and get on over here, you boys.' Next was a school of leaping dolphins, then across the street an octopus so tall people could wander among its pink tentacles like a little forest. This was followed by a parade of gigantic, golden sea horses and down a few more doors a huge, blue shark that stretched twenty feet across the entry. Customers had to walk into the shark's mouth and out the back to get inside the store. Every time CeeGee's mother walked by this store she said, "What were these people thinking, making you walk through a shark's behind? Disgusting, simply disgusting."

Carl Williamson said that when he left his drugstore at closing time every day, he felt like he'd walked onto the set of an undersea fantasy movie and any minute someone would yell, "Okay, that's a wrap!" Then crews would come, load up all the outrageous props in big trucks, haul them away and Southport would look like a normal town. But this would never happen. Those sea creatures were what brought in the tourists and made Southport so special.

In pure defense, when Carl and Bobbie moved to the island from Seattle seventeen years before and bought the pharmacy, Carl had a great big new sign made to hang out front, high above the entry door. It said *Southport Sundries and Sodas*, the three words in red, stacked on top of each other with the S's real big. People used to call it the drugstore, but from then on everyone called it the Triple S. Carl would not go so far as putting a sea creature in front of his business, but he was going to have himself a sign that wouldn't be missed. That sign was the newest addition to Beacon Street for years.

CeeGee cut to the alley behind the store and parked her bike, then opened the metal service door she knew would be unlocked during business hours. She crossed the storage room, made her way through the aisles to the soda fountain and ordered her root beer float from Johnny Johanssen.

Johnny was a miserable looking kid. He slouched, and his hair stuck out every which way. He mumbled out of the side of his mouth and never, ever smiled. CeeGee knew all this because he had lived on her street since she was born, three years after her twin brothers. Johnny had been working at the Triple S ever since he landed in Bobbie's freshman English class and she decided this quiet, awkward and lonely student would feel better about himself if he had something to do besides go to high school—like a job at the Triple S. Carl didn't see why making Johnny Johanssen feel better about himself should be his problem, but Bobbie was determined, which was pretty nice of her, considering that when CeeGee was a baby Johnny whacked a baseball through their living room window. Bobbie, like usual, never gave up and Carl finally gave in.

Carl kept a hawk's eye on his new hire and at first, he just had Johnny clean up after the boy who worked the soda fountain. Johnny had to scrub and polish the dark gray Formica counter and the row of red vinyl stools. He had to wash and stack the little silver dishes with their pedestal bases in the shape of a pyramid on top

of the bar. Then he had to line up the banana split dishes and soda glasses on a shelf, keep the sinks clean, and refill the ice cream containers from the freezer in the supply room.

Pretty soon, Johnny had everything in order and started experimenting with the ice cream recipes. Carl said the kid was so intense he reminded him of a scientist on the verge of a major discovery. One by one he made up trial dishes and offered them to Carl and old Mrs. Whiting who worked the cash register. It didn't take long for the two of them to realize that awkward and sullen Johnny Johanssen was a whiz at making absolutely perfect ice cream sodas, root beer floats, hot fudge sundaes and milk shakes. His banana splits were like works of art, with a scoop each of vanilla, chocolate and strawberry lined up neatly across the dish, whipped cream spooned over the top in lacy mounds and a big red cherry on the tip top. In time, he added a dusting of finely chopped pecans to make it his own.

Carl said, "You quit giving these to us for free, son. Start selling these to the customers!"

In six months, Johnny had a fan club and the kid who used to work the soda fountain was cleaning up after Johnny. Whole families came to the Triple S after church or fishing and ordered banana splits to share. Southport mothers came in with their toddlers for ice cream sundaes after a morning at the beach, and kids of all ages came after school for a milkshake or a float.

Johnny's dishes were so popular that Carl decided he better make the soda fountain bigger, so he took a whole aisle out of the sundries part of the store and put in a new row of five red vinyl-covered booths with gray Formica tabletops that matched the counter. Even with service for twenty more customers, it was still hard to get a seat in the soda fountain once it got hot outside. And, even though Johnny was a star, he stayed as sullen as ever.

CeeGee had to wait forever for Johnny to finally, finally bring her float. She didn't have to pay for it because her dad owned the

store, and she never left Johnny a tip like some of the other customers, so it was no wonder he was slower and even more grumpy when he had to take care of her. She took her time sucking and slurping and licking her spoon and thinking about Mr. Tindale. By the time she twisted the straw in her glass to get to the last bits of foam on the bottom, she'd decided that instead of getting herself all worked up about her Knowing again, she'd go over to a tacky store and see if there were any tourists who wanted to get inside the shark's mouth, so she could take their family photo.

CeeGee called out a thank you to Johnny Johanssen behind the bar, waited for his usual gruff nod in reply, twirled off her stool and made her way to the front of the store. She gave her father a wave as she went past the pharmacy counter, said hello to Mrs. Whiting at the cash register and pulled open the big wooden door. No sooner had she stepped onto the sidewalk, but who did she see—strutting down Beacon in a clean white shirt, seersucker pants and a straw hat with a bright blue band—but Mr. Tindale!

When he caught sight of CeeGee, he raised his cane and pointed it at her. "Celia Gene Williamson! It is good to see you on this fine day."

"Mr. Tindale," CeeGee said as he approached her eagerly. "It's pretty hot today, isn't it?"

"Like I said, it's a fine day, and I'd say I'm lucky to be alive." He tapped the side of her sneaker with his cane, winked and said, "As you well know."

He looked so cheerful she figured maybe the midday heat had gotten to him and he forgot he was mad at her for telling him he didn't have much time left. CeeGee took his arm and pulled him into the shade under a store awning. "So, where you off to, dressed up so fancy?"

"I got a busy day," he said. "I got to go back to Sandwith Brothers' Funeral Home to check on my arrangements. I think I got

everything all set. Still a few choices to make about the music, but those caskets—my land, they cost a pretty penny! At first, I thought I'd have an open casket, but after I looked them over with all the fancy gee-gaws—handles and hinges and satin and such—I thought, my land, no. They make 'em up to look like a brand-new car with frosted platinum paint. Silly if you ask me. Whatever happened to a simple box of good oak? That's what I'd go for if I could find....”

“Casket?”

“You know, the box I'll get buried in. What do you think?”

“About what?”

“About a plain wooden casket? Think I could get one made of oak and maybe line it myself with some nice fabric from the mainland? I got time for that, don't I? I'm not going to get hit by a truck tomorrow or anything, am I?”

For a moment, CeeGee was speechless. “Sure, I think you could do that, line it with fabric. And I'd, uh, I'd help if you want?”

“Why that would be fine, just fine.” He cocked his head to the side, “You know I miss having you around, Celia Gene. And I should tell you, I'm sorry I got so mad at you. You just told me the plumb truth. Course I'm going to die, could be any time now, so might as well do it up right. But first, I have to find someone to make my box for me. Could take a while...you sure that's okay?”

“Yeah, sure. I think that's okay.”

“All right, then. Well, good day, missy. I got a lot to do. I got to get on over to Sandwith Brothers, then I'm off to buy a new suit. Open casket, you know.” He touched the brim of his hat and winked at her again.

CeeGee watched him as he walked away, whipping his cane around with each step like the drum major in a marching band. He had his chin up high and the rainbow of light she remembered from so long ago shimmered around his head once again. What had happened? A week ago, she gave Mr. Tindale her Knowing and he

was furious. Today, he was acting like getting himself ready to die was a barrel of fun. And that pretty halo of light—did it come back, or was she just now able to see it? And how could she have given the worst Knowing of her whole entire life only to have the person who received the terrible news go strutting around like everything was plumb perfect?

CeeGee forgot all about the tacky stores and went straight back through the Triple S, got her bike from the alley and rode to the jetty. She needed to think.



## Chapter Three

On the seaward side of Southport, the jetty stretches from the southeastern shore of the island out to the deeper gulf waters, creating a wide, calm channel to guide fishing boats and cargo ships safely to the mainland harbors. The jetty, made of huge cubes of rose-colored granite stacked on top of one another, is topped by an asphalt path. Most any day, a long line of fishermen stand all along the jetty, waving to the boats going by and casting into the channel while sand crabs scurry for lost bait among the granite rocks below. At the very end of the jetty the water is still and deep and the smell of civilization entirely absent, replaced by the scent of seaweed, hot stone and bright, briny water.

CeeGee rode her bike down Beach Road to the jetty and made sure to park in the dry sand above the high tide line. She climbed up the rocks to the path on top, stuffed her hands into her pockets, put her head down against the wind and started walking. She didn't even bother, like usual, to check on the fishermen to see what they had in their buckets. She didn't look down between the rocks in search of a crab or a sea urchin either; she just kept on walking out to the very end of the jetty, where rolling swells of slate-colored water slapped gently against salt-crusted stone. She found a block of granite positioned just right, sat down and got ready to work out all the questions that were tangled up in her mind. But before she could even get started, a voice interrupted.

"Mind if I join ya?" CeeGee looked up into the glare of the sun and raised a hand to shield her eyes. Standing over her was Mike Robins, the carpenter who rebuilt the Williamsons' porch deck the summer before. "How you be, Celia Gene?"

"Hey, Mr. Robins, I'm okay." She pointed at the stone next to her, "Here, you want to have a seat?"

He shook his head 'no' without answering, which wasn't like him. Mike Robins was the kind of man who knew how to talk to a kid. When he was working on their house, CeeGee used to hang around until it was time for his break; then she'd bring him a big glass of ice water and sit with him while he drank it. He never shushed her or waved her away, and he always thought up interesting questions to ask her. After he got done for the day he would toss a ball around with Danny and Davey for a while, like he was the Dad of everyone. She remembered him as young looking and fit, but today his eyes were rimmed in red and his hair was shaggy and dirty, pulled back into a tangled wad that stuck out from under his baseball cap.

"What are you fishing for?" CeeGee asked.

Mike set down his gear, reached into his dirty shorts pocket and pulled out a plastic bait bag. "Dinner," he answered as he squatted down to bait the hook.

"Oh. Well, good luck."

"Yeah. Haven't had much of that lately." He stood, made his cast, waited a few seconds, then began to reel the line in, jerking and twisting his shoulders until the rod whipped back and forth over CeeGee's head.

He was upset, even a little scary, and CeeGee got to her feet thinking maybe she should leave, but before she had a chance to take a step away she felt the beam of light coming down, warming her skin. Again? Not another Knowing. She stayed put. "So, what's going on, Mr. Robins?"

“What ain’t?” he said. “First off, the wife got sick right after she had our last kid, the fourth. We couldn’t afford the kid in the first place. I mean, I love him and all, but he was an accident, you know, and we needed the wife to go back to work to make ends meet, but she got so sick she couldn’t. Top a’ that, I got laid off a few months back; then the boss went broke ’fore he could hire me back. I’m just tryin’ to hang on to our house; that’s how bad things are.”

“Hey, sorry to hear all that. What a streak of bad luck.”

“It’s a damn mess, that’s what it is. Oh, sorry, I shouldn’t a’ said that. No damned excuse for cussin’ in front of a kid. Shoot, did it again. Sorry ’bout that.”

“That’s okay. How’s your wife feeling now?”

“Sicker.” Mike reeled in his line and saw the bait was gone, which was no surprise with all of his jerking and twisting. CeeGee stood by him in silence as he re-baited his hook and made another cast. The light kept on coming and CeeGee began to get the gist of her Knowing.

“Say, Mr. Robins...”

“Call me Mike, for Christ’s sake...sorry.”

“Okay then, Mike. What would you really like to do, if you could do anything you wanted?”

“Win the lottery.”

“No, I mean for a job.”

He looked over at her and once he saw it was a serious question he put down his pole, sat down on the block of granite and hung his forearm across his knee. CeeGee sat next to him and waited. “Furniture. I always wanted to make wooden furniture, ever since I can remember. But, no one makes custom furniture ’round here, so there was nobody to work for and I was too scared to go out on my own. Besides, look at this town, whadda’ we have, a few thousand people? And most of ’em not in much better shape than I am. How many people you think would order a one-of-a-kind piece of

furniture? Maybe a coffee table made from a surfboard or somethin' like that, but not enough so's I could support my family proper. Top of that, seemed like every time I'd start in dreamin' about starting up my own business, there'd be another new kid at home, hungry as a baby bird, mouth wide open all the time. Never was any extra money to tide us over. Anyway, long story short, make furniture—that's what I always wanted to do...like you asked."

"I guess you haven't got much to lose right now, huh?"

He plucked a dried-up piece of bait off a rock and flipped it into the water like a cigarette butt and laughed dryly. "I got nothin', so yeah, guess I got nothin' to lose."

They sat silently for a long time, staring out at the rolling swells while CeeGee tried to sort out where her Knowing was taking her. Finally, the pieces came together, and she could see the connections as clear as a constellation in the sky. "Mr. Robins, do you think a casket counts as furniture?"

"A casket, nah." He shook his head, then stopped and thought for a moment. "Well...yeah...I guess it could, with some good wood and the hardware and joinery and all. Kind of like a fancy extra-long trunk. Why, somebody die?"

"It'd be for Mr. Tindale."

"No kiddin'? That's a shame. I'm real sorry to hear that. Why, I just saw old Tindale in town the other day. He looked just fine to me, fit as a fiddle."

"He's not dead yet. He just wants the casket for when he is. Dead, I mean."

"How the hell would you know that? Sorry."

"He's my friend. He told me."

"Seems mighty strange." Mike Robins thought for a few moments longer. "Other hand, come to think of it, maybe with his wife gone and all that's the way to do it. Take care of things 'fore it happens. Yeah, that'd be good, making a casket. I'll go talk to him."

“Let me talk to him first. I’ll do it right now. Then you can go—maybe early in the morning?” CeeGee stood to leave, then added, “He wants it to be oak.”

“All right, I’ll do that, I’ll get on over there first thing.”

CeeGee ran all the way back down the jetty, pedaled her bike as fast as she could to Mr. Tindale’s house and told him that Mike Robins would make his casket and that he would come over to talk about it first thing in the morning. CeeGee said she was pretty sure she could get permission from her Mom to go to the mainland to buy the satin casket lining, so they decided as soon as Mr. Tindale was finished with Mike, they would head out.

Mr. Tindale rubbed his hands together and said, “This is good, a good plan, thanks for helping me out with it. You get on home now, girl. I don’t want your momma gettin’ mad at me.”

Before she left, CeeGee said, “Mr. Tindale, Mike’s come on some real hard times. He’s out of work and his wife’s awful sick, so this will really help him out.” Mr. Tindale gave her a smile, “Nice of you to notice and to care, Celia Gene. You do have that special way about you, child.” He reached out and squeezed her shoulder.

When CeeGee got home, she found her mother at the stove fixing dinner. “Hey, Momma.”

Her mother put down her spatula, stepped over and lifted CeeGee’s hair off her damp neck with both hands and kissed her on the cheek. “Hey darlin’. Did you have a good day?”

“I did, Momma, I had a real good day,” CeeGee said. “Thanks for kicking me out of the house this morning.”

“You are most welcome. Where all did you go? To the marsh?” Bobbie turned back to the stove and used her spatula to lift the corner of a fish fillet. The underside was golden brown with flecks of burnt black in it like bits of confetti. She flipped the fish over gently.

“Not today, Momma, but I’ll get to the marsh soon. Today I went to the Triple S for a float like you said. And I went out on the

jetty, and I saw Mike Robins. I saw Mr. Tindale too, and he invited me to go shopping on the mainland with him. We'd take his car and go across on the ferry. He wants to go tomorrow. Can I, Momma?"

Bobbie turned back to her daughter and smiled gently, "I think that would be fine. Be nice for you to keep him company," she said. "Besides, it'll get you out of the house for two whole days in a row. Might become a habit. What else did you do?"

"That's about it, Momma."

Bobbie opened a can of stewed tomatoes. "Then you go on and clean up. Dinner's almost ready and you're sticky all over."

"Okay. What all's for dinner?"

"I've got this catfish, and I'm making fried okra with tomatoes. Mashed potatoes and biscuits are already in the oven."

"That sounds good, Momma, really good." CeeGee watched her mother put flour, cornmeal, salt and pepper into a paper bag.

Bobbie added the okra to the bag, rolled the top closed, held the bag up high and shook it a few times. She did the little dance she always did, like she was shaking a Maraca in a Mariachi band, then bumped CeeGee with her hip, "Get on now, Celia Gene, you'll be late. And tell your brothers to wash up for dinner."

That night after dinner was over, it was the twins turn to clear the table and CeeGee's to clean up the kitchen. By the time she was done, everyone had gone off to their rooms. CeeGee needed to think, so she went to her bedroom and changed into her nightgown. Then she went quietly back down the hall, crossed the living room and opened the kitchen door to the deck.

Just as she was about to step out, she heard a thumping sound. She knew it well. Danny and Davey were throwing a tennis ball against their bedroom wall over and over as they wound down the day. She could see them, sitting side by side on a twin bed. Danny throws one across the room, thump against the wall, bounce on the floor, Davey catches. Davey throws one across

the room, thump against the wall, bounce on the floor, Danny catches. Then she waited for the next inevitable scene in this oft-repeated movie.

“You boys!” she heard her father yell from his bedroom. “Put away that damn ball and go to sleep!” One more thump and then the finale. “You hear me? Another sound from you two and I’m coming down there.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

Would they never learn? CeeGee went outside and quietly closed the door behind her, crossed the deck and went down the stairs to the backyard. She climbed onto the wooden swing hanging from the tree and began to rock back and forth, back and forth. Finally, she quieted down enough to think about what had happened. She’d had a pretty good day, no doubt about it. And the reason for it was her two Knowings, no doubt about that either. The terrible one about Mr. Tindale hadn’t happened at all. The other one, about better times coming for Mike Robins, looked to be good news all around—for Mike, his family and even Mr. Tindale in a way. Plus, it was all connected—the bad news for Mr. Tindale led straight to the good news for Mike Robins. How could that be? If there was one thing CeeGee knew for sure it was that her Knowings were always bad. They always came true and always brought nothing but trouble. She’d spent the past three long, lonely years doing her best to keep them from coming. Now she’d had two in a week and there was no trouble in sight.

What should she do? Was this just the moment of calm before the bad storm that would wreck everything? Or had something changed with her and with the Knowings? She couldn’t talk to her parents about it—that was out. She’d learned that much when she was nine. And unlike her brothers, she was not about to keep stirring up trouble with her parents, over and over again.

CeeGee looked up at the sky, exhausted from remembering. She was afraid, afraid of the bright light that brought the Knowings, afraid of what she would come to know, afraid of the harm that might come to someone. She searched the sky for the constellations, trying to remember how the special stars were laid out in the heavens above. If she could just connect the right stars, one to another, there would be a picture in the sky, instead of bits of light and patches of darkness scattered everywhere. If she searched, maybe she could see Scorpio, or The Big and Little Dipper like her Dad taught her. Right now, she was all in a tangle, wary of the present, tired of the past. But maybe there could be a way to connect all this—the things that happened years ago and the things that were happening now. Perhaps it could all make up a picture, like a constellation in the stars, and she could find a way to make sense of it and go on. Maybe she didn't have to go back to where she had been, stay forever the person she had decided to be at nine years old, locked up inside, connected to no one. Maybe she could travel into today, shoot into the unknown and become someone else, the person who knew Mr. Tindale was going to die, and the person who knew Mike Robins was going to have a better life. And maybe it could be all right for her to know both of these things.

After staring at the heavens for a while longer and trying to make meaning out of the vast, brightly lit sky and where she might fit in that design, she still didn't have a thing sorted out. Her Knowings were back, whether she liked it or not, and she didn't want things to turn out bad like they had before. She couldn't talk to her parents because they just wanted a nice normal kid and that's what she aimed to be, as far as they were concerned. And she couldn't figure out any of this on her own, that was for sure. Finally, she decided that tomorrow she would take a chance and talk to Mr. Tindale about it. He had that rainbow of light shimmering around his head, maybe there was a chance he would be able to understand and help.

## [Read more of \*CeeGee's Gift!\*](#)

### What People are Saying

[“\*CeeGee's Gift\* is a novel that stuck with me, and taught me valuable lessons on giving generously. I couldn't stop thinking about it.”](#)

— Anna, 13-year-old girl

“My daughter and I read [CeeGee's Gift](#) in our mother-daughter book club. It led to a very interesting discussion about childhood, facing difficulty, what it means to be gifted and how to deal with death. The novel is written in a way that allows young readers to consider large and important issues.”

— Kierstan, mother of a 12-year-old daughter

“As a host of an author interview series, I read a LOT of books. [CeeGee's Gift](#) captured my attention and took me to that small, island town and into the lives of its residents. The sense of place and purpose is very strong.”

— Cari, Host of *Cheez Zee* Author Series

## About the Author

Joy Selak is an author, nonprofit leader and philanthropic advisor in Austin, TX. [\*CeeGee's Gift\*](#) is her second book. The first, [\*You Don't LOOK Sick!\*](#) was written while Joy was living with chronic illness, an experience that inspired the one act play, 'CeeGee's Gift', which evolved into this novel.

Joy has received awards and commendations for her writing. Her play won the San Juan Islands Playwright's Festival, as well as the Audience Choice Award, in 1992. *USABookNews* named [\*You Don't LOOK Sick!\*](#) a Finalist for Best Health Book in 2005. Early manuscripts of the novel [\*CeeGee's Gift\*](#) were awarded Runner Up for Best Fiction in 2008 and Winner for Best Young Adult Fiction in 2010 by the Writer's League of Texas.

Joy continues to write and looks forward to sharing her forthcoming stories with her readers. Learn more about Joy at her website: [www.joywrites.com](http://www.joywrites.com).