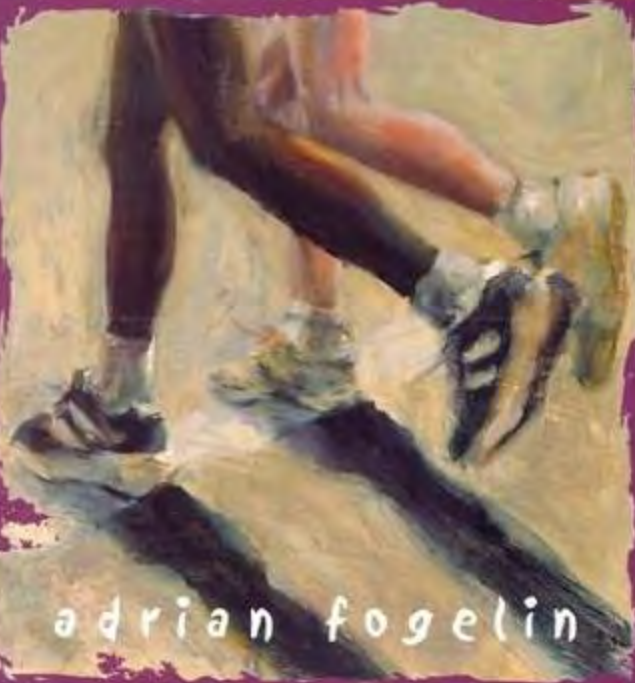


crossing jordan



adrian fogelin



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*For my daughter, Josephine Sandberg Faass
With thanks to my husband, Ray Faass, and my agent, Jack Ryan
And to the Wednesday Night Writers—Beverly, Helen, Linda, Noanne,
Richard, and Taylor—thanks for listening.*



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CHAPTER ONE



The Fence

Daddy held out his hand. “Got another one of those nails, String Bean?”

“This fence is awful big,” I said, handing him one.

“Good fences make good neighbors,” he said, and gave the nail a whack.

“But we won’t even be able to *see* the new neighbors with this fence in the way.” I pulled my hair back and lifted it to cool my neck. Summer’s the worst time to build anything in a hot place like Tallahassee, Florida, but Daddy was determined to finish the fence before the new people moved in.

“If they stay out of our business and we stay out of theirs, we’ll get along fine,” he said.

The For Sale sign on the house next door had hardly been up a week when Mama told us she’d heard that a black family had bought the old Faircloth place. Daddy brought his fist down on the table and the supper plates jumped. “Place is gonna go downhill,” he said.

I didn’t know how much further downhill the place could go. The paint was all cracked, and the flower beds were overgrown. Seemed like it was at the bottom of the hill already.

“I’ll just have to build a fence,” he said.

Mama stopped pouring milk. “Shouldn’t we wait and see?” she asked. “They might be nice people.”

“Better safe than sorry,” he said.

The next night Daddy came home with a huge pile of boards in the back of his pickup.

Mama stepped out of the house with my baby sister, Missy, on her hip. “How much did all that cost, Seth?”

“Not a thing.” He laughed and told us it just so happened they were building a pool at the apartment complex where he’s the maintenance man, and they had to take down an old fence to do it. “They even paid me to haul it off.”

I helped him carry the posts and boards to the side yard, then we spent a whole bunch of evenings with him hammering and me handing him nails and fetching him glasses of iced tea. Now he was hammering the last nail. “There.” He lifted his ball cap and wiped his face with his bandanna. “Bet even Michael Jordan couldn’t see over that.” And he walked off toward the house whistling.

I was just taking a hard look at our new fence, trying to decide whether or not I liked it, when I heard a shout from the street.

“Watch me, Cass!” Cody Floyd was wobbling along on his bike with his older brother, Ben, running behind him.

“Hey, Cody, you’re doing good,” I called, walking along the fence to the edge of the road. “You take his training wheels off, Ben?”

“Yup.” Ben flipped his brown hair out of his eyes and stood for a second with his hands on his hips watching Cody dip and swerve his way down the road. “Don’t lean!” He ran and grabbed the seat to keep Cody from falling over.

As I watched Ben chase after his brother, I wondered when he had gotten so cute. He didn’t used to be that way, and believe me, I know. I’m an expert on Ben Floyd. We’ve known each other since we were both babies. Mama has pictures of the two of us in diapers—which I’d like to burn. Even though he’s a boy, Ben’s always been my best friend. At least until last

year. Since then he's been hanging out a lot with a boy named Justin who moved into the neighborhood last summer. I guess it's easier for him. I know it would be easier for me if he was a girl.

And I wish he hadn't gotten cute. Last year other girls started getting all giggly and tongue-tied around him. They were jealous if they saw him talking to me, and the guys teased him. No one would believe that we were just friends.

"Turn, Cody, turn!" Ben jerked his brother's handlebars and the bike came back my way. Ben ran alongside, one hand on the seat. "Your daddy gonna build that fence all the way around?" he called over his shoulder.

"I don't think so."

"That's good." He swooped the bike around again. "Your place'd look like a fort if he did."

"Ben," Cody whined. "I'm getting dizzy going back and forth. I want to go home."

"Okay. See you later," Ben called to me as they streaked by.

Other girls would spend hours on the phone trying to figure out what Ben Floyd meant when he said, "See you later," but like I said, I know him. "See you later" meant see you later.

"Later," Cody repeated. He jingled the bell on his handlebars all the way to their house at the end of the block. He only stopped ringing it when Ben shouted, "Brake, Cody, brake. You're gonna hit the garage!"

Trailing my fingers along the boards of the new fence, I walked back toward the rose of Sharon bush that grew near the edge of our yard. The fence was pretty close to the bush, and it crowded the spot where Ben and me used to play when we were little. We would sit behind the bush, hidden from the house. Sometimes we would throw a blanket over the branches to make a tent. I guess we've outgrown all that now that we're both in middle school.

I still have a chair back there, though, and when my parents and my big sister, Lou Anne, and the baby are all fussing at once, I sit back there, just to get away.

Before we built the fence, I could see the house next door real well. It's the only big house in the neighborhood, and it was built a long, long time ago. It must have been beautiful back then. It has fancy railings and a porch that wraps all the way around. Too bad it hasn't been painted for at least fifty years.

Until March, when she died at ninety-seven, Miss Liz was always out on that porch. She would talk to Ben and me when we were playing by the rose of Sharon bush. After Ben stopped coming over, Miss Liz told me I should come sit up on the porch with her so the two of us could talk "girl to girl." Sitting side by side in the two rockers on the porch, we'd talk. I would tell her about how much I loved to run, and about how I wished I could be pretty like my sister, Lou Anne. Miss Liz would tell me old-timey stories about ice cream socials and hayrides.

"You know, Cass, when I was a girl like you," she'd say, "all this land belonged to my daddy." Then she would sweep her thin, bluish hand through the air, and our house and all the other little houses would disappear. "The buggies would come from that way, up the hill. You'd hear the clomp of hooves on the sand road before you saw them." We'd squint, imagining we could see the horses nodding as they climbed, the buggies swaying, even though we were really only seeing Mr. Martin coming home from the bus stop or Miss Johnette walking her old dog, Gregor.

While we rocked and talked, Miss Liz's fourteen cats—each one named for a Confederate general—took turns napping in her lap or weaving around our ankles. There was General Nathan Bedford Forrest, and General Jubal Early. (We just called him Early—he always got to the food first.) There was also a Jeb Stuart, and a Henry Alexander Wise, and quite a few more I never could keep straight. The biggest one, an orange tomcat, was named General Robert E. Lee. He was always in trouble for sharpening his claws on Miss Liz's chair. After Miss Liz died I took my rocker off the porch and put it in my spot behind the bush. I just know she would've wanted me to have it.

The day of Miss Liz's funeral I felt so bad that Mama let me stay home from school. That's how come I saw Miss Liz's family drive up in a rented moving van. Still dressed in their funeral clothes, they took everything out

of her house they thought was valuable, from the porcelain dolls to the rosewood dining table. When they left, Miss Liz's scratched-up rocker was still on the porch.

So were her fourteen cats.

One of the neighbors must have called animal control because a couple of days later they came and netted up thirteen of the fourteen generals. Mr. Barnett, who's home on disability, watched the whole thing, and told me that General Lee squeezed under the porch. The cat catchers were too fat to crawl after him and their nets wouldn't reach, so they left him behind. "Looks like we're down to the last general, Cass," Mr. Barnett said, shaking his head.

After that, the last general yowled at my door twice a day. Once I'd fed him, he'd go back to Miss Liz's porch. No one yelled at him anymore when he sharpened his claws on her rocker.

Sitting in my chair now I was almost smack up against the new fence. Its boards were weathered silver with holes where knots had dropped out. And that's when I discovered it; a knothole at just the right height. If I pressed my knees against the wood and squinched my eye up to it, I could look right into Miss Liz's yard. And I thought, maybe I could do that sometimes; not spying exactly, just looking to see what the new family was up to.

There were other black families in the neighborhood, a couple of streets over, and plenty of black kids in school with me, but I didn't know any of them to talk to. I peered through the hole. All there was to see so far were butterflies in the weeds and General Lee stretching his back in the sunshine.

I wondered when the new family would get there and what they would be like.

CHAPTER TWO



Cat Stealers

The next morning my house seemed like it was set to explode. Upstairs Daddy was pounding the bathroom door and yelling, “Scoot yer boot, Lou Anne, I gotta shave!” Through the kitchen doorway I could see Mama making coffee, carrying the baby on her hip, and packing Daddy’s lunch all at the same time. “Come eat your breakfast,” she called to Daddy over Missy’s crying. “Lou Ann’ll be out by the time you’re done.”

Me, I was sitting on the staircase in the middle of the shouting, putting on my socks and sneakers for a quick getaway.

I dashed into the kitchen. “Bye, Mama.” I kissed her cheek, then ran out the front door. The spring on the screen door twanged, and the door slammed behind me.

Outside, it was still cool, and it was quiet. I walked past the end of the fence and looked back at Miss Liz’s house. General Lee was walking along the top of the porch railing. “I’ll feed you when I get back,” I called. He rubbed his face on a column. I wondered if the new people had any kids. I guess it wouldn’t matter if they did. Daddy wouldn’t want me hanging out with them.

The air felt silky on my bare legs as I began to jog. Halfway down the block the Cortezes’ dogs, Fran and Blackie, started running with me. A couple times a year Mr. Cortez has to go get them back from the pound, which makes him mad because it’s expensive, but as soon as he opens his

car door they're off again, running. Except for the times when they're being thrown in the back of the dog-catcher's truck, Fran and Blackie own the neighborhood.

The brick front of Monroe Middle School looked pink in the morning sun as the dogs and me trotted up. Closed for the summer, the school was dark, except for the safety light over the front door, which I knew would turn itself out at exactly seven-thirty. We jogged across the basketball court. Sometimes while I did my run, Ben would be out there, shooting baskets with his new friend Justin. It wasn't much of a contest, Justin was such a shrimp. But today the court was empty.

I sat down in the damp grass by the track to stretch. The dogs flopped down beside me. When I told them, "You two stay," they cocked their ears like they understood.

Quickly I opened the gate and stepped onto the track. I stood still a minute, then leaned forward, about to run. A breeze blew my hair back and I smelled the dry red dirt.

I was in the third grade when I found out I was fast. It was field day, and everyone was competing in high jump and long jump, in throwing contests, and in races. I was still short in the third grade. I didn't do too well in the jumps. When it was my turn with the softball Ben said I threw like a girl.

Then we lined up for the four-hundred-meter dash.

"On your mark, get set, go!"

When I started running, a funny thing happened. I passed all the girls, and then I passed the boys—even Ben. As I crossed the finish line I was all by myself. When Ben caught up he kept saying it was a miracle, but I could tell he was proud of me. I still have the certificate I got for winning that race. I'll always remember that day. That was the day I found out what was special about me, that I could run. Now everybody says, "Cass Bodine? She's the girl who runs."

This year I'll be in the seventh grade, so I can join the track team. Then, look out! I bet I'll win sometimes, even against eighth and ninth graders. But winning isn't the important thing. Running's the important thing. I just love to run.

I looked at the track and said to myself, ready, set, go! Then I took off. As I rushed by, the tree beside the track and the two dogs lying underneath it blurred. I must've been a blur to Fran and Blackie too, I was moving so fast. I wasn't tired yet, or too hot. It seemed as if I was still picking up speed; like if I pushed a little harder I would reach escape velocity. Running that fast, all the fussing back at the house faded until there was no sound in the whole world but the double-time rhythm of my own flying feet.



I made Lou Anne and me grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch. She said that next time they could use more cheese, and I told her that next time she could make her own, then I took my glass of iced tea and went outside.

I was sitting in my chair by the fence watching the glass sweat and wishing Ben would forget he wasn't my best friend anymore and come over, when I heard a racket from the other side of the fence. I put my eye up to the knot-hole. The pickup that had pulled into Miss Liz's yard said Lewis Painting, Interior/Exterior, No Job Too Small on its door. It was loaded with beds and dressers and boxes. The brakes squawked and all that furniture rocked. The two men in the back had to grab things to keep them from falling out of the truck. Their arm muscles were smooth and shiny as melons.

They laughed. When the truck came to a full stop, one of them opened a can of beer. The other one lit a cigarette. The driver, a skinny old lady with a straw hat shoved down tight on her head, climbed down from the cab and shook her finger. "Y'all can party on your own time. We got stuff to move."

The two men shrugged at each other and started carrying boxes inside.

A pretty, younger woman in a pale blue dress slid out of the truck, then walked around the passenger side and lifted a baby out of a safety seat. "I don't believe this," she said, hugging the baby and glaring at Daddy's fence. "I'll just have to call zoning and see if they got a permit."

The old lady quit bossing and put a hand on the younger woman's arm. "Now, Leona, honey, let it go. Like Jesus says, turn the other cheek. Love thy neighbor."

"I'm sorry. I can't love a bunch of crackers who put up a fence soon as they hear a black family is moving in next door." The younger woman pushed her damp bangs back off her forehead and frowned.

The old lady shook her head. "Jesus never said it'd be easy, child." Then, in a big, loud voice that seemed to be meant for us crackers on the other side of the fence she said, "Me, I like a big old fence. Gives me something to grow my gourds up against."

I heard the passenger door slam and a girl about my age came around the truck. Lucky she was real skinny or they never would've fit everyone in the front of the pickup.

"Take a look at this," the woman in the blue dress said to her. "This is what bigotry looks like."

I pulled back quick, afraid they'd see me. But I didn't want to miss anything, so I put my other eye up to the hole. The girl had only looked at Daddy's fence for a second before the old lady put a hand on the back of her neck and turned her around. "Let her make up her own mind about all that, Leona. See that house?" she asked the girl. "It's all ours. That's what's important."

The girl climbed the front steps and lifted Robert E. Lee out of Miss Liz's chair, then she sat down with the cat in her lap. "Look what I found, Nana Grace." She stretched her long legs out and rocked. Her skin was as dark as black coffee. Gold hoops sparkled in her pierced ears. I wanted pierced ears in the worst way, but Daddy had put his foot down. "Only ethnics pierce their ears," he said.

The girl giggled. The general was rubbing his whiskers against her face. "Looks like we got us a cat!"

I almost shouted, "Put the general down. He's Miss Liz's cat." Then I remembered I was spying.

A loud crash sounded from inside and the old lady, Nana Grace, marched her red tennis shoes up the steps, yelling, "Do I have to knock heads?"

When the furniture and boxes were all inside the house, she drove away with the two men in the back of the truck. She came back without them.



“The new neighbors are two women, a baby, and a girl,” I reported at the supper table.

“Not surprised,” Daddy said, spooning peas onto his plate. “With them, the men run off. The women take care of the kids.”

“Now, Seth....” Mama raised her eyebrows and put her hand on top of his. She was afraid to come out and say it, but she didn’t like that kind of talk.

“Well, it’s true,” he said, and pulled his hand away.

That night, I put out a dish of food for General Lee but he didn’t come. I wondered if Daddy was right. Those people hadn’t been in the neighborhood one day, and already they’d stolen a cat.