

from *Bone Black: Childhood
Memories*

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SHE WAS CLOSEST to her brother. Not only were they just months apart in age but they looked alike. They looked like twins even though he was older. Like twins they shared the same dreams and longings, the same devotion to one another. Strangely enough it was a toy that separated them, that forced upon them different roles, different identities. She remembered the toy—a bright red wagon. They shared possession of it but they had different roles in relationship to it. She was to ride in the red wagon and he was to pull it. She was to ride in it because she was a girl—a would-be princess whom some rich prince would come seeking, take away to his palace, and keep her there in splendor forever. He was to pull it because he was a boy—a would-be prince who would do all the hard work, slay the dragons, fight the slimy creatures, challenge the fat

ugly men so that he could carry away the beautiful princess. He never carried her any further than the corner of the street and all the while he complained bitterly about how awful it was pulling her, how he wanted a turn sitting in the wagon. Sometimes he would cry—that was just how much he wanted to be pulled in the red wagon.

She did not mind pulling him. It was the grown-ups like Papa her great-grandfather who had trouble seeing her pull that big boy in the wagon. When they finally got daring enough to go around the corner he would immediately dump her out and demand that he be pulled. Her legs were short and fat, his were long. She could not pull as fast as he wanted her to but he urged her on, watching with glee as the little fat legs struggled to move him, fast, faster, struggled to give him the fastest ride of them all. Her struggle to give him the fast ride made the boy happy, so happy that he never wanted to take turns. He only wanted her to pull and pull him. It was because of this that she began to assert her girl rights, to tell him that he was the boy and should pull her. He rarely listened so she would threaten to tell the grown-ups. He would always say, Tell them, knowing all the time that she would not, that she hated to see him punished. If he was punished she would want to be punished, too; even if they would not punish her she would cry with him. Sometimes the father and the great-grandfather would find out that the boy rarely pulled the girl. They would stand towering over him speaking in harsh big voices, explaining that he was the boy and

should do this, explaining to him that if he did not do what boys should do they would take the toy away, give it to the girl only, not let them share it. She was always standing in the background listening—waiting to hear the boy tell her when they were alone that he hate, hate, hated her because she was a girl.

She grew up not remembering why the red wagon had been so important. She grew up and found that the red wagon of her memory had never existed. Going through boxes of old black-and-white photos, she found many of herself plump and unsmiling seated in a wheelbarrow with the boy-brother holding the ends as if at any moment he would dump her out. In the photos the boy looks very happy and self-important. She looks apprehensive, unsure. Seeing that the toy of her memory was a wheelbarrow she understood why there had always been bruises, dirty torn clothes. She had never understood why she would have fallen out of a wagon, but a wheelbarrow she could understand. She could understand the boy's pleasure, his longing, his constant sorrow.

No one could tell her what happened to the red wheelbarrow. No one knew whether it was kept at the house of Papa the great-grandfather. They could not remember playing with it anywhere else. He lived on a side of town where there were sidewalks, maybe that is why they only played with it there, maybe it disappeared because of their constant fighting, because of the boy's whining, maybe he made it disappear.