

Visual Liberties

by Alec Clayton

Excerpt from opening chapter

Calling Bitsey Ashton a square peg in a round hole would be like saying the *Titanic* was a motorboat that sprang a leak. Bitsey is more like a trapezoid with razor edges, capable of drilling herself into any hole of any shape no matter how big or little. She's now middle aged with grown daughters. At least the daughters think they're grown; Bitsey is not so sure about her youngest, Molly, a brand new freshman at Mississippi University for Women on the Gulf Coast. Big sister Jamie Lew married Abdul Taylor and is living in New Orleans. Those sharp edges of Bitsey's have been sanded smooth by hard times and tragedy—most devastating, the loss of her son, Justin.

She can fool most people into believing she's just like a normal person, which has proven to be a blessing to her husband, Malcolm; but there are times when he wishes she'd get a little of her edge back.

Bitsey poked her head out of her mother's womb two weeks prematurely on Christmas day, 1966. She came out screaming and flailing her arms and legs. Beet-faced. Hard little knots of muscle showing in her calves and biceps. "This'un's gonna be a fighter," her mother said with self-evident pride. The proud mama, Geraldine Fordham, seventeen at the time, was not married and refused to tell anyone who the baby's father was. She said it was nobody's damn business. Truth was, she didn't know. Conception happened when she was living in a crash pad in Nashville. Throughout the six weeks that she lived there, at least two dozen hippies called the place home for a night or two or at most a month. They'd climb off the Greyhound bus at the downtown station and make their way as if by internal radar to Centennial Park where they would inevitably run into someone from one of the many crash pads in town such as the house on West End Avenue where Geraldine lived. Multiple sexual partners amongst the many West End hippies was the order of the day. Free love. Whatever gets you through the night. One of the men Geraldine slept with was a tall man with long blonde hair and charismatic personality. She slept with him only once, but they did not use a condom. She liked to think he was the father of her baby, but she knew she would never know for sure. He vanished from her life before she even knew she was pregnant.

Geraldine was a big woman. Not fat but big boned as she liked to say. She was loud and outspoken. Once she got started on any of her favorite subjects—war, love, sex, art, literature, the degradation of popular culture and the blight of consumerism—she was next to impossible to shut up. She wouldn't even pause between sentences but filled the silences with *ums* and *ahs* and indescribable sounds and nobody else could sneak a word in—a trait her daughter would learn from her as a means of self-preservation. Geraldine loved to sing and did so often, whether others wanted to hear her or not. When she announced her pregnancy the commune threw a party to celebrate, and Geraldine told everyone she planned on having her baby at home. Natural childbirth of course. No anesthesia. She had heard about giving birth in a tub of warm water and thought that would be cool. She wanted someone to film it. But her housemates talked her out of

birthing at home. They said it was too dangerous. What if something went wrong? Wimps, every one of 'em, Geraldine thought.

After the baby came out and Geraldine exulted about how she was going to be a fighter, she said, "That was a piece of cake, a mere bagatelle. I could'a done it at home if ya'll hadn't been such worry warts." She called the baby the itsy-bitsy one and the name stuck. Soon it morphed into Bitsey.

A week after Bitsey was born Geraldine went to a rally in protest of the war in Vietnam, carrying the baby in a Snugli baby carrier and wearing an American flag shirt. While lying on the grass in the park and passing a joint after the rally, Geraldine met Reggie Gardner who lived in another commune—this one on a farm outside of town. Not long after that she moved in with Reggie and she stayed with him until Bitsey was twelve years old. The everyday aspects of Bitsey's life, which she assumed were normal for everyone else, were rock and roll, folk music, marijuana, acid, nudity, organic food, outdoor showers, swimming in a muddy pond, marching for women's rights and against the war, and gay liberation (with some radical faerie folk she met from the Short Mountain Sanctuary in Liberty, Tennessee), and home schooling with teachers and classmates who lived on the farm. The kids got good educations because their parents were college educated and dedicated to teaching their children well. Two of them were teachers who had dropped out of the system because they were fed up with the restrictions and regulations and were convinced that the public schools were turning out legions of robots. Among the residents were scientists and artists and a writer for a Nashville newspaper. The farm was not very large, but the number of people who lived there was. There were so many that they had to build sheds on the property to have places for all of them to sleep. Whole families or groups of friends would share a single room. Some slept in tents and some in a tree house. They took turns with farming and housecleaning chores, cooking and child care. A lot of them had jobs in town.

When Bitsey was twelve Geraldine married Reggie and moved to the waterlogged town of Freedom, Mississippi, where Reggie's parents lived. His mother had been in her forties when Reggie was born, his father closer to fifty. They were getting old. Geraldine and Reggie figured they would nurse his folks in their old age and stay in Freedom until they passed away. Then they figured they would sell the family property and get the hell out of the South. But two things happened to change those plans. First, the old folks didn't die. In their nineties now, they're still hanging on. And second, Reggie and Geraldine discovered that they loved the town of Freedom. They discovered that unlike the denizens of other small towns in the Bible belt Freedomites did not ostracize people for being different, at least not for being different in the ways they and their daughter were. Bitsey grew up to be quite the popular teenager. Her schoolmates at Booker T Washington High School admired her chutzpah. Some of them even wished they could be more like her.