

{ Seven }

# CHAMBERLAIN DRIVE



I WAS NAMED after two people, my maternal grandmother Pauline Cooley Hale, and my father's dear sister Edith Faye Grizzell Bowling. It's hard to imagine life without any of my wonderful aunts and uncles, but I know I wouldn't be the person I am today without Aunt Faye's guidance, love and support.

I thought Aunt Faye, my father's sister, had first come into my life when I went to live with her during second grade. My father's refusals to pay rent and the ensuing evictions led us to believe the state of Tennessee might split up our family. To prevent this terrible situation, my mother accepted Aunt Faye's offer to take me into her home. I would learn later that Aunt Faye slipped money regularly to my mother and did whatever she could to help raise my siblings and I. She had actually been involved in our upbringings all of our lives.

Aunt Faye married a gentleman who managed the VA hospital's dietary department. Uncle Clark was a kind man with a great sense of humor. Clearly, he was loyal and dedicated to his family, proven each day as he never failed to provide for them. He was well-respected in the community. "Come over here, I'm

going to box your ears,” he would say to tease my brother Gee, who would have been six at the time. Uncle Clark always made us laugh and feel welcome.

I was enthusiastic about spending the second-grade school year with Aunt Faye and her family. Their two-story home was located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, about an hour drive from Nashville. It had three bedrooms downstairs and one bedroom upstairs, and it had the loveliest gardens I'd ever seen. Aunt Faye always brought fresh flowers into the house and over to her neighbors. She was a master gardener who loved sharing her prize roses, mums and gladiolas with family and friends. In fact, the colorful blooming plants overtook the grass, leaving a narrow straight stretch of sidewalk as the only place to step in the front yard.

Aunt Faye worked as a registered nurse at the VA hospital. I loved the look and smell of her uniform. Her white starched cap, navy cape, and white stockings made her even more regal than she already was. She wore classic clinic nursing shoes, polished to perfection each night by Uncle Clark. No matter how sick you were, Aunt Faye could make you feel better with her presence alone. Her bedside manner was as healing as it was effortless.

Aunt Faye and Uncle Clark had two daughters who were teenagers when I came to live with them. The younger daughter, Shirley, had an outgoing personality and worked hard to welcome me. Every morning, the girls woke up early to perform

their chores, including gardening duties, which they taught me how to do as well. When they learned I was a bed wetter, they awakened even earlier, at 4:30 a.m., to take me to the bathroom. If I had already wet the sheets, Shirley would say something like, “Groovy! Now we will not have to go to the bathroom, let’s sleep another hour.” They also helped me maintain the elaborate rubber sheet that was placed on the bed to protect the mattress from my accidents. In Aunt Faye’s house, like in my other aunt’s and uncle’s homes, everyone served one another.

What I also loved about living there was the formal but comfortable atmosphere. I was always called Paula Faye in the house. Aunt Faye sometimes allowed us to drink Coca-Cola on the porch when we were snapping peas or shucking corn. My mother never allowed us to drink what she called “that old black burning juice,” so it was a treat to have it as often as we did in Aunt Faye’s house. Meals were served on a regular schedule, in the dining room, in precise portions and always on clean plates with fine silver and crystal.

The family meals were all cooked by Henrietta, Aunt Faye’s housekeeper for over 40 years. Some of my fondest childhood memories are the times I spent with Henrietta in the kitchen. She would tell me all kinds of stories, and animate them with her deep, belly laughs. Her big freckles and dimples also helped make her one of the friendliest and most approachable people I’ve ever known. While we talked, she loved to sit me up on her steel stool which doubled as a stepladder, so I could dry the plastic melamine dishes after she washed them so thoroughly. When Aunt Faye wasn’t looking, Henrietta would

sneak cookies, homemade desserts, extra bacon strips and other treats to me. She also gave Shirley her very first cigarette. I think it was a Pall Mall. Henrietta never ate at the dining room table with the family, even when Aunt Faye and Uncle Clark invited her to do so. She always pulled her stool up to the kitchen counter and ate her meals there. Whether it was a line society drew, or one she drew herself, Henrietta never crossed the line between wealthy people and their domestic help.

Henrietta lived with her husband in a house located about 30 minutes from Aunt Faye's house. Every night, Uncle Clark drove her home while Shirley and her sister cleaned the dinner dishes. Henrietta never had offspring of her own, but as she demonstrated so often with me, she enjoyed being around children immensely. She dearly loved Aunt Faye's daughters.

We walked everywhere from Aunt Faye's house. School was a safe and short walk and on Sundays, we all strolled to church. Uncle Clark believed families should always walk together. Aunt Faye bought me a beautiful outfit for church and other special occasions; the skirt and the matching blue shoes made me feel like a princess. Aunt Faye also gave me a Bible and I never left home on Sundays without it.

Aunt Faye and Uncle Clark owned two cars, but Aunt Faye never learned how to drive. (As I recall, Shirley snuck the car out occasionally before obtaining a driver's license, but never got caught.) Most of the time, Uncle Clark drove their 1958 Pontiac. It had a white body, green roof, a wide green stripe

down the side, big fenders and an Indian head hood ornament. He never left home without one of his English twill driving hats, which were his trademark, so to speak. It was fun to ride in that car on Saturdays to Pope Taylor's Barbecue Joint on the edge of town where the food was smoked onsite.

One of Aunt Faye's favorite drives was to the Grizzell Farm in McMinnville. Sometimes, Aunt Faye would bring Henrietta along to give Grandmother Grizzell a day off from cleaning. Throughout the drive, Uncle Clark would smoke one cigar after another. In fact, Uncle Clark smoked habitually in and out of the house. His feet always hurt him, so when he was home we often found him smoking cigars in his favorite recliner. Aunt Faye hated those cigars and the stench they left behind, but that never stopped Uncle Clark from lighting up each and every day.

Aunt Faye loved to take us girls to cultural venues. We went to museums, art shows, and zillions of antique markets. Antique markets were her favorites. Uncle Clark could never understand why Aunt Faye always felt compelled to buy something at those markets. Maybe, it was payback for all those cigars. Cuckoo clocks were another one of Aunt Faye's passions. There were several in the house, ticking and going off 24/7. The squeaking from the hardwood floors was about the only sound that could drown out those clocks. Aunt Faye also collected stamps and plates from all over the world. In particular, I loved the plates with Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler. She had a plate for each of the Presidents of the United States.

A symbol of wealth in 1950s Tennessee was a piano. Aunt Faye and Uncle Clark had an impressive one, but it was the two keepsakes on the piano that we all remember more. The first was Aunt Faye's bride doll, which was as tall as I was. No one was allowed to touch the doll. The other keepsake was a stuffed monkey that stood on its feet. It just begged to be a children's toy, but like the doll, no one was allowed to play with the monkey. (Sometimes, when Aunt Faye was at work, Shirley let me hold the monkey.)

It is interesting how certain things remain a vivid memory. In Aunt Faye's bathroom, there was a toothbrush holder attached to the wall. It had teeny doors for individual toothbrushes. Each door was engraved with the family members' names...my toothbrush laid across the top. For fun, we entertained ourselves with the heat register, a huge grate that encompassed the hallway floor. It could blow our dresses up over our heads and made us girls feel like Marilyn Monroe. We could stand on it to keep warm when we were wearing shoes. When we were barefoot, we had to jump over the register or risk having our soles scorched in mere seconds.

Holidays at Chamberlain Drive were always a treat. Henrietta would cook up a storm of desserts and other food items which went well with Coca-Cola. Aunt Faye would always serve her guests fresh orange juice in her special juice glasses. Aunt Faye was a wonderful hostess and a prolific note writer. Every day, she wrote five to six notes. It was her favorite way to extend kindness

to her family, friends and neighbors. I'm forever grateful to her for teaching me how to write notes for every occasion.

I'll also be indebted to her for the way she handled my homesickness. Even though Aunt Faye and her entire family treated me like I was one of their own, I missed my mother and siblings terribly. Aunt Faye and Shirley would take turns holding me whenever my homesickness was too much for me to handle. I would cry for hours and the pain felt like my sternum was breaking in half.

One day, my school class was taking a field trip to Nashville to see a replica of the Parthenon. Aunt Faye thought it would be the perfect opportunity for me to reconnect with my family. Before I left, she gave me a dime and the phone number of my family's next-door neighbor, since my family had no phone. To this day, I can remember all the lush trees and beautiful flowers that surrounded the Parthenon and the aroma of freshly cut grass that pervaded the air. It's an enormous place in the middle of Nashville's Centennial Park. My attention shifted though when I spotted a phone booth in the park. I snuck away from the class, but at seven years old I wasn't tall enough yet to reach a pay-phone receiver. I tried so hard to reach the coin drop and receiver. All my futile jumping and reaching eventually caught my teacher's attention. She didn't have the time or the patience to understand what I was doing. No doubt I would have been in trouble if the teacher knew I never made it inside the Parthenon. She simply ordered me to get back on the bus with the other children as we were leaving.

As the bus pulled out of Nashville, I could see the

government housing project where my family was residing. The huge brick building had one door and one window per family. Seeing children playing in the yard there made me heartsick. My brothers and sister were within yelling distance, but I couldn't reach them. I was on a bus heading back to my school, over forty miles away. I recall putting my head in my wadded-up sweater so the children would think I was sleeping, but I cried so hard it was difficult to take a deep breath. My teacher did not know what was wrong, but she sat close by and attempted to console me. She gave me her apple.

To make matters worse, on my walk home from school that day I found another phone booth. I lagged behind Shirley a few feet so I could sneak into the booth. This phone booth had a built in seat. I thought for sure I would reach my family this time. With Aunt Faye's dime, I stood on the seat trying over and over to call the number I held in my little hand. After what seemed to be a hundred attempts, I gave up and headed back to Aunt Faye's house. I was too young to know that a dime wasn't enough money for a long-distance call from Murfreesboro to Nashville. My heart was broken when I had to tell Uncle Clark I never went inside the amazing venue. As always, he turned it into an adventure gone haywire, helping me laugh it off.

Shirley was wonderful to me, especially when she realized how homesick I was. The girls had the entire upstairs of the house to themselves, "our suite" as they used to call it. As anyone can imagine, having that much space was a big deal for teenage



girls. They were just barely old enough to begin dating. You'd think that adding a seven-year-old into that environment would cramp their style, but they always made me feel like I belonged there. They never treated me as if I were in their way. I may have been young and naïve, but I was keenly aware that Shirley hated Uncle Clark's insistence that her date come into the house for a long chat before taking her out to eat or to a movie. Yep, the boys had to pass the Uncle Clark test.

However, Uncle Clark did have the wool pulled over his eyes occasionally by Shirley. Once she had some girlfriends over to spend the night. We all went upstairs to go to bed and we did not see Uncle Clark or Aunt Faye again until the next morning. If they had come up to say good night, they would have walked in on Shirley and her girlfriends playing "strip poker"! Undoubtedly, Shirley thought I was sound asleep, but I heard and saw everything. The girls had a deck of cards and the loser of each hand had to take off an article of clothing. The hilarious part was each girl started the game with several layers of shirts, skirts, scarves, you name it. They played until some unfortunate person ended up in her bra and underpants. The giggling going on in that upstairs suite was loud enough to wake the dead, but it never woke Uncle Clark. He thought his girls were perfect.

The sisters had matching dressers in their bedroom, filled with make-up and special keepsakes. Shirley made sure my hair ribbons were tied properly every single day, and she would always tie my dress sashes in perfect bows. With her sister's help, she braided my hair. They would braid my hair so tight my eyes would slant, but just a few moments later, my hair would

loosen up so I could wear my matching ribbons. Shirley never let me leave the house without matching ribbons. The girls were terrific teenagers who later became upstanding educated citizens. Shirley worked as a registered nurse with advanced education at St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Memphis. She was intimately involved with very specialized work in cancer treatments.

Like Shirley, and like Aunt Faye, I too wanted to become a nurse. But first, I had to leave Tennessee. When I was 18, I told Aunt Faye I wanted to move to Atlanta. She knew how difficult this decision was for me because it would mean I'd have to leave my family. She also knew it was the best time for me to make this move. After giving me all the reassurance anyone could ever ask for, Aunt Faye loaned me \$100 for this journey. I don't often think of people in terms of their money, but I will never forget the dime Aunt Faye gave me for the Parthenon trip and the \$100 she bequeathed for my one-way trip to Atlanta.

My bus ticket cost \$12. For only the second time in my life, I left the state of Tennessee, heading for the big city. I enrolled in a four-month government program to become a medical assistant. The program arranged housing for all us young women. My residence was in the garage apartment of a wealthy family near Chastain Park, in Atlanta, that had four young children. I took care of the children at night and on weekends in exchange for room-and-board and an additional \$11 per week. After cashing my first paycheck, I put a ten-dollar bill in an envelope and mailed it to Aunt Faye. Instead of accepting

this first installment on my loan repayment, she mailed the money back to me and forgave the debt. Her generosity knew no bounds. And she wrote to me every single week.

As soon as I completed the program, I found a job in downtown Atlanta with a private medical practice. I also moved into a one-bedroom apartment with eleven other girls. To pay the rent, I worked four additional jobs: sales clerk at a toy store in “Underground Atlanta” on Sunday afternoons, sales clerk in Sears and Roebuck’s womens’ clothing department on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, babysitter on Saturdays and “medical sitter” on Friday nights at Emory University Hospital. My biggest break was a job offer which allowed me to teach in Atlanta at Bryman’s School of Medical Assistants for \$5.00 per hour. Every month, I mailed \$20 to my siblings, a commitment I had made to them before I left Tennessee. Less than a year later, I began taking night classes at a community college. Eventually, I enrolled in nursing school. A busy oncologist recruited me a few months prior to my graduation to become a chemotherapist, a position I would hold for 16 years.

Aunt Faye visited me twice while I lived in Atlanta prior to my nineteenth birthday. On her first trip, she brought me a can of mace and a device that sounded like a siren. She was always looking out for my safety and well-being. We were walking on Peachtree Street just under the famous population sign when my aunt demonstrated how to spray the mace. She accidentally walked into the mist and it blinded her for a moment as she fell

to the sidewalk. We actually had a great laugh over the incident.

I'll never forget the time when we went to see the movie, *The Last Picture Show*. The bus ride cost us 35 cents each. The movie ticket was more expensive, but we didn't stay for the whole show. As soon as Cybill Shepherd bared her breasts on screen, Aunt Faye hurried us out of the theater. She wasn't going to stand for "that indecent act." She informed me that Uncle Clark had been working at a movie theatre in Murfreesboro since his retirement and that she would see the movie there later by herself!

The last time I saw Aunt Faye was in 2004. Her health had deteriorated to the point that she needed to live in an assisted-living facility. When I walked in that day, she glanced at me and said, "Paula Faye! You look like me!" But that's not my lasting memory of this incredible woman. I'll always remember her as the kind-hearted person who wrote notes every day, the hard-working nurse with the healing touch and the generous aunt who helped out my family financially and in so many other ways. I'm honored to be named after her and blessed to have had her as my guardian angel for so many years.