

NOTES FROM A SISSY

A Memoir of What He Broke and What She Built

An Opening · Waymon Hudson



CHAPTER ONE

Growing Up in the Big Potato

Make no mistake, Central Florida is the Deep South. Not the quaint, antebellum, sweet-tea-on-the-porch kind, either. Think of it as the frayed hem of the Bible Belt: slightly moldy, always damp. Where the humidity clings to your skin and the past clings to your soul.

Right in the middle of the state, close enough to Disney World to smell the magic but far enough to never touch it, lies the small town of Apopka. Calling it a “suburb of Orlando” would be giving it way too much credit... and frankly, way too much glamor.

Apopka is a small, working-class town stuck somewhere between a John Deere catalog and an episode of *Cops*.

But don’t be fooled, Apopka has its claims to fame.

For one, it’s proudly known (as declared by dozens of sun-faded signs) as the “Indoor Foliage Capital of the World.” That’s right. Our great civic pride? Potted plants. There are hundreds of nurseries and greenhouses, which means the whole town perpetually smells like fertilizer and regret.

It’s all glamour and class in Apopka.

And in a poetic flourish only Florida could pull off, the town’s name comes from a Native American word that, no joke, translates to “Big Potato.” Move over New York... our tuber-themed metropolis is coming for your title. Why, we had a Dairy Queen *and* at least three stoplights. What more could you want?

It was on a seven-acre patch of green on the outskirts of this starchy paradise that I grew up. Down a dirt road flanked by rusted mailboxes and clay-coated weeds sat our little farm. Cows, pigs, and chickens roamed freely, though never with much dignity. We grew

every Southern vegetable you could imagine: okra, collards, squash, green beans. It was rural as hell.

Now, before you let your imagination run wild and start picturing a charming, white-fenced farmhouse with lace curtains and a wraparound porch, let me stop you right there. Our house started as a mobile home. Not a fancy double wide. Not even a “modular unit.” No, this was an aluminum-sided rectangle on concrete blocks. Basically, a sardine can with windows.

At some point, in what can only be described as a burst of architectural optimism, my parents decided to “build onto it.” Instead of just constructing a new house, they built *around* the trailer. They poured a foundation, added cinderblock walls, and eventually absorbed the trailer like some kind of mobile home Matryoshka doll.

It was a Franken-house: part trailer, part house, all confusion. But it was ours.

Directly across the road from us sat the local fairgrounds, home to Apopka’s only real cultural event: the Zellwood Sweet Corn Festival. Picture it: carnival rides, crafts, country music, and corn cooked every way imaginable. We’d climb onto our roof during the concerts to listen to cover bands wail about heartbreak and tractors while the smell of grilled corn wafted through the air like Southern perfume. It was magical. Sticky. Swarming with gnats. But magical.

Just down the road from our house was a massive clay pit, mined by heavy trucks that raced back and forth all day long, kicking up so much orange dust that everything- our furniture, our clothes, our actual skin- developed a permanent terracotta hue. When the clay ran out, they turned the pit into a landfill. So, we went from terracotta skin to eau de garbage.

Welcome to Apopka: come for the corn, stay for the toxic dust.

But to me, this wasn’t strange.

This was just life.

The only one I knew.

Apopka had a way of pulling you in like kudzu... quiet, relentless, and impossible to kill. Generations of families stayed put, working the

same jobs, passing down the same weathered houses, and recycling the same tired stories about the “good ol’ days.” Men were tough and sunburned, working farms or factories. Women stayed home, raised kids, and kept casseroles warm. Boys played football, girls took Home Ec.

And then... there was me.

I could hold my own on the farm. I carried feed sacks, pulled weeds, dodged chicken pecks, even herded a pig or two. But more often than not, you’d find me perched on the kitchen counter watching my mom cook or curled up at my grandmother’s feet as she snapped beans and told me stories in her soft drawl.

I was stocky (okay, fat... let’s be honest), which led every man in my life to dream I’d be some kind of football prodigy. Maybe even get a scholarship, win a championship, and open a used car lot like every washed-up athlete in town. Those dreams were quickly dashed when it became clear I had zero coordination, a strong aversion to sweating, and asthma that flared up anytime I looked at a patch of grass.

So instead of the gridiron, I gravitated toward my sisters’ dolls, homemade fashion shows, and reading books under the table during dinner. I wore my mom’s apron more than she did. I made lasso props out of yarn and tried to get the dog to play Superman in our backyard ‘Super Friends’ reboot. I gave monologues to the cows.

It didn’t take long for everyone to realize the horrible truth:

I was different.

I wasn’t just quirky.

Or sensitive.

I was a full-blown glitter-powered sissy: bookish, artsy, always humming showtunes under my breath and staging impromptu dance numbers in the living room.

I wasn’t made for farm life. I was made for spotlights.

I didn’t have the words for it yet, but I knew that somewhere out there was a world that made sense. A world where I wasn’t too much, or not enough. A world where being a sissy wasn’t something to fear... but something to celebrate.

So I waited. I watched. I built a world inside myself, made of glitter and courage and jokes sharp enough to deflect shame.

I didn't know it yet, but one day, that world would save me.

But first... I had to survive the Big Potato.

FRAGMENT
Footsteps

It always started the same way.

The footsteps.

I think I was around five the first time I remember the footsteps.

Maybe younger.

Old enough to know fear,

too young to name it.

Heavy. Slow.

Deliberate in a way that said: they weren't walking.

They were *coming*.

Down the long, dark hallway of our mismatched house, through the linoleum kitchen and across the groaning wood floor of the living room, each step got louder.

No. Not louder.

Just heavier.

Each step carried... intent.

They always stopped outside my door.

I never locked it. Maybe I already knew it wouldn't matter.

Locks were only for people who believed they had a right to say no.

I clenched every muscle like a trap waiting to spring.

Even my eyelashes felt tense, as if the slightest flutter might give me away.

I trained my breath to be slow, even, shallow. Practiced.

Like I was already in a coffin.

The light from the hallway would slip under the door... a thin, jagged line cutting across the carpet. I'd watch that light go dark as two feet stopped directly in front of it.

Work boots, I think.

Or maybe just heavy shoes.

I never looked long enough to know for sure.

Then came the sound that still tightens my stomach when I hear it today: the click of the door handle.

It wasn't loud.

Just a soft, metallic *snick*.

But some sounds don't need to be loud to be terrifying.

They just need to mean something.

And that sound meant one thing: whatever safety the outside world pretended to offer was gone.

The door creaked open.

A pause.

Then the shape in the doorway... big, broad, blocking the light like a dark curtain pulled across a stage. One hand resting on the frame, the other braced like it was holding back something worse. I always wondered if he paused to make sure I was asleep, or if he just liked that moment of power. The breathless hush before the lights went out for good.

He never said a word.

Just stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

And I became smaller than my own breath.

WHAT SHE LEFT ME
The Open Door

Some kids ran away from home.

I ran toward hers.

The route was three miles of back dirt road

I knew by heart

long before I understood

why I kept walking it.

I spent afterschool with her every day.

But these trips were different.

These were after my parents had already picked me up.

After supper. After bedtime.

These trips were in the dark.

Often in pajamas with sneakers thrown on hastily,

a flashlight in hand

and a little backpack packed for school the next day.

She never asked why I showed up.

Not once.

Not even when I showed up often enough

that it should have been a question.

Her door was always unlocked.

That sounds like a small thing.

It was not a small thing.

A door that stays open

is a decision someone makes

every single day.

She made it.

Every day.

The house smelled like her.

Warm and familiar,

the way only one person's house ever smells.

Something always on the stove.

Something sweet underneath that.

The scent of her lotion, her hairspray, her powders.

The comfort of a home

that had been loved for a very long time.

I'd come through that door and she'd look up.

Not startled.

Not questioning.

Just... looking.

Reading my face

the way she read everything.

All the way to the core.

Then she'd say something like

"Supper's almost ready"

or

"Come sit with me"

or sometimes just “Hey, baby”

in that voice of hers

that always seemed to have

the warmth of a hug in it

when directed at me.

And that would be enough.

No why are you here.

No does your mama know you’ve come.

No what happened to you.

No are you staying the night.

Just room.

She made room.

Every time.

I’d find my spot at her kitchen table

or curl up at her feet in the living room

and feel something

I didn’t have a word for then.

But I have a word for it now.

Safe.

Not the kind that means nothing bad has happened.

The kind that means even if it has,

in here, right now,

you are not carrying it alone.

I didn't know then

that she knew I was carrying something.

But I know now.

A child who comes to your house

every chance he gets,

who takes the long walk alone in the dark just to get there,

who walks through your door and exhales

like he's been holding his breath for days...

that child is telling you something.

She heard it.

She never said so out loud.

She didn't have to.

She just kept the door unlocked

and supper warm

and a spot at her table

and a place at her side

that was always, without question,

mine.



The story continues. Read more at waymonhudson.com