**The Kisses I Forgot**

Summer of 1967, my sixteenth.

Youngstown, Ohio.

Long steamy days. Sunburn and chlorine hair.

Babysitting the neighborhood. Doing my best thinking on my blue Schwinn.

At 6 o’clock, Dad loosens and takes off his tie.

Walter Cronkite, LBJ, Vietnam, marching, fires, riots.

Riding with Mom through the city; lock the car doors.

Quietly humming along in the suburbs.

Doing my best thinking on my blue Schwinn.

At 6 o’clock, Dad loosens and takes off his tie.

News drones on. Vietnam, protests, riots.

Set the table.

Buzz. Mumble. Whisper.

New family…end of the block.

Neighbors buzz, mumble, whisper.

They say… a black family.

I heard…property values…

Buzz. Mumble. Whisper.

Threats, vandals…garbage thrown in their yard last night, some landing on their roof.

Their blinds drawn.

Isn’t it awful…

Three children, we hear…

Army, captain, they say…

Deployed, they say…

So awful for her.

Buzz. Mumble. Whisper.

Fall comes.

At 6 o’clock, Dad loosens and takes off his tie.

Tonight’s newspaper…tragic…up the street…killed in action

Buzz. Mumble. Whisper.

On my blue Schwinn, circling.

Late afternoon, then, a plan, mine alone.

Heart pounding.

Blue Schwinn creeping up the street.

Dark, sad house, blinds drawn.

Deep breath. Knock.

Three little faces, dark curious eyes, at the door

Summon the conclave of sad brown women in the little kitchen.

Dishes clang. Hushed voices.

Buzz, mumble, whisper.

Eyes look up, to the door, then, to *me*

One came forward, drying her hands on her apron.

“She’s resting now.”

Not now but later, someday when she is ready…

I could babysit.

I hold out the smudged scrap of paper.

She slowly opens the door to take it, but only just a crack.

Weeks pass.

“It’s for you.”

Phone cord stretching across the kitchen.

Wednesday? Yes. I can. Okay 6:30. Yes.

Then, on Wednesday, the trusty blue Schwinn.

Heart pounding. Deep breath.

3 sets of curious brown eyes.

Unfamiliar, but mostly the usual drill. Homework. Cookies. Stories.

Hair and teeth brushed. Tucked in. Hushed quiet.

And then, one set of big brown eyes, the littlest one

Peers at me from the doorway and softly says my name.

Hmm?

“You forgot.” Tiny shy smile.

“Forgot?”

“…to kiss us goodnight.”