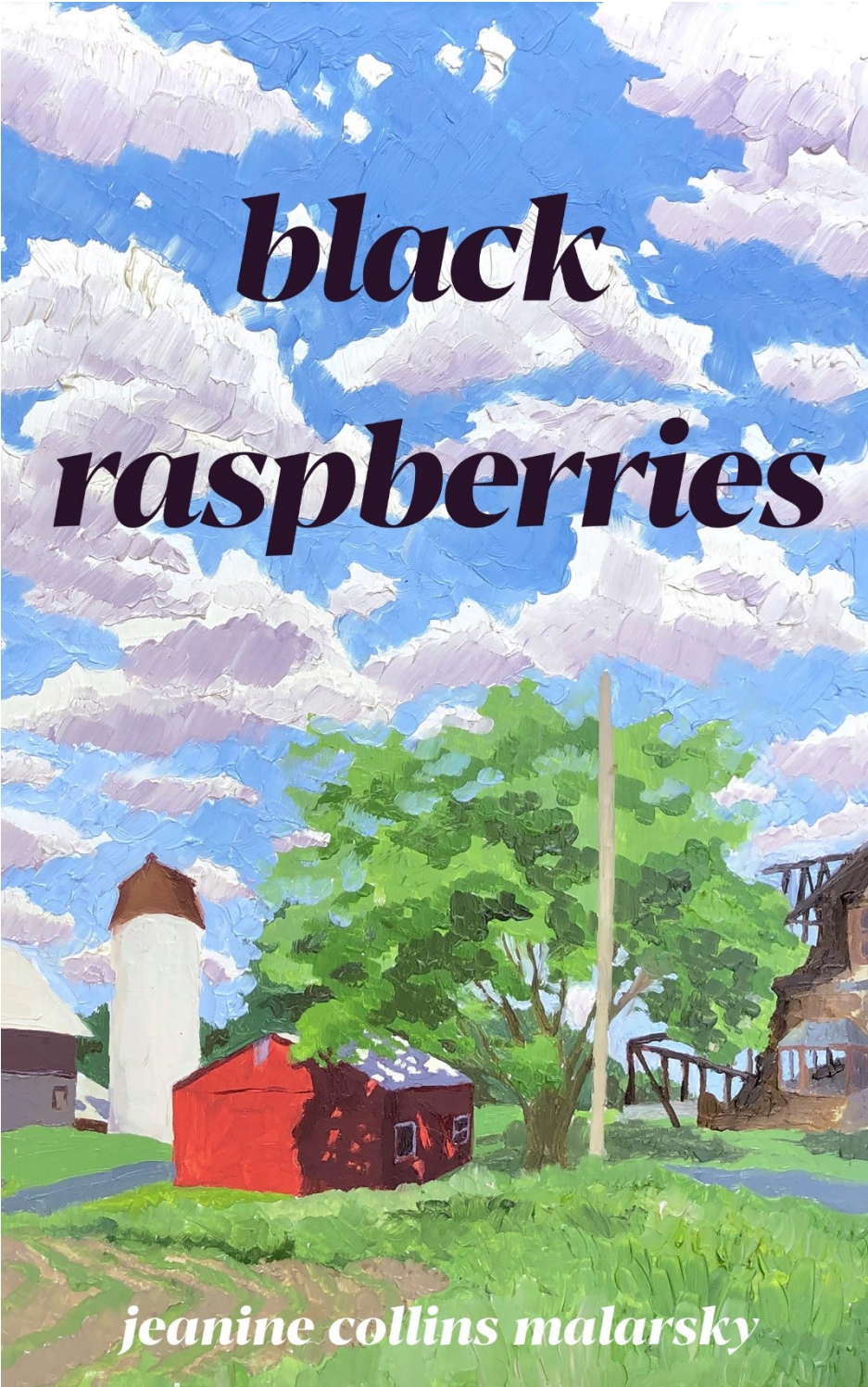




black raspberries

jeanine collins malarsky

BLACK RASPBERRIES

by Jeanine Collins Malarsky

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Author's Note

Though the narrative in this book is based on fact, the passage of time and the vagaries of memory relegate the tale herein to the realm of fiction.

*To my siblings, whose stories I cannot presume to relate, I offer this quote from Judy Blunt's "Acknowledgments" in her book *Breaking Clean*.*

"And finally, I want to acknowledge those who might choose a different version of the story than the one I tell. In sharing stories with others who were there, we discover how inevitably each perspective offers its own, sure version of events. I've long since made my peace with that variety of fiction we call truth."

CHAPTER 30

Three Birthdays and a Whipping

Dear Janice, the letter from Mother's friend, Anne White, read. I've missed the little church group in Greenville with our long afternoon picnics and inspirational talks. Without Sim, I'm more comfortable here in Virginia with my parents. Linda is doing well. She misses Sheila.

Mommy looked up with a coy smile, a clue of good news to come, and continued reading.

The reason I'm writing is to invite you and your family to come to Stanton, Virginia for a week. About five miles from my parent's home is a charming log cabin that is often rented to summer guests. It sleeps up to ten and would be perfect for your family. If Alton could get away from the plantation, I know he would love it too. The cabin sits on the edge of a forest and has a large grassy lawn. A wide brook runs along the side. It's a beautiful setting and you could even go bird watching if you liked.

Mommy laid the letter down on the table, her face aglow with happiness. It was Saturday night after a light supper. We were all eating our favorite food, ice cream. I had collected three huge cherries in my mouth savoring their cloying sweetness on my tongue. Mommy looked down the table at Daddy, a large toothy smile spreading over her face as she announced, "And Daddy is coming with us." She picked up the letter, refolded it neatly and carefully put it back in the envelope. "We leave in two weeks."

With the exception of having to drink milk from black and white cows again, those were halcyon days in Virginia. We swam, explored the woods, played games, and took day trips with Mrs. White and Linda, her daughter. We laughed endlessly about the outhouse and we took baths in the swift-flowing stream that tried to escape with our floating bar of Ivory soap. The sun brightened every day and fireflies lit the yard at night. We played kick-the-can, hide-and-seek and piggy-wanna-signal. We roasted marshmallows in the huge stone fireplace and Mommy recited *The Cremation of Sam McGee*. She also read *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, taking on his persona as she held us spellbound with her ‘glittering eye’.

Daddy and Mommy did not fight for seven days, and some nights, Darel didn’t pee his bed.

But paradise was short-lived. We went back home to reality. According to my memory, that was the only vacation we ever took together as a family.

That fall, Mr. Ricketts began to drink more heavily and money for the plantation grew scarcer. Mother’s short temper grew shorter, weeds in the garden were tougher, the drought lasted longer and the cotton crop was smaller. Though Frank Ricketts still drove a late model Packard, a genteel poverty began to spread over the rich man’s holdings.

In spite of all that, life on the Delta had its rhythm. Negroes bent their backs pulling their heavy cotton sacks, stooping lower to pick the withered crop. Mules, pulling cotton wagons filled to overflowing, plied their way between field and shed. Tractors, pulling larger, wire-sided wagons with rubber tires for the highway, caravanned their way to the local cotton gin.

Just before school began in September, Daddy had traded our 1952 Chevrolet coupe for a brand new 1954 Chevrolet sedan, pale green and all new car smelly. A new car made Daddy’s life worth living. Changing

cars every two years was about all Daddy asked for. Well, that and breakfast on the table when he came in from the barn. Since hell would freeze over before Mommy got up and made his breakfast, he continued driving into Hollandale every morning where he enjoyed a steaming plate of eggs, bacon and hash browns, served to him by a cheerful waitress, who often poured him a second cup of coffee for free.

When school began in September, all five of us boarded the bus. Like Anita and me, Sheila hungered for knowledge and brought home perfect report cards. The die had been cast in grade cards; it was the girls against the boys.

Half the wild letters had fallen off the living room walls. Our strivings toward perfection had fizzled, leaving us five children sinful as ever, no closer to heaven. But, sins were not ignored and a sinner had to pay a price.

No one said what crime Darel had committed nor could I have ever imagined what any seven-year-old boy could have done to warrant the whipping he received from Mommy that hot September afternoon. Nothing was said about the punishment at supper that night. When Daddy stopped in the boys' room later that evening to speak to Dennis, Darel was undressing for bed. "What happened to you?" Daddy asked Darel, bending down closer to examine the swollen red welts covering Darel's back and legs.

"Mommy whipped me," Darel answered.

"With what?" Daddy asked, turning Darel around to view the welts on his stomach and chest.

"My belt."

"What belt?"

"This one," Darel said, reaching under his bed where Mommy had tossed the belt when she had finished.

Daddy took the tooled leather belt in his hands and brought the ends together slowly, matching the engraved silver buckle to the engraved metal tip and the angry welts on Darel's body. He turned around slowly and walked out of the bedroom, across the hall and into the dining room

where Mommy was sitting at the table watching Anita and me clear the supper dishes.

He grabbed Mommy by her arm, lifted her from her chair and wrenched her around to face him. “Did you whip Darel with this belt?”

“What’s it to you? You never discipline the boys.” She tried to jerk free of his grasp but lost her footing.

They whirled in a blurred tangle of flailing arms and screaming oaths. Thrashing about the room from one wall to the other, they careened from the dining room into the living room, falling onto the davenport but getting up again still exchanging violent blows. Dennis and Darel stood transfixed in the doorway as Mommy and Daddy grappled with each other. We three girls were frozen in our tracks near the dining room table.

As Daddy gained the upper hand, he pinned Mommy’s hands behind her back and bent her backwards over the end of the piano keyboard. He’s going to break her back! I screamed inside my head.

“Daddy’s going to kill her!” Dennis yelled, galvanizing all five of us into action. In our struggle to pull them apart, they broke free and charged past us, back into the dining room. Reeling in uncontrolled rage, they fought their way into the hall, shattering a bottle of Ketchup grabbed from the supper table. In a cowering huddle, we five children stared in horror at the cream-colored walls covered with blood-red Ketchup and shattered glass.

There is no particular time when you grow up, when you know you’re an adult. But there is that year, that day, that moment in time, when you stop being a child.

A clue to this event might be when you learn that the people who were put on this earth to care for you and protect you are perhaps the most dangerous people in your life. You realize that Mommy isn’t a rational, loving Mommy, but a raging, religious maniac. And Daddy reveals he can be pushed too far, and you wonder what too far is?

Early in October, Mother gave Anita, Sheila and me a choice, a new girls' bike we three would share, or our first birthday party, one for all three of us. With great excitement, we hashed over our options and voted for a new bicycle, a first for our family. Not two days later, Mother took us to Hollandale for groceries, but she had one errand to run first. She parked the car under a shady tree and said, "You three stay in the car. Don't follow me into the store. I'll be back shortly."

Of course, shortly turned into longly and Anita said, "She's been gone a long time. Besides I saw her go into the hardware store, not the grocery store."

"So what," I said. "She said we had to stay in the car."

"That's for you little kids." Anita opened the car door, closed it, and walked into the hardware store.

"She's going to be in twubble," Sheila said.

"Probably."

Not two minutes later, the big glass door opened again and out marched Anita and Mother, Mother's left hand holding Anita's shoulder in a vise-like grip.

"That's it," Mother announced as she slid in under the wheel, "no bicycle." Sheila and I exchanged silent glances. Aware that we hadn't been present for the scene in the store, Mother explained, "Your older sister couldn't mind her own business and do as she was told. She disobeyed me and came into the store while I was choosing a new bicycle for you girls."

"What color are we getting?" Sheila asked. Boy she doesn't get it, I thought.

"No color," Mother continued. "You're not getting a new bicycle at all because Anita can't do as she's told." That is blatantly unfair, I said to myself. But I knew better than to challenge the decision. From my seat in the back, I bored holes of hate into Anita's head all the way home. I cast a few hateful stares at Mother's head also, but had to be very careful she didn't catch me in the rearview mirror.

Three days later, Mother relented and said we could have a birthday party, inviting three guests each, if we cleaned the house and got everything ready the night before. We forgot the bike in our excitement of choosing our guests and dreaming of a real birthday cake from the store.

The night before party day, Mother came home from Greenville late to find we had failed to clean the house. “Why does this house look like a shit heap?” she yelled as she kicked off her high heels inside the door and bent to pick them up. “Where is everybody?”

Frozen in place with shock and surprise, Anita and I looked at each other across the dining room table where we’d sat down to get our homework done early. Sheila was quietly drawing pictures. “I thought I told you to clean this house tonight if you wanted a party tomorrow,” Mother said, standing in the dining room doorway, her shoes and purse dangling from her hands.

“We are going to clean it,” Anita said, closing her textbook and stacking her books together. “We just started our homework early and lost track of time.” Anita stood up to take her books to the bedroom.

“Well you don’t have to bother cleaning,” Mother shot back as she whirled around and marched off to her bedroom in her stocking feet. “You can go to school tomorrow and tell all your little friends they can’t come home with you because *there is no party!*” she screamed before she slammed her bedroom door.

This was worse than no party. Visions of humiliation overwhelmed me as I followed Anita into our bedroom and threw my schoolbooks on my bed. I knew that Anita shared my agonizing images of retracting our previous invitations when she said, “We’ll clean the house and maybe she’ll change her mind.” Bulls would grow teats before Mother would change her mind, but I damn sure was willing to try to undo the damage we’d done. I’d be willing to clean toilets, scrub floors and lick the counters clean to avoid going to school and telling my three fifth-grade classmates that my party had been cancelled.

Anita swept and vacuumed; Sheila and I dusted; and Mother followed us around, stripped down to her underwear, cursing and screaming like a Banshee. Mother stood in the doorway watching as I set a pail of clean mop water in the middle of the kitchen floor. She came over and gave it a kick. “You haven’t got all night,” she screeched. As I bent down to wipe up the water that had sloshed all over the floor, she kicked my butt and sent me sprawling on my face. Like a possessed heathen she dogged our tracks, kicking us and slapping us, turning our attempt to clean house into a fight for survival.

When every floor had been vacuumed and scrubbed, every stick of furniture dusted and polished, every kitchen and bathroom fixture washed and shined, Mother softened. She called us three girls into her bedroom where she had retired, exhausted from kicking and cursing. “I’ve changed my mind,” she said calmly. Her voice was as sweet as candy. “You girls can have your party tomorrow. When you bring your friends home after school, I’ll have cake and ice cream ready.

I’ll even buy some pretty paper plates and napkins and maybe a fancy party tablecloth.”

That night when I went to bed, I pushed the scenes from the evening out of my mind and fell asleep dreaming of my first birthday party. *It was also my last birthday party, but I didn’t know it then.*

Now I know how other girls feel on their birthdays, I thought, as I sat at our dining room table between Patricia and my two other friends the next afternoon. Anita and her three friends filled the other seats at the big table. Mother had arranged Sheila’s friends around a small card table right next to ours. Clumps of candles were placed next to each of the three names on the cake, twelve for Anita, ten for me and six for Sheila. Tiny wisps of smoke rose from all twenty-eight candles as Mother cut the cake into small wedges.

“Can I have some cake and ice cream?” Darel asked from the doorway. He’d been told to stay outside during the party, but no little boy could resist cake and ice cream. “I’ll give you some later,” Mother said. “Go away.”

Except for one or two gifts each Christmas, we didn't get presents. I couldn't keep my eyes off the tiny stack of gifts that sat over on a chair, waiting to be opened. I was torn between slowly savoring the delicious cake and ice cream and gulping them down in a rush to open my presents.

The magic moment finally came and Mother placed a stack of three gifts in front of each of the "birthday girls" as she called us. Each of my friends leaned forward on the table crying out for me to open their gift first. I closed my eyes and picked a gift at random and unwrapped it, holding my breath the whole time.

Under the lovely butterfly paper and yellow ribbon lay a child's necklace made of multifaceted plastic beads in pastel colors, pink, blue, yellow and green.

"See?" Patricia said in her high-pitched child's voice.

"You can wear it with any outfit. It matches everything."

"Thank you so much," I said, giving her a special smile and laying the necklace aside gently.

The next gift yielded a child's finger ring with a purple plastic stone set in silver plastic. The third gift was a bracelet that matched the necklace, obviously an arrangement between the two girls' mothers.

"That was very thoughtful," Mother said over my shoulder. "Now Neenee has matching jewelry."

All too soon pretty ladies in nice cars lined our driveway, calling for their daughters who yelled frantic good-byes and climbed into the nice cars and drove away. It was a wonderful birthday party, just wonderful.

Now Darel could have his cake and ice cream. He sat alone at the table, a wasteland of crumbs, melted ice cream and wadded napkins, filling his face with cake while ice cream ran down his chin and dripped onto his shirt. He was happy.

Anita and I spread our jewelry out on Sheila's bed to survey our treasures. Sheila had received coloring books and a book of real paper dolls—The only other real paper dolls we'd ever had came in the Tonette home permanents for children—Every one of the gifts Anita and I had been given was play jewelry. "You know you can't keep that jewelry,

don't you," Mother said, coming into our room and sitting down on the foot of the bed.

"I know," Anita said, a bit hangdog now that the fun was over and none of our gifts was usable.

"Can we keep them in our drawers if we don't wear them?" I asked.

"Remember when I was a newly married woman and hadn't converted to Seventh-day Adventism yet?" Mother asked. "And I wore jewelry, including my gold wedding band?"

"No, I don't remember," Anita said, showing off how clever she was. "I wasn't born yet."

"All right Smarty Pants." Mother laughed. "But you do know that I stopped wearing makeup and gave up my jewelry when I joined the Seventh-day Adventist church. Years later I wrote a story about it titled *Tinkling Ornaments*. It was published in *The Review and Herald*." How could we forget it? I rolled my eyes when I was sure she wasn't looking. If she'd told us once about her famous publication, she'd told us a million times.

"Gather up your jewelry and come with me," Mother said. "I'll get a hammer." Outside the back door, Anita and I scooped down and took turns smashing our lovely new presents into powder. We scraped the powder off the cement step and dumped it in the burn barrel.

Funny, I feel a bit numb when I remember destroying my pretty presents. But by then, I'd already learned not to feel. Today I own a few pieces of lovely jewelry, a paucity when compared to my peers. When we go out in the evening, my husband still has to remind me, "Wear some jewelry, for Christ sakes, Jeanine. What's the matter with you?"

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER 30 FROM BLACK RASPBERRIES



About the Author

Jeanine Collins Malarsky was born on the shores of Cayuga Lake in upstate New York in 1944. The middle daughter of a peripatetic dairy farmer, she was moved from house to house and state to state east of the Mississippi. She left home to attend college in New England where she met her husband and found a permanent home near Boston, MA.

Ms. Malarsky spent thirty-six years in business management, focusing on financial accounting and computer systems, including twenty-two years operating her own company. Following years devoted to gourmet cooking, sewing, and raising two children, she is now retired and living with her husband, a retired airline pilot.

She has traveled extensively including most of Europe and the Far East, indulging in her love of history and learning. An avid life-long student of human behavior, she now devotes her energies to travel, reading and writing.

Thank you so much for reading this sample chapter. I hope you will read the whole book and write a review so others may learn about my stories.

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