

Recollections of an Old Scrubwoman

Interviews with Bernice Higgs by Larry Redmond (LCR)

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LCR: So, do you remember, were you there when he designed that bird?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, heavens on earth, no, I was, Bird's Eye, I don't know how long Bird's Eye has been – I was there when they – now, they had, another company came out, and they, he designed that, he drew that, there's a trademark on that. Another company came out and did something similar to that. And of course, I was there when they sued them.

LCR: And naturally won.

Ms. Higgs: Of course they did, yeah, they won. I guess that was about nine years – until they both died.

LCR: When did they die, do you remember?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes, he died in '70. He was a deist,

LCR: A what?

Ms. Higgs: A deist, like a diety. He believed in God, and he believed that God made everything, and then he said, I'm a deist. But he didn't - and all Christians are deist, but he was a deist, he said God made you, and made the world, and he had nothing to do with you after that. There was nobody, and he was a kind of a being that made the world, and made you, and then you didn't pray or anything, you had no one to pray to, he paid you no attention after that.

And so, of course when he died, it was his request that he be cremated. So that's what they did.

They died within two days of each other.

LCR: Is that right?

Him first?

Ms. Higgs: Yeah.

LCR: I know they kids must have –

Ms. Higgs: This is a ... people are strange beings. He was in the hospital, and I took him over there, he was the kind – he was 89, and he walked to the office every day, and he had to go into town, too. And he came home and he went out to the village, after he came to the

office one afternoon, and I don't know what, he must have had a slight stroke, but he fell, this was when he got in the driveway, and there was someone bringing him in, so he was saying, I'm all right. I said, what happened? And he went to the bathroom, and took a washcloth, and washed his head off. There was no bleeding, he had a knot on his head. So I went on and so I said, they needed a specialist. So I called Dr. Tuart. Dr. Tuart came down, and he examined him, then he called his son. He had one son who lived there. I didn't think it was too serious. He still, but then I sort of noticed, he was just kind of, like he was a little out of it, you know? But he was dizzy. He had lost his equilibrium. So then I took him down, he didn't want to go out, and Dr. Tuart said, don't let him go out alone. He said, Ralph, you cannot go to the village. Oh, I can, but he said, no, don't go to the village, and he said, no, I won't. His - mother was in the hospital, so he said, I want to go up to the hospital to see - he said, we'll get a taxi and go up there. We got a taxi and went up there, and I carried him, he went on up there, and she was lying there, and she wasn't out of it or anything like that, she was had diverticulosis and something was wrong, she was 85, and she was overweight for her height. But anyway, I guess it must have been that Thursday that we went up there, and his son lived a couple of blocks on what's called the high road, from there, so he - I saw him coming down there, they got a nurse, and she came down there. He got a nurse to stay there. So they just went on home. And then he got me to stay there. So I stayed there.

LCR: At the house, there.

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm. Stayed there at night with him.

That night, he got the nurse, then he got Ophelia Leak, she was a woman who went and she did that, she'd just stay with people down there, in Bronxville. She was sort of a practical nurse, you know, and everybody knew her in Bronxville, everybody knew Ophelia. And that night, Ophelia said, This old man is - well, he wouldn't get in the bed, he wouldn't stay in the bed, and then he would sit in his chair. And he called his office. They had an office in White Plains, and he called the office and was giving some instructions what to do. And he said, And be sure you do this, get these things out by Monday morning. And gave them all these instructions. And so, he looked like, I don't know, Ophelia said, so mangled, like he's going to come out of this. And I said, well, I'm going home. I go to church in the morning (because I was teaching Sunday school, I had my Sunday school class).

And she called me that Sunday morning about 6 o'clock and said, Mr. Butler died, in the night. I said, Who was there? She said, You know I called and told them, you better come on down here, his daddy was just lying here, but you know he never did lose consciousness. And he went on just like he was going into a deep sleep. She had been around people so long, she knew he was dying, and said, I called them and told them. She said he got out here about an hour or so later.

LCR: Too late.

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm. So then they went on and it was Sunday, and he told her, and of course he had the arrangements already made, he had everything all written out and everything,

and they cremated him. They had a little service there in the parlor, and of course I went. And they went over to tell her, and then Monday, she died. She was Catholic, so they had, we went to that funeral. And they didn't want to be – they were from Albany, New York, and that's where they wanted to be buried. They had a family plot there. And they only had two boys, and they took that – that's the difference between them and us, they took that jar of ashes and they put it in there with that casket, they had the undertaker do it, and they shipped that body on up there, and not any of them went.

LCR: Shipped that sucker on up there.

Ms. Higgs: Both of them. Shipped their parents on up there. Frank did, whatever business they had to do, all that banking and that kind of stuff, and he went on back to Philadelphia. They lived in a suburb outside of Philadelphia.

LCR: Well.

Ms. Higgs: That was that. [Unintelligible speech; laughter]

LCR: Yeah, we had a string of cars going up there. A string of them.

Ms. Higgs: Who was that, was it Richard? Was it Clifford, your cousin? What were they saying, about 13 cars?

LCR: Did you go?

Ms. Higgs: No.

But I went to the service. I didn't go out to the cemetery, but there was –

LCR: Oh, you went to the service?

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, but I had to get – what day was that?

LCR: I don't, Thursday, or Friday, some time.

Ms. Higgs: Sometime in the middle of the day. 12-12:30.

LCR: Something like that. But I didn't stay, because I apparently had someplace I had to be, I don't remember offhand.

Ms. Higgs: You took off?

LCR: I must have, because I know I was there, though I did not take off for Walter's funeral, because I had a class. That's another story.

But anyway, how did you, how did it come to be that you worked for Mr. Butler? How did you find out about him?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, a friend of mine, in Bronxville, told me about it, because I had been sleeping in, in New York, and I didn't want to sleep in, and they told me about the Butlers.

LCR: Who were you working for at the time?

Ms. Higgs: I was working for the Pooles.

LCR: Oh, that's the lady that you became friends with, wasn't it?

Ms. Higgs: Yes. But I haven't heard from them, they had – she called me one day, see, it's unlike her not to call me; she called me every month, and she called me here, and she said, she's always – I never made any bones with the people I worked with, that I was a Christian, you know, and I would always have them know that I pray for you, and I prayed, but she said, Bea, I just, well, you can pray for me, but I don't think God is in you and me either. I don't think God is bothered about, and she went on talking all that kind of talk, and so after Mr. Poole died, she just went off completely. And she talked and I asked her, I hadn't heard from you, and I wrote to you, and told you what I thought, and told you something to read, when Mr. Poole died. I said, Did you read it? She said, oh, no, I don't read letters. They're all stacked up here. I don't ever read them. They had moved to Florida, Boynton Beach, for the winter. And they'd come back up in the summer. And she said, I haven't been in that house, I can't stand that house any more, because that house was there in that family, where her father bought them two houses, that house and the house where her mother and father lived. He bought a plot of land. And she said, Bea, I can't go into that house since Hal died. I can't go in there, I went and moved there, she had an apartment there. And then she hung up, after we talked for a long time, and about five minutes later, she called me back, crying, just weeping, and talking and telling me about, Bea, pray for me, and so I went on trying to console her and comfort her, just saying some scriptures to her, and she seemed to get a little calmer, you know, so she said, call me and I'll call you, if you don't call me, but call me. And I haven't heard from her since that day. I did try to call her one time, but didn't nobody answer. So I don't know what, I believe they have put her in the –

LCR: Give her a call.

Ms. Higgs: This is still winter. Once they are here, I might just do that. Just to see where she is. I have been thinking about her.

LCR: Isn't she the one that her and somebody threw a brick through a window or something like that?

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh, yes! I talked to her one day, and she just stopped, she was talking to me, and she just swiveled, Help! And she put the phone down and I could hear them talking, and he said, (and he always used these cuss words), What the hell is wrong with you? She said, There's nothing wrong, what's wrong with you? And he said, there's nothing wrong with me. And then she said something, and he said, Well, if you feel that way, just call the police, but there's nothing wrong with me. And I just held the phone and listened, and then I just hung up. So about half an hour later, she called me back, and

she said, Bea, I'm sorry that I did that, but when I was standing here, while I was talking to you, I could have sworn someone (because that house evidently has a big picture window) threw something through this big window, I heard this big window crash, and since I have spoken to you, we've called the police and they have been in every crack and crevice in this house. They thought perhaps I might have heard a picture fall off the wall, they got paintings or something on them.

LCR: Or a vase, or anything.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. But the crash she heard, they've got these big wall paintings, they might have fallen or something.

LCR: Big gilded frames and ...

Ms. Higgs: Uh-huh. They have some of the children, that artists painted them, because I know one used to hang over the couch in the living room, and then one was over the mantelpiece, you know, and that kind of noise. And all on the grounds they looked, but nothing. She said, you see, she was the kind of person, when I first went to work for her, she had had psychiatric, been under psychiatric treatments, and we used to fight and I'd go and get her to come back. Oh, by the way, she asked about you. Larry, her mind is getting so bad, she has forgotten so many people, but she never, every time I talk to her, How's the boy? I told her they went up to GreatAmerica, which didn't mean a thing, and I said, GreatAmerica is like, do you remember Coney Island? And she don't know nothing about Coney Island, she said, Oh, yeah. I tried to make her remember. So I said, they went up there Saturday, but he said to hang in there. Yeah, that's all I can do is hang in there. Tell him I said to hang in there, that's my boy! And it's this one thing that she remembers. She remembers that, and you remember you went to see her, she gave you some money, she remembers that. But now, today, I was talking about – but see, it doesn't do any good to tell her about current things, they go in one ear and come out the other. I find to make conversation with her, that she can follow, is talk about, reminisce about things, and each time I talk to her, it seems she has forgotten people that she knew so well. I was talking about Pearl. That's one of her favorites that she knew before she was even in Memphis. She didn't know Who is Pearl? I said, your friend, Black Pearl.

You know, honey, your mind! I tell you, that's an awful thing to lose.

LCR: Yeah, that sounds like Alzheimer's.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. And I was talking to someone, and they said, it is sort of like hardening of the arteries. It seems like it's an epidemic. A lot of people, they lost their - Oh, Lord, I said, I'm already blind, I'm fine, I can cope with that, I said, just don't let me lose my mind!

And it's strange how you can go and think about it things, you've heard me say this before, I'm sure, but these two old ladies met, and they said, How are you doing? I'm sure I've told you this!

LCR: I don't think so.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, she said, I'm doing fine, you know I got so I couldn't hear well, and they got me hearing aids, so that's better. And I would say, yes, now my teeth are getting bad, so I couldn't hardly eat, so I got me some teeth, and now I'm doing all right too. And they were just walking down the road, talking and saying, my eyes are getting bad, she said, and I got me some glasses, so I'm seeing all right. The other said, but oh, my mind! My mind. Nothing they can do for my mind!

LCR: Yes, indeed!

Ms. Higgs: And you know, the more people I see like that, it loses its humor, you know.

LCR: Yes, sir. It ain't funny no more.

Ms. Higgs: It was awfully funny!

LCR: I'm sure that's a good one among young folk, too.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yeah, I was young then! And honey, you know, and I never think - there are two or three things that I have learned, I read, and it seemed so far-fetched then. But as you get older, honey, you find the wisdom in these things. I read this once, this woman said, she was working for this woman, she said, I heard your friend died the other day. She said, who? Oh, she said, Sally. Oh, she said, she was no friend of mine. And the woman she was with was astounded, and said, no friend? I used to always see you laughing together all time. She said, but you never saw us crying together.

And I read this once, that when you reach threescore year and ten, and you can count your friends on one hand, and have some fingers left, count yourself blessed. Well, I thought that was the most ridiculous thing I had ever heard. And so when Willa Mae and I were just running on my friends, I thought, how silly. I can remember exactly where I was, it was down on Walnut Street. I am sure that has been fifty years or more ago, do you hear me? Do you hear? I can remember exactly where I was, because it was some book that I had at the time, I've always been, some book I had gotten from Mrs. Halliday's house, I had just brought it home and I was reading it, and I was in that book, and I was sitting there, in that front room, there were no living rooms in those days, it was the front room, and I was sitting there in that front room reading that book, and how, honey, how I can attest to that now. To that thing.

LCR: How true it rings.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, dear, and that is the truth. Count them on one hand and have some fingers left! But whatever reason, they die or something, whatever.

LCR: Or go their way.

Ms. Higgs: Or they go on there, they get some, for whatever reason, they leave you.

LCR: Or just fall out of favor.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. If you can count them on one hand and have a few fingers left, count yourself blest.

LCR: That's the truth, too.

Ms. Higgs: So, your mind, you never appreciate your mind, until you look at someone who doesn't have theirs, and then you have, I don't go around saying, I don't think, I don't consider myself, that I'm disadvantaged. I look at mine and I will take mine every time, instead of theirs. There she is over there, shut up in that house, she doesn't even know where she is in the world, really, or not.

LCR: You know, in fact, I called her.

Ms. Higgs: She doesn't know what is happening more than the man in the moon.

LCR: But more than that, I didn't have anything to say to her. I think when she asks how I am, she's referring back to another time.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, she is.

LCR: Because when I'm in her space, it's altogether different. It's kind of a vacant smile.

Ms. Higgs: If you would come here, she would meet you face to face. As she did, she was over here when you had this graduation thing. She didn't say anything. You couldn't even communicate with her. And you know how she and Bess used to –

LCR: Yes, indeed. Talking about Paul Newman and Robert Redford! Just like they lived out there in Hollywood, right across the back – [laughing]

Ms. Higgs: And I now she did that. She never called Bess' name. When I'd call her I talked to her about this. It's, I would just like – now, she would say something when I'd talk to her, when I'd say something to her about this, she slightly remembered. "Ah, yeah, we got to ... " She didn't really remember what she and Bess used to talk about. But every time I'd talk to her, she'd say something about you, and she'll remember, "Yeah, I like that boy, too." But now she will never, that's the only time she will bring up the Rosars, as long as she worked for them, she'd never bring them up, she'd never talk about ... so many, every week when I talked to her, she was going out of her mind, and suddenly I wouldn't be all that surprised if she didn't remember me, but I make it my business to call her once, and sometimes twice a week, just ...

Just to keep in touch. And you see, her brother is bad, they don't talk, there's no communication, and her nieces, well, one of them doesn't live there, there are two of them, of course, that hadn't lived there for, they moved out. And they're in that big old house. You've been, there to Willa Mae's house?

LCR: Mm-mm, never did.

Ms. Higgs: It was over there, on 87th, not far. They're not really far from here. And it's a great big house.

LCR: They almost rattle around in it.

Ms. Higgs: They are rattling around, and that other niece, she's on the third floor, there's a whole apartment up there.

But it's not made like this house, it's a big house, and they converted it to an apartment on the third floor. Letice, Letice never talks to her, she might talk, but you know, no communication, and if you had good sense, you could sit up in a house like that, and ...

LCR: ... and go bananas!

Ms. Higgs: And of course – with nothing to do. You got to have ... Now, I like to find myself something to do. Like here, and with your mama here, not going to school, not doing anything, I don't cook as often as I have been ...

LCR: Used to.

Ms. Higgs: And that gives me nothing to do, you know?

LCR: You know what you should do? Just, you do the cooking sometimes.

Ms. Higgs: Well,

LCR: Because that's your life.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, I know, but that's, I just don't, you got to have something to do. You do have to have something to do. And doing things that kind of keep you alive. Like, well, you don't have anything to do. And I have to rearrange my schedule now, with Vera, because I just get up, we just go, go shopping, see, Rivonda does the shopping now, and that was the job I had, you know. We would shop, and I took the groceries, I mean the bulk of them, once a month you went in and got the bulk of things, and

LCR: Flour, and sugar –

Ms. Higgs: Yes, all that kind of stuff, and the butter and the eggs, and all kind, and the canned goods, stuff like that. And you knew that's what you were going to do. For ten years, because that's what we did. And Vera had, that was her job, and she looked forward to it as much as I. I'm going to take Mother shopping! And going to see what's in the store, but you can just deteriorate if you don't have anything to do.

LCR: Yes, indeed.

And that's not just for old folks, either, that happens to young folks, too.

I think that might be what happened to Walter. He just got to messing around, and didn't do nothing with his life.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah! Honey, you have to have something to do. You just do.

LCR: Otherwise you'll be in a sorry state.

Ms. Higgs: Yes. I just don't understand it. You take anyone, anyone who sits down and doesn't do anything, and look what condition they're in, mentally and physically. Just look at 'em. They seem to think it's a great thing not to have anything to do, well, I enjoyed, it was just one of the things that I enjoyed doing. So, I just don't do much anymore.

We got off on a tangent there!

LCR: Yes, but it was an interesting tangent.

Ms. Higgs: You know, I just say this to you, and you just say some things to me, so I just – you know, in the Chinese language, that language is in symbols. You realize that?

And they said, one of the symbols in that language is, not to have to women in one kitchen. And it's just not good.

LCR: Yeah, they have a similar one in Africa about not having two women living under the same roof. I guess maybe it deals more with two wives living under the same roof. There's going to be trouble.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yes. I used to always say I would never live with my children, but it's just hard to have two women in the same kitchen. It just is. They feel like that's their domain, it's their territory, and they don't want anyone interfering, you know.

So.

Take my cousin Roxie. She had lost her vision, but she had just given up. Can't do nothing. I said to her, do you want to go to a nursing home? No, she – what, are you going to get sick there? I said, you know everything in your house, but you went blind. You go and you are losing your reason. You should know where everything is. She can't make herself a meal. If there's nothing else wrong with her except being blind, they have no sympathy from me.

LCR: It's all in your heart, though, you know. It's how much nerve have you got.

Ms. Higgs: And, of course, I have another point of view from what you have. If you are a Christian, you have God with you. He said, I will never leave you. Jesus said to Paul, I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me.

She had two kinds of drops she put in her eye, one three times a day, two drops you put in every four hours, and one she puts in twice a day. I said, well, if you tell me you cannot see again, I don't know what I will do. I said you have told me that 100 times, so

don't tell me any more! I said, get with it. I said, not only do you act like you have, you have lost your vision, I thought you had lost your mind also. [Laughs] And then I'd go and apologize, because of course she's an old lady. And I said, what you do, take those two bottles that you use every 4 hours, and put them together and put a rubber band around then. And you know those are the ones that you put in every 4 hours. And that other one, you just leave it there, you know that's the one you put in twice a day. Simple as that.

LCR: Simple as pie.

But she doesn't want to do that.

Ms. Higgs: She doesn't want to do that, she just puts, some people just put themselves on the pitty pie, and I won't put myself on the pitty pie, and I resent it no end that people put me on the pitty pie.

LCR: When they try to put you on it.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, don't put me on there, you know?

I come back from church on Sunday so tired, people always want to help you, and they invariably do the wrong thing. They grab you, without so much as a by-your-leave.

LCR: So much as a May I? Or, Do you want to do this?

Ms. Higgs: And they grab my right hand with my cane, and have the audacity to put my cane, the reason I can't – you know, the way I have it.

[Short gap in recording]

All you do is put my hand – and they teach you this, you see, when they teach you to travel, they teach you this, and that's another thing about some black people, they have had no mobility, you see, and they don't know anything about –

LCR: About getting around.

Ms. Higgs: No. So I say, just put my hand on the top of the car door, you see, you feel that, you take it from there. And then they tell you how to get in. Then you feel the seat, and you back in. That's the proper way to get in.

LCR: That's the way you're supposed to get in even if you're not blind.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, it is?

LCR: Mm-hmm.

Ms. Higgs: Most people don't do that.

LCR: No, they stick one foot in and start ducking their head down.

Ms. Higgs: I always did!

LCR: You know, I guess it was my father that told me that, because he always had these sports cars that were so low that you couldn't do that. You couldn't stick a foot in and then duck your head over, because the car was too low. You'd have to be stooping down on one leg in order to do that. He said, what you do is, you stand up with your back to the car, stoop down and poke your behind in.

Ms. Higgs: That's right!

LCR: And then you sit in it, and then you swing your legs in.

Ms. Higgs: That's right. That's what blind people do. That's what you were taught to do. But now, they don't, these blind people down there, they don't know to do, but you see, my instructor taught me that.

We went to Arlington Heights, that was a white church. Have you ever been to Arlington Heights?

LCR: No, I haven't.

Ms. Higgs: I think it's predominantly white.

LCR: I think it probably is.

Ms. Higgs: Anyway, these are whites here, this was a white fella, and so we were going along, and invariably they go along, and they creep, and I said, I'm not lame, I'm just blind, so keep walking.

LCR: We want to go somewhere, let's move it! I got places to go even if you don't.

Ms. Higgs: So he said, (and he was doing the best he could do, that he knew how, and these people have had no training and don't know how to handle blind people), so he said, we're coming to the sidewalk, he stopped. I said, listen, Bill, what's your name? I said, listen, darlin', don't give me any instructions, hear? I have mobility. I've been taught how to travel. I said, I know before you even speak, what I have come to. Before you ever said anything about the curb, I knew that I was there and how far I had to step to get to that. I said, I use my cane, the way they taught me. I said, now, don't try to tell me anything, because you don't know how. I said, all I want you to do, even if you don't let me hold your arm, you can just walk in front of me, and tell me, as long as I could follow your voice. I could follow you. I don't need any instructions. Let's go.

All right, all right!

And as soon as I got him, he carried me to where we were getting registered, and I found another one, she was a woman, and she said, Now we're coming to the rug.

[Laughs]

LCR: If you're walking on the floor, you couldn't –

Ms. Higgs: We're coming to the rug!

It really ain't funny.

So I just turn them off, and just go on, just keep walking. I said, just tell me, and I will go – “this way” doesn't mean anything to me. Tell me if we're going to make a right turn or a left turn. Or go forward. That means something to me. I said, but this way, I don't know what you're talking about. It could be up or down or wherever.

LCR: We might be getting ready to levitate, for all I know, from what you just said. We need our parachute!

Ms. Higgs: We're getting ready to hit the air!

LCR: What, you Superman?

Ms. Higgs: We're coming to the stairs – all right, it's 8 stairs, 8 steps down.

LCR: She meant well, she thought she was doing her good deed for the day. [Both laugh]

Ms. Higgs: I know. Sometimes you just get tired of saying anything, so you just walk along.

LCR: And accept the ...

Ms. Higgs: Lord have mercy, and when they get to the chair, I said, now listen, what we do, just put my hand on the back of the chair. Don't try to sit – they're going to try to direct my rump somewhere.

LCR: “Now turn around ...”

Ms. Higgs: I said, put my hand on the back of the chair, honey.

“I know where the chair is.”

Then I get my directions from that. Oh, brother, and you're so tired after ...

LCR: Yeah, I know, it must be tiring.

Ms. Higgs: I asked the Lord to give me strength, and He advised me to go ahead on. I thank God for Jesus, I don't know what I'd do without Him, I really don't. Your grandmother doesn't know what she'd do, I tell you. But I thank Him. Yessir. I really thank Him.

LCR: So let me ask you this. This is getting back to Mr. Poole, because when you first mentioned him, I thought of an episode that you mentioned, that you told me about a long time ago, isn't he the one that used to take you on these trips up to Maine?

Ms. Higgs: Oh, yeah, we used to go to Maine, Prout's Neck, honey.

LCR: What is it, Prout's Neck?

Ms. Higgs: You wrote me a letter, from where you wrote me when I was up there ...

LCR: Oh, that wasn't the letter about wigs and stuff, was it?

Ms. Higgs: Mm-hmm. You got that letter.

You got that letter!

Listen, Vera was over here, talking about these old letters, and she said, Mother, did you get a copy of – I said, leave them right there, and when I die, you can throw them away, have a ball!

LCR: Laugh at 'em, do anything you want.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, I got them. In my trunk I got valentines that your mother and various teachers had them make them at school.

LCR: Lord have mercy!

Ms. Higgs: Somewhere in that trunk.

LCR: That stuff.

Ms. Higgs: But it was, I was sentimental about my little children making me a valentine, instead of throwing it away, I kept it.

LCR: Aunt Mamie's got stuff like that, too, she's got a horse that I made for her when I was ten years old, somewhere in that area. She just, she liked that horse, and she just kept it.

Ms. Higgs: Yes, I know I have that letter, but you might have a letter, I might have more, that Madeline wrote me. So, I have, what do I have? I guess I must have a baby cap of yours, and I have, what did I have, your little shoes, I had Madeline's shoes. I did, and I gave them to her. She said she was going to have some bookends made from them. I don't know what she's going to do with them, she might not even have them any more.

LCR: She probably does. Women save stuff like that. Course I guess some men do, because I know Big Daddy saves stuff. Big Daddy's got some stuff that I'd have just got rid of a long time ago.

But I guess I got some, I got a couple of pictures that Masai drew when he was about three years old, that I thought were so good. And I keep them, I keep it rather. I probably have something that Nini made.

Ms. Higgs: Yeah, I've got a lot of stuff in that trunk of mine. My kids, and my grandchildren, letters, and things. I used to look back, when I'd go down in that trunk sometimes, for something down there, and look at them. Mother's Day cards, and birthday cards, and all that. I can't see them any more now. But they're there, so when I go ...

LCR: Some folks are going to have a field day, chucking stuff that they've been trying to get rid of for a long time, evidence!

Ms. Higgs: And sometimes they won't take time to read some of it. All kinds of stuff.

LCR: So, have you talked to Vera lately? I haven't talked to her in a couple of weeks.

Ms. Higgs: Vera comes here every Tuesday. She was here today. She comes to look at my things, my clothes, my shoes, stockings, comb my wig, and she brings me water, you know, because I still drink that water, and whatever I might want from the store. She brought me some ice cream. They had Breyer's on sale over at her store. She checked my clothes out to see what needs to be done, go to the cleaner's or whatever.

And I fixed dinner Sunday. I came from church, I had broiled steak, baked potato with sour cream, sliced tomato, beans and rolls, had that broiled steak a long time.

LCR: I remember that steak you fixed when I was staying with you in New York. That was the best steak! You remember that? And we just sat there and ...

Ms. Higgs: Ate like pigs! [Both laugh]

LCR: That might have been one of the, no, it wasn't the first time, but I remember you re-introduced me to avocados, I know you used to fix them when we were in Memphis, when we were living in that place where I got hit by that bicycle.

Ms. Higgs: You remember that?

LCR: Yeah, I remember that. I've still got scars from that. I remember you used to call them alligator pears.

Ms. Higgs: Lord have mercy!

LCR: And I always wanted to taste a piece of this alligator pear. You'd say, no, you don't want to taste none, and I just figured it would taste just like pear. That's what you called it. You said it was an alligator pear. It's just a pear that's got a funny skin on it. And you gave me a piece of this alligator pear, and I can see what my face must have looked like! You stuck this thing in my mouth!

Ms. Higgs: [Both laugh] Larry, you can remember that! I'm bad as my Mama was.

LCR: Do you remember that?

Ms. Higgs: Yes! But I didn't know you remembered it.

LCR: I remember seeing you sitting up there, you used to dice up chickens. I don't remember how chickens came, but you had to cut them up, and take the intestines out, and cut them up, and there's always a green thing, and you never wanted to break this green thing – the gall – because it would make the meat taste sour.

Ms. Higgs: It would make it bitter.

LCR: And so you were always careful not to break that.

Ms. Higgs: Child, you remember that!

I remember Mama, when I told her something about Mr. King, your Aunt Vivian's husband's father, he was a cook. Jim King. And when I told your mama something Mr. King did, Mama said you couldn't have been more than three years old to save your life, how could you remember that! But I told it to her.

LCR: I actually have some very vivid memories from that time. I don't know why, that time and not times after that, but I can remember a lot of episodes, like one time you – I don't remember where you, you must have just come in the house or something, and I think Ma and I were in the house, and you started looking around for your purse, and apparently you were in a hurry or something, I don't remember that much detail, but I remember you started looking for your purse, and you looked in the living room, and you looked in the kitchen and you looked in the bedroom, in the drawers, and unbeknownst to you, I was looking at you as you were looking for things, and you had a purse tucked up under your arm. But I just figured, well, that can't be the purse she's talking about. So I figured, well, I just won't say nothing. But honey, you were around and around that house looking for things, almost literally shifting the purse from one arm to another so you could look.

And then I said, well, Mother, is that the purse you're looking for? [Both laugh]

You talk about somebody nonplussed! I mean, just "Ah ... ah ..."

I mean, it wasn't funny, so naturally I didn't laugh, but when I think back on it, honey, I chuckle every time I think about that.

And there was an old lady that used to live somewhere nearby us. And this is, there were a couple of –

Ms. Higgs: Ms. Guy.

LCR: In fact, I think that was her name. But there were a couple of little girls that used to live around there, and I used to play with these little girls all the time. And we used to play

up under the house, and we used to make mud pies, and it was the most fascinating thing, because very often, like if it had rained out, we could get water from the street, but sometimes we didn't have water, and these little girls would urinate in the dirt.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, come on!

LCR: And we made mud pies.

Ms. Higgs: Now you've –

LCR: Honey, if you had known ...

Anyway, one of these little girls stepped on a can or a piece of glass or something up under this house, when we were making these mud pies, and she went hobbling home, or up to Ms. Guy, who was, there must have been a fire escape or back porch or something back there, they were kind of steep, too, and Ms. Guy licked that and rubbed it, and apparently she chewed tobacco or dipped snuff or something, in fact it must have been snuff, because she used to send me to the store to get it for her sometimes, Red something snuff. And she spit some of this snuff on this girl's foot, like that, to heal it or something, but I think about that now and get shivers, because I had shivers then. "Yikes, there's brown stuff coming out of this woman's mouth, what has she got in there?" And she started smearing it on this foot, and after she did it, the girl went back to playing, so -

Ms. Higgs: It worked!

LCR: I guess, because she didn't have to, we went back to doing whatever we were doing.

Ms. Higgs: I got that chain on the door; I have to take it off before your Mama comes.

LCR: It's 20 minutes to 10.

Ms. Higgs: Oh, I better get it off.

LCR: All right, well, I'll let you go then. We could sit up here and run our mouths for the rest of the night!

Ms. Higgs: I enjoyed it!

LCR: I did, too!

But anyway, you be sweet, and I'll talk to you later.

Ms. Higgs: Okay, dear. Bye-bye.