

# 1965—A Year in My Life

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The first day of 1965 was a Friday. Most Americans faced that frigid ice kissed morning wanting to hope, needing to hope, for things to get better. The night before, Mama and Daddy had let all the kids—even Baby Margaret—stay up until the old mahogany mantle clock struck twelve and then we toasted each other with apple juice. Since Lawrence was almost seventeen and I was on the downhill slide to eighteen, Daddy gave us a sip of the champagne he'd driven to South Carolina to buy. Our rural North Carolina county was dry and no one was allowed to sell alcoholic beverages—even for medicinal purposes. Four-year-old Mary Alice, dressed in her Annie Oakley pajamas, had fallen asleep on the couch and missed everything and my stair step brothers--nine year old Timmy, seven year old David, and five year old Michael--were glued to the television set and watched the big silver ball drop in Times Square. It was an uneasy time that even children sensed.

Everyone already knew that change was coming. It was in the air. A long time ago someone said "If you can keep your head while all around you are losing theirs...." Maybe it was one of Marie Antoinette's soothsayers who had first uttered these dire words of forewarning and like Marie, that poor doomed French queen, we should have listened and, perhaps, better prepared ourselves for the changes that were about to take place across our country as well as within our own families.

Months before, the American public had found itself in the midst of a revolution. One that had not begun with a loud bang and the acrid smell of freshly burnt gunpowder like so many revolutions do, but rather one that had begun with a simple sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. Integration had belatedly come to the South. About the same time, Americans realized the war in Southeast Asia was claiming the lives of too many of their sons. Even women marched--out of hot, steamy kitchens and into the workplace. Yes, the winds of change blew over the land. It was a time of fading innocence and a time of learning too much too fast, a time of dreams and nightmares.

## JANUARY

I was almost eighteen that January and ready to graduate from Chase High School whose olive drab walls were constricting around me. I couldn't wait to leave all that complacent familiarity behind me. I wanted to face the big bad world I only knew from television and magazines, to see the Pyramids, to ski the Alps, and to feel the hot Costa Rican sun against my pale winter skin. There was so much to do, so much to see, and there I sat behind Joey Abernathy while the hands on the clock in Mr. Greene's algebra class held me captive each day until three o'clock. It was only January and I wouldn't graduate until Friday, May 29th. Over and over, I counted the hours, the weeks that separated me from that magical day while time limped by.

On the twentieth day of January, Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as President of the United States for his first full term. We watched the inauguration on television during World History. Johnson talked about "The Great Society" while we wrote notes to each other in our "slam books"—the spiral notebooks where we asked and answered deep probing questions such as what's your favorite color and do you French kiss on the first date--and whispered about Mary Frances Hamrick who had not returned to school after Christmas break. Her mama said she had moved to Atlanta to take care of her ailing grandmother, but I knew her grandmother lived in Asheville. I didn't tell anyone, not even my best friend Sharon, and I figured Mary Frances might be pregnant but never voiced my suspicions out loud.

On the last day of that month, Nana Wilson—singer of hymns, baker of chocolate chip cookies, teller of fantastic stories, and believer of Heaven and Hell--had a heart attack and died suddenly while taking her afternoon nap.

## FEBRUARY

Senior year crawled by. In February Johnny Murphy broke up with me and a week later began dating the new girl who had transferred from somewhere in South Carolina. I returned his senior ring to him—the one I had worn around my neck on a silver chain since last August. I kept the chain and replaced his ring with a shiny peace symbol charm that had recently become popular. I didn't receive any fancy box of Valentine's candy that year and

I sat home on Saturday night and babysat my younger brothers and sisters while Daddy took Mama out to dinner and a dance at the Shrine Club.

A week later I broke my left arm at cheerleading practice and had to drop out of the squad. On that same day, Malcolm X was assassinated in Manhattan.

### MARCH

In March, a few brave Jonquils lifted their creamy yellow heads above ground and two hundred Alabama State Troopers met 525 civil rights demonstrators with armed force in Selma. The headline on the March 8th issue of the *CHARLOTTE OBSERVER* called it “Bloody Sunday.”

A small article ran in that same issue informing the few who wanted to know that 3,500 United States Marines had arrived in South Vietnam. These were the first American combat troops in that country. They had been there before that, but they had simply been called advisers.

Walter Cronkite told us on the evening news that a Russian cosmonaut had become the first person to walk in space. He had been outside his spacecraft for twelve whole minutes. Daddy, who didn’t trust the Russians one bit, proclaimed it to be another example of Soviet propaganda.

Dr. Radford cut the heavy plaster cast off my left arm just in time for prom. The skin beneath the flakey cast was white and dead looking. I stopped by the drug store on the way home for a bottle of Q-Tee Tanning Lotion and the next morning my left arm was a sickly orange against my white cotton blouse.

I went to the prom with David Padgett, a new boy in my English Lit class. Mama and I picked my dress out at the Davis’ Sisters Dress Shoppe. It was white organdy and strapless and Daddy said I looked like a princess. David brought me a corsage of pink roses and wasn’t sure what to do with it. His face turned red and his complexion almost matched his carrot colored hair. Thankfully Mama took over and pinned it to my waist. Daddy took our picture and told David to take care of his little girl. I was so embarrassed, but Daddy winked at me and said I could stay out until midnight.

At the dance, the DJ played “*Eight Days a Week*” a million times while we—the members of the junior and senior classes—moved under an improvised underwater kingdom. Johnny Murphy asked me to dance while Bobby Vinton crooned “*Blue Velvet*” but I said no and walked away. I noticed he had come to the dance alone. I wondered what had happened to the South Carolina girl, but I didn’t ask.

After the dance, David and I drove out to the lake and I missed my curfew. Mama grounded me for the rest of the weekend.

### APRIL

Spring was glorious that April—frilly dogwood whites and daffodil yellows danced across our front yard. Mama and Daddy began talking about building a new house. They had never had a new house and this seemed like a good time to build. Nana Wilson had left them a few acres of land at Lake Lure when she died in January and now Mama was always talking about the colors for the walls and looking at swatches of fabric for a new couch. I didn’t really listen to her because I was leaving. I was going to college and then—who knew?

In Washington, D.C., one Saturday, there was a march against the Vietnam War and over 25,000 protestors marched on the nation’s Capitol.

Pampers, a new disposable diaper, were advertised in the Sunday paper and Mama said the inventor should get the Nobel Peace Prize.

For Lawrence’s seventeenth birthday, Mama and Daddy bought him a hard used Volkswagen Beetle. It had been red in a previous life but now the color was molted and scabby. The left fender was crumpled and the driver’s seat spilled its cotton stuffing that dotted the seat of my brother’s pants. He loved the battered little car at first sight and promptly named her Sandra Dee. He painted a peace symbol on the driver’s door and got a job delivering pizzas for Fasolino’s Italian Restaurant.

### MAY

May came and now it was only twenty-nine days until graduation. I had been accepted at Appalachian State Teachers’ College but Daddy was holding out for The Women’s College in Greensboro and Mama had decided I would attend classes at Gardner-Webb, the small Baptist college about thirty miles away.

A black military car was parked in front of Mrs. Callahan’s house next door when I came home from school one Thursday. That night, the women in the neighborhood took food to Mrs. Callahan and they held each

other and cried. Danny Callahan was coming home from Vietnam, but he would be sealed in a black rubberized body bag and wrapped in an American flag. There would be no open casket at his funeral.

Daddy, who had been a lifetime Democrat like his father before him and his father before him, began attending Republican Party meetings. He had four sons and I think he was beginning to worry how long this undeclared war would last.

ABC, NBC, and CBS showed us young men in Berkeley, California, burning their draft cards and chanting “Hell, no! We won’t go!”

Daddy bought Timmy a skateboard for his thirteenth birthday. The Western Auto stocked only four of them because the manager, Mr. Dugan, wasn’t sure anybody would buy them. Mama served chocolate layer cake with vanilla ice cream and Spaghetti-Os for Timmy’s birthday dinner. We all loved the little round pasta—it was a brand new product Mr. Wells had just put on the shelves in his grocery store--but Daddy wouldn’t eat it, wouldn’t even taste it, saying it wasn’t natural.

After graduation, my girlfriends and I were headed to Myrtle Beach for the summer where we had rented a house a few blocks from the water and had lined up jobs at Mammy’s Pancake House waiting tables. With six of us sharing expenses we thought we might actually be able to save a few dollars for freshman year.

Graduation night finally came. We moved those tassels from right to left expecting to become wiser, more grown up but, of course, we didn’t. Afterwards we went to the Blue Bird Café and ate big thick greasy hamburgers and fries covered with ketchup and planned our summer. It was going to be the best ever!

## JUNE

It was hot—even for June. The little house we rented was too far from the ocean to let us catch any of the cooling ocean breezes. We ran vacillating fans and sweated. Grape Kool Aid and peanut butter sandwiches sustained us along with all the pancakes we could eat at work and the watered down beer that sunburned tow-headed tourist boys bought us at the Bowery. I fell in love two weeks at a time and said good-bye to those laughing boys of summer on Sunday mornings after they had checked out of their hotel rooms and stood before their loaded cars headed back to where ever they had come from.

The Rolling Stones blared from every speaker on Ocean Drive and we hummed about not getting any satisfaction under our breaths and were not even aware that we knew the words.

## JULY

Too soon, June melted into July while we shagged and twisted and baked under the hot sun in bikinis we had bought from a stand at the Pavilion. These were not suits designed for swimming and we knew that these skimpy pieces of brightly colored fabric would not be making the trip west towards home with us in August.

In the California district known as Haight-Ashbury, flower children and hippies grooved to Bob Dylan and smoked dope on the street and made love in the back of their vans.

My parents came down for a week in July bringing with them Grandma Brewer and all the kids, except for Lawrence who was working a summer construction. During that week, I moved in with them at the rental house on the beach. I left behind the bikini, my miniskirts, the beer cooler and the little bag of Marijuana I kept tucked under my mattress. It was wonderful to see them—I had really missed them--and to taste Mama’s potato salad and fried chicken again, but after three days I was ready to wave them goodbye.

Daddy talked a lot about what was happening in Southeast Asia. President Johnson had announced his order to increase the troop number from 75,000 to 125,000 and to raise the number of men drafted per month from 17,000 to 35,000. Lawrence was seventeen. He had to sign up for the draft soon.

## AUGUST

August was the saddest time at Myrtle Beach. Everyone was packing up to head home. Some of the luckier people were staying through Labor Day, but we—the girls from the little house on Sea Island Road-- were headed home. We had college waiting for us.

On the drive back home the car radio blasted the hot air with the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. In between the songs about love and loss, we heard about the riots in the black section of Los Angeles known as Watts. The announcer said this was the second day of rioting and the California National Guard had been called in. Unbelievably people were being killed on the sidewalks of an American city.

At home, Mama won the college battle. She did not defer to Daddy and I was not even considered. She wanted me safe at Gardner-Webb College. Mama had heard too many stories of what happened to girls who went

wild when they went off to school and she was determined that was not going to happen to her oldest daughter. Mama was adamant.

There was no sense wasting breath to argue with her so I packed my bags—once again leaving behind the miniskirts, the beer cooler, and the bag of Marijuana--and reluctantly enrolled in classes at Garner-Webb College where I earned beer money renting out my warm body for chapel duty. I had learned within the first week of classes that the mandatory twice a week chapel attendance was not well received among many of the students from out-of-state, but attendance was noted and punishment was meted out but as long as a body—any body--occupied your numbered seat, the monitors didn't care and you were saved from long hours in the library writing a thousand words about why you did not attend chapel. After several weeks, I could recite the Ten Commandments and most of the Psalms in my sleep.

President Johnson signed a law penalizing the burning of draft cards with up to five years in prison and a \$1000 fine as punishment. Jimmy Callahan's mother and the members of her garden club—Mama included--marched downtown and burned Jimmy's tattered draft card in front of the army recruiting office.

The county schools opened and, at Chase High School, twelve black students enrolled in Lawrence's senior class. Fifty-two others walked into Cliffside Elementary School on opening day along with Mary Alice, Timmy, David, and Michael. Parents, black and white, stood on the sidewalk and watched.

### OCTOBER

By October, I knew my college career was not going well. I had missed the deadline for my English 101 theme and I had refused to dissect my pig fetus in Dr. Rash's biology lab. The Dean of Students had called me into his office several times and the house mother at Carmichael Dorm had caught me slipping in after curfew several times and I had been seen in Gaffney drinking beer.

The first boat load of Cuban refugees arrived on the coast of Florida that month and I was much like those refugees. At the end of the semester I too would be afloat in a strange land.

By mid-month, anti-war protests were drawing tens of thousands in cities around the country. I marched in Columbia, taking care to keep my face hidden from the flash bulbs of the reporters. I was afraid of what Daddy and Mama would do if they saw me.

### NOVEMBER

I went home for Thanksgiving and ran into Johnny Murphy at the Blue Bird. The right leg of his khaki pants was pinned up and he stood with metal crutches under each arm. We talked a little bit. He told me about rehab at the Army Hospital at Fort Jackson and I talked about school, but neither of us really had much to say.

Two days after Thanksgiving, the Pentagon generals told President Johnson the troop levels in Southeast Asia had to be increased from 120,000 to 400,000.

We gathered around the food laden Thanksgiving table. Mama and Grandma Brewer had been cooking for two days and nose-tickling aromas lurked in every corner of our old house. Daddy bowed his head and prayed for our family and then our country. We talked about all our loved ones that were no longer with us.

Next door, the Callahans' house was empty and up for sale. Mrs. Callahan told Mama she couldn't look at Jimmy's empty room anymore and so she and Mr. Callahan had moved to Florida where her sister lived.

Mama and Daddy decided to stay in our rambling old Victorian on Main Street and canceled their plans to build at the lake.

I had applied at the University of South Carolina in Columbia and Mama didn't say a word when my acceptance letter finally came.

### DECEMBER

In December, we held our collective breath and strung brightly colored lights from our roof tops. We watched for the first few snowflakes and planned the best holiday parades anyone had ever seen. Kids searched the Sears-Roebuck catalog "oohing and ahing" at the wondrous assortment of toys. Daddy and Lawrence came back with the perfect Christmas tree for the living room.

Mama took a part-time job at Sears. She knew a lot about kitchen appliances and wanted to work in that department. After all, she had spent most of her adult life in front of one, cleaning one, or lifting one. However, Milton Barnes, the manager at Sears, thought men could better explain how the shiny avocado and harvest gold appliances worked to the housewives who came in with their husbands to buy the expensive items so Mama sold ladies' shoes and handbags instead.

Daddy expanded his business and now had two other agents fresh out of Gardner-Webb College working in his insurance office.

My brother, Lawrence, had been accepted at UNC-Chapel Hill and Mary Alice who would be eight two days after Christmas had her first piano recital coming up. Baby Margaret would attend kindergarten in January while Michael and David strutted through halls of Cliffside Elementary. Thirteen year old Timmy had suddenly discovered girls and was dragging the telephone into the hall closet at night after dinner.

Daddy was looking grayer and gaining a little weight. Mama watched him silently and then asked him to take her on a real vacation—just the two of them—and she left brightly colored travel brochures in the bathroom for him to see. And time flowed around us, over us, drowning us —swirling, tugging, pushing us this way and that--and we wondered if we could ever be the same again. But we had lost our innocence that year and, for some of us, it was too late to go back to who we were before.