



The Plastic Wallet

By Gracie Chandler

The tire swing soared through the humid South Georgia air. Leona, coiled inside, held on tight. “Higher!” she yelled. “Up to the sky, Tattletale!”

Her cousin gave the swing a mighty shove and Leona almost touched the pecan tree’s lush branches. “Wheee! I’m flying!” she shouted, and her thick, reddish-brown braids, flapping from either side of her head, did indeed look as if the eight-year-old had sprouted wings.

Tattletale Tyrone got ready to push even harder, but suddenly the tire began to flail. It spun wildly and Leona gripped the black rubber as it spiraled to a dizzying halt. She trailed her bare honey-brown toes in the sand and yelled at the figure hidden among the thick foliage.

“I know you did that, Willie Junior! How come you always got to be so mean?”

“How come you always got to be so selfish?” Her brother’s voice, muffled by the leaves, filtered down. “Daddy put that swing up for everybody, not just us, and you ain’t let Tattletale swing one time. Now you get out and push him some!”

Leona scrambled out of the tire and propped her hands on her bony hips. “Hey! This is the 40’s, we ain’t no slaves no more. You ain’t the boss of me!”

“Then how come Mama told me to be?”

She knew that was true but Leona, a bantam copy of her mother, refused to let him have the last word. “I don’t care what Mama say. You can’t *make* me do nothing, you ol’ black buzzard!”

Tattletale eased into the swing and shouted toward the branches. “Ow-weee! You gonna take that off *her*?”

A branch shook and Willie dropped to the ground. His plump body, heavier than most 12-year-olds, sent the dirt flying, covering Leona in a dusty film. She shot Willie an accusing glare, batting at the dust as she tried to keep it out of her hair.

“You know Mama told me not to get sand in my hair.”

Willie grinned, scooped up a fistful of dirt, and sidestepped toward Leona. She eyed the clinched fist and began to edge away, stooping just long enough to pick up a rock.

“You better not throw that dirt in my hair!”

“What you gonna do about it, yella gal?” He inched closer.

Leona stepped back. “This!” she yelled, throwing the rock. It clunked him on the forehead, breaking the skin. The chase was on—under rickety fences, through stalks of backyard corn, and around splotchy chicken coops. Leona easily outran him. Willie soon gave up and headed toward the pecan tree.

“Too fast for you again, huh?” Tattletale shouted.

“Naw, man,” she heard Willie shout back. “I wasn’t even *trying* to catch her.”

Leona kept running, not stopping until she realized she’d crossed the oyster-shell road behind Bradford Academy’s school yard. She started to turn back, remembering Mama’s warnings: “Don’t let me catch you over there. Play over here on your own side...you ain’t got no business over there.” But the image of a knot on Willie’s head and Tattletale’s teasing, kept her from going back. *I’ll just stay for a little while* she decided, and ventured deeper into the shadowy redbrick campus. The air was tranquil and soothing, shaded by moss-laden oaks; the manicured lawn, unlike the dirt-filled yard at her own wood-frame school, had been freshly mowed.

A violet crepe myrtle caught her eye and she knelt beneath its flowering branches. *If Mama find out I’m over here, it’ll all be Willie’s fault*, she thought. She picked at the loose grass and inhaled its sweet aroma. *Why he always be messing with me, calling me out my name? But I shouldn’t be calling him names, either*, she reasoned. *I wouldn’t never, ever, call Daddy a ol’ black buzzard, not even in my own head, and he be way darker than Willie.*

She threw the blades of grass to the windless air, watching them fall limply back into the stillness. Sitting cross-legged, she tried to figure it out: If she were dark-skinned like Willie and Daddy, instead of light-skinned like Mama, maybe her brother wouldn’t tease her so much.

She ran her hand through the grass again, but instead of clutching loose grass, this time she gripped something bulky, solid. She picked it up. The plastic on the dark green wallet was stamped to look like alligator skin. Her hands shook as she unzipped the square-shaped object. A clear plastic accordion spilled out, openings for lots of pictures, but it held only one: a poor-faced little white girl, so pitiful she couldn't even pretend to smile. The name scribbled on the back said *Amy Lou, 8 years old*. "Same as me," Leona muttered.

She flipped the picture aside, anxious to explore the wallet's nooks and crannies. The place for folding money held a phony dollar bill and the coin holder lined up fake nickels, dimes and pennies. There was even a place to keep a tiny yellow pencil and notepad. The neatest thing was the ruby-red heart dangling from the key chain. Leona thought it was the niftiest billfold she had ever seen.

"Just wait 'till ol' Willie see this!" she said, scrambling to her feet.

Stuffing her treasure inside her jeans shorts, she started toward the road. Suddenly a shrill voice rang out from across the schoolyard, startling her.

"Hey, you dumb nigger! What you..."

Leona looked back. Seeing the face of an angry white girl rushing toward her, she took off, not stopping until she got home.

Willie started in as soon as her feet hit the porch steps. "Where you been?" he demanded. "Mama been looking for you...and why you looking so crazy?"

Her eyes were wide and wild, and she could barely catch her breath. The sound of the girl's hateful words echoed in Leona's head, but she couldn't let Willie know she'd been in Bradford's schoolyard. She took a deep breath and flaunted the wallet. "Look what I found," she bragged, waving it in front of him.

Willie snatched the wallet and sneered. "This ain't nothing but a piece of junk."

Leona snatched it back, clutching it to her chest. "No, it ain't. You just jealous 'cause you didn't find it first. Finders keepers, losers weepers!" She stuck out her tongue.

"You gonna be weepers if Mama find out you been somewhere you ain't got no business."

She leaned against the slatted banister and crossed her arms. "Who gonna tell her? You?"

Willie eased down the steps and made his way towards the corner of the house. "No, / ain't," he said. "But them rednecks over by the pecan tree might."

Leona looked across the road. A lanky, swayback figure was talking to Tattletale. It was the girl from the schoolyard and she was holding a little girl's hand. Leona took a closer look and recognized the smaller girl as was the one in the picture—Amy! She was terrified as Tattletale led them towards her house. Leona rushed inside. Frantic for a place to hide, she darted behind the open front door; pressing her thin body against the wall, she waited.

Soon she heard the scruff of feet on the porch and banging on the shaky screen door. Squeezing her eyes shut she silently prayed. *Oh, Lord, please don't let Mama hear them; please Jesus, make them go away! Amen.*

The banging grew louder and, despite her prayer, the sound of Mama's slides came flip-flopping through the narrow shotgun house. Leona peered through the sliver of an opening formed by the door and the wall. She heard Mama shuffle into the room and clunk the scrub brush on the mantel. The smell of bleach tickled Leona's nose and she fought down a sneeze.

"Hold your horses," Mama cried out, drying her water-wrinkled hands on her apron. "I'm comin' as fast as—"

The sight of two white girls standing at the screen door made her stop, stock-still; her open, honest face became wary.

Mama peered through the screen. "Good afterno—," she began, but the older girl's nasal twang silenced her.

"You got a gal live here?" She pointed out into the road, towards Tattletale. "He said her name is Leona."

Mama stood at the door and Leona heard Tattletale say "Good afternoon, Aunty."

She ignored him, opening the door a bit. "Please come in, ma'am. It'll be a little cooler inside."

Ma'am? Who Mama talking to? Leona held her breath and pressed hard against the wall.

"I can't do that," the girl replied, "never had cause to go in a nigger house before."

The smaller girl tugged at the larger one's flour-sack shift. "But, Dilliann—my billfold...."

Dillian? What kind of name is that? Leona almost snickered.

“Well, just for a minute,” the older girl replied.

The girls entered and Dilliann looked around; her blond eyebrows knitted into a frown. Her eyes, little blue slits, narrowed even more as she took in the chenille-covered sofa and flower-patterned linoleum. Amy stared at the ceramic nick-knacks crowding the coffee table, and when the oscillating electric fan caressed her freckled face, she uttered a soft “Ohoo!”

Mama closed the front door. Leona, drenched in sweat and heart hammering, stood in the glare of six astonished eyes.

“That’s her!” cried Dilliann.

Mama grabbed Leona’s arm and snatched her from behind the door. The wallet tumbled to the floor.

“Mama, I...” Leona began.

Her mother pointed to the wallet. “Where you get that from?”

“I-I...” she stammered.

“She stole it,” Dilliann shouted. “She stole Amy Lou’s billfold!”

“No, I didn’t! I found it in the schoolyard.”

Mama’s face was calm, but her grip tightened and her voice held an urgent threat.

“You callin’ this white lady a liar, Leona?” The words “white lady” hung in the room.

Leona looked at Dilliann’s pimpled schoolgirl face and scowled. “But Mama, she ain’t no la—.”

Mama’s jagged fingernails sank into Leona’s arm, “Answer me, you little heifer!”

Leona yelped in pain as blood seeped from her broken skin. That’s when she knew that something bigger than crossing the oyster shell road had happened; knew she’d crossed a line she couldn’t see, one she hadn’t known existed. Leona fought back the tears; even her own mother seemed like a stranger. “N-no ma’am,” she stammered, “s-she ain’t no liar.”

Mama slackened her hold and tiny drops of blood dripped to the linoleum.

“Then pick up that wallet and say you sorry!”

Leona stooped to pick it up, remembering how happy she had been when she first found the wallet.

“I’m s...s...sorry,” she said, gingerly placing the wallet in Amy’s grimy, outstretched hand. The girl grasped it triumphantly; her wide, scraggy smile revealed a mouth of crooked, over-crowded teeth.

Dilliann sneered in Mama’s general direction. “You know niggers ain’t allowed on white folks’ property. Your little bastard come snooping ’round Bradford school again, my pa’ll take care all ’o you.”

She draped a protective milk-white arm around Amy Lou’s thin shoulders and the gesture made Leona long for her own mother’s comforting strength. But Mama’s eyes were bland, holding no fire. Her wide grinning mouth condemned no one. “Yes’um, I be sure to do that. Thank you mighty, ma’am.”

The pair turned to leave and Mama shuffled to the door, holding it open for them. Leona’s last hope for redemption was crushed. She lost the determination not to cry, and a mixture of tears, sweat, and dirt, muddied her face.

Mama stood at the window, peeping through the starched lace curtains. When the girls vanished from sight, she slumped to the couch and buried her face in her hands. The fan’s gentle hum amplified the room’s silence. A peculiar odor hung in the air and a mixture of humiliation and frustration loomed over the once inviting space.

“Mama, I ain’t mean to—.”

Mama deeply exhaled and lifted her head. “Let it be, Leona, it’s over and done with, let it be.”

The subject was closed and Leona tried to ease her mind; she had already thought too much that day. But she could no longer hold it in. Her bawling bellowed out into the yard. Through the open window she heard Tattletale alerting the neighborhood. “Hey, ya’ll—come listen; Leona getting a *real* whipping!”

Mama stood up. “Leona! Hush that fuss and go get that bucket of bleach water out the kitchen.” Her voice was firm and decisive.

Leona, still sniffing, ran to do her bidding and soon struggled back with the pail. Mama knelt beside it, dousing the scrub brush. She sloshed water on the already immaculate floor, singing softly as she scrubbed: “*This joy I have, the world didn’t give it to me....*”

The brush moved to her upbeat tempo. Leona, overjoyed that Mama was herself again, joined in. “*The world didn’t give it; the world can’t take it away!*”

They sang in a reaffirming harmony of alto and soprano, cleaning and scouring until exhaustion brought a measure of peace and the room felt like home again.

December brought Christmas and Santa brought exactly what Leona had asked for—a brown cowgirl suit with a fringed vest and a baby doll that peed when she fed it. She also got something she hadn't asked for: a dark green, plastic wallet stamped to look like alligator skin. A ruby-red heart was attached to the key chain. She fingered the wallet, uneasy, not knowing how she was expected to react. She decided to say what she felt.

“Mama, why you let that white girl—.”

“Let it be, Leona, it's over and done with; let it be.” Her voice was strong, resolute, and the case was closed.

But Leona knew it was not over. The wallet had uncovered some threatening unknown, something she had to tackle by herself—like learning how to ride a bike or tie her own shoes, but without the pride of accomplishment. She didn't even know what the problem was or how she was going to solve it; she just knew she *had* to, or become two people like Mama.

She stared at the wallet, frowned, then tossed it back under the Christmas tree. *Willie be right, that ain't nothing but a cheap piece of junk.*

THE END