

A shocking revelation changes a young girl's life forever.

THE CHURCHKEY KID

by Carla Baughman

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— A MEMOIR —

The
CHURCHKEY
Kid



Carla Baughman

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Chapter One

The water was cold. In my excitement I almost didn't notice the shivers that went up and down my spine. I moved cautiously, making my way about a hundred yards upstream to my favorite spot near the bridge, Dixie cup in hand, held high so the water couldn't weaken the paper before I completed my mission. My younger brother, Charles, age 9, (we call him *Chic*) followed behind me but then wandered off in another direction. We all — myself, Chic, my older brother Melvin, age 15, and my 16-year-old sister Kathy — had chosen areas we liked to imagine were exclusively ours. I reached down and rustled the tops of the emerald green shrubs that lined the river on both sides. Their bright leaves shone in stark contrast to the dry brown grasses behind them, which had lost the luxury of quenching their thirst in the wettest sand. The distant backdrop of Cottonwood trees, with their light green foliage, were most likely robbing them of their already-limited supply of underground moisture.

I was in my very own world. A place where I had control of everything around me and I could experience the peace and harmony I craved. Almost up to my hips now, I was glad wherever I was in the river, this was likely the highest the water would get.

Looking down through the clear moving water, I watched my feet sink deeper into the soft beige sand, full of rocks of all colors and sizes. I didn't like getting my long hair wet so I would "toe dive," as I called it; I scooped up a foot-full of pebbles, shook my leg to sift out the dirt on the way to the surface, and then transferred the captives remaining to my hand. After choosing the best ones for my collection, I would drop the rejects one by one, watching their slow, graceful dive back to the bottom.

Continuing onward, I slowly swayed my hips from side to side, doing a water dance while humming one of my favorite songs, *Daydream* by the Loving Spoonful. I missed my GE transistor radio. It had almost become a part of my anatomy now, stuck to my ear most days like an earmuff in the cold winter snow. "It might get wet," Mom had said before we left. "Then it won't work anymore and you'll be very upset."

I had to admit she was right. It was my one prized possession that I usually took with me everywhere. The thought of damaging it made me very sad. I thought about the time when I spent the weekend with my cousin Nora, who was only a few months older than me. We would while away the whole day huddled around my handheld radio, trying hard to win Davy Jones's ponytail on the local radio station, KFXM. We took turns frantically dialing the number on her Trimline rotary wall phone until they announced the winner. We memorized every song the Monkees sang and we could hardly wait until

September, when NBC was planning to air a new weekly show, starring our newest heartthrobs.

I stopped for a moment to shift the medium-size cup to my other hand, thinking how glad I was it wasn't the "World's Largest Paper Cup" that was over three stories tall. It was a local landmark in front of the Lily Tulip Cup Company on Iowa Street in Riverside, California. We loved it when Mom would drive by there so we could stare up at it, mesmerized by its size and wondering how they made a cup that big. Chic always added to the adventure for me by saying stuff like, "Carla, wouldn't it be fun to climb up there and look inside?" I could actually picture what it would be like to peep over the side and into that huge cupful of what no doubt was our favorite drink, cherry Kool-Aid.

Near a bend off in the distance, I heard Melvin and Kathy talking about building a dam as they had done many times before, so they could jump off the big rocks into deeper pools. I was always the "scaredy-cat" of the family, so I stayed away from that area. I was terrified of falling in over my head. Besides, I preferred being alone and had not come here to swim, but to explore life.

"Melvin, come help me lift this big log!" Kathy yelled.

"I'll be there in a minute," Melvin replied.

Only a year apart in age, they did everything together these days. Kathy had the typical tomboyish, "I can do anything you can do"

attitude. Our oldest sister, Linda, married her boyfriend Leroy when she was only sixteen. She begged Mom to let her, and my stepfather liked the idea because it would be one less mouth to feed. I know because I heard him say it one night. I was really heartsick she was leaving because she had always been more like a mother to me than a sister. I know she felt sorry for us, but she didn't like it at home either. As the oldest, she had taken care of us a lot, and was yelled at the most when we all did something wrong while our parents were away. I missed her looking out for us and protecting Chic and I from the torment of our two mischievous older siblings when we were alone with them.

I felt the sun on my back now, warming the long white T-shirt I had put over my new red and white polka dot two-piece bathing suit to keep my back from getting sunburned. At least that's what I told everyone: my skin was fair and I had been burned to blisters once before. I kept the real reason a secret and was glad no one questioned me further. I did resent not being able to show off my new bathing suit, though.

Just when I was beginning to enjoy the silence, I was startled by a familiar sound that always alarmed me at first, but I reminded myself it was not as secluded here as it seemed. The Santa Fe Railroad ran parallel to the river, the tracks stretching in both directions as far as you could see. The sound of the engines came alive out of nowhere, progressively getting louder and louder,

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shaking the ground all around me upon arrival, and then fading slowly away into the distance. I loved the trains, even though the squealing noise pierced my ears, distracting me from what I was about to do. I was frightened although exhilarated as it went by, feeling somewhat protected by its awesome power.

About a mile further upstream was an old wooden railroad trestle. We could hike there without ever having to leave the river, twisting and turning around several narrow bends until we reached the sandy walking path that led up to it. The water there was only ankle deep in most places, so I usually took my time, inspecting the new surroundings along the way. After we arrived, we would be able to stand directly under the large framework and hear the deafening roar of the train up close and personal. The musty smell of tar lingered in the air and many lovers' autographs had been etched in numerous places in the reddish-brown wood. Melvin would always have to assure me that no trains would show up while we were there, saying he had them timed. I didn't really like it there because I worried too much about everything. What if the train fell through the shaky wooden bridge and killed us all? What if the boulders tumbled down upon us and we were crushed? The only reason I wanted to go was because under the beams there was a procession of large granite-like boulders, stacked haphazardly about, with a dirt path among them leading right up under the overhang but not close enough to touch it. We would

climb up to the top and take turns yelling, “Hello, Hello!” and listen as our voices echoed back to us. I also enjoyed playing sand and rock hopscotch in the cool, even dirt.

Arriving at the far side of the shallow river, I looked up to see the familiar Route 66 two-lane highway that linked Victorville with other points in southern California. The silvery steel trusses, rising high above the thick concrete platform, crisscrossed and created a rectangle of support that spanned diagonally across the width of the somewhat dry lakebed. I loved to watch the cars play peek-a-boo with the railings as they whizzed by, their color flickering in and out like an old-time movie. Looking below, I was glad the expansive structure created a large shadow in the water below, protecting my hazel blue eyes from the sun. I resented the sudden shade though; it robbed me of warmth and brought punishing chills to interrupt my concentration.

Laying my back flat against the cement support column, I positioned myself as I always did, somewhere in the middle, halfway between the darkness and the light, so I could relish the best of both worlds while I waited. A dragonfly buzzed over my head, diving for a small butterfly he was hoping to make his next meal. I shoed him away because I loved butterflies, especially the large orange and black monarchs we had in our front yard at home. I used to like catching them until someone told me they lose the powder on their wings if you touch them and they can't fly anymore. I made the mistake of

telling Melvin and he laughed at me for being so protective of them. He also enjoyed watching me run away when he burned ants on the sidewalk with a magnifying glass.

I carried their small curled up dead bodies to the backyard, giving them a proper burial, then making a small cross out of tree branches and setting it on their grave.

I also hid in the backyard when he and Kathy would catch June bugs and tie a string to their back legs and fly them around like an airplane, as they buzzed round and round with nowhere to go. I was afraid they might put one on me, so I never tried to rescue them.

I listened quietly now for that welcoming sound to affirm I was on the right track. The rippling effect of the small waves calmed me, escaping around my legs, then swelling up as if to say goodbye as they continued on their way. *Would we find any here this time?* I wondered, excitement building in me as it had many times before, turning to butterflies in my stomach. Here the reeds grew tall, obscuring the dormant beds behind them, painting a healthy green border all along the way, which would sustain the life that called them home.

I heard a splashing sound and quickly turned around, scouring the leaves and parting the thick brush, looking for any signs of movement. I spotted a few minnows swimming frantically about as if they were sure danger was ahead. Usually when I tried to catch them, they seemed to know which direction my cup was pointing, and raced

back the other way to the safety of their sanctuary. I enjoyed the challenge of catching them, but for now it seemed harder and would require more tolerance than I had to give. I always let them go after a few minutes of observation anyway, and today they were not worth the frustration to add to what I already felt.

I waited patiently to see any motion. I knew they were black and would be easy to see in the clear water. Suddenly I heard a loud girlish laugh coming from our car, which was parked down the left side of the bank and up onto a dirt road, near a row of tall mesquite trees that provided protection from the scorching sun. We had never parked there before. We normally parked our maroon and tan station wagon close by with the extra food and supplies we might need for the weekend ahead. After parking, we would set up camp in the sandy area down below under the large cottonwood trees, pitching our musty-smelling, army-green canvas tent on the soft dirt.

I strained to see what was so funny but all I could see was my mom and that man Jim in our car, kissing. I despised him and I hated the fact that my mother liked him. I looked away, angry my peaceful world had been so rudely interrupted. I was glad we had only come here for the day though. I tried to forget the turmoil I felt inside and concentrated on the task at hand.

I looked around in the reeds more intently now, slowly parting the tall green beds that beckoned me here in the first place, bringing me back to the closeness I hoped to soon enjoy. All at once I saw one

and readied my cup, weak now from the constant splashing of the water onto the paper vessel. I gently scooped up the half-pollywog, half-frog and delighted in my swift capture. Pollywogs. What a funny English name for a tadpole! What a strange-looking creature, somewhere between a frog and a fish. I felt giddy and giggled out loud, looking around to see if anyone was watching.

“It’s okay,” I said, “I won’t hurt you.”

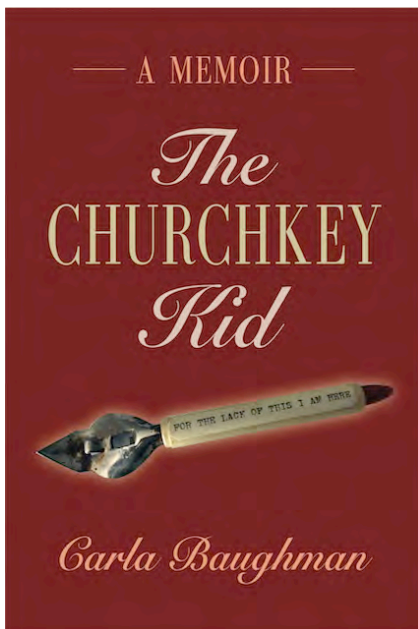
I reached in and touched the dark silky round head, stroking him tenderly; assuring him I would soon let him go. I was careful not to injure anything I caught because I knew what hurt was like and I couldn't imagine harming anything I loved so much. He swam frantically about, searching round and round in my paper aquarium to find an escape route. He was just beginning to develop his two small back legs and couldn't use them to gain leverage, so he remained helpless in my watery prison. Tadpoles first develop in the egg, and then they eat their own egg case. After that, they often seem to disappear because they are so small you don't see them in the big pond. But after a while, you'll see them swimming around in the warm areas around the edge of a river.

After months of careful examination, I discovered tadpoles grow their back legs first, and then their front legs grow in, and shortly after that, they lose their tails. This is an amazing time in a frog's life where they are approaching the delicate stage of turning into a frog. After a while, they won't be pollywogs anymore; they'll be froglets.

I've seen them in all sizes and stages of development and no matter how many times I came back here over the years, I felt just as thrilled and fascinated to see them as when I spotted my first one.

Strangely, I felt a kinship with these fragile beings and was compelled to protect them as they adapted to this weird time in their lives. Even though I didn't know how or why they had to go through it, I assumed they were probably just as afraid of the unknown as I was. After all, nothing had prepared me for all the adjustments I had gone through in my twelve years of life either. All I knew was I had been questioning who I was and why I came here from as young an age as I could recall. Why didn't I fit in? What was I always afraid of? Would each phase of my life be as hard as these helpless creatures seemed to be? Slow and complicated? Was this a necessary period of growth along the way, to test my resilience to this abnormal world we lived in, full of dangers and fears that seemed to do nothing except make me less willing to adapt? Or are we all just acting out a predestined existence where each separate experience we have has no meaning at all?

My questions would have to go unanswered for now as I was still very confused as to what path I was to take and who I would become. I observed my captive for a little while longer and then gently placed him back into the refuge from where he'd come, wishing him a safe and pleasant journey on his way to becoming a frog.



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