

A Selection from: ANYTHING IS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY,
BUT THIS WAS A CONVERSATION

Boyd was a cripple from polio clutching crutches and smiling thinly with talk. It was polio put us in fear when the rains came those New Orleans summers my mother screaming, "You'll catch polio I'm telling ya! Sam make them wear shoes! In the rain yet I'll give ya playing you wanna play!" We believed the hand but not the polio part.

One night the mattress in the back downstairs bedroom caught fire; Louis and Jack Morris my cousin were shooting their cap guns. A spark flew. I was watching TV. Bebe and I, we carried buckets and pots of water from the kitchen down the hall slipping against the walls to throw on the mattress. Louis and Jack Morris ran upstairs with white faces screaming "FIRE! FIRE!" and my mother came flying down the stairs screaming "FIRE! FIRE!" slapping at anything in sight which was mostly me carrying a pot of water sending me and the water against the wall. "Playing with matches again!" she yelled and the hand across my face whap whap whap! It wasn't much of a fire and what was she hitting me for anyway? Childhood is a time of great mystery obviously. "I was just watching TV," I yelled. The fire was out with one or two splashes of water. But the EVENT was in progress. Aunt Fanny was already on the phone calling the Fire Department and the National Guard. Then the sirens knifing into the house, black rubber raincoats, men with hoses and big rubber boots and mom still slapping anything she could find hysterically. Shit I said throwing the pot of water into the bathroom put out your own damn fire.

But then it was all over. The house full of neighbors, Boyd on crutches, Mrs. Highbee oooing and ahhing. Aunt Fanny saying, "Regina, sit down." The fire out but my mother still looking into corners calling "FIRE! FIRE!" Did I ever tell you how crazy my family was? The next morning we took the mattress from the back yard where it had smoldered out and threw it out front for the trash pick up. Mom discovered that her purse was missing. She had left it on the kitchen table the night of the fire. She started waving her hand in the air, "Oh my God, my purse, where's my purse!" Whack! Whack! She starts slapping me around and here we go again. Aunt Fanny screaming, "Regina sit down, please," but Aunt Fanny's a little nutty too and before long, Whack! "Where's your mother's purse!" The slapping lasted into the night with news about President Truman and the war that was going on in Korea. Very thin men walked home with their heads bandaged and bloody. I was eight years old, and the news must have been about terrible things. The grownups looked at the TV set very seriously. I was put to bed the next night after a bubble bath and very soft flannel pajamas under warm covers. We never found the purse. Boyd took it, I know, but no one believed me.