Our little neighborhood gang had tired of Cowboys and Indians. We had played Restaurant, exchanging Fool’s Gold dug from the arroyos near our home for cold biscuits from the kitchen and carrots and tomatoes from the garden. There was no shade near the woodpile where we stacked logs to play School.

Huddled beneath purple-blossomed Chinaberry trees, one of us speculated, “What do you think is in the hen house?”

My sister ventured in among the perches and nests and soon returned with a lone egg cupped in her hands. We huddled around like students observing a procedure in a surgical theater, while Valura, our natural leader, whose second toe was longer than her great toe, broke open the egg. (Having a second toe longer than her great toe, her mother taught her, was a sign she was destined to be the boss in her family.)

The contents of the egg spread over the ground in the center of our circle. We all leaned in and stared in silence. Suddenly a wrenching, sulfuric odor hit us. We leaped back, grabbed our noses, and made awful faces.

After our nausea eased up, together we decided that what lay before us were the earthly remains of an unborn chick. Without question, it deserved a proper burial.

We knew what to do. Funerals were a mainstay of the social life of our village. A Diamond matchbox from our kitchen served for a coffin. Bobby got Papa’s shovel from the toolshed. Valura led, and we marched single file across the grass, past the barn, and into the alley on a scorching July afternoon. Along the way Helen gathered a handful of tiny white and purple wildflowers.

The ground in the alley was dry and hard. The weight of the shovel, whose handle reached above our heads, made excavation even more difficult. With a merciless sun bearing down on us, each took a turn. The instant the hole was deep enough, we placed the matchbox in it and made a mound using the excavated dirt.

Two sticks bound together with stems of Johnson grass formed a cross at one end of the grave, and Helen placed her bouquet in the center.

Forming a circle around the grave, we bowed our heads. I said the only prayer I knew:

“No I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

We sang a hymn with a hearty chorus: “In the sweet by and by.” Eventually, all must die. With a little bit of luck, we’ll meet again “on that beautiful shore.”
We were about to hurry to the nearest shade when someone said, “There’s been no weeping and wailing.” We had forgotten this essential element. So, drawing back into a circle around the grave, we began trying very hard to cry. But crying on demand did not come naturally to any of us.

Looking for a quick way to escape the cruel heat, I suggested we go around the circle, each one slapping the person on his right, until someone cried. It was agreed.

So, we began. We took turns, one after another. All of us were reluctant to slap a good friend, so the slaps were more like pats.

Forgetting that Valura, older and a head taller than me, was on my left, I shouted, “If we’re gonna do it, do it and get it over with!”

Like lightning from a cloudless sky, Valura’s arm flew through the air. Her open hand blazed a trail across my face and left my jaw stinging.

Forget the chick! Forget the ceremony! Forget the fact that I had just asked for it! I grabbed my jaw and raced into the house, crying at the top of my lungs. And I told on Valura Sides for hitting me!