

Chapter 9

VERNICE

Mrs. Ola Mae and Miss Jemison ended up driving me to Atlanta, my first road trip. Beside me on the back seat was a carpetbag stuffed with clothes that were approximately my size, donated by the congregation of First Iconium. I was ashamed to accept their gifts after they had just passed the plate the month before to help with my tuition and the saints had given up a year's worth of S & H stamps.

"No weapons formed against you shall prosper," said the First Lady as I hung my head.

"Thank you," I said. "I never intended—"

"You are not the only one this happened to. After they cut Christ down from the cross, the soldiers cast lots for his clothes. Don't you remember that? Young lady, you are walking a path trod by the King of Kings."

All that endured of my original plan was my round hatbox, bound by masking tape the color of the ugly bus driver's face. What had just been so elegant now looked like the entire history of the Negro race—battered but held together somehow. My own face was in similar condition, marked with the print of Larry's hand. Don't ask me how or why, but my spirit was forti-

fied by the experience. I felt a little more like Annie and Aunt Irene, eager to get away from Honeysuckle, not caring if I never saw the state of Louisiana ever again.

From the back seat, I studied their heads. Mrs. Ola Mae covered her pin curls with a floral scarf. Her skin, inky black, shone with a coating of what smelled like evergreen needles. Miss Jemison wore her thick hair split in two, braided down the sides, pulled up, and pinned tight. As soon as we passed the sign that said sUnny siDe, meaning we were officially out of town, Mrs. Ola Mae said, "Call her Raynelle, and call me Mae." Then they released whooping laughs.

"Congratulations," said Miss Jemison. "You have officially broken free."

Mrs. Ola Mae clapped, but her hands were so soft, they hardly made a sound at all. Then she reached up and tucked Miss Jemison's braid back into the teeth of a tortoiseshell comb. As her hand retreated, Miss Jemison twisted her head to graze Mrs. Ola Mae's palm with her lips, confirming the rumors with pleasure.

My teacher watched me in the rearview mirror and I felt myself smile. She nudged her wife with the hand not guiding the wheel. It tickled me a little to think that word, "wife." I was glad that I had only pronounced it in my mind. Ladies couldn't marry ladies, but it was exciting to think that maybe they could. Or maybe it was thrilling just to see that ladies can be that way to each other. My mind went to darling Annie, run off to Memphis. And while I knew that it would have been a disaster to follow her, I couldn't help imagining what would have happened if I had.

"At Spelman College," Miss Jemison said, "there is much to be navigated. I am class of 'twenty-seven."

"The year of the flood," I said.

Mrs. Ola Mae said, "Raynelle, she's saying you are old as Noah!"

"Not that flood," I said. "The Mississippi flood."

Miss Jemison said, "Ola Mae, the girl is just only giving some context. In return, I will provide her with the same."

In the voice I recognized from the classroom, she gave me a condensed history of my new home. Spelman College was

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founded in 1881. “So how long was that after Emancipation?” While I scrambled to do the math, she said, “Eighteen. Unless you lived in Texas. So, these two white ladies decided to make a school for colored women. They just had eleven girls and one hundred dollars. This is why I don’t divide the world by color. These two missionaries from up north came down to Georgia to truly do the Lord’s work.”

Mrs. Ola Mae wasn’t as convinced. “You know they don’t do nothing unless they have their own reasons.”

“Man has his reasons; God has His reasons.”

“Maybe they were each other’s reason.” Mrs. Ola Mae let out a zesty laugh.

“And I got my reasons,” I piped up from my place behind them.

“She can talk,” said Mrs. Ola Mae. “You know, I was there when you barked out your first word. You shook the whole house. MOTHER! I thought Irene was going to stroke out.”

Miss Jemison said, “Mae, stop talking over her.”

Mrs. Ola Mae said, “Forgive me, Raynelle.” Miss

Jemison said, “Forgiven.”

From the back seat I said it, too, “Forgiven,” because it felt like the way everything in church was punctuated with “Amen.”

“So where were we?” Mrs. Ola Mae asked.

“Vernice was giving us her *raison d’être*.”

With a wink, Mrs. Ola Mae said, “See? I got me a school-teacher.”

“And I’m going to *be* a schoolteacher!” I said.

“For somebody to get?” said Mrs. Ola Mae.

“Mae,” said Miss Jemison. “Be serious for a minute.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll behave.” To me, she said, “What’s your reason, baby? Why are you heading off for Atlanta like one of the three little pigs? Seeking your fortune?”

“Just to see what’s out there, I guess.”