

A FAMILY GATHERING

a novel

*A 12 year-old girl's traumatic journey
from tragedy to triumph.*



GENE
CARTWRIGHT

A Family Gathering

a story of triumph over tragedy

A literary journey, fourteen years in the making.

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Disclaimer:

The town of Reedville, Arkansas, mentioned in this fictional work, should not be confused with the actual town of Reedville, Arkansas.

in Honor:

Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee

One cannot mention the one without, in the same breath, speaking the name of the other. That fact says all that need be said about the love and life they shared. They were, and are still, one.

One cannot honor the one without honoring the other. And so I am honored to honor them both. They have long been an inspiration to me and countless others. I dedicate this work to them, their inspiring lives, their unquestioned commitment to each other, to their craft, and to the betterment of humankind.

Mr. Davis sought no awards, no public praise, no special honor. His reward came daily, through his unwavering devotion to his calling. Yet, what will leave an even more indelible mark is his great humanity—their great humanity. Both he and his beloved wife were always determined to, by their deeds, not words alone, uplift us all. May it always be so.

Thanks.

Deepest thanks to my editor and devoted friend, Louise Turner. It is impossible to overstate the extent of your invaluable contributions to this 'labor of love.' Your tireless work and boundless dedication to this novel were matched only by my own.

A Family Gathering

third novel by

Gene Cartwright

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Dedication

For the innocent victims of life's tragedies;
for those who struggle with crippling adversity,
and those who have overcome it—lifting
themselves from the basement of their lives.

—
For Bruce Henry,
my best friend when we were mere 'infants'
at George Washington Carver High School, in Baytown, Texas.
And for all those—present or now absent—whose footprints once marked
those slate-grey hallways so long ago. That hallowed institution, once a beacon
of hope in a segregated system, is now gone, destroyed by those with no sense
of history; reduced to dust by those who gave not the slightest damn
for generations to whom it meant so much. Even the tiniest
flakes, from decades-old brick and mortar, have long since
been scattered like cremated remains; made to vanish
by the relentless force of dry summer winds.
And yet, that institution stands,
even now...in all of us.

—
For Willianne Lewis, my longtime friend and confidant,
whose belief in me never falters. You are irreplaceable.
Thanks for reading AFG,
and offering invaluable help and advice.

—
For all those whose paths my life has crossed,
whether for good or ill, and whether charged to their account or mine.
Live long, live well.

—
Finally, and always,
for my parents, Elmer and Marie Cartwright.

A Poem

I Weep No More
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I weep no more.

Well of tears—bone dry,
bed of thorns now lies empty,
absent my presence, waiting, hoping, expecting,
foretelling my return to its piercing embrace.
But I have moved on.

I weep no more.

Wall of fear—once stone,
blown asunder, now gone forever,
reduced to dust, crumbled, shambled,
unable to thwart my will, nor prevent my escape.
'Cause I have moved on.

I once longed for the serenity of death, the solitude of nonexistence,
the eternal peace of unbeing—as in never having been. But no more.
I once sought the tomb of a mindless darkness, unacquainted with
the informing nature of memory, or the gift of light. But no more.
I have found my voice, heard my song, seen my spirit leap
like a geyser toward heaven.
And I have moved on.

I weep no more.

Well of tears—bone dry,
bed of thorns now lies empty,
craving my presence, waiting, hoping, expecting,
predicting my relapse to its cruel embrace.
But I have moved on.

I weep no more.

Wall of fear—once stone,
blown asunder, now gone forever,
reduced to dust, crumbled, shambled,
unable to shunt my will, nor stay my escape.
'Cause I have moved on.

I weep no more,

'Cept for joy, aloud I cry,
now yearning to be, to live, not die.
Now cleansed of shame, I weep no more.
My soul is free. I weep no more.
My soul is free. I weep no more!

Book One
In Her First Life

“Where was God on May 15, 1974?”

—*Aunt Rose*

chapter one

In Her First Life — Life in the ‘Sticks’ - Reedville, Arkansas, 1974

“I’m runnin’ a bid’ness here...”

It usually killed old folk first.

Especially poor ones—“The Disposables:” poor, feeble, often lonely, living alone. Infants were likely next—“Poorborns:” newborns, mostly poor, mostly black. Proof, to many, that even the gods favor the rich.

Then, stray dogs. Mangy mongrels with heads down, ears drooping, tongues hanging, tails dragging. But not cats. Never cats. Could be cats are way too cool and arguably smarter. They always managed to avoid the killer: heat.

Heat rained down, then back up, like invisible hellfire. Hundred ‘n four, not a hint of rain. Kind of Arkansas heat that parched throats, dimmed vision, sapped strength, slowed speech. It was brain-baking heat, akin to inhaling furnace blast, minus singed brows and lashes.

It was only May, for God’s sake, not August. Yet, the ‘Sticks’ were already blistering. But then, the *Sticks* always seemed to get more of everything nobody sane ever prayed for. More sweltering heat; more flash

floods; more twisters...hurricanes; more mosquitoes; more DDT; more poverty; more garbage dumps; more rut-ravaged, unpaved roads; more broken sewers, more malevolent neglect. One could surely blame God for the heat, the bad weather, even the mosquitoes, but not the rest.

Precious few souls in the Sticks, a.k.a. Oakwood Manor, owned window-unit air-conditioning, let alone central air. For most, central air meant opening the front and back doors and allowing the wind to race through the *center* of their rented 'shotgun' houses. Those fortunate enough to have 'store-bought' air frequently found themselves visited by neighbors who just happened by, and were in no hurry to leave.

Cooler place around was Mr. Bryson Peabo's pool hall and juke joint. His was a well-patronized, 'round the clock hot spot near Miss Ruby's Café and backroom whorehouse. Both establishments dominated the western end of poorly paved Oak Street, the only thoroughfare in the Sticks' red light district, not counting backalleys and trails.

Ol' man Peabo—a grumpy, tattooed, bald, six foot-four ex-Marine with one leg and one fairly good eye—did not allow for 'hangers around' and 'lookers-on.' If you were not spending cold cash, he would toss your ass out into the hot sun, whether you were friend or foe, Jew or Gentile.

"Nothin' personal. I'm runnin' a *bid'ness* here, not the YMCA," he would say, with no hint of a smile, and just before the heavy wooden door slammed closed.

Miss Ruby's was even more popular. Ruby Jean Dandridge was an aging, though still vivacious, vixen who had the natural ability to wow and woo a crowd. True, her café offered unsurpassed, mouth-watering, soul-food fare, but 'after-hours' drew her most devoted patronage.

The fiery, eldest daughter of a Mississippi sharecropper, the Rubenesque Miss Ruby possessed an entrepreneurial spirit and genius to rival that of the wildest Wall Street wizard. Her place was a cash cow. She knew how to pack 'em in. Her southern cuisine drew widespread praise, and garnered nearly as much addiction as did other 'unwritten menu items' she offered. Of course, few ever admitted to being more than café customers.

And Miss Ruby was no miser. To the contrary, she was a philanthropist. College scholarships, church offerings, and charity events were beneficiaries of Miss Ruby's generosity. And she sought no recognition.

Then, there was the 'Blue Room.' The exterior of Mr. Lonnie Cooper's *Blue Room* was painted blue...had a blue bulb over the door...came on as soon as the sun went down. Despite the Sticks' modest population, Mr. Lonnie's 'honky-tonk joint' had its share of devoted patrons as well.

"LC," as some called him, was a longtime widower. He was suave, well-read, articulate, and a world-class gambler, by his description. He reportedly earned his fortune in all manner of gambling—mostly illegal—from Maine to Seattle. In reality, few believed he had ever traveled much farther than New Orleans. His place was located near the eastern end of Oak Street, opposite direction to Mr. Peabo's and Miss Ruby's. All existed in an air of friendly competition, except on one occasion.

In the summer of '73, Mr. Lonnie added a large, twelve-table pool-room to his operation. Until then, his was mostly a beer joint, night-club, gambling-in-the-room-in-the-back sort of place. Mr. Peabo's had its specialties, Miss Ruby's had hers. But the Blue Room? Now, that was the place to go for live entertainment—particularly blues acts, and lots of hard liquor, especially on Saturday nights.

There was a division of vice offerings, so to speak, until Mr. Lonnie crossed the line. However, the matter was soon rectified. Mr. Peabo paid an after, after-hours visit, and had a 'Come To Jesus' meeting with the brother—Mr. Cooper. No one else was present. The next day, the tables were loaded onto a semi and carted off to...well, no one ever knew for sure. Things soon returned to normal, and that was that.

To be fair, it must be said, the Sticks boasted more than 'dens of iniquity.' It was, as were many poor, southern neighborhoods, a self-sufficient community. Few things were needed that could not be had. There were two preachers, two plumbers, an electrician, two carpenters, a roofer, painters, masons, two dry-cleaners. There were corner grocers, record shops, mechanics, beauty shops, barbers, seamstresses, baby-sitters, yardmen, cooks, gamblers, undertakers—jacks-of-all-trades. And then

there was 'Rainey's'—Mr. Samuel I. Rainey. 'Course the "I" did not stand for anything. He added it so his initials would form the word, SIR. Rainey had the best damn barbecue anywhere in Arkansas, or Texas. Folk would drive for miles, even stand in line for his 'cue.'

Rainey's is where the phrase, 'Finger Lickin' Good' allegedly originated. Hordes of white folk found their way to his door, even some 'Kluxers,' reportedly. Of course, they would grab their barbecue and scurry back out of town. But at least their dollars remained in the Sticks.

Truth is, white folk patronized other businesses as well. Miss Ruby's 'pleasure room' had its clientele—mostly male, mostly white, mostly at night. Proof, to many, that even color can sometimes be overlooked. These 'gentlemen' found their way to the back door, entering only under Miss Ruby's discriminating eye. Even Sheriff Lucas Darden, wearing street clothes, was often reported seen leaving in the wee hours of the morning.

Licensed businesses aside, the Sticks had its share of petty thieves, rip-off artists, hucksters, and...well, smartasses. No other way to put it. But they were severely dealt with by the residents themselves. The place was a village. A poor village, but a village nonetheless.

The Sticks even had a lawyer, well...sort of. That is what he claimed. 'Course no one ever saw Ol' 'Fessor, Lemuel J. Marshall III's license or degree, nor heard of a case he ever tried. But he could talk up a storm. He was full of advice, but never accompanied anyone to court. 'Fessor would write out a little speech to be delivered by the accused, then advise: "You'd be better off pleadin' guilty and throwin' yourself on the mercy of the court." He told this to every client, no matter the charges. If further convincing was needed, he relied on his tried and true: "Now, if you insist on a trial, it'll cost you nearly everything you got if I go to court. Least this way, when you get out you'll have some money left."

But 'Fessor left town rather hurriedly one night. His whereabouts were never discovered. Rumor was, a jealous husband got after him. Seems 'Fessor had bartered his fee for 'favors' with the man's wife. And she still went to jail. The fact the woman was a great cook only fueled speculation regarding the true reason for her husband's rabid anger.

chapter two

In Her First Life - May 15, 1974 Rural Reedville, Arkansas.

Fear seized her like a claw.

‘**B**out a mile from The Sticks, three miles from Reedville, proper, Jonathan Jefferson Reed’s old ‘62 Ford pickup just set there—a rusting hulk held together with baling wire and a prayer. The sun-bleached, blue heap hugged the edge of a large circular clearing, nearly surrounded by a sentry of towering Arkansas pine.

Nothing moved. Nothing. Damn truck looked downright abandoned. Always did, moving or not. The old wreck was an unlikely means of transportation for the son of one of the most powerful families in Arkansas. Not surprising, since Jonathan’s parents discouraged him from flaunting his wealth in the face of those who had so little.

Just then, his scrawny, naked, pale-white backside—with nearly protruding vertebrae—appeared in the lowered driver’s window. Inside the seedy truck cab, carpeted with fast food wrappers and the decomposed remains of unidentifiable crawling critters, the thick, hot air reeked of musty sneakers, sweaty private parts, and unshaved armpits.

Jonathan kicked open the creaky door and backed himself out onto the parched ground. His wet skin sizzled in the unforgiving heat. He drew the back of his right hand across his dripping brow, swiped it on his right pant leg.

Sixteen year-old Jonathan, whose middle name was given to honor the only President of the Confederacy, was nearly six feet two, barely a hundred thirty pounds, brains and all. Like a soiled mop turned upside down, his stringy, rusty blond hair fell past a pimply face to just above sloping shoulders.

Jonathan closed the door, yanked up his faded Levi's and tucked 'himself' back inside. He zipped his fly; slipped his white, Harley Davidson T-shirt over his hairless, sunken chest; then buckled his overlapping belt. He paused, glanced back at the beautiful, sweat-soaked black girl. She sat slouched in the passenger seat, breathing heavily, staring into her lap with vacant eyes. Her bra was back in place now, but much of her taut, flawless, creamy-brown skin was still exposed.

At 12 years old, Deborah Yvonne Davis had the sweet, innocent face of a young girl, but the fetching body of a woman, years older. It was her blessing and her curse.

Jonathan stared long and hard, savoring the sight of her. His bowed erection was still at full bore. A look of self-satisfaction covered his pock-marked face. With a cocky swagger, he reached through the open window, touched Deborah's shoulder with unsure fingertips. She flinched, leaned away. Her smile was gone. Deep frowns etched her glistening brow.

Deborah was in complete disarray. With her chin pressed against her chest, she slowly arched her supple back, raised her bare bottom, snaked up her white panties and forced down her brown, flower print skirt. Never did look up. The heat-brewed stench rose in nearly visible waves. She appeared ready to puke.

Jonathan straightened his lanky frame and swiped his dripping brow once more. He gazed with expectation toward the distant tree line for nearly a minute. Curiously, as he peered into the distance, he raised his right arm high above his head for several seconds, then sauntered to the

passenger side. With his left hand briefly resting atop the roasting cab roof, he again stared toward the tree line.

Deborah appeared dazed, remorseful; her breathing was uneven. With unsteady hands, she tried to straighten her soiled, once-white blouse. She peered into the cracked, side-view mirror and attempted to groom her curly, shoulder-length black hair.

Just then, sour sputum bubbled up, filling her mouth. Deborah leaned forward, braced herself against the dash, and repeatedly spat onto the cluttered floorboard.

Swatting gnats and flies, Jonathan thrust his left hand through the lowered passenger window. He attempted to caress Deborah's contorted face. She recoiled, aimed a questioning glare at him. He loosed a weak smile and folded his bony arms across his chest.

Jonathan had heard things—all manner of things said about black girls. Things, the truth of which, he was set on discovering for himself. They were all hot and wild; full of fire; beyond satisfying, he had heard. He had spent many nights in his room, his mind boiling with steamy imaginings while he pleased himself to the point of self-abuse.

"The young stuff is best," he was told and believed. Such talk had come from a few boastful rednecks, and several young black boys touting their sexual prowess and eager for a taste of "Vanilla."

Some had even offered to barter: "Chocolate for Vanilla," they said. Jonathan refused such quid pro quo, boasting he needed no middlemen; he could get any *snatch* he wanted. He was a Reed.

Jonathan yanked the passenger door open, leaned back against its unpaneled inside, with its exposed glass, and rusting gears. He slouched, with arms folded, chin extended—looking all proud of himself. He took a deep breath, filled his lungs with superheated, pine-scented air.

"Why are you opening the...the door?" Deborah's feeble voice barely registered.

"So you can go. I got 'a get home, take a bath...change clothes. It's hotter'n hell out here. C'mon, girl! It's gettin' late."

Deborah grimaced then looked away. She took another labored breath, gathered herself, and slowly stepped from the odorous wreck. With her strength nearly sapped, she stumbled. Jonathan held fast, offered her no assistance. He just stood there flicking sweat from his pimpled brow.

Undaunted, Deborah righted herself and aligned her twisted skirt, while aiming an acid-laced stare. Jonathan looked away, avoiding her caustic gaze. He responded with a smirk, combed fingers through his hair then wiped both hands on his soiled jeans.

“You ain’t seen me today,” he barked, pointing. “You hear? You be sure and tell your friends they ain’t seen me either. And don’t say one word about what we did here. It would just get *you* in a heap ‘a trouble. Who knows, we might even want ‘a do this again sometime.”

Before Deborah could speak, Jonathan bolted to the driver’s side and leaped behind the wheel. He fired the ignition and raced the engine, forcing Deborah to scurry to get clear. She watched in silence as he peeled away, spitting soil and grass from beneath the tires.

With her fists clenched, Deborah stood alone now in the sweltering heat. Her blouse stubbornly clung to her sweat-soaked skin. She felt cemented to the spot, unable to move.

Then fear seized her like a claw. Her eyes began misting. The heat flared mercilessly; trees seemed to swirl. Deborah collapsed to her knees, lifted her head, began sobbing, then praying. With salty sweat pouring—some seeping into the corners of her mouth—she stuttered through the Lord’s Prayer. Her voice crackled. Gram d’lena, her late, paternal grandmother—had taught it to her when she was barely two. They would often read scriptures and pray together.

Just now, Deborah could almost see Gram’s face. She sensed her grandmother’s presence, and felt ashamed. Unclean and painfully ashamed. What ever had possessed her? How could she have defiled Gram d’lena’s memory this way? This was not real. It could not be. She felt separated from her inner self, disconnected from the person she always believed herself to be.

Time. Deborah lost all awareness of time, yet knew she had to hurry home. But home was the last place she wanted to be now. How would she ever explain her appearance? How would she account for being more than two hours late arriving from school, and without her friends? What would she say? How would she be able to keep her secret?

Then, panic struck her. Kay, B.B., and Tommy were Deborah's schoolmates. The three girlfriends always walked home from school together. Tommy had joined them this day, of all days.

Surely, all had long ago arrived at the Davis home and found 'Sister Davis'—as most called Mabel Davis—waiting, as was her custom. What must her mother be thinking? What must Kay, B.B., and Tommy be thinking? What explanation had they offered, in light of her mother's certain grilling?

By now, everyone, especially Deborah's brother, Matthew, was de-ranged with worry. Matthew had likely arrived home from school, found his sister was not home, and insisted he would find her. Always eager to assume his 'big brother' role, he was likely trudging down dusty Crispus Attucks Road this very minute—his .22 Winchester rifle, or Louisville Slugger, gripped in his powerful hands, or slung over his broad shoulders. Not finding her, he would not hesitate to search the woods as well.

Deborah's younger sister, Rachel, was a precocious fifth-grader with a 154 I.Q. She was likely finishing her homework, unimpressed by anything save her own lofty thoughts. For reasons unknown to Deborah, or anyone else, there was little love lost between the two.

Rachel exuded an air of superiority that seemed to exist almost at birth. She was always quick to exhibit, if not flaunt, her brilliance. Even her parents were not exempt from her acid temperament, especially her mother. Rachel treaded much more cautiously with Reverend, and for good reason.

Rachel had adamantly refused to walk home with Deborah and her friends. "They are all so childish and intellectually immature. And they're *boy crazy*," Rachel often complained to her mother—and in that precise language. Mabel Davis did not press the issue. Mrs. Abigail Linton,

Rachel's homeroom teacher, lived less than three miles away. She always drove her 'Ace Student' home evenings.

Then there was Deborah's father, the Reverend Henry B. Davis. God forbid he had arrived home from Pine Bluff to find his daughter was not home, and her whereabouts unknown to anyone. And his mood would certainly not be helped by the loss of his car's air-conditioning the day before. That fact was compounded by Reverend's insistence on wearing long-sleeve white shirts and dark suits, no matter the weather.

Such sobering thoughts quickly inspired a bit of fiction. Deborah began plotting her defense with each unsure step: *Upon realizing that accepting Jonathan's offer of a ride was a bad idea, she got out of his truck and resumed walking home. She then decided on a shortcut through the piney woods, but got lost.*

The story sounded plausible enough, until Deborah remembered Crispus Attucks Road passed less than an eighth mile from the Davis home. No need for a shortcut. No one would believe such a tale.

Rachel would likely be first to point out the flaws of such a story. Not only would Deborah be punished for straggling home hours late, but for lying—an unpardonable offense in the Davis household, as grievous as Satan worship.

So what now? Deborah wished with all her heart it were already tomorrow, next week, next month, any day but the present. Maybe, just maybe, everyone would be out searching for her. She would then be able to slip into the house unnoticed; bathe, change clothes, then face the music later. That thought quickly became her prayer. She pleaded with God to make it so.

Despite the crippling heat of earlier, the evening breeze felt cool against Deborah's tear-stained cheeks. The feeling was short-lived. Piercing pain, then a burning sensation, consumed her lower abdomen and vaginal area. She doubled over, gasping.

Hungry, trembling, her vision blurred, Deborah straightened her frame and waited for her eyes to focus. Shortly, she began forcing herself forward. She willed her way along the fresh tire trail, trudged past

the tree-line, and onto the degraded asphalt roadway. Heat waves still spiraled from portions of the bubbling black surface. She paused at the winding road's edge and anxiously searched in both directions.

Then, a startling sound—crackling twigs, rustling leaves. A cold chill darted down Deborah's back. She wheeled toward the tree line. Silence. Dead silence, except for her pounding heart. She took a couple of unsure steps forward, paused, then gazed back down the road.

Deborah prayed no one, especially Tommy, would happen along, and see her this way. His shortest route home was back down Crispus Attucks. She hoped he had already passed, or taken an alternate route.

Almost as quickly as it had come, the creepy sensation eased. An eerie calm washed over her. She was unnerved by its unexpected effect, but doubted it would last. Shortly, with tears winding down her face, Deborah began her dreaded journey home. Vivid thoughts of Gram consumed her; they brought both comfort and condemnation.

All those years, all those treasured moments spent with Gram d'lena, now seemed so distant. Were they ever real? Why did those times with her have to end? Why had God—a supposedly merciful God—taken her grandmother away?

Deborah wished with all her heart Gram were still alive. Her mind, though spinning wildly, remained awash in memories of her beloved grandmother. Her tenderness, her comforting gaze, her unconditional love, her gentle spirit always provided refuge—the refuge Deborah desperately needed right now.

But who was Deborah Yvonne Davis? And who was this Gram d'lena, who meant so much to her? How had this young girl—second daughter of the Reverend Henry B. Davis, and Sister Mabel Davis—come to be at this place, on this day?

chapter three

In Her First Life—Seven Years Earlier - Reedville, Arkansas,—Summer '67

She stared in stunned surprise, then...

Her eyes were first to answer.

A telling glow. A fluttering of long, thick lashes. A deepening of well-earned lines. A face that beamed like August sun.

The question, softly spoken, fetched a lingering smile. The youthful inquisitor—her own eyes gleaming—waited with head tilted, a thick, curly, black braid grasped between tiny thumb and forefinger. A soft breath exhaled. Silence.

Gram d'lina looked away for a time. She stroked her furrowed brow then paused to allow the sudden swell of emotion to retreat. With her left forearm pressed down against the timeworn tabletop, she leaned forward, gently caressed her granddaughter's upturned face. And while exuding the sort of warming love that can only come from grandmothers, Gram gazed into expectant young eyes and loosed a warm smile.

"Kinda caught me off guard, babygirl. Wasn't expectin' you to ask me such a question right out. Needed a minute to collect myself...let my

heart slow down a bit. But, all that aside, the answer is yes. Yes, I still love your granddaddy...love him with all my heart.”

Gram’s voice grew wispy. Her eyes glistened with a hint of mist. Through the tiny kitchen’s open French window, dawn’s early light caressed her dimpled face, revealing every twitch and twinkle. The delicate, soft-white, handmade, English lace curtains—drawn but untied—danced in cool, gentle, country breeze.

“And I’ll love him the longest day I live. Reckon love is ‘bout the most important, most wonderful thing you can give or receive. Can’t be bought or sold, only freely given. It’s the one gift that leaves giver and receiver...richer. I must sound like a Hallmark card or somethin,’ huh?”

“You make all that up, Gram d’lena?” asked Deborah, more in awe than doubt. Never doubt.

“Wish I could take the credit, babygirl. But your granddaddy used to say that all the time. And I believe it with all my heart...made his words my own. I always say, for somebody who barely finished the ninth grade, that man sure had a way with words. Words flowed from his mouth like honey. Like warm, sweet honey. And I still love him...much as I ever did. There’s a peace that comes over me, whenever I speak of him. I feel it down to my marrow.”

Gram’s unsteady voice trailed like a wreath of smoke in the wind. A lone tear spilled. She hesitated wiping it away, determined to not draw attention to it.

“Are you crying, Gram d’lena? You crying? Please, don’t cry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Must be my hayfever, baby. Gets real bad, come summertime.”

Deborah’s own eyes began to tear. She reached for ‘Marie,’ her hand-painted doll with the big brown eyes, brown face and long, shiny black hair. Gram had ordered it ‘special’ from New York for her grandbaby’s fourth birthday. Marie was Deborah’s constant companion, a faithful friend who never betrayed a confidence, never awakened her during the night, and never wet her diaper.

“You miss him, Gram? You miss Pa-Pa?”

“God, yes. More than I can tell you, baby. See, when you truly love somebody, and been with them long as me and your granddaddy were together, ain’t a day go by you don’t miss ‘em. You prob’ly too young to understand this, but sometimes when I’m walkin’ ‘round this ol’ house, he spring to mind so quick I have to stop and catch my breath.

“I can almost see his face...can almost touch him. He look so fine, just like that picture of him hangin’ over the divan. He’s all smilin’ and everything, like he own the world. He was one proud man. Hand me that towel, baby.”

“Does it scare you, Gram?”

“What, baby? Seein’ your Pa-Pa?”

“Yes, ma’am. I don’t like no ghosteses.”

“Ghosteses?” Gram chuckled. “No, baby. Sometimes it happens when I’m not expectin’ it. Kinda’ catches me off guard, but it don’t scare me none. I just get sad for a few minutes. Then, I think of somethin’ funny he used to do, or say, and I’m alright. I ever tell you the story ‘bout the apron?”

“I’m not sure,” said Deborah, despite having heard the apron story at least a dozen times. She knew it word for word. But Gram loved telling it and she was not about to deny her that simple joy.

Gram’s eyes danced, as she folded her arms across her ample chest, and reared back in her specially-cushioned, straw-bottom chair.

“When we lived in our ol’ house back in Kirbyville, Texas, your granddaddy loved to tease me. Used to sneak up behind me, loosen my apron strings and go stand in the kitchen doorway. I had a big kitchen, then. You could get six or seven grown folks in it at once. House was fairly good size, too. I sure loved that ol’ house. It was so roomy and airy...lots ‘a shade trees. Had a front porch. Made a lot ‘a mem’ries there.

“We lived on a couple ‘a acres, next to ol’ man Koontz’s place, ‘bout three miles from town. C. Rodd Koontz was his full name. Never knew what the C stood for. He was one mean ol’ cuss. Mean and rich. Had a peg leg. Cursed a lot. Dipped snuff, too. Nasty habit. All that spittin,’ juice drippin.’ Unh!” Gram scrunched her face at the mention of it.

“But he and your granddaddy always got along. That’s ‘cause Reverend George didn’t take no guff from nobody, black or white. He was kind, but...Anyway, all of a sudden, while I’m busy cookin’, my apron would fall to the floor right in front of me. Your granddaddy would double over laughin’, like that was the funniest thing he ever saw. I can just see him now. Didn’t matter how many times he played his little joke, he laughed just as hard every time. Glasses would shake; dishes would rattle.”

“For real?” Deborah returned Marie to the chair next to her.

“Sure as I’m sittin’ here. Lord, I do so miss hearin’ him laugh.”

Deborah stroked Gram’s hand lightly. Hers were loving hands, with fingers gnarled by time, ravaged by arthritis.

Gram grew quiet. Both gazed out across the rich green earth straddling Arkansas’s Ouachita and Central regions. Her small A-frame house seemed lost in the vastness—a speck on the horizon.

Nearest town, Reedville, was just over four miles away. Nearest neighbor, other than family, was three miles away, just past winding Drawhorn Creek. Gram said that was just fine with her, said she rather liked having a neighbor living so close.

“You scared of dying, Gram?”

Gram sat straight back, thrust her right hand to her chest. Never knew what was coming out of Deborah Yvonne’s busy little mouth.

“Dyin’? Not anymore, baby. Stopped being scared long time ago. Reckon it was after Mama and Papa passed away.”

Deborah scooted her straw-bottom chair closer to the old, oak leaf-table. The aged, pine floor creaked its familiar symphony. Gram was sure she saw another question form on her granddaughter’s determined brow.

“Gram, is ‘passed away’ same as dying?”

“Well, yes. Reckon that’s ‘bout as plain as you can put it.”

“Then why don’t you just say died, instead?”

“Hmm. Baby, you know...I never thought about it, until you asked. Guess it just...just seems less sad when you say passed away. Like your loved ones just faded away, slow like.”

“Like in a dream or something?”

“I suppose. Took me a long time to get over losin’ my mama and papa, I tell *you*. Didn’t think I ever would. Was hard to imagine never havin’ them around again. World’s a whole lot different without your mother and father. You feel so alone, even if you got sisters and brothers—even ones you still on speakin’ terms with. Nothin’ can take their place. They say the worst thing is for a parent to bury a child, but I couldn’t imagine anything harder than losin’ my mama and papa.

“Funny thing is, I soon started to look at life a lot different...started to realize how little of it there is; that there’s a lot of livin’ to do everyday. God must ‘a meant for it to be that way.”

“Is there really a heaven and a hell?”

“Now, where did *that* question come from?”

“From Daddy.”

“Your daddy?”

“Yes, ma’am. Daddy is always preaching about heaven and hell. He says heaven is way past the sky, but he never says where hell is. I think it must be far away—way past Arkansas, even Miss’sippi, ‘cause it takes your whole life to get there.”

Gram smiled, shook her head. “You don’t say. Baby, most folk who look like me and you...think Mississippi really is...Anyway, don’t you believe your daddy?”

“I just want to know what you think.”

“Babygirl, you sure ask a lot ‘a questions, to be so little.”

“Daddy said that’s how you learn, Gram. You ask questions, then listen to the answers. That’s what Daddy said.”

“I guess your daddy ought ‘a know. He was the same way when he was comin’ up. Would ask one question right after the other. I would sometimes give him food, even candy...fill up his mouth just to give my voice and my ears a rest. He took after his daddy. Should ‘a known he was gon’ be a preacher, too. That child could talk up a storm.

“He was different from my other children in that way. Used to pretend he was havin’ church in the back yard. Had his sisters and brother, even neighborhood children, singin’ and shoutin,’ fallin’ out like they

was filled with the Holy Ghost. His daddy made him stop, when he started takin' up offerin's."

"So, is there?"

"Is there what, baby?"

"A heaven and a hell, Gram."

"Now, your brother, Matthew, is outside workin' so hard...washed dishes last night. And you s'pose to be helpin' me shell these peas. I'm lookin' in your bowl and I only see two, four, five, six...less than a dozen peas, babygirl. Now, why you s'pose that is? *My* bowl is half full already."

"Gram d'lena, your hands are much bigger than mine, that's why."

"I see."

"I'm only five and three 'mumfs.' I have little bitty hands. That's what 'Maffew' says. He says I got little bitty hands. You think I got little bitty hands, Gram?"

"Maybe. But they most certainly are growin' right along with the rest of you. Your mind sure ain't little, though. Tell you what, I'll take your bowl and give you mine, alright? See? Now that makes it look like you workin' a lot harder than me."

"I *am* working harder, Gram. I'm just not working as *fast* as you."

"Is that right? Now, why didn't I figure that out?"

"Cause you tired?"

"Must surely be the reason, baby."

"Can I come and live with you, Gram? Please? I can help you do stuff. And I don't eat a lot, 'cept on Sundays. That's when Mama cooks up everything I like. But not as good as you do."

"Baby, you're somethin.' I don't mind your eatin.' And there sure is plenty of stuff to do 'roun' here. But your mama and daddy likely wouldn't take kindly to you leavin' home at such a tender age. Thanks, anyway. I'm sure glad you and Matthew came to spend the night...help ol' Gram out today. With you helpin' me shell peas and Matthew outside rakin' up leaves, I can prob'ly get aroun' to makin' those sweet potato pies I promised y'all last time. You like that?"

“Yes, ma’am. I can shell the rest of these here peas all by myself. You can start making those pies right now.”

“Babygirl, you’re a doozy.”

“Gram, what’s a...”

“Shhh. Enough questions for right now. You got some peas to shell,” said Gram. Deborah laughed.

Suddenly, Gram d’lena shot straight up, gasped, covered her mouth. Deep frowns carved her brow. She clutched her bosom and sank back into her chair. Her eyes riveted on her grandbaby. What she saw chilled her blood, stole her breath.

Less than three feet away, her beloved Deborah Yvonne appeared cloaked in a dark shadow that obscured her features. Pure evil is what it was. Gram cursed the demonic presence, even as she trembled the length of her body. With jaws clenched, her heart quaking, she summoned the name of God to her lips. In the name of all things Holy, she petitioned the Almighty to build a hedge around her babygirl.

In an instant, two distinct names, two distinct images leaped to her mind: Jude Barsteau, and Florinda Batiste. She quickly dispatched the former from her thoughts, but the latter persisted. Could it be true? Was ol’ lady Batiste fulfilling her curse from the grave?

When Deborah was first born, well-wishers often visited the Davis home, bringing gifts. One Wednesday morning, ninety year-old spinster, Florinda Batiste, was among them, cloaked in her customary white, from head to toe. It was well-known that the longtime resident was a Voodoo practitioner of longstanding.

The moment Florinda practically ‘appeared’ near Deborah’s bassinet, everyone shrank away. A hush fell. Gram d’lena observed Batiste staring at the baby, frowning and chanting. Mabel Davis watched, passively. Just as the old woman extended a gloved right hand toward Deborah, Gram glanced at Mabel, then rushed forward. She grabbed Batiste’s left arm and nearly dragged her from the house. And without raising her voice, Gram d’lena sternly commanded she never return, nor be caught anywhere near a single member of her family. “Not ever,” Gram repeated.

An angry Florinda Batiste started away, then turned, pointed, and yelled: “That baby is got a dark cloud over her, Miss Magdalena. I seen it. You gon’ see it, too...all ‘a y’all. She’s dead! Y’all can pray to that God ‘a yours all y’all want, but she’s dead! You hear me? She’s dead!” Then, despite her years, Batiste, who lived a mile away, left walking, briskly.

The next morning, shock and horror gripped the Sticks. Batiste’s charred remains were found in her smoldering shack near Devil’s Woods. Some blamed The Klan. Others swore it was a single bolt of lightning. Official cause of the mysterious blaze was never established. Florinda Batiste was reportedly found sitting upright...in an oak rocker. A badly ripped Bible, open to Psalm One, rested in what remained of her hands.

Psalm One:

“1. Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law doth he meditate, day and night. 3. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. 4. The ungodly are not so, but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. 5. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. 6. For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish. —(Authorized King James Version)

But what could not be explained, was the fact neither the chair nor the Bible was so much as singed. Grim photos of the horrific scene, reportedly taken by Coroner, Henry P. Chesney, were never released. Never. Sheriff Darden claimed they were likely misfiled, and that he “wuddn’t” about to waste taxpayers’ money, nor his precious time, looking for them. Some said he was just plain too scared to even look at the photos, let alone touch them. If true, it may have been a wise decision on his part.

Less than twelve hours after Batiste’s remains were carted off to the morgue, Chesney himself fell dead. Heart attack, they said. Only fifty-one years old, the longtime Reedville resident, and Reed family cousin, suffered the attack while examining Florinda Batiste’s cadaver.

The bizarre events sparked fear and speculation, regarding evil spirits and demonic curses. Few in the Sticks, or Reedville, were inclined to even speak Batiste's name. To this day, even weeds will not grow on the spot where her hovel once stood. And for about a year following her death, dozens reported seeing what they were certain was Florinda Batiste, dressed in white, and scurrying along the backroads of the Sticks. The last such sighting was on Easter Sunday, 1963.

Now, five years after Deborah's birth, Gram stood staring at this dark shadow. She had heard her beloved mother speak of such evil in hushed tones, but had never witnessed it until now. With fists formed, Gram kept repeating her prayer, commanding the evil spirit to flee.

The baleful omen persisted only seconds. But that was enough to cast a lasting pall. Gram stared at her grandbaby, before turning away until the fear subsided. Why was such an ungodly spirit being visited upon an innocent child?

Gram prayed that whatever evil this dark sign portended would pass quickly and forever. She gathered herself and, with faltering steps, moved to plant a kiss on her grandbaby's brow. She laid warm, loving hands on Deborah's head, then moved to the open window. She was certain that if she remained near the table, the fear branded on her face would not escape Deborah's probing eyes.

A chill coursed Gram's shivering frame, even as she prayed. Deborah gave her a curious glance. Gram took a deep breath, forced a weak smile then turned away. Deborah resumed shelling her peas, as Gram kept whispering her prayerful mantra, summoning the Holy Angels:

"God, I pray your Holy Spirit come now. Deliver us from this evil; drive it from this place. Father, build a hedge around this child for the length of her days. In the merciful name of God the Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen." Gram took a quick breath and repeated her prayer.

Gram d'lena told only one person—a close friend—what she experienced that day. The woman, unrelated to her, vowed to keep her secret forever. Gram had no doubt she would keep her word.