1. Walking Unafraid

Every evening, in the tiny kitchen of the old frame shotgun house where I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, my grandma Rachel marked the day's end by a ritual etched in my memory with a clarity that belies the eighty years since then.

She ceased to rush, as she did endlessly in the hours between dawn and darkness, and she commenced to draw water and lay out clean towels and mix an ointment she made of turpentine and mutton tallow. I would stand, quiet, watching her heat the water on the wood stove, pour it into a metal pan, then remove her stockings and hoist her skirts as she lifted her feet into the steaming bath.

Her feet were broken. They were gnarled and twisted and horribly misshapen, with the bones sticking out in strange ways. As she lifted them into the steaming water, she winced. And I would know, though she had spoken no word and given no sign, that all day long her feet had been paining her.

How frightened I was the first time I saw those poor broken feet. I was five years old, and my mother and my three sisters and I had just moved to my grandparents' home after the death of my father, James Eliot Johnson, in the influenza epidemic of 1919. My grandmother had scooped us up and taken us under her wing, whisking us from my parents' house to the little parsonage where she lived with my grandpa. All day long, she hovered over us, even as she flew about the house and garden, baking communion bread and hauling water and starching altar linens. Like a tiny whirling dervish she moved, and so, when I first saw her grow quiet, I was startled.

Then I saw her feet, so large and misshapen they seemed to belong to another woman entirely, and I drew back, frightened. Every night after that, I'd look at her scarred, twisted feet, at the skin stretched taut over

the jutting bones, and I'd want to ask her what had made them that way. But something in her silence warned me not to.

Over time I grew to cherish this part of the evening, for it was one of the rare moments when I could actually be of help to my grandmother, who appeared in daytime hours, so far as I could tell, to hold the whole earth and sky under her command. I learned to wait by her side as she began the bathing process and watch for the moment when her face began to relax, the sign that the steaming water had done its work. I'd stir the ointment, and gently as I could, I'd rub her feet, taking care not to hurt the sores and bruises and bleeding places. The salve, like most of my grandmother's homemade medicines, smelled worse than sin itself, but it had mighty healing powers. For in the morning, she was moving once again about the house and garden, swaying and swinging on the outsides of her feet, awkwardly, but swiftly.

The day came, finally, as I was just beginning to mature into womanhood, when Grandma took me to her in private and spoke to me of what had happened to her feet.

A white man had broken them.

It had happened a very long time ago, Grandma said, when she was a young girl, just coming into womanhood herself. She was only thirteen years old, but she had developed early, and she had seen the man watching her with a look that told her he meant to do her harm.

"The slave master," she called him, though in point of fact the days of slavery ended ten years before my grandmother was born. He was the overseer on the farm near Henrietta, North Carolina, where her father worked, and when she spoke of what he had tried to do to her, a look of anguish crossed her face unlike any I had seen before or would see after.

"He was meanin' to bother me, Dovey Mae," she told me, in the delicate way she had of speaking about things sexual. "I ran and fought every way I knew how. And I hurt him. Then he grabbed hold o' me and he stomped, hard as he could, on my feet—to keep me from runnin' for good, he told me. But I kept on runnin'.

"Wasn't nothing to do but fight him, hard as I could," she said. "He wasn't goin' to have his way with me."

Grandma's mother had wrapped her smashed, bleeding feet in cloth and rubbed them with the mutton tallow and turpentine ointment Grandma would use for the rest of her days. But the bones had been so crushed that her feet were forever misshapen, and so twisted that for

a while she could not walk at all. When she did, it was with a swaying awkwardness that late at night became a limp.

And yet, for all of that, she had won. He had not, as she said, had "his way" with her.

I saw my grandma Rachel fight everything with that same fierceness—poverty, sickness, injustice, and even despair. Like a mighty stream, her courage flowed through my childhood, shaping me as rushing water shapes the pebbles in its path.

She was not, of course, the only influence upon me in my early years; my mother, with her keen intelligence and her quiet ambition, and my grandpa, with his passion for books and education, set me on my way toward learning and goodness. But my grandmother was the warrior in the family. It was she who armed me for battle, with weapons both soft and fierce, imprinting me with a mark so deep it seemed to go down into my very soul.

There was, to be sure, nothing of the warrior in her tiny person, for she was small of stature and ever so feminine. Many a time as a girl I would study the faded old photograph of Grandma on the parlor wall and wonder how the delicate black-eyed young woman who looked part African queen and part Indian princess had fought that white man with such ferocity, whence came the iron that carried her through the sorrows that befell her in the years after that portrait was made. She had married, given birth to my mother and her two brothers, and then in the way of so many black women of her time, she'd had to stand by helplessly as the wrath of the Klan fell upon the head of her young husband. No one knew what had incited their rage, nor did Grandma ever learn the particulars of his fate after she bade him farewell in the woods outside Henrietta. She'd sent him on his way with all the money she had in the world—a quarter she'd kept in her apron pocket—and had never seen him again. Somewhere in his flight northward, he'd met his death at the Klan's hands.

She had to push onward after that, to do what generations of black folk had done before her—to "make a way out of no way." I am persuaded, thinking on it now, that my grandmother spent all her days making a way out of no way. And she'd done it with no more than a third-grade education. She'd picked herself up after the loss of her young husband and rebuilt her life with the great man who became my grandfather, the Reverend Clyde Graham, but that, too, had its hardships. Again and again she had to uproot her family, for the life of

an itinerant preacher in the South meant endless movement from one country church to another. At last, Grandpa's reputation as a preacher won him an appointment as pastor of East Stonewall AME Zion, one of Charlotte's largest black churches. Grandma settled with Grandpa into the parsonage, watched her daughter, Lela, marry, give birth to me and my sisters, make a home of her own.

And then my father was stricken.

I was too young to grasp the terrible sweep of the influenza epidemic that the returning soldiers brought home after World War I. I understood only that my tall handsome papa, who one moment had been riding me on the handlebars of his bicycle in the autumn sunshine, was gone, and my mother was crying. The next thing I knew, we were in my grandmother's home, to stay. So ferociously did she take on our sadness that if grief had been a wild animal at large in the house, she could not have attacked it with greater vengeance.

I have thought many times since then how defeating it must have been for Grandma—a woman who knew what it was to lose a husband and be left with young children—to watch my mother disappear into a netherworld right in front of our eyes. My beautiful mother, so young she seemed more like a big sister, the playmate who loved to beat us at jacks and hike up her skirts and jump hopscotch with us, grew silent and thin. She took no care of her person, wore her long wavy hair in a tangle down her back, and refused to eat. It was terrifying to me and my sisters, and surely my grandmother must have been horrified.

Yet she took us in hand so fiercely and so firmly that for the rest of my life I have remembered that time as one when I was swallowed up in love. Against the tidal wave of sadness, Grandma pushed back with a tidal wave of her own, launching what amounted to a one-woman assault on despair. In such things as the baking of cinnamon pastries and the pounding of herbs and the serving of sweet potatoes and the setting of bread to rise she undertook to push the darkness out.

Soft weapons, those, and yet in my grandmother's hands they were as formidable as any I have seen in my time. Only someone who has lain in the early morning darkness breathing in the smell of bread baking and beans and ham hocks bubbling, as I did every day of that long winter of 1919, can know the potency of such small things to heal. It was not simply the food, of course. It was my grandmother herself, all five feet of her, that filled the house from morning to night, her fiery spirit that displaced the darkness.

The stiller my mother became, the more quickly my grandmother moved, rushing back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom, serving up tea, endlessly tempting Mama with treats for weeks on end, until finally, one day, Mama laughed.

It was not a little chuckle, but a great loud laugh. When the rest of us heard the sound of my mother's laughter coming from the back porch where she and Grandma were stringing beans, we all burst out laughing—Grandpa, who'd been studying over his Bible as he prepared his Sunday sermon, my older sister Beatrice and my younger sister Eunice and even baby Rachel in her high chair. I had no earthly idea what the joke was, nor did I care. I joined right in with the laughter, too, and in that moment, the world righted itself.

The sadness never completely vanished, of course. It never does, after death. My father's passing left a hole in my heart that was to stay with me for the rest of my life. Even to this very moment, the emptiness remains with me. But after my mother laughed at whatever little joke Grandma made that day, our family was able to move forward, to get on with the business of living, in all its goodness. And my childhood, which had begun with the terrible darkness of my father's death, opened up at the hands of my grandmother into a time shot through with light.

Everything Grandma did seemed woven with magic. Even before dawn, summer mornings came alive for me, as I trailed behind her into the woods in search of blackberries. They grew along the creek, amid stickers and bushes, and Grandma knew how to find the ripest, the best. She knew how to follow the birds to the places where they grew thickest. And in some otherworldly way I could not fathom, she could read the darkness simply by listening to the sounds that came out of it.

With autumn came the time for the making of lye soap, a rite that drew the neighbors from blocks around to our backyard as Grandma turned fat drippings into soap that bleached clothing so white the ladies had a name for it: "Miss Rachel's clean." It was made, my grandmother said, by the "right sign of the moon," and she alone among all the women knew when that sign came. I'd dart in and out among the fig trees that grew tall around our property and breathe in the cool air as Grandma lit the fire beneath the great cauldron. Moving in as close as I dared, I watched as she poured boxes of Red Devil lye into the mixture of cooking grease she'd collected all year from the neighbors. The liquid in the cauldron boiled, the ladies sang and gossiped and laughed,

Grandma ladled foam from the top, and then all at once, the bubbling mass cleared. Closely as I watched I never could tell the precise moment at which that filthy mess turned beautiful. But the white cakes of soap, gelled and molded and placed on butcher paper for the neighbors to take home, were as perfect and pure as the liquid in the cauldron was greasy and dark and foul smelling.

Enfolding it all, week in, week out, was the Sunday ritual that pulled us up tall with pride, my sisters and me, as we rushed to take our places with Mama in the grand procession Grandma and Grandpa led from the parsonage to East Stonewall AME Zion, where Grandpa pastored. Behind us marched the whole world—the dozens of families who made up Grandpa's flock, wending their way through the clay streets and alleyways of the neighborhood known as Brooklyn. At the head of the parade walked Grandma, starched altar linens draped over one arm, the other linked with Grandpa's, as she led the crowd in the chorus of the hymn she loved best, the one she hummed from morning to night.

Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine.
O what foretaste of Glory Divine.
This is my story, this my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

People came to Grandma—people whose faces were heavy with sadness, mothers worried about their children, girls in trouble of one kind or another, men who'd gotten mixed up with the bootleggers or card sharks who preyed on the desperate. For all of them Grandma had something—a sermon with plenty of scorch, or as the occasion required, what she called "some straightnin' out." For sick folk she bottled up doses of the cold medicines she pounded from gypsum weed and herbs she found in the forest, the paste that stung and smelled but that somehow sucked the pain from your chest.

So powerful a force was my grandmother in our home and in the neighborhood at large that it never occurred to me as a little child that there was anything she could not shape, or mold, or fix, any darkness she could not chase away. But the day came, as it had to, when I grew old enough to venture forth from the cocoon I inhabited. And I saw for the first time an ugliness Grandma could not banish. On that day, I looked Jim Crow full in the face.

Nothing about that morning, in the spring of my sixth, or perhaps my seventh year, betokened ill. The sunshine warmed the earth beneath my feet the moment I stepped outside; the birds called, and the forbidden creek beckoned. Before I'd even had a chance to weigh the prospect of chasing butterflies against the possibility of a whipping, though, Grandma surprised me.

"Dovey Mae," she said, using the name she herself had given me at birth, "you may come with me to town this morning."

I nearly jumped out of my skin. The prospect of accompanying my grandmother on such an adult errand as business in town sent me ripping into the bedroom to change into a dress and a sunhat as fast as I could go.

As Grandma and I came up the block, I could hear the Biddleville trolley clanging and squeaking its way down McDowell Street, the thoroughfare that connected the city's Second Ward, where we lived, with the neighborhood known as Biddleville. Wild as a buck to begin with, I was so excited on this occasion that Grandma had all she could do to keep me by her side, no matter how much she threatened to wear me out if I didn't hold tight to her hand. The minute the trolley doors swung open and I spotted an empty seat behind the driver, I shot up the steps and settled right into it. There I was, with a perfect view of just about everything worth looking at on that trolley car, so far as I was concerned. I sat up straight in the cane-bottomed seat and grinned at Grandma.

But she wasn't smiling, and neither was the driver, who had turned around to look at me. The color rose in his face, and when he spoke, he spat.

"Get that pickaninny out of here!" he shouted at my grandmother, with such venom that my cheeks burned. "You know she can't sit there."

I had never heard the word "pickaninny" before, but I could tell immediately from my grandmother's face that she had. It was a moment that was replayed hundreds, perhaps thousands of times across the country in the years when segregation held the South by the throat. More than three decades would pass before Rosa Parks refused to move to the rear of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and launched a movement.

In the twenties, such behavior was unthinkable. My grandmother, a middle-aged black woman abroad in a North Carolina town with a small child in tow, did the only thing she could do and still hold on to both her dignity and her life. She got off the trolley.

In one motion she grabbed me by the hand, whirled around and yanked the cord so hard I thought it would snap. The moment the trolley stopped, she pulled me down the car's back steps and turned, face set, toward town.

Then she began to march.

Block after block we walked, round the corner of Brevard, past Meyers Street Elementary School, across Alexander Street, half a mile to town. There was no sound but the rustle of Grandma's stiffly starched apron, and there was no stopping. She had me tight by the hand, all the way up the steps of the brick insurance building where she did her business, and back again. We crossed the square and made our way down East Trade Street, heading for home.

That was the longest mile I ever walked. I had to run to keep up with my grandmother, who quickened her pace with each block. And the faster she walked, the more awkwardly she swung her legs, rocking and swaying from side to side the way she did at night when she was very tired. Though trolley after trolley passed us, my grandmother never slowed or even turned her head. What frightened me more than anything was her silence.

It wasn't until after dinner that she finally spoke about the trolley car. Just as she did every night, she lit the kerosene lamp in the sitting room and cleared a space for my grandfather to open the old family Bible. Then she disappeared into the kitchen to take her cinnamon and butter pastries—"stickies," she called them—from the oven. It seemed to me that she was gone an unusually long time.

When she came back, she set down the tray and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Something bad happened to Dovey Mae today," she said.

I felt my cheeks grow hot, and I looked down.

"The mean old conductor man on the trolley car called her a bad name." No one spoke. In the lamplight, I looked up into Grandma's face, and I knew she was almost as angry as she'd been that morning.

"I want to tell you all something," she said. She looked around the table at each of us. Her gaze rested last on me.

"Now hear me, and hear me good," she said. "My chillun is as good as anybody."

Only from a distance of years is it possible for me to fathom the courage required for my grandmother to pick herself up from such humiliation and speak those words. I believe, now, that in the long moment

when she vanished into the kitchen, Grandma was crying. Certainly she was reaching down into her heart's core, for she was wrestling with the greatest curse of segregation: the horror of having to watch one's own children and grandchildren face its degradation.

In the course of my life, I have heard black people say they got used to the pain of segregation, eventually. I weep for the numbness of mind and the brokenness of spirit that motivates statements like that. Let me say here for all time that never for one moment of my life under Jim Crow did I grow accustomed to being excluded, banned, pushed aside, reduced. I was never to take a back seat on a trolley or bus, drink the rusty water that trickled from the "Colored" fountains, smell the garbage in the back-alley entrance to segregated movie theaters, or scratch myself on the rough toilet paper in the black restrooms but that I felt personally violated. And I know, having seen the look on Grandma's face that night, that she felt the same way. Powerful as she was, she could not protect me from the thing she most hated.

But she could arm me. And arm me she did, with words that lifted me up and made me forever proud: "My chillun is as good as anybody."