

Afterword

A NOTE ON MIRACLE-MAKERS

When two lives intersect as fruitfully as did Dovey Roundtree's and mine during the twelve years we spent working on this book together, there is much to be grateful for—more than can be articulated in any conventional reckoning. For Dovey, *Mighty Justice* was one long, sustained thank-you to each of the great figures in her life, from her beloved Grandma Rachel to the staggering procession of legal, intellectual, and spiritual giants who shaped her.

“I have found that there is always somebody who would be the miracle-maker in your life, if you but believe,” she told the *Washington Post* in February 1995, for an article on her work with actress Cicely Tyson in connection with Tyson's portrayal of a civil rights lawyer in Dovey's mold in the television series *Sweet Justice*. It was that utterly unlawyly statement, printed under a photograph of Dovey, that compelled me to seek her out for a *Washingtonian* magazine article that eventually led to our collaboration on her memoir. What I did not know then, what I could never have imagined on that cold winter morning twenty-four years ago when she ushered me into her office, was the extent to which Dovey would become the miracle-maker in my own life.

From the time we met until her death in 2018, Dovey gave me the gifts of her time, her wisdom, her friendship, her support of me and my family, and the breathtaking example of her unflagging faith. And, in a world riven by racial hurt and anger, she gave me her trust. She was a black woman born in the early twentieth century in the Jim Crow South. I am a white woman who came of age in 1950s Washington, DC. And yet Dovey chose to enter into a critical partnership with me, to bring me into her home, to enfold me into her family, and to share with me over more than a decade not only the facts of her life but also her doubts, her sorrow, and the pain of race and gender exclusion she

called “a rusty nail upon my heart.” I put endless questions to her in my search for understanding. And Dovey rose up with the entirety of her being with responses that often took my breath away. She filled the room with the force of her vision. She spoke with a depth and honesty that told me she believed I could in fact understand both her worldview and her suffering, for all the apparent differences between us.

This, of course, did not happen all at once. For that original magazine article, as I raced after her to court, to her home at the edge of Rock Creek Park, to the Anacostia church where she ministered, she was watching me as closely as I was watching her. I could barely keep up with her, despite the fact that she was an eighty-two-year-old diabetic with arthritis and failing eyesight who navigated the courtrooms and streets with a walker, and I was half her age and in perfect health. Drawn to her fierce passion for justice and her mesmerizing eloquence, I followed wherever she led, and along the way I became convinced that the piece I’d set out to write about her life could not possibly encompass even the bare facts of it, let alone its animating spirit. In the half century of her career, she’d walked with nearly every giant of the American civil rights movement, breaking barriers herself at every turn. And she had a vision of justice so vital and transformative, it needed a book to contain it.

I’ll never forget the day I told her that, nor the clarity of her response.

“I believe there’s a book in your life, Mrs. Roundtree,” I said, not yet quite ready to address her, as I eventually came to do, as Dovey, or Dove.

“Why?” she asked, her brow furrowing. This, I remember thinking, must be what it felt like to be deposed by her prior to a trial. I said that her life had great historical significance, and that the world needed to hear about it directly from her. I explained that I couldn’t devote my full time to the book until I cleared my other writing obligations, and that this was an undertaking that would almost certainly require years. Dovey closed her eyes and shook her head.

“I don’t have time,” she said. “I’m eighty-three years old. I need to hurry.”

So I threw myself into the listener role, and Dovey talked, and talked, and talked, and we embarked on a book together. We formed a bond that survived her move from Washington to her Charlotte, North Carolina, home as she became increasingly incapacitated by her

diabetes. That bond survived her blindness, my slowness, and our fear that we might not complete our work in time.

The fear lifted for both of us the day I read Dovey the first words of the book—the chapter called “Benediction,” which eventually became the final chapter rather than the opening. She and I had revisited many times over the years the edge-of-memory details of her magical pre-dawn berry picking with her grandmother, even as we wrestled with the minutiae of the book’s legal and historical chapters. What would I do, I wondered, if she did not approve? I began to read, and she leaned forward with the most intense concentration. As I moved through the words of the Benediction, her face began to glow.

I exhaled, and we pushed onward, through hundreds of hours of phone interviews and trips on my part to Charlotte, until at last in June of 2009 I was able to put the book into Dovey’s hands, in its first incarnation, and celebrate with her. It was the Benediction she wanted to hear that day. And so I read it aloud to her as we completed our work by sharing what we’d begun so many years earlier when we’d thrown in our lots together without any certainty of the outcome. She and I could never have anticipated then the lives that would be changed by our collaboration, in ways that extend even beyond the pages of *Mighty Justice*, that her story would inspire two children’s books, generate feature film interest, and make possible the creation of a scholarship in Dovey’s name for deserving Spelman College students. “Pass it on,” her beloved Spelman mentor Mae Neptune told Dovey in 1937 when she arranged the loan that enabled Dovey to finish college. Now, more than eighty years later, the passing-on continues.

A project like *Mighty Justice* could never be the work of just two people, and along the way Dovey and I encountered many miracle-makers to whom we owe a great debt. Chief among them is my lawyer husband, Jack McCabe, who regarded Dovey as the lawyer’s lawyer and pushed me to continue the work when my spirit sagged and my fears for Dovey’s health overtook me. I am also greatly beholden, for their counsel and encouragement, to my writing colleague Adina Rishe Gewirtz and my former student Sharon Holland, and to my incomparable agent Jesseca Salky, who refused to give up on the book until she found it its first home at a university press, and its current home at Algonquin Books. No agent could have embraced a manuscript more passionately than Jesseca, nor championed it more expertly than she did.

And finally, there is Dovey's beloved goddaughter, Charlene Pritchett-Stevenson, a woman with as large a soul as Dovey's own, who threw herself behind this project from the very beginning. I am deeply grateful to Charlene for sharing with me the story of her journey with Dovey, and later on, for enabling Dovey and me to complete the book's final chapters by opening up her home in Spotsylvania, Virginia, when Dovey moved briefly back from Charlotte to the Washington area in 2000 to live with Charlene. It was Charlene who did me the honor of inviting me to speak at Dovey's funeral on May 29, 2018, just eight days after Dovey left us at the age of 104. In so doing, Charlene allowed me the opportunity to stand before the mourners who filled the church of Dovey's childhood, East Stonewall AME Zion, to speak about my sorrow at the loss of my friend, to celebrate in the stillness that followed her departure the enormity of her legacy, and to say one last thank-you to the miracle-maker who, in entrusting me with her life's story, had so profoundly transformed mine.

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