

EASTER SUNDAY, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 1984

THE CONGREGATION IN WISDOM SEAT Baptist Church was hushed. All eyes were focused on a four-year-old brown-skinned girl in a red-and-white ruffled dress.

Trembling, the child looked out upon the congregation and reached down to scratch her knee. Twisting her hands together, she looked at the front pew as if for reassurance. Then, taking a deep breath, she said, “I don’t know why you all are looking at me; I didn’t come to stay. I just came to tell you that today is Easter Day.”

The congregation clapped and cheered loudly. Mothers smiled as the little girl ran to sit down. “Who was that?” Mildred whispered. “She sure is cute.”

“That’s Nikki Anderson’s little girl Jamila.”

Aunt Rose held her fan in front of her face as she talked to her niece. “You’ve seen Nikki and Dwayne—they live in Mrs. Patillo’s build-

ing. Dwayne works at the Greater Foods over on Kedzie, and I think Nikki stays at home.” She began to fan vigorously.

The organist began to play the first bars of “Blessed Quietness.” The congregation fell silent as they waited to receive the Word. Reverend Giles slowly approached the pulpit, pausing every now and then as if to ponder some divine inspiration. His long flowing purple robe shimmered with each step, and the grave expression on his face told all that this would not be a happy sermon.

“Good morning,” he whispered, shaking his head at the seriousness of his task.

“Good morning,” the congregation murmured back as they prepared themselves for their fall from grace.

“I have,” Reverend Giles cleared his throat, “a serious message to lay on you today. Amen. The Lord pressed this upon me last night, and I struggled with it all night long, church.”

Some of the parishioners nodded as if they, too, had experienced this same dilemma. “Preach it,” a few called out.

“Talk, Pastor,” a young woman urged.

The organist played a few tentative bars. “The Lord wants me to talk to the womenfolk today,” the reverend intoned. Aware that he had the congregation’s full attention, he leaned back and folded his arms over his protruding stomach.

“The family unit is being destroyed!” he thundered. “Young women today think there’s something wrong with staying at home and taking care of their families, Amen. They beat their husbands getting up and going to work, letting someone or something else raise their kids!”

Reverend Giles searched the faces for confirmation. Mildred stared blankly ahead. Aunt Rose bobbed her head and waved her fan.

“They don’t want to cook; they don’t want to clean...” Reverend Giles punctuated each point by jabbing his finger at members of the congregation. “They just don’t want! But they do want to spend your money,” he shouted.

Mildred leaned toward her aunt. “Is this directed at us or at Mrs. Giles?” she whispered.

“They want to buy shoes and bags from Gucci and Lucci,” he continued. A few teenagers giggled in the back of the church. Reverend Giles focused in their direction. “They want to walk around with all kinds of face paint on.” He began to strut back and forth in imitation. “They want to go out and drink and shake and shimmy,” his voice began to escalate as he performed his version of a young girl’s dance. “And you can’t talk to the mothers about them!” He screamed, “Help me, church! Because the mothers are out there on the floor shaking with their daughters!”

The organist struck up a lively tempo, and people began to witness. Reverend Giles collapsed into his high-backed chair and wiped his face before continuing his sermon.

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Aunt Rose sat in front of the window in her rocking chair, watching the neighborhood. Mildred lay on the floor in front of her, reading.

“Mildred Walker,” Aunt Rose whispered to herself and chuckled. Mildred glanced up and wondered what story Aunt Rose was reliving about herself and Mildred Walker. “Mildred Walker.” Aunt Rose said the name belonged to a woman that folks were still talking about in Crayton, Tennessee. Mildred Walker didn’t take nothing from nobody. She stood up for what she believed in, and if she thought you were right, she stood up for what you believed in, too. Aunt Rose often turned to her niece to say, “My greatest compliment to her, and my gift to you, was to give you her name. Wear it proudly and take it to her on Judgment Day”—she always stopped and fixed her eyes on Mildred at that point—“unstained.”

“Unstained Mildred Johnson,” Mildred called herself privately. The only thing that stopped her from saying it out loud was that maybe someone would hear it and take it up like a chant, and then before you knew it, everyone would be saying it over and over: “Unstained Mildred Johnson! Unstained Mildred Johnson!”

“Mildred, are you listening to me?” Aunt Rose’s voice broke the silence.

“Yes, Aunt Rose.”

“If you want to meet a nice boy, just go to church.”

“I was just there today, remember? I didn’t see anything extraordinary there other than Reverend Giles,” Mildred said dryly.

“I noticed Wilbur Spencer eyeing you from across the pew,” Aunt Rose said hopefully. “What’s wrong with him?”

Mildred looked up. “You mean the one who drools all the time? Are you serious?”

Aunt Rose pressed her lips together. “Nobody’s perfect, Miss, not even you. Could be the Lord wants you to take Wilbur and clean him up? Make him what you want him to be.”

“Believe me,” Mildred returned to her book, “the Lord don’t want that.”

“You know what we used to do in my day?” Aunt Rose persisted.

“What?” Mildred continued to read.

“If you saw a nice boy in church, first you just stared at him awhile and let him stare back at you. Then, when you knew he was looking at you, you opened your pocketbook quietly and snapped it closed real loud.”

Mildred looked up at her aunt incredulously.

“That’s all it took, and if you ask me, that’s enough. You don’t need to walk around with your face all painted and showing every single thing God gave you. It don’t take all that.”

Mildred knelt down in front of her aunt. “Yes, it does. It takes all of that plus a good personality, intelligence, and charm. You have to know what to do in the kitchen and in the bedroom.” She smiled innocently up at her aunt.

Aunt Rose chose to ignore that last comment. “Mildred, you make the best lemon meringue pie in Chicago.”

“But what about all those other things?”

“What about them?”

“Aunt Rose, look at me.”

Mildred inched up until her face was right before her aunt’s. “I mean really look at me.”

“I am looking at you, baby, and you’re a good-looking girl.” Aunt Rose took Mildred’s face between her hands and kissed it. “You’re my baby, that’s what you is.”

Mildred smiled resignedly at her aunt and stood up. She walked over to the hall mirror and stared at the taller-than-average, thinner-than-average, and plainer-than-average 27-year-old reflection.

Her nondescript face was accentuated by a nose that was a tad too wide, matched with lips that were slightly too thin. This—aided by a shyness that only Aunt Rose was able to penetrate—was Mildred Johnson.

Mildred carried her book into her bedroom to read.

Aunt Rose’s memories about growing up in Crayton, Tennessee with Mildred Walker could go on for hours. Her stories had no beginning, middle, or end; they were woven together in a warm, colorful tapestry like the patchwork quilt that covered her bed.

Mildred often wished that she’d been born during that era. Maybe if she’d been surrounded with the “down-home” feeling of the Southern people and the easygoing atmosphere, she would be able to relax and open up more. As things stood now, her contribution to most conversations and encounters consisted of nods of the head or shrugging of her shoulders.

Although Aunt Rose assured her that that was more than enough for most conversations these days, Mildred would have preferred to be more of a bluesy, gutsy woman like Aunt Rose or Mildred Walker.

She sighed, flopped down on her bed, reopened her book, and returned to where she had left off.

One

MILDRED ENTERED THE EL car with her head down and eyes averted. She scanned the aisles as though looking for an empty seat, but she was secretly canvassing the El car.

It was a game she played often. She memorized the faces, mannerisms, and actions of people she encountered during the day. If anything ever happened, or if something “big” were to go down, Mildred, and Mildred alone, would be the one to call on. She would be able to vividly recall to the police on the scene:

“He was wearing a plaid coat with a yellow, dirty handkerchief in his pocket on his right, no left side... Officer, she was a gray-haired, stoop-shouldered woman with a topaz ring on her third finger...”

She would be on Ted Koppel’s *Nightline*, explaining her method of total recall. Oprah would invite her on her show and hug her, saying, “Girlfriend, how do you do that?” Mildred would only smile enigmatically and shake her head. Some gifts could never be shared or explained. Then she would wink at Aunt Rose, who’d be smiling proudly in the front row of the studio audience.

Mildred slid into an empty seat while making a mental note of the snake charm on the neck of the man in front of her. She stared out the El window and watched the platforms and people whiz by. The El slowed to a stop and she read, "Cathy sucks good ____!" She felt herself blushing. She could just imagine Aunt Rose riding with her and watching her aunt's mouth drop open in shock. "What's the world coming to?" Mildred could hear her saying. Still grinning to herself, Mildred was soon lost in thought.

"Hey, sister, what's putting that smile on your face? Who are you thinking about? Or should I say, what are you thinking about?"

A tall, slender man with dreadlocks slid into the seat next to Mildred. She could smell a faint trace of incense on him. Incense and maleness. A sweet, musky combination.

"When someone tries to bother you on the El, don't look at them," Aunt Rose cautioned her. "If you on the bus or El, look out the window and shake your head a little; that'll let them know."

Mildred turned her head to the window with a slight shake.

"What's that shake mean? 'No, I'm not smiling about somebody' or what?" he persisted.

As he slid closer, she could feel his warm breath in her ear. She stared at the platforms and people whizzing by.

"You got a name?" he asked.

Mildred continued to stare.

"Baby, am I that ugly that you can't even look at me?"

She turned slightly toward him to prove that he wasn't that ugly. And he wasn't. He had a red, black, and green skullcap pulled down over his dreadlocks. His eyes were bright and laughing at her from smooth, brown skin. His mustache and beard were sprinkled with gray, and the V-neck of his multicolored dashiki revealed a hairy chest with more sprinkling.

"My name is O'Kanta," he said, smiling at her. "And yours?"

"Mildred," she whispered.

"Uh, Mildred, listen." O'Kanta slid his arm across the back of her seat. She could feel it tickle her neck. "Do you think me and you can get together sometime?"

She snapped her head back to the window.

"I told you."

The El slowed to a stop, and O'Kanta looked out of the window.

"Oh wait, this is my stop! Here," he jumped up and took a leaflet out of his pocket and dropped it on her lap. "You can reach me here...and keep smiling, okay?" He gave her a wicked grin and was gone.

"Don't touch it," Aunt Rose warned. "Leave it right there."

Mildred waited until he'd gotten off and the El was speeding away before she curled her fingers around the paper and slid it into her pocket.

Getting off at her stop, she floated down the El steps at Pulaski and bought a \$2.50 bunch of carnations for Aunt Rose. She smiled at the toothless flower man and held her head up as she walked the two blocks home. When she came into sight of the brown brick two flat, she reached deep into her pocket to feel if the paper was still there. It was.

She unlocked the four deadbolts that Aunt Rose insisted would protect them from the scum of the streets.

"Millie? Is that you?"

"Yeah, Aunt Rose, it's me."

Mildred walked into the front room and saw her aunt at her favorite post—sitting in front of the window, watching the comings and goings of the neighborhood.

"Look what I bought you," she said as she handed the flowers to her aunt. Aunt Rose smiled as she took the carnations and stood up as Mildred bent down for their customary greeting. Aunt Rose always kissed on the forehead or on both cheeks. She believed firmly that once a child passed the age of eight, she should never be kissed on the mouth by anyone other than a spouse.

"My goodness child, why did you go and do this?" She sniffed the carnations and then held them away from her to examine them.

"I don't even think I'm dressed fancy enough for these."

Mildred left her talking foolishness and went into the bedroom to change. She wondered if she should read the paper now or wait until later when she was in her nightgown and could appreciate it the most.

She decided to wait.

“I fried some chicken and opened up a can of cream-style corn. It’s on the stove,” Aunt Rose said.

Mildred came out and went into the kitchen. “I don’t like cream-style corn.”

“Yes you do.”

“No, I don’t. You like cream-style corn. I like whole-kernel corn.”

Mildred wondered how many times the two of them would have this discussion.

“How anybody could like that dry whole-kernel corn is beyond me,” Aunt Rose said. “Cream style is better for you and that’s a proven fact.”

Mildred knew where her aunt got her facts. She made them up. She went into the pantry and got out a can of whole-kernel corn.

Aunt Rose came into the kitchen holding the flowers and got a tall vase out of the cabinet.

Mildred turned to her. “Do you want me to make a salad to go with it?”

Aunt Rose nodded absently as she arranged the flowers in a vase. She sat the vase in the middle of the kitchen table and turned to watch Mildred reproachfully as she opened the can of whole-kernel corn and poured it into a pot.

“I met a man today,” Mildred said offhandedly.

Aunt Rose’s head turned excitedly toward her niece. “Where? At the bank?”

“No, I told you that tellers can’t talk to the customers.” She went back to the refrigerator and pinched out a hunk of butter with her fingers. Aunt Rose normally could not stand for this, but she was just curious enough about the man to let it pass. She dropped the butter into the pot of corn and put a lid on it.

“Well, you can talk to some when you’re cashing their check, can’t you?” Aunt Rose persisted. “You can give him change and smile, can’t you?”

Mildred went back into the refrigerator and took out lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, and cheese. “Do you want to hear this or not?”

Aunt Rose propped her elbows on the table. "What's his name?" she said warily.

Mildred stared at her. In her excitement her aunt seemed to be forgetting her table manners entirely. "Well, you don't have to sound so excited." She rinsed the vegetables in the sink and smiled.

"Where did you meet him?" Aunt Rose ventured.

"On the El."

"I told you not to talk to nobody on the El. Nobody but a bunch of fools ride the El."

Mildred got two bowls out of the cabinet. "I ride it."

"I'm talking about men, as you well know, Miss Fast. What's his name?"

"O'Kanta."

"What? O' What?"

"O'Kanta," Mildred said nonchalantly as she placed the two bowls of salad on the table and turned the corn off.

"What kind of name is that?" she asked suspiciously.

"What kind of salad dressing do you want?"

"What kind have I been using for twenty years?"

"I don't know; I didn't ask him." Mildred got out the French and Italian dressing.

"What was he, drugged out or something?"

"What do you mean 'drugged out'?" Mildred turned to face her aunt with her hands on her hips. "Does he have to be drugged out to talk to me?"

"You know what I mean." Aunt Rose got up to get the plates.

Mildred sat down and wondered why she could fix salad, corn, or cook anything under the sun, yet Aunt Rose would never permit her to fix her own plate.

Aunt Rose uncovered the platter of fried chicken on the stove and got out a wing and a thigh for Mildred and a back and neck for herself. She spooned out cream-style corn on her plate and whole-kernel for Mildred.

"He asked me out," Mildred offered.

“Well, I hope you told him ‘no.’” Aunt Rose placed the two plates on the table and sat down heavily.

The last evening rays of the western sun filtered into the Johnson kitchen window and reflected on their two heads bowed in prayer.

“Precious Lord, we thank You for the food we’re about to receive for the nourishment of our bodies in Jesus Christ’s name,” Aunt Rose prayed.