

## The Goodbye

*Spring, 1981, the Carolinas*

It was 4 a.m., and the Mother was nearly done. She had loaded the last of her things into the trunk of her green Ford Fairlane. The suitcases, packed for months and carefully hidden in the attic, contained clothes her grandmother had made for her children, the family quilt that her grandmother's Gullah grandmother had begun with her own mother's head scarf, clothes from the Mother's stylish pre-hijabi days, and some money her father had pressed into her palm months before, his face tight with disapproval as he observed the life and the man his only child had chosen for herself. The most precious items - her sleepily stirring daughter, 3 and son, 1, - were wrapped in blankets and placed tenderly in the back and front seats. (Her loaded .38 was placed with as much care in the locked glove compartment.)

She'd been packing for almost four hours, had started the moment her husband's tail light's disappeared down the street. He wouldn't be back until after eight that morning, and by that time they would already be nearing the emerald-colored Georgia highway border. His dinner awaited him in the oven on a warm plate, and on the worn kitchen table, a letter, explaining everything, and telling nothing. Her husband, the product of rage that stretched across and ran through the lives of everyone who shared his bloodline, handled problems like this with fists. He hadn't always, but he did now.

Resolute, the Mother closed the trunk firmly, careful not to alert her neighbors or wake the Son and Daughter. She hoped to be in Georgia by the morning. They always woke up hungry, and the Son was still nursing. As she turned the ignition, he yawned, smacked his tiny lips, and burrowed deeper into his seat. The Daughter, she knew, was awake. Even in utero she'd been a light sleeper, waking up when jolted out of sleep by loud noise, pushing her submerged hands out so hard you could see her tiny fingers in the Mother's belly. She tuned in her seat to check. Sure enough, the Daughter's eyes met the Mother's calmly, her expression interested, but unafraid.

"You okay, baby?" the Mother asked. The Daughter nodded.

"Is your seatbelt on?"

"Yes," she answered, her little brow furrowed. "But where are we going in the night time?"

"We're going on a trip," her mother said, smiling in spite of the nervous fluttering in her breast. "We're going to see your Pop-Pop."

Pop-Pop. A mean faced assemblage of perfectly ironed clothing and wrinkled brown skin, all permanently infused with the stink of cigar smoke. The Daughter's frown deepened.

"We just saw him yesterday," she said flatly, wrinkling her nose, her concept of time flattening everything

earlier than the present into "yesterday," and everything in the future into "soon." The Mother shook her head, laughed.

"No, not THAT Pop-Pop. Your other Pop-Pop. Your daddy's dad. You were just a tiny little baby when he saw you last," the Mother said, almost to herself. She hadn't told her father-in-law that she was on the way, sensing correctly that he would have alerted her husband. She couldn't know then that when she arrived days later, exhausted and in need of a bed, that he would greet her at the door and refuse her entrance. "I don't want to get involved," he would say to her, half-apologetic and half-accusatory, as his baby grandson dozed in the Mother's arm and his toddler granddaughter played clumsily with a yo-yo a few feet away. ("It was one thing," the Mother would tell the Daughter years later, explaining her coolness towards her former father-in-law, "to turn me away. But to turn YOU all away.

Well..." Here, her voice would always trailed off as her eyes narrowed, burning with remembered hurt and righteous anger.)

Temporarily satisfied, the Daughter settled back in her seat and looked out the window as the car backed slowly out of the driveway and into the street. The Mother drove with the contained desperation of the pursued, carefully stopping at every red light on the empty streets. She self-consciously removed her hijab at the freeway entrance ramp, fluffing her mashed-down hair with her free hand and checking her face in the mirror.

She turned the radio on, low, as she drove, the Son still blessedly slumbering next to her. It would feel

good to be gone from this place. To be home. The thought propelled the Mother, and she drove, stopping only at rest stops to nurse the baby and take the Daughter to the bathroom. She had packed up some groceries for the trip, and the Daughter amused herself by asking the Mother what words letters spelled. It would occur to the Mother some months later that this was when her child had begun to read, her maddening and ceaseless question game a showcase of budding intelligence.

"What does F-O-R-D spell?" the Daughter asked, reading the floor mat.

"It's 'Ford', sweetheart. It's the kind of car we're in."

"A Ford?"

"Yes."

"What does C-A-M-P-B-E-L-L--" The Daughter paused, perplexed. "What is this thing before the 'S'?"

"That's an apostrophe," the Mother explained, smiling to herself. "It means something belongs to someone."

"Okay, what is C-A-M-P-B-E-L-L-aposturpee-S?"

"That's 'Campbell's.' That's the kind of soup it is." The Daughter frowned.

"You said it's chicken noodasoup!"

"Yes, it's CAMPBELL'S Chicken Noodle Soup. That means they make it."

"So they can come and get it?" the Daughter asked, alarmed.

"No, baby. It's our soup. It's ours. Yours and mine." Relieved, the little girl sat back again, frowning, turning the concepts of creation and ownership over in her head. Yours. Ours. Mine.

Dusk crept along the edges of the shrinking highway, twining itself above the tributaries feeding the Apalachicola River and saluting the Panhandle in final bursts of orange and dusky pink. It had been over two decades since the Mother had left this place, and many years since she had visited, yet even in the ever-deepening darkness, she could get there. Her hands guided the steering wheel with the blind assurance of someone who knows the way. The Son, fretting next to her, hungrily awaited his evening nursing. She clucked and cooed to him, murmuring singsong to calm him. They were almost there.

Ahead of her stretched a winding dirt path, the signature orange of the clay-rich earth by daylight, now a sombre ochre in the car's headlights. At the end of it sat a house: squat, wide, with an ancient paint job and a set of termite-eaten stairs leading to a surprisingly gracious front porch with two wicker rockers and a hanging swing. On it, lit from overhead by a single bulb, stood a woman, the sister of the Mother's

mother. As the Mother's car crept slowly along the path, she watched the Aunt's expression. Even from here she could see the stern set of the jaw, the narrowing of the Aunt's razor eyes a precursor to the unsheathing of her razor tongue. Sighing deeply, the Mother parked the car in front of the house, and gingerly lifted the fretting Son to her breast. She uncovered herself with practiced ease, fixing him at her breast with one hand and slinging her purse over her shoulder with the other. Behind her, the Daughter watched the woman on the front porch with growing worry.

"Mommy, who is that?" she asked. The Mother took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and was silent for a moment before answering.

"That's your Auntie \_\_\_\_\_. She's your grandma's sister. I want you to be nice and give her a hug. Okay?"

"Okay," the Daughter replied cautiously, tucking this new aunt into the vast category of aunts and uncles who were not her parents' siblings. Auntie \_\_\_\_\_, tall and thin as a whippet with an unsmiling face, was a vast departure from the other aunts: laughing, cloud-soft women whom she knew to be wells of warm, good-smelling comfort and pleasure. Still, she was old. Maybe she had candy. Old ladies always seemed to. Encouraged by the possibility of sweets, the Daughter unbuckled the safety belt at her waist and opened the heavy door, taking the Mother's hand as they advanced towards the porch.

The Aunt folded her arms as they approached, her mouth upon close examination set as if hewn in

granite. (If you weren't afraid and knew where to look, you could glimpse the remains of a firecracker who in her saucy youth had left a string of broken hearts all the way from the Panhandle to the Rio Grande. Who had broken strong men with the curl of her lip and the curve of her strong legs and firm backside. You could see in her face, under the ravages of a lifetime of drink and endless, bottomless heartache, a still-handsome woman. But you had to know where to look. And then, you had to be brave.)

"You stayin'?" she asked the Mother as she stood at the foot of the steps, her viper's eyes now glimmering slits in the light as she scowled at the Son in the Mother's arms. Craning her neck, she peered into the darkness, where to her surprise, the Daughter was watching her, openly, as she held the Mother's hand.

"Well!" the Aunt huffed. "Who is this piece of freshness lookin' me dead in my face like she grown? That your gal?" Flustered, the Mother leaned down, her warm hand stroking the always present parade of cowlicks and fly-aways off her eldest child's forehead. "Don't stare, baby," she murmured. "It's not nice." The girl looked down at the ground. This Aunt, it seemed, would **not** have treats.

Snorting, the Aunt turned her attention to the Son. "He still on the titty?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the Mother, her voice, though tired, tightening with irritation. "I'm still nursing him. I suspect you know why I came."

“I do,” the Aunt said. “You got some way to get that baby’s milk for him before you do take the rea?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the Mother, shifting the sleeping Son in her arms. “I’m going to get settled before I do it. I’m not far along. Three weeks, maybe four.” The Aunt huffed.

“That’s far enough. You goan have to watch the bleeding. You stayin’ with kin, so they’ll take care of you. It’s goan hurt you. I suspect you know that.” The Mother nodded. “Good. Be ready for it. You goan have to pay yo’ respects before you do it, too.”

“I know,” said the Mother. She shifted again, her back groaning in protest. “I was hoping I could do it tonight.” The Aunt nodded.

“It’s in the kitchen, in the big Mason jar in the left cabinet, behind the Constant Comment,” the Aunt said, tersely. “Go to the prayer closet, pay yo’ respects, and take that jar. Gimme the baby. I’ll watch the chirren.”

Tenderly, the Mother handed the Son to the Aunt as the Daughter watched, wide-eyed and fascinated. Sighing, the Mother passed a hand once again over her child’s riot of hair.

“Mommy’ll be right back, okay?” she said. Sensing the seriousness in her mother’s tired face, the Daughter nodded. Her eyes slid hopefully over to the working porch swing. “I can sit there?” she asked.



The Mother chuckled, a tiny croak of a usually melodious bubbling of sound. “Yes, baby, if you can get up there.”

The Daughter grinned. “*I* can get up there!” she declared, and in a flurry of struggling, chubby limbs, she was seated, delightedly kicking her tiny legs back and forth, back and forth.

As she had done so many times in her youth, the Mother pushed open the screen door, rusting faithfully off its hinges since 1929, and walked down the shotgun hallway, into the living room, where behind a beaded curtain sat an altar, groaning beneath the weight of photographs of the departed and a sparkling copper cross. Swallowing the knot in her throat, the Mother stood before the altar. She bowed her head.

“I am so sorry, my sweet, sweet little baby,” she choked, the tears she had pushed back through sheer force of will since she left her husband and their life behind her suddenly springing forward, coursing down her cheeks in hushed, saline sorrow. Gingerly, she touched her gently swelling middle, just beginning to arc outward with the imprint of life. “I never dreamed I would ever do this. I never imagined this would be my life. And I want you. I swear to you, I want you. I do. But I am all we have, and we have no money, or home. I pray that God will forgive me. I pray that you will forgive me. I will never forgive me. I love you so, so much.”

Swallowing the massive, heaving sob that threatened to scream out of her, the Mother hastily wiped her face with the back of her hands, and walked briskly to the kitchen. In the cabinet, to the left, behind the

Constant Comment, sat the Mason jar filled with a splendid rainbow of dried and crushed roots and flowers that would become the tea that would terminate the tragically timed life that was growing inside her. It was something only her Aunts knew the secret of; “woman’s magic,” it was. Passed down for ages, this tea had saved the lives and freedom of countless women. It was their family’s recipe, and one that Mother had refused to learn herself. It was terrible knowledge. But this was no time for sentimentality. Setting her mouth firmly, the Mother grabbed the jar, and wrapped it in a piece of torn burlap that sat on the rickety and ancient kitchen table. Securing her bundle, the Mother strode outside, the wooden floorboards wailing their protest at the determination in her step.

On the porch, the Daughter had dozed off in the swing, where the Aunt sat next to her, holding the sleeping Son. Smiling softly, the Mother quieted her footfalls, letting the door close behind her, softly. Wide awake, the Aunt stared out from the porch into the deepening night. All around, the evening song of crickets and frogs chirped and whirred, and the heady sweetness of night blooming jasmine sighed into the languid breeze.

The Mother sat down on the porch swing, cuddling the Daughter into her lap. Suddenly, the Aunt reached across her sleeping child’s form, and grasped the Mother’s hand, her grip tight and dry, but warm. Startled, the Mother looked at the Aunt, whose gaze remained steadfastly forward.

“You know what I thought when I saw them?” the Aunt asked. The Mother, sighing inwardly, girded herself.

“No, ma’am,” she replied.

“She look just like my mama,” the Aunt chuckled. “She look just like my mama just spit her right on out. That gal right their is ours. Damned if she don’t look just like us. And if that boy don’t look like my Papa...!” The Mother laughed, quietly, relieved at this break in the rain.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, they do look like ours.” *Ours. Yours. Mine.*