

## **AUTHOR TERRI LYONS - LET ME TELL YOU WHAT MAMA SAID**

### **THE JOURNEY (continued)**

By the time I came along, the backroom had long been a bathroom. It was eerie to walk up the long dark steps even as the hall light dimly burned above my head. Midway up the stairs on my right was the room. My heritage room. I used to visit that room every time I came to the old homestead. The wallpaper had bursts of rose buds strewn all over with pale green and white stripes behind the bunches of buds, but time turned the peeling paper gold, standing in stark contrast to the fresh white curtains hanging across the large hazy window. The dark hardwood floors were worn and creaky. An old dresser sat in the corner with legs as long as mine. I came into the room and sat on the side of the bed looking out the window. It was a view of a lonely field that led to Sumneytown Pike. My mother was born in that dingy room and so was her mother.

My great grandmother died in this same room while sleeping. Haunted by spirits, I scurried down the hall to my original destination, the bathroom. The large room had a huge footed tub with no shower and a large toilet with a tall filling tank. The sink had individual spigots for hot and cold water with a chained plug in the middle of the lime-stained sink. A fluorescent light was on either side of the mirror mounted high on the massive red wall. I had to reach beyond my capacity to get the paper roll, which was too low for a toilet that sat so high. I was in my Sunday best' my black wool jumper and red turtleneck top. I enjoyed the reflection in the long mirror mounted on the back of the door. I stood there twisting my red and black yarn adorning my freshly straightened ponytails that had come unraveled. I hopped on the pot and had an elevated view of the desolate backyard that reached forever. The pink sliver of soap at the sink smelled of Camay clashing with my Avon Pretty Peach Cachet. I took one last peek of my picture perfect self and headed out the door.

When I left the bathroom, I went back to the room again for reasons I still don't understand. There was nothing there to see and there was nothing to say, but I couldn't fight a spirit that seemed to insist that I feel, yeah that's it, I had to feel that room. It was the room where Nana and mommy's life began and Mama Lou's life ended and I could visit her anytime I wanted. I felt a strange peace and a peculiar love in the room that I have never felt anywhere else. A child's imagination is strong indeed, but it is true that I have never entered a room since that time with such a strange brew of anxiety and welcome. There was a lot of history in the old house and I had no choice but to hear almost all of it. I was about ten or eleven years old and everyone in my family was old. The women all wore orthopedic shoes and had salt and pepper hair covered with church sister hats. Mothball aroma mixed with perfume stuck to their coats. They always talked about something that happened fifty years before my birth. They enjoyed what I didn't understand. The after church dinner was always good, but everything seemed to come to a fuzzy halt, especially my childhood and the clock. Sagging skin and gaunt chins were before me, showing off aging dentures. I was always so awed by how teeth could move independently of the rest of the human face. Their dingy grins were full of praise' how pretty my dress was and how much I looked like my daddy as if I didn't know that. I knew I had to be seen and not heard in the old Gwynedd, Pennsylvania, house, leaving me with no one to talk to or play with. I have no siblings. In the summer, I went out onto the wraparound porch that overlooked lots of empty space' beautiful fields and a strange but comforting quiet' chipmunks and rabbits going about their day. I didn't know it was the land my great grandparents owned. I didn't know they had been slaves and earned their estate through unconscionable struggle. I didn't realize what that meant. Back in the quiet fields of what used to be a fertile garden that fed my mother from birth, I saw an old rusted-out meat hook in the field and a small shack with some chipped green paint and a quarter moon carved on the door.

Peeking inside, I looked down on what seemed to be a wooden bench with two large holes. The shack looked like a haunted house, and I didn't see how anyone would live in it, filled as it was with spider webs and bugs. Sometimes I played with the black and brown mutt, Pretty Girl, wondering how Cousin Verlie came up with the name. Pretty Girl was more than happy to drag me up and down Swedesford Road. Knowing the field better than I did, she took me for a walk. Cousin Joe and Verlie lived in the old house after my great grandmother's death in 1942 until Verlie died in 1980.

Cousin Joe's mother was my grandmother's sister, Mary who died in May 1907 after giving birth to her hunchback son Joseph, so no one at the table knew much about her. Nana wasn't born until October of the same year. Luella, my great-grandmother, took care of her grandson Joe. He and Nana were more like brother and sister than aunt and nephew. Cousin Joe was a short and stumpy dark brown skinned man who loved his pipe and baseball. One of his shoes had a thick heel to accommodate his uneven legs. In spite of his handicap, he worked every day until he got too old. Cousin Joe's wife, Verlie Free was from Greensboro, North Carolina. Her ancestors dropped their slave name after emancipation. Cousin Verlie's chunky frame stood about five feet, three inches with coca brown skin. Her soft, silver hair beautifully crowned her kindly face. She usually had something nice for me' a puzzle or comic book to help me get through the grueling evening. Verlie had an awkward walk because her limbs bowed outward from having rickets as a child. She ran away from home to come north in the 1920s. Sundays included visiting every shut-in all over Ambler and Penllyn. By the time my parents and I arrived at the old house, the church crew was already there and the table was loaded down with food. The food always smelled so good and the prayer always lasted too long. Cousin Verlie hobbled in the dining room carrying a big bowl of creamed corn' Alright now, time to eat.' Cousin Joe was right behind her carrying the bird of the week. It could have been, a duck, goose, or turkey.

A couple of times pheasant was under that cover. Everyone took their place at the table and bowed their heads. Cousin Joe led us in prayer."Let us pray' Lawd we thank you for bringing us here together..."I was wondering to myself just how long this evening would be. I thought I got a whiff of turnips. I hate turnips. I hope mom doesn't make me eat them again. Maybe I'll get a chance to look at the Ed Sullivan show if Cousin Joe will let me. I always liked that show."Bless the hands that prepared the food for the nourishment of our bodies..." Boots came crawling under the table snuggling around my feet. I felt the vibration from his purring. My stomach gurgled as the aroma of the fresh baked bird teased my nose and steam floating on top of the potatoes seemed to only come my way. I was so hungry. I peeked to the right where mom was sitting deep in prayer. When Cousin Verlie greeted me earlier she said she had a surprise for me. I wonder what it is."We thank ya Lawd for your grace..."I guess we'll get to eat sooner or later. Old folks sure can sit for a long time. I peeked on the other side and there was my dad. his head was in his lap too. I should have brought my coloring book with me."In the name of the Father, the son and the holy ghost....Amen."Plates and bowls floated up and down the table. I was able to pass those turnips without mom noticing I didn't take any. Pretty Girl had her head near my lap on the look out for any unforeseen accidents. I zoned out into myself for a while. I gazed around the room when I could looking at nothing in particular but noticing details that escape grown people. Cracks haddrawings throughout the chalk white walls right up to the toggle switch. The mirror above the ancient buffet was hazy and peppered with black dots. I don't think anything in the house was made in the 1900s. I grabbed a biscuit while Missus Byrd was talking and slipped my giblets to Pretty Girl. With a clean plate in front of me, mom gave me permission to leave the table with a nod of her head. After dinner, I helped to clear the table and found my cozy spot, which was wherever Boots and Pretty Girl were. They fought sometimes, but for the most part got along well as people and didn't seem to mind the extra company. I snuggled in' hoping not to be noticed' with nothing left to do, I listened. The old men always ended up in the living room after dinner and, with the most delightful pipe tobacco permeating the air, conversed about the ball game or the highlights of the deacon meeting. The women stayed in the dining room. They sipped tea, offered me cake, and every once in awhile looked down toward the floor at me with a feeble smile to make sure I was okay. Those old folks were not educated, but they had a lot to say.

There were treasures in their heads and they were gonna 'sot' you down and tell you all about it. Entire evenings were spent getting it straight and they took no lip if they thought someone was wrong. When they disagreed, a lot of preaching took place to make their point clear. Work was hard and they got it done with pride. I heard things and saw pictures that meant nothing to me until years later. My maternal grandmother, Nana, was Homzell Williams and loved to be the center of attention telling everything she knew about everyone. Her husband, my step grandfather, was William Govan. Pop-pop was a loving, low keyed dark skinned man with a potato sac physique who was totally illiterate and almost blind from glaucoma. He was owned by Nana. She was the lightest and the

youngest of her brothers and sisters so her imagined birthright made her a bit presumptuous at times. Her bouncy gait and strawberry hair was quite a spectacle, especially when she entered a room. She lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut so when she came to town everything, at least in her mind, was supposed to stop and focus on her. Her pancake makeup made a clear line around her neck and her eye shadow sometimes turned her eyebrows blue. Her demands were as high as her pride and her reciprocation was low. Nana liked to upstage the ladies who wore no makeup or perfume. To Nana, they had no style. I didn't know the church sisters very well. They traveled in herds catching every dinner in town. I only saw them in church and at the Sunday dinners when Nana was in town. Miss Ida was a rather short dark skinned woman with a warm personality. She kept company with Cousin Verlie. They met weekly for scrabble games and church projects and spent afternoons making plans for the missionaries, the deacons auxiliary and Sunday banquets. Missus Byrd was a big black woman with squirrel gray hair who walked with a cane and had a little short stumpy man for a husband with a bad temper. She was nice to me' the only one who ever took time to talk to me. I didn't like her husband. When he got mad, he would foam and bubble and walk. I loved to watch old folks get mad. It put the fear of God in me, but at the same time it pulled back the veil to their otherwise holy demeanor. He was so angry, he once got up from the table in the middle of dinner, frothed and foamed out the door and walked all the way to North Wales where they lived. He had to walk, he couldn't drive. Missus Byrd drove. Missus Byrd was the first one to park at the table, all three hundred pounds of her. She always ate the biscuits-all of them. Miss Gladys was a nice fluffy faced woman with thin pitch black hair and a thick moustache whose daughter was one of the first in the area to have a house built. That was something. Most people bought houses that were already built. They all belonged to the NAACP and the Harriet Beecher Stowe Club. Along with cousin Verlie, Nana and my mother Hazel, they sat around the table most of the evening talking about the old days. I was hearing my history. Boots was purring at my feet' Pretty Girl was sniffing my face and licking my hand every once in a while. I was listening." "I don't really remember who was the meanest, the white folks or my family. I simply walked out of the house one morning and never looked back.' Verlie said shaking her head looking down at her cake." "Down home was bad for me. I couldn't wait to leave. I don't have nice memories like you all. "It was the perfect opportunity for Nana. Her eyes rolled toward the top of her head while her red rag almost hit her chin. She was ready." "Not up here with momma and pappy. Dem people down there crazy! Oh ma gawd! The way we had to cook and clean and tend to the pigs and chickens, ain't that right Hazel?" "That's right momma.' my momma said." "Joe'll tell ya. We used to laugh and talk while getting food together. The white folks was good to us. We had so much, we sold food to them! And didn't momma set a table?! Hazel was little, but she still had to help in the garden and in the kitchen, ain't that right Hazel?' Nana barked. "Gawd knows we ate until we couldn't move. We had the best corn and tomatoes and pears. The table was loaded down with good food. We had everything. There wasn't no time for dirt and mess either. Momma would kill us, pappy too, but we had fun running out in the field picking berries and making ice cream. Ain't that right Hazel?' Nana talked like she was the star of the show. "That's right momma."".