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A Black Girl's Song

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A BLACK GIRL'S SONG

by

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A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

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MARIE A. SUTTON

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

A Black Girl's Song tells of the journey of the late Jimmie Lee Elliott, a Birmingham woman who experiences a series of nearly debilitating relational, emotional and racial experiences, but goes on to become the first woman to reach the level of EAS-22 Postmaster in Alabama's postal system. Jimmie's is a life of interruptions, precipitated and agitated by money issues, mental breakdowns and men. But for her cast-iron will, she would have abandoned her thorny path to greatness as it had more dry patches than grassy places.

Keywords: Fiction based on a true story, Jimmie Elliott, U.S. Postal Service, Birmingham, Southern, African American Women

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my brilliant, beautiful and fiercely brave grandmother Jimmie Lee Elliott

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere thanks to Dr. Kieran Quinlan, Jim Braziel and my dear, sweet Kerry Madden. You three were very generous with your wisdom and I will be forever grateful.

I could not have done this project without the love and support of my parents Marvin and Brenda Jones, my children Simone and Stephen and my husband James.

Lastly, and most importantly: for my life and for my words, I owe it all to Jesus Christ!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
EPIGRAPH	1
CHAPTER ONE	2
CHAPTER TWO	11
CHAPTER THREE	20
CHAPTER FOUR	28
CHAPTER FIVE	33
CHAPTER SIX	41
CHAPTER SEVEN	49
CHAPTER EIGHT	58

EPIGRAPH

somebody/ anybody
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/ struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty
she's half-notes scattered
without rhythm/ no tune
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly.

-- From "*For colored girls...*" by Ntozake Shange

CHAPTER ONE

Jimmie Lee

1951

Tangerine flames kicked and bowed like a chorus line of wild women in the old heater that sat in the corner of Jimmie's room. She imagined that their shadows were voodoo priestesses, speaking in tongues while hovering over some smoking pot.

She had never seen a voodoo priestess, never been outside of Birmingham, Alabama; but she had read about them in books she checked out from the Booker T. Washington Negro library up the road.

She should be asleep, but her stomach felt as if it was being wrung out to dry — twisting and squeezing and pulling. Every time the fifteen-year-old brown-skinned girl began to doze, she'd be smacked by a dizzying nausea or punched in the gut by some heave.

Outside, a light blanket of snow covered the yard. It was December's parting gift on that last day of 1950. Her family's tiny three-bedroom home sat in a row of dull-colored houses on 11th Court North. Inside, the smell of kerosene swelled within the walls, smothering the family of nine as they slept.

Everything was quiet and still — the kind of silence that makes you hold your breath and clench your covers. Was everyone asleep, or dead? Loneliness lodged like a steel anchor sitting on Jimmie's chest. She sank beneath her covers and wished that she

could bargain with those voodoo women and arrange for some magic spell to make her problem go away — the one growing inside her womb.

At first, she thought her nausea and cramps were just a stomach bug, but no remedies worked; not Buffalo Rock, Milk of Magnesia or spearmint gum. Before she knew it, three months had passed and she couldn't remember the last time she had her period.

Jimmie quickly tucked that thought away, and tried to busy her brain by going over her vocabulary words. She had a test coming up and didn't want to break her record of all A's.

ABACUS...A-B-A-C-U-S, an instrument for performing calculations by sliding counters along rods.

Saying the words underneath her breath made her smile. She loved the tickle of their tones on her tongue and the rhythm of their sounds on her lips. She had memorized them perfectly — all twenty. Each new school year brought with it words that got harder, from “obsolete” to “onomatopoeia.” Jimmie relished every term, even the tricky ones like those with an “i” before “e.”

No matter how many long-lettered words Jimmie had conquered, though, the one that had gotten the best of her only had three: S-E-X. She wasn't allowed to say it, think it, let alone do it. That was for girls who were “hot in the pants,” and Jimmie's mother, Jessie, warned that she had better not be named among them.

In her logical fifteen-year-old brain, Jimmie figured that there must be something to this “sex” thing, since everyone was saying not to do it – although they all were. She supposed it was like that clear moonshine her Uncle Fat Sam kept hidden in his shed. She

discovered it one day after being sent on a hunt for his monkey wrench. It was back behind his toolkit, wrapped in a worn red washcloth.

Jimmie marveled at its clarity against the light and studied the motion of its form as it rose and fell inside an old maple syrup bottle. It smelled sweet like green rubbing alcohol, and she could not resist but raise the glass to her lips and take a swig.

A shock of dynamite hit the back of her throat and she nearly dropped the bottle. Once the heat in her mouth cooled, the buzz she had all day was worth the fear of a beating. But the consequences of sneaking a sip of liquor was nothing compared to getting pregnant in the tenth grade – especially when your mama is Jessie Moore.

Suddenly, Jimmie thought of Clarice Bell — the prettiest girl in all of Birmingham. The sixteen-year-old had long, black hair like satin drapes, hazel eyes with flecks of green and a skinny, pointed nose. People whispered that her daddy probably had been a white man. None of the regular negroes around town looked like her. When Clarice walked into a room, no boy with a pulse would look your way. And, she wasn't the type of beauty who was stuck up. She talked just above a whisper, and walked around with her head slightly bowed as if she didn't know she looked like Dorothy Dandridge and Elizabeth Taylor all rolled up in one.

“That tiny waist and perfectly narrow hips are gone be shot to hell now,” Jessie told Jimmie at the news of Clarice.

When word spread to the pews of St. Luke African Methodist Episcopal, the young girl was summoned to stand in front of the congregation and repent for letting the “Jezebel spirit” get on her.

It was the fourth Sunday in July, and church let out early for the occasion of Clarice's confession. It was blazing hot outside, and all the church ladies were waving their paper fans to muster up some cool air, and turning up their noses while the girl spoke.

"I have sinned," Clarice whispered with her eyes staring at the ground. She wore a mint-green dress that looked like it was her mama's, and fidgeted with the side of it while she slowly rocked from side to side.

"Speak up," the chubby church mothers barked.

"I. Have. Sinned," she said through clenched teeth and falling tears.

While she rattled off her speech, the boy who had knocked her up was probably at home drinking a Coca-Cola and reading a comic book.

Jimmie tried to get eye contact with Clarice, to let her know that there was at least one friendly face in the crowd, but the girl kept her eyes locked on the tattered green carpet — green, the pastor said, because the Lord leads us through green pastures. By the next Sunday, Clarice was living in Chicago with her Aunt Sugar.

Five months later, lying in her bed, Jimmie's nausea began to worsen. She wanted to cry out for her mama, and ask her for some baking soda water, the kind that bubbles in your mouth. But she couldn't. Her mama kept tabs on the baking soda and rationed it out to make sure she had enough for cleaning and baking and such. Even if Jimmie wanted to sneak some, she couldn't without the whole house being turned upside down. So, she had to endure the pain, and ready herself for her own church confession that was surely soon to come.

So much had already gone on that year in Birmingham. There was nothing a Negro could do — walk, live, breathe — that would go without penalty by white folks. A week before, the Ku Klux Klan, or the “white sheet devils” as her daddy called them, had bombed a house up the street. While his family slept, Pastor Leroy Johnson’s perfectly fine green-and-white wooden house, with its yellow petunias and pink impatiens out front, was blown to bits. It was a warning, he was told, for helping to organize those mass meetings. He, his wife, Lydia, and their three children survived, but had to move into their church until they could build another home. That was probably the safest place for them, Jimmie thought. Surely no one would ever bomb a church.

It felt like a bomb was about to go off in Jimmie’s stomach. Last night’s supper of baked chicken legs and field peas began to quake in her belly; shooting its way out of her stomach, blazing up her throat and landing in her mouth. She clawed her way out from beneath her faded pink-and-green blanket and sprinted toward the bathroom.

She ran on the tips of her bony toes so not to wake her family. Jimmie’s younger sisters Kathleen and Marjorie were draped across their twin beds like limp rag dolls. In the next room, her brothers Garfield, Roland and Calvin drooled into their pillows as their eyes rolled into the back of their heads. Down the hall, her parents laid worn in their matchbox-sized room.

As Jimmie made her way down the hallway, she kept her eyes low, avoiding the judgmental glances of the sepia-toned family portraits that lined the walls. With each movement, she felt her full-length, white gauzy gown sticking to her body. She was covered in sweat and her pressed hair had turned back nappy.

Within seconds of reaching the toilet, Jimmie vomited out what seemed like every ounce of liquid and solid inside her. She was careful to keep her head buried down in the porcelain bowl so it would swallow the sound of her gags. She panted for breath, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and laid her head against the cold, round porcelain seat.

From that view, the room looked like a foreign place. In all the days and nights she had pottied and primped in the tiny, perpetually cold room she hadn't noticed the growing water stain in the far-right corner of the ceiling just above the tub. It looked like what one might see through a kaleidoscope: rings of brown melting into each other and forming an off-centered cloud.

All the other times in the bathroom had been under some understood timer as she had to share the space with eight other people. Quick moments in the mirror above the sink were to check that her mousy brown hair wasn't out of place before darting off to school. During short respites sitting on the pot, she'd have her head in some book like *Jane Eyre*, *Little Women* and the like.

She adored Jo March and imagined her to be a best friend. But Jimmie could think of no real-life white people like that. All the ones she knew snarled at her or made her feel like a gnat buzzing too close to their face.

Jimmie was always in the way. In a house packed with people, eyes never lit up when she walked into a room. They glazed over, or just saw right past her. That was especially true with her mother. Jessie didn't dote on her children or greet them after school with warm cookies and a smile like the mamas in Jimmie's books. The part-time seamstress and full-time server at the Jewish Country Club was always working; so,

when her children wanted to play, hug or hang onto her skirt tail, she couldn't be bothered.

Jessie came from women who talked harsh to their children; who believed you don't attach yourself to your babies, because children with brown skin could be kidnapped, lynched or God only knows what. For sanity's sake, you raised them, but didn't bond. Though she tried, Jessie couldn't find the genes to make herself soft; hard is all she knew.

Lying on the bathroom floor, too sick to move, the night inched by. Jimmie rubbed her stomach and wondered if she would be like Jessie. For the last three months, as fall turned to winter, she had tried to walk the straight and narrow so not to awaken any unwanted attention from her mother. At night, underneath her covers, she'd secretly watch her womb slowly swell from a pudge to a pouch. She had gotten away with wearing her cousin Dorothy's hand-me-down jackets, oversized sweaters; or, hiding behind a table or sofa during family gatherings. After a while, though, the morning sickness grew harder to hide.

"You getting fat," Jessie said weeks earlier as Jimmie walked toward the dinner table.

"Ma'am?" Jimmie said, caught off guard.

"I said, you getting fat," Jessie spoke a little louder. Everyone at the table stopped gnawing on their biscuits and began to examine Jimmie.

"It ain't like you been eating," Jessie continued. "You been picking at your food like a bird."

Jimmie drew up her shoulders and pulled her sweater close.

“I’m just playing,” Jessie said with a half-smile, which signaled to the family that the questioning was over. Then, Jessie dropped her smile, looked Jimmie dead in the eyes and said, “You know better.”

A shot of fear raced up Jimmie’s back. She thought about running away and going to live with her Aunt Cynthia in Valdosta, Georgia, but she had no invitation, no money and no means to even get beyond the dented stop sign at the corner of the road.

She considered jumping off of the 39th Street Bridge, the one where the homeless man slept underneath, but figured she probably would just end up breaking her neck, or, even worse, dying and burning in hell for eternity like Jessie threatened all sinners would do.

Months earlier, hellfire seemed worth the risk to lie in Webster’s arms. Jimmie closed her eyes and tried to get comfortable on the bathroom floor while she relived their meeting. The tall, quiet seventeen-year-old boy looked just like Humphrey Bogart dipped in chocolate. Jimmie always had sweet tooth.

She had been in the lunchroom trying to cut through a piece of Salisbury steak with a fork when she felt someone staring. She looked up and saw his eyes fixed on her. She was so nervous that she bent the fork from the pressure of baring down so hard. She was too shy to eat the meat with the afflicted fork, so she drank her milk, took up her tray and went hungry for the rest of the day.

Days later, while walking towards her locker – arms piled with algebra and world history – he floated towards her. Her ears began to feel hot and her knees felt as if they were about to give way. Up close, he smelled like fresh starch and Lifebuoy soap.

“What’s up, Cheeks,” he said just above a whisper. Later, he would tell her that he called her that because hers were so round and cute.

“What do you want,” she snapped back with a hint of sass and smidge of ‘come hither.’

“*You*,” he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Still lying on the bathroom floor that last night in December and with the toilet seat as her pillow, Jimmie thought of Webster. No other colored boy in Birmingham – that she knew of – had that name. When she'd think of his funny name, his half smile or replay the sound of his deep, musical voice, it made her heart beat in her chest so that she thought it was going to explode.

Webster was in A.H. Parker High School's Class of 1951 and Jimmie was Class of 1955. She couldn't believe that, among all the girls at Birmingham's only colored high school, and the largest Negro high school in all the world, he liked her. She wasn't one of the hundreds of girls with thick legs, skin light as a paper sack and bone-straight hair hot-combed to flow down her back. She was the color of mud, and kept her cottony, dirty-brown hair sculpted into pin curls. She could never get it to grow past her ears – no matter how much castor oil she would rub into her scalp at night.

Jimmie would practice posing with her dark brown eyes half opened so not to reveal that they were as big as jawbreakers, like her daddy's. And, she wore mostly A-line skirts to camouflage that she, like Jessie, had wide hips – the kind that were destined for a girdle.

Webster seemed to like it all. She never questioned him why because she didn't want him to change his mind.

While daydreaming, a voice broke Jimmie's concentration and made her flinch.

“What you doing on the bathroom floor like that,” Jimmie’s sister Kathleen said. Even though she was a year younger, she was an old soul, Jessie always said. The girl had a smart mouth and already thought she was grown.

“Girl, you scared me,” Jimmie said and then fumbled for words. “My, uh, stomach was hurting so I came in here.”

“And sat on the floor?” her sister said. “Want me to get mama?”

“No, no...please.” Jimmie said. “I’m alright. I just didn’t want to wake nobody up. Why you up?”

“I came to get some water. My throat dry.”

“Well go get it. I’m fine,” Jimmie said. “And please don’t wake nobody up. I’ll be back there in a minute.”

Jimmie raised the hem of her gown and motioned as if she were about to sit on the toilet. She knew that would make Kathleen head for the next room.

She pulled the toilet seat down and sat on it. She kept still and listened as her sister opened the kitchen cabinet and turned on the faucet. There was a pause and then footsteps down the hallway and back into her room.

Jimmie planned to wait a few more minutes before moving again. If there was too much movement in the house, it would signal her mama to spring out of bed because the woman was a light sleeper.

She tried to focus back on her vocabulary words.

Calamity...

Sanctimonious...

Malady...

Even her school work was mocking her. So instead, she thought of Webster.

When their love was new, the two of them would get to school early enough to see each other, but not so far ahead of class that they would have to answer questions from their parents. They would stand by the stairs on the side of the building and talk with their faces so close they would almost be kissing.

“Smoked sausage,” Jimmie would say once, staring into his eyes.

“Huh,” asked Webster.

“You had smoked sausage for breakfast.”

“Yep,” he said, and they’d both laugh.

When the first period bell rang, Webster would walk Jimmie to class with his arm around her neck. It was a task making sure that Kathleen, who was in ninth grade, didn’t spot them. Thankfully, she never did.

Jimmie felt as if she had two lives. At school, she was a woman with her very own man to love. At home, however, she was one of seven, with chores and no privacy and brothers who called her “big butt.”

With Webster, she was no longer invisible. Her world was just as exciting as a tale in one of her books. In her journal – the one with the faded cover of teddy bears – she would scribble, day and night: Webster Elliott, Jimmie Elliott, Mr. and Mrs. Webster Elliott. He was her favorite secret.

After two months, however, her secret man wanted to make their love known.

“Can I come see you tomorrow,” he asked on a Friday before school.

“What do you mean? Come to my house?”

“Yeah.”

“Umm...”

“You don’t want me to?”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean...”

He looked at her like he was trying to figure out what she was saying.

“I want you to come,” she said. “I’m just scared of what my mama might say. She would kill me for having a...boyfriend.”

The late bell rang.

“It’ll be fine,” he said and kissed her on the cheek.

“But...” she said.

“It’ll be fine,” he said and ran off. “It’s time they knew. I’m coming tomorrow,” he called out.

That next day, a Saturday, when it was still daylight and the crickets had just begun their night song, Jimmie heard a knock on the door of her powder blue bungalow home. At the sound, the blood felt as if it had drained from her body.

A part of her didn’t believe Webster would be bold enough to come, so she didn’t dare tell her mother. Just in case, though, she made sure that her hair was combed neat and her lips were covered with Vaseline.

Webster knocked again. This time, Jimmie slowly walked to the living room curtain and peeked out. When she saw that it was him, she froze.

“Who is it, Jimmie?” said Jessie, who was watching – always watching. “You ain’t gone answer the door?”

Jimmie just stood and stuttered and shuffled her feet.

Jessie rose out of her seat while shaking her head and smacking her lips in disgust. She walked to the front and looked out the peep hole. When she saw that it was the ruddy boy she recognized from around the way, she turned and looked at Jimmie as if she were expecting some explanation written on her face.

Jessie yanked open the door.

“Can I help you?” she said without warmth.

“I, I, um, I come to visit with Jimmie,” he said, dressed in a crisp white short-sleeved shirt and neatly pressed khaki pants. He was holding a fist full of dandelions whose heads had begun to droop.

“Alfreeed,” Jessie sang out as if she was tattling.

Jimmie’s father ambled toward the door. His pipe and *The Birmingham News* were still in his hand. He was a lean man, the color of whipped peanut butter, and as he spoke his black glasses hung from the tip of his narrow nose.

“This boy here say he come to visit with Jimmie.” Jessie said, rolling her eyes.

“Well come on in boy,” the man said as he ushered Webster inside the foyer. “I know your people. Y’all attend the Baptist church up the street. Your mama sang in the choir, right?”

“Yes sir. Yes sir,” Webster said. Jimmie could see a rush of relief wash over him.

“Well, I won’t hold it against you that you are Baptist,” her father said with a hearty laugh.

Jimmie was standing off in the corner, too shy to move.

“He’s alright,” Alfred said to his wife and started toward his recliner in the back.

“His folks are good church people. If he gets out of line, we know where to go.”

“Mmm hmm...,” Jessie said under her breath. “Now, y’all can sit right here on the sofa up front, but no funny business. You hear me?”

“Yes ma’am,” Jimmie and Webster both sang in unison while trying to hide the smiles growing on their faces.

They sat beside each other on the sofa. Their hands were folded in their laps and there was about six proper inches between them. Jessie was in the next room hemming and creasing a mountain of dress pants and skirts. Webster and Jimmie would whisper inside jokes underneath their breath. He thought it was funny to try to get her to bust out laughing so that her mother would come running into the room like the fun police.

“Knock, knock...” he whispered, the bass in his voice tickling her ear.

“Who’s there,” she would say while rolling her eyes.

“Boo.”

“Boo who?”

“Why are you crying?”

Jimmie would giggle until her stomach hurt.

Then, Webster sang his favorite Hank Williams song in her ear, rocking from side to side and leaning in and out toward her face in between stanzas. He would get close enough to where it felt like a series of soft air kisses:

Hey, hey good lookin’

Whatcha got cookin’?

How’s about cookin’ something up with me?

Jimmie's cheeks were so red it was as if someone had pinched them. Being with Webster was the first time in all her years of living in a small, crowded house of nine and sitting daily on a packed school bus of seventy and learning in a classroom of thirty-three that she felt like the only person in the world.

Sprawled out on the bathroom floor, she smiled as she remembered that moment, but quickly dropped her grin when her stomach reminded her of her current circumstance. She was back to feeling like the only person in the world.

If it weren't for the worn book she found in the "P" section in the back of the library, Jimmie would still think she was suffering from some plague. *Becoming a Mother* was a faded pink hardback that she snuck out of the library and read under her covers at night. According to Chapter Two, she was likely four months pregnant, teetering on five.

During the day, she would put it out of her mind and try to forget. She would keep a piece of peppermint in her mouth to remedy the morning sickness. And, since it was winter, she could tell people she was cold-natured and keep on her jacket all day without anyone being suspicious. At night, though, she would lie in bed, or sit in the bathroom floor like she had been on that night. There, she would cry and think and try to pray.

"I'm so sorry God," she whispered. "If there is any way you can take it away, give it to some woman who's been praying for one. Please. I promise I won't do it again. If you do, I will even breakup with Web—" She couldn't say it. She couldn't promise to leave him.

Then, she felt hopeless, knowing that, just like her mama and Pastor Smith said, “God doesn’t hear the prayers of willful sinners.”

Jimmie hadn’t even given thought to the sex of the child or allowed herself to get excited about the possibility of bringing a life into this world. For her, in that moment on the cold floor, she was stricken with some plague that made her impure.

She tried to focus on the happier times.

She and Webster had sofa sat for weeks. Jimmie would sneak a spritz of Jessie’s Flori Roberts perfume – the bottle that was only reserved for church on Sunday. Her brothers Roland and Garfield would hover around the doorframe like vultures, serving as spies for their mother. They were on the lookout for any touching and talking that was “inappropriate.” Webster eventually got smart and would pay them a nickel to split if they would leave the room. They would go, but not far.

On the worn sofa that had faded from a hot cocoa to a faint shade of fawn, Jimmie and Webster would talk about school, home life and their dreams. Jimmie wanted to go to college and work in an office. Webster just wanted a good paying job so that he could buy a house and a brand-new Ford Thunderbird.

When they weren’t on Jimmie’s sofa, they’d meet before and after school to smooch in dark corners and underneath the stairs. They would feign library trips or visits with school friends on the weekends so that they could hold each other and French kiss like Rick Blaine and Ilsa Lund in the movie *Casablanca*.

One day, Jimmie and Webster were sitting in a pair of swings at Woodrow Wilson Park and a girl with a Coca-Cola bottle shape and long straight hair walked past. Webster's eyes locked in on her silhouette and followed as she sauntered into the distance. Jimmie shrank in the swing and her eyes began to well with tears.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"That's what you like, huh?"

He chuckled.

"She's alright," he said. "But she's not you."

Jimmie turned her face away as if she didn't believe him.

"She's not you, Jimmie," he said, turning her face towards his. "I love you, Cheeks."

A grin she couldn't hide grew on her face. Her head slowly moved toward his, and for the first time, she initiated a kiss.

In the bathroom, Jimmie closed her eyes and relived that moment. She parted her lips, leaned her head to the side and kissed the air.

CHAPTER THREE

Jimmie walked right past William Shakespeare, stopped and then scrunched her nose. She had gone too far. The book she was looking for was in the “S-E” section, and not the “S-H.” She made an about-face, cocked her head to the side and restudied the spines of what seemed like an endless row of books.

Shampoo...

Shamrocks...

Sears & Roebuck...

The walls of hardbacks and soft covers at the Booker T. Washington Library on Center Street made Jimmie smile. The smell of stale pages and the forced silence was intoxicating. She wanted to take all the stories and facts and verses and rhymes and pour them into her brain until it overflowed. And she was close: according to Mrs. Stewart, the librarian with bucked teeth and cat-eyed glasses, no one in all of Birmingham had checked out more books than Jimmie — almost 100.

Portraits of famous blacks like Washington, Frederick Douglass and Marcus Garvey hung on the tan speckled walls. Jimmie had memorized their hollow eyes and stoic faces, trying to tap into their strength. Secretly, she hoped that one day a picture of her face would hang there, too – right beside Harriet Tubman.

Since the librarian knew her by name, Jimmie couldn't dare let the woman see the book she was checking out on that day: “Sexual Relations for the Marriage Bed.” Jimmie had been eyeballing it for weeks. She grabbed the brown hardback with its discreet Times

Roman letters and slipped it into her school satchel. The book Jimmie wished she could find was “Fifteen, Hot in the Pants and Scared of Your Mama,” but no one was writing books like that in 1950.

She needed to find out more about sex — the how, the what and the when. The only thing Jessie had ever said about it — and it was always in passing — was “Keep your legs closed.” For years, Jimmie didn’t know what that meant. It wasn’t until she started to feel a warm throbbing in her private when Webster was around that she figured why a motherly warning might be necessary.

After sifting through the chapters for a few days, Jimmie got the nerve to tell Webster about the book. One Friday evening after school, the two of them sat on a park bench and thumbed through the pages, laughing about the formal way the author explained things. Webster and his friends would always use words like “humping” and “screwing” to describe sex, but the book called it “copulation” and “intercourse.”

Webster thought those words were so funny he almost fell out of his seat laughing.

“I want to *copulate* you,” he whispered into Jimmie’s ear.

“Stop boy,” she said and pushed him away while giggling.

“I do,” he said, getting serious. “Don’t you want to?”

Nervousness gripped Jimmie. The kissing, the touching, and even getting that book from the library were exciting teases, but now things were getting real. Webster put his hand on her knee and slowly moved it up her thigh. She was overwhelmed by the feelings rushing over her body — fear and ecstasy all rolled into one. It took her breath away.

“I do, Webster. I’m just scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Scared of getting caught. Scared of getting pregnant. Scared you will get it and then leave.”

He looked stunned.

“Leave,” he said. “You don’t get it, huh?”

He sat up and looked away.

“Get what,” she said, trying to find his face.

“I love you Jimmie. I’ve never loved anybody but you,” he said. “I love the way you try to be all mean when inside I know you are sweet like a bag of sugar. I love how your eyes get big when you get excited. I love how you put Vaseline on everything: your lips, those little baby hairs on the sides of your face and even on your eyebrows.”

He chuckled.

“I know everything about you, Jimmie,” he said, “and I love every part.”

Jimmie reached out and squeezed him. They embraced in silence for what seemed like hours. In the quiet, she was reviewing her list of fears and slowly canceling out each one with the thought, “but he loves me.”

On a Sunday afternoon, Jimmie and Webster both told their parents they were going to the youth picnic at First Baptist Kingston. Every year the church hosted an end-of-the-fall gathering at the park where they sang songs, played games and ate those blood-red hot links wrapped in light bread. Instead of eating hot dogs and singing about

Jesus, however, the two of them snuck down to the colored motel near the downtown Carver Theater. Webster's oldest brother, Henry, who was twenty, signed for the room and gave them the key. He had told the hotel clerk that he was in town visiting relatives.

Webster had saved up the money for the room by cutting grass and skipping lunches on some days. He needed three dollars and seventy-five cents, but when the time came to get the room, he only had three dollars and fifty cents. Henry felt sorry for him and gave him the quarter he needed plus two nickels in case something came up. They agreed to share the room. Webster would have it first and then Henry would come back later with his girlfriend Claire and spend the night.

Walking toward the big, brown door of Room 3 at the Roadside Motel, Jimmie, who was wearing a powder pink blouse with little white four-leaf clover buttons, squeezed Webster's hand. She had wanted this, but suddenly all the warnings and sermons she had heard about "fornication" and "sin" had come rushing over her again. When they reached the door knob, Jimmie pulled back.

"What's wrong," Webster said.

"Maybe we shouldn't," she said, starting to feel her age. Instead of the woman she thought she had become, she felt like the girl who liked to eat mounds of penny candy and sit on the floor playing jacks with her sisters.

"It's OK," Webster said. "You're with me."

Jimmie inhaled what seemed like all the air around them, held her breath for a few seconds and then slowly blew it out in a long, soft stream.

"OK," she whispered and walked in.

Inside, it smelled stale and musty like the door and windows hadn't been open for months. There was a large, queen-sized bed that was shabbily dressed with a blueberry comforter. Sitting beside the bed was a faux oak nightstand topped with a lamp that had a thin veil of dust on the beige shade. There was also a scarlet-red Gideon bible that Jimmie pretended not to see.

"What's that," she asked and walked over to a box affixed to the corner of the headboard. It was one of those wooden panel Magic Fingers Vibrating Bed boxes that would prompt the bed to shake for fifteen minutes if you put a nickel in the slot. When Webster figured out what it was, a smile grew on his face. He quickly searched his pockets for change and pulled out two nickels.

He then walked up to Jimmie and wrapped his arms around her. She greeted him with a half-smile as her nerves began to take hold. His body felt warm and Jimmie could sense the beating of his heart inside his chest. He began to kiss her cheeks, her neck and her shoulders. He lightly rubbed his fingers along the seam of the back of her bra and she began to slowly unbutton her blouse. Her fingers were shaking, which made her fumble with the tiny clover buttons.

Webster pulled his shirt over his head and revealed his smooth, hairless chest with hints of muscles along his arms and stomach. Jimmie had never really seen a naked man before. The closest she had come was seeing the backsides of her brothers running to and from the bathroom at bath time.

When they were both wearing only their underwear, Webster and Jimmie slipped underneath the cold bed sheets. He reached out and held her, and when their slow, heavy breaths became in sync, his fingers started to explore her body. Every so often, she would

jump like a frightened puppy, but tried to calm herself by closing her eyes and grabbing her side of the mattress.

“Wait,” she said and sat up.

“What?”

“What about protection?”

“Oh,” Webster said, relieved as he thought it was something more serious. “My brother said that it’s a scientific fact that you can’t get pregnant on the first time.”

“But my book said that you can...”

“Would I lie to you, Jimmie,” he said. “Henry knows a lot of people who had sex, and none of them got pregnant until around the fifth time. It’s something about your ovaries not being used to it yet.”

“Oh...OK,” she said, half believing him.

After a few moments of silence and Webster running his feet against Jimmie’s, he whispered, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” she said, held her breath and braced herself. Her friend Cheryl told her that it was going to hurt the first time, but to pretend it didn’t so not to scare Webster away.

Webster reached over and dropped a nickel into the box on the bed. It started with a slow, clumsy shake, and built up to a dizzying rock, which got Jimmie out of the mood. Several seconds later, Webster was ready and they began an awkward dance; of trying to figure out what goes where, of the pain of breaking through, and then hot breaths. Once a rhythm between their bodies began to build, it was over.

Webster rolled onto his back and had a satisfied look on his face as he stared at the ceiling.

“You okay,” he asked, sounding winded.

“Yeah,” she whispered. Her throat was dry, which made her think back to what it felt like to be extremely thirsty and spotting a big glass of water. She remembered the feeling of reaching for that water and anticipating the cool on her tongue. Instead of it being icy and refreshing, though, it was lukewarm and flat. That’s how she felt lying in bed. She had risked life and limb to have sex on a Sunday night when she was supposed to be at a church picnic; all of that, for this.

That irony exactly kept ringing in her head as she relived those moments while collapsed on the side of the toilet bowl. It all made her tired and she dozed off.

It wasn’t long, though, before she was awakened by the sound of footsteps getting closer to the bathroom door. They were steps of purpose, like that of a petite woman who had memorized most of the Bible and who never smiled. Jimmie jumped up, straightened her gown, and hoped instead to see one of her siblings.

The wooden door swung open and Jessie stumbled in, blinking her eyes, trying to get the sleep out.

“Jimmie,” she said, startled. “What in the world?”

Jimmie stood straight like a soldier reporting for inspection. The waft of vomit was still hanging in the air. Jessie began to sniff.

“You sick,” the woman said.

Then, her eyes examined her daughter, landing right on her stomach. The gauzy white gown Jimmie was wearing might as well had been see-through. Jessie walked up to her, pulled on the gown and inspected the bulge showing through.

Jimmie dropped her head and whispered, “Mama, I’m pregnant.” The words came out before she knew it. Her mouth had betrayed her.

Jessie didn’t move. She didn’t blink or breathe. She just stared.

“Mama,” Jimmie asked, scared that she had sent the woman into shock.

Jessie jumped as if she were coming back to life. Then, she tightened her body, reached back and slapped Jimmie down to the cold, hard floor. The force made Jessie’s wire-rimmed glasses fly off her face.

“Webster’s?” Jessie spat.

“Yes ma’am,” Jimmie said, her face hot and stinging.

“Get out of my sight,” Jessie said with a tone as cold as that floor.

Jimmie held the side of her face with one hand and cradled her bulging belly with the other. She walked to the room she shared with Kathleen and Marjorie who were now awake. She buried herself beneath her quilt on her bed and cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

The morning sun poured into Jimmie's bedroom, its rays exposing tiny dust particles dancing in the air. Although it was well past eight on a Sunday, Jimmie was still hiding beneath her worn patchwork quilt, pretending to be asleep – cocooned underneath the pink and green blanket that her great grandmother Lily hand sewed. It had been fashioned from old clothing scraps into shapes that she made into wagon-wheels. Jimmie imagined her tears melting into the fabrics and mixing with those of a woman who was born a slave, and who also got pregnant at fifteen.

No one in her family went to church that morning, and for hours Jimmie heard the whisperings of her parents as they discussed her. Words like “rebellious,” “embarrassment” and “whorish” were spat into the air. The smell of the breakfast of bacon and toast was a temptation to move, but, despite the rumblings of her stomach, Jimmie refused to and, plus, no one came for her.

Later that day, her sober-faced father walked in and told her to get dressed, that Webster and his family would be coming to “discuss things.” Being an unwed teenage mother was unacceptable in their proud Negro community of educators, doctors and preachers. They had to move fast to cover the transgression growing inside her womb.

Jimmie threw on a house dress and brushed her hair into a little bun. Even though she was ashamed and hurt, she still put a little Vaseline on her lips. Her mother hadn't said anything to her all morning. Her father wouldn't look her in the eyes and her sisters

and brothers stayed out of the way. She felt like the only person on earth again. The loneliness caused a shiver in her bones.

Webster came wearing his Sunday's best – a starched white long-sleeved shirt with pressed, chocolate brown pants, and worn black dress shoes that he had shined earlier that morning. Jimmie had never seen him so dressed up. He always had on dungarees or khakis and some different version of a short-sleeved shirt. He stood, head bowed, beside his mother Agnes, a plump, high-yellow woman known for a warm smile that was hidden on this day. She was with her pencil-thin husband John, who people called "Pickle" because of his round head. He was Webster's stepfather. The boy's real father divorced his mother years earlier to gamble and run behind women.

The house smelled of lemon Pine Sol, the kind that burned your nose. Jessie, Marjorie and Kathleen had scoured the house – from the ceilings to the floorboards – so that at least their home would be without reproach.

The Moore's and Elliott's gathered in the cream-colored living room that was only reserved for visits by the pastor and rich white folks. The only times Jimmie was allowed in there was to dust or fluff the pillows. Stiff plastic covers draped the faux French furniture and a world of porcelain knick knacks sat forbidden to touch on the shelves of a wooden China cabinet. The parents all sat down and discussed Jimmie and Webster's fate while the teens sat in the kitchen in silence and holding their breaths.

"There's no way my daughter is going to be branded a whore," Jimmie's father said, sounding more serious than he had ever in her life. "Marriage is the only option."

“He’s barely a man,” Agnes said. “How is he going to take care of a family? He is months away from graduating from high school.”

“Well, he should of thought of that before he...” Jessie snapped back.

“Now wait a minute, she is the one who brought her fast tail over to my house fanning in front of him,” Agnes said as she stood.

Jimmie stood up and started a march toward the living room.

“Jimmie,” Webster whispered, trying to get her to stop.

Jessie’s eyes met with hers and shot a paralyzing glance. Jimmie froze, shrunk her shoulders, turned around and sat back down.

Webster looked at her, trying to catch her gaze with his eyes. She wouldn’t look his way.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Jimmie,” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

She knew. She wanted to be perfect in his eyes – beautiful, smart and loving – so she kept the secret of the nausea and the swelling waist to herself. She was more afraid to tell him than her mother. She feared he’d leave her and that would be worse than any beating. So, she carried the secret alone and prayed that, by some miracle, God would take what was growing in her stomach and put it in the belly of some barren married woman. The secret pushed her back into a lonely place where no other soul on the earth knew her story, but God.

The two did have sex a few more times after the motel – once in the park, twice at his house and once in the bathroom at the library. When her stomach began to grow bigger than she could hide, she would come up with excuses as to why she couldn't make love – her period, stomach aches, diarrhea. When he got suspicious, she would pick a fight and walk off with her lip poked out and her secret intact.

“You didn't have to keep that from me,” he said, trying to scoot his chair closer to hers.

She moved her chair further away.

“This is the worst day of my life,” she said as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Don't say that, Jimmie.”

“It's true,” she said, staring off. “I was going to go to school; be somebody.”

“You can still go to school,” he said.

Jimmie said nothing.

While they heard their parents raising their voices in the other room, occasionally, Jimmie and Webster would steal a glance at each other, wondering what they really knew about each other, other than what they looked like naked. Jimmie felt nauseous thinking about that Magic Fingers coin-operated box. Ten cents and two months later, she was going to be the mother of his child.

The noise from the living room eventually quieted down to a hum. About twenty minutes later, Jimmie's father Alfred walked in and announced, “Y'all getting married tomorrow.”

“Married?” Jimmie said as her eyes widened.

“Tomorrow?” Webster asked.

“Mmm hmm,” Jessie said, rolling her eyes as she walked in. “Probably can’t even spell it.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jessie

Jessie was so mad she could spit. Purse her lips tight, inhale long and hard and spit right there onto the kitchen floor. But good, Christian women didn't do that; couldn't do that. Whether scrubbing somebody else's floors or serving on the No. 9 usher board on first Sunday, good, Christian women had to hold it together and be holy unto the Lord.

"You may not be able to control husbands or babies or white folks, but you can at least control yourself," Jessie's mother would say.

Jessie thought about those words and the restraint she needed as Agnes Elliott's cheap perfume lingered in the air. The woman smelled more like weeds than a bed of flowers, and her lipstick was too red for a woman in her forties. Jessie prided herself on always being appropriate with her rouge: just enough to look like it's barely there.

Red lips and stinky cologne aside, the last thing Jessie wanted was for somebody to have anything to say about her or one of her children. She prided herself that the Moore's always kept their business inside the walls of 919 11th Court North.

Nobody knew that she and Alfred argued about the much-too-friendly Sunday School teacher who often got too close, not a soul caught wind that their family got behind on the light bill one month and had to eat beans for a week to catch up. But now, the Elliott's had been all up in her house, studying her furniture arrangement, drinking the last bit of lemonade and casting her daughter Jimmie as some hussy after their boy.

Jessie drug herself into the living room and stood just close enough to the picture window to see out and not be spotted. She held her breath and watched as the Elliotts walked across her wooden porch that creaked underneath the weight of Agnes' girth. The family took the stairs down to the sidewalk and sauntered to the corner bus stop.

Jessie saw their lips move and tried to decipher every syllable. She wondered if they were talking about her, about Jimmie, or about that line of dust she had missed on top of the ice box in the kitchen. Jessie hadn't notice it until she was looking away while Agnes spoke.

"Your home is so lovely," Agnes said with a half grimace.

"We do what we can with what we have," Jessie said swiftly.

As far as money and material things, the Elliott's didn't have more than Jessie and Alfred. She did domestic work like her, too. But she was one of them high-yellow blacks, the ones who got credit for being beautiful just because their skin looks more like cream than coffee. To some folks, that made her better.

Jessie was dull brown – like the lusterless dirt that's found in the backyard underneath the porch. She had big eyes and wide hips, which, on the right day and with the right skirt, could turn a few heads. But Agnes – and her kind – were always the prized ones. Her son Webster must have gotten his chocolate color from his daddy, but his features were like a white man: narrow nose and a confident, relaxed smile as if he nor anyone around him had ever been oppressed.

Now, Agnes, with her thick ankles and cream-colored skin, and Webster, with his pointy nose and power over Jimmie, would be a part of her life forever.

Tears began to well up in her eyes – the kind that come from rage, not sadness. Jimmie had brought all this shame to their home. And for Jessie, shame was worse than death.

Plus, Jimmie was supposed to be the one in the family to get out of Smithfield and away from Birmingham. Her teachers had been talking about her going off to college. She was going to be the first one ever to go to one of those four-year colleges like Spelman or Howard University. She was going to make it – using her brains not her behind. Moore women were smart and proud, but their weakness was and always will be a man.

At the news of the wedding, Jimmie had run off to her room. Alfred tiptoed away to his pipe and newspaper and let Jessie have her moment.

Jessie walked a slow pace to her bedroom, dragging her feet along the way. Once she got inside, she let out a sigh. She hadn't realized that she had been holding her breath the whole time.

She walked over to her oak dresser drawers and pulled out her brown head rag and wrapped it around her hair in a slow, exaggerated movement. She reached under her dress and snaked her hand up to the back of her bra and popped it loose. As her breasts fell, she felt as if a load had been dropped from her chest down to her feet. She slipped on her nightgown and got in the bed although it was still the middle of the day.

"Jimmie, Jimmie, Jimmie," she whispered. The last thing she thought Jimmie would go out and do was get pregnant. She was too smart for that, too stubborn to lay down her freedom for some knuckle-headed boy.

She laid, there trying to figure out if she was angry because of her disappointment in Jimmie, or because her daughter represented the last bit of hope she had that a Moore woman would be more than just a maid.

“You alright,” Alfred asked tenderly as he peeked his head in the door.

“I’m alright,” she said, with her eyes closed.

“I talked to the pastor. He can come here tomorrow at 2.”

“OK.”

“He charge two dollars.”

Jessie rolled over and didn’t say a word.

All the fuss of the day made memories come rushing back: those of being a little girl in Fulton County, Georgia, playing with stones in the front of her family’s shotgun house. Their lemon-drop yellow wooden home stood up straight like a soldier giving a salute, and had the neatest yard on the street. Jessie’s mama, Addie, didn’t play that. “Cleanliness is next to godliness,” she said almost every day.

Even though there wasn’t any green grass in their yard, every morning Addie took out their metal rake and pulled it across the brown dust, removing the litter and stray stones, and leaving a trail of waves. It looked like a chocolate ocean flowing up to the front steps, and you had better not step on it and mess up the pattern.

While playing out back in her imaginary world of dancing trees and talking squirrels, six-year-old Jessie found a stone the color of a pearl. It was milky white and flawless lying in the sea of dusty gray rocks, waiting for her to pick it up.

“Lookie, lookie,” she said and held it up to the sky. She kicked up her heels and danced a jig.

She polished it with the hem of her dress. It looked just like one of her mama’s earrings she wore on Sundays. Immediately, she felt different, like she was rich, and just as good and important as other folks – even the white ones.

“Mama, mama,” she sang out as she ran up to the woman to show off her spoil. Addie smiled. She didn’t have the heart to tell her daughter that it was just a worthless old river rock.

For days, Jessie kept it tucked in her right bobby sock during the day and under her pillow at night. She was waiting for the right time to take it to the store in town and swap it out for a new dress for her mama, a pipe for her dad and a handful of taffy for her and her sisters and brothers.

About a week later, Jessie was back in her spot on the porch polishing her stone and playing with her rag doll that was made from a sock, some thread and a ball. She heard her mother’s voice yell like someone had stolen something.

“You son of a bitch,” the woman called out while the sound of crashing dishes pierced the air. “You are worthless. Worthless, you hear?”

Jessie’s ear perked up. She had never heard her mother use those words. She began to study the sounds, but she knew from the past not to go barging into grown folks’ business.

“How could you? How could you,” her mother screamed.

Moments later, her father walked a steady stride out of the front door. The tall, well-dressed man looked straight ahead and unbothered as if his wife hadn't been practically foaming at the mouth.

"Daddy," Jessie called out and stood.

The man – who was wearing a crazed smile on his face – kept walking as if he didn't hear.

Then, her mother came running out of the door. She threw a tin cup toward his head and missed.

"And don't you ever come back!"

He galloped down the walkway, out the gate and up the road.

All the while, Jessie kept calling his name. Nothing moved him.

"Stop calling him," her mother said. "He don't care about nobody and nothing but himself."

Addie marched back into the house and let the screen door slam behind her. Against her better judgement, Jessie followed.

Inside, her mother was digging in the cookie jar where they kept their rainy-day money. She pulled out the money and placed it on the kitchen counter. There were only nickels and dimes. All the dollars and quarters had been taken.

"He got a girlfriend," the woman said toward Jessie, but not really to her, "and he took the rent money."

Jessie didn't fully understand it all, but walked up to her mother and began to rub the woman's back.

"Don't worry mama," Jessie said. "I'll take care of you."

“We have nothing left,” the woman said as she slammed down a hand full of pennies.

“You can have my stone,” Jessie said and reached down into her sock and pulled it out.

The woman looked at Jessie as if she were a foreign object.

“What am I supposed to do with that, huh,” the woman said with disgust.

Jessie brought the stone closer within her mother’s view to let her see the curve of it and the color against the light.

The woman slapped Jessie’s hand, which caused the stone to fling into the air and land in a crack in the floor – lost among a sea of darkness.

“No,” Jessie screamed out and dropped to her knees in search of her treasure.

“That ain’t nothing but a river rock,” the woman said. Jessie ignored her and moved her fingers along the ground.

Addie grabbed Jessie’s face and looked her in the eyes. The girl could see that the sun she had always seen in her mother’s eyes was now gone.

“It’s best you learn to stop pretending and understand what it’s like to live in this world,” her mother said. “Dreams and pretending...that’s for white folks. Colored folks ain’t got no time for dreaming.”

Jessie felt her heart drop into her knees. The only things she had in this world besides her thrice hand-me-down ragdoll, two dresses, a pair of brown shoes that buckle on the side was that stone and her dreams. She felt like she had been robbed. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she knew something was gone. And what made it so bad was that the one who took it was not a robber or even a friend, it was her mother.

Back in her bed on 11th Court North, Jessie remembered the loss of that day and how it felt the same as it did with the news of Jimmie. She had so much hope for her. She wondered what she did wrong with that girl.

She should have been softer, should have talked to her more so that she wouldn't run into the arms of some boy. Jessie wished she knew how to be that way. It was just something in her that wouldn't let her break free. It was too much like white folks, too much like having freedom. It was stupid and pointless to even try to be that way when your skin was brown.

Just like that pearl stone, Jessie had stored up her dreams into Jimmie. She was hoping that she would be different, but she wasn't. Now those dreams had fallen into a crack in the floor, gone for good.

CHAPTER SIX

Jimmie

Jimmie stood in front of the bathroom mirror and stared at her face – studying the chubby cheeks that looked like they were full of bubblegum, wide eyes that seemed to take up most of her face and thin lips that nearly disappeared if she smiled too bright. She looked just like her mama except without the trails of lines that stretched across the woman’s forehead and the crow’s feet tucked in the corners of her eyes. Growing up, Jimmie would hear old ladies say that a woman’s beauty would eventually be sucked away with years of marriage and mothering: hips spread, hair thins and rosy cheeks tarnish. It made her sad to think of the prospect. God had given her so little beauty to work with, she thought, and eventually the little she had would be dried away.

After a few moments of gazing, Jimmie began to look past her face and into her future. She imagined what her life would be like as Webster’s wife. Would he be like her father? Come home from work at the steel mill, beat down from a day of hard labor and being called “boy” and “nigger” and “spook”; hungry for food, sex and kind words from his wife’s lips. Would she have it inside her to give him those things, when she would rather read books, daydream and eat Chick-O-Sticks?

The night before, Jimmie was piddling around her room – straightening her book stacks and shuffling her notebooks – when she caught her sister Margie going through her cardboard box of dolls – the one she still had, but kept secret.

“What are you doing?” Jimmie barked as she made a beeline toward the girl.

“I want Molly,” said the eight-year-old, who was heavy for her age and had apparently discovered a new boldness.

“That’s *my* doll,” Jimmie said and snatched the tar-colored baby with tight curly hair and a worn blue dress the color of the sky.

“What you need it for now,” Margie said and snatched it back. “You gonna have your own baby, a real one.”

Those words cut.

Jimmie’s brother Calvin had walked near the bedroom door at that exact moment and heard the exchange. He was tall and slender like their daddy, but had Jessie’s bulb nose and her mean ways.

“Jimmie, you still play with dolls,” he asked as he made his way into the room. He threw his head back and laughed from his gut and then sang out, “*Jimmie still play with dolls. Jimmie still play with dolls.*”

“How you gonna be somebody’s wife and still play with dolls, stupid,” he spat.

Jimmie felt a white-hot rage shoot through her veins. She gritted her teeth and snatched the doll back with such a force that she almost ripped Margie’s arms out of the socket.

Both Margie and Calvin looked at their sister with narrowed eyes as if they were trying to recognize the person who was standing in her place.

Jimmie instantly felt embarrassed and sad. She stood quiet for a moment, feeling as if she was standing outside of herself and watching the story of a stranger. There she was: pregnant, about to be married and fighting over a doll.

“I’m sorry, Margie,” Jimmie said, her words soft as cotton. She helped her sister up from the floor and wiped the girl’s eyes. “You can have Molly. You’re right. I don’t need her anymore.”

Margie’s eyes softened.

“Now,” Jimmie said, cradling the doll and handing her to Margie. “Molly likes to sit up straight just like this. And, be sure to brush her hair each night before you go to bed. She likes that, too.”

Reliving that moment while standing in front of the mirror, the shame still felt fresh. Jimmie thought about that night – and everything really – and her stomach began to churn. Was it her nerves, or did even her unborn child suspect that things were not right.

Suddenly, her breaths began to get short and she felt a tingling in her fingers and toes. She had an overwhelming urge to get away and began looking around for an open window or an escape latch. Did she have enough for bus fare to Georgia among the nickels and dimes in her piggy bank? Just in case, how long would it take to walk to Valdosta where her Aunt Cynthia lives?

Her mind was spinning.

Then, she heard her father blow the horn of his old black Buick, the one he washed every Saturday. Its sound was grating on her fragile nerves. She felt her body wind tighter and tighter until she thought she would break.

“Too late now, huh,” Kathleen, Jimmie’s sister – the knee baby – said just above a whisper. Apparently, she had been standing in the doorway, watching her the whole time.

“Whatchu talking ‘bout,” Jimmie asked, embarrassed and startled that she had an audience.

“Girl, I know you ain’t ready to be nobody’s wife. You’re not the wife type,” she said.

“What do you mean?” Jimmie asked, sounding annoyed, but secretly seeking wisdom from her thirteen-year-old sister.

“Jimmie, you the college type, not the wife type.”

“I can do both,” Jimmie said, straightening her dress and getting into character for her imminent role.

Kathleen sucked her teeth. “Child, please.”

The horn kept blowing.

“Jimmie,” shouted Jessie, who appeared in the doorway and brought with her a rush of wind. “You deaf? Don’t you hear your daddy blowing that horn?”

“Yes ma’am,” she said. The girl took one last look in the mirror at Jimmie Moore and then darted out the door to become Mrs. Jimmie Lee Elliott.

“What took you so long, girl,” her father asked as he clutched the steering wheel.

“I don’t know. Just slow, I guess,” Jimmie said, barely opening her mouth.

“You ready?”

“Not really,” she said. “I don’t know anything about being a wife.”

“Well, apparently, you know how to do one part of it.”

He smiled at her. She tried to hide the smile forming on her face.

“Daddy, stop.”

“Listen Jimmie, your mama and I will be just around the corner, you hear.”

“I hear.”

Jimmie laid her head against the car window and stared out. As the car moved toward town, she watched the houses whiz by, then the trees, the stoplights and, after about ten minutes, they pulled up in front of the big Jefferson County Courthouse. It was chilly on that January 31 day in 1951. Webster was already standing outside in front of the building with his mother.

“Good morning,” Alfred called out to Webster and Agnes as he walked toward them.

“Morning,” they both said.

Jimmie stayed by her father’s side and kept her head down. Webster looked down, too.

“Gone now,” Alfred said. “Go get your wife.”

Webster walked up to Jimmie, grabbed her hand and went in.

They were there right when the doors opened at 8. Webster wore an oversized gray suit that belonged to his older brother, Henry, and Jimmie had on a winter-white coat dress with matching white tuck combs in her hair. Together, they walked down the long hallway that led to the marriage license clerk’s window while their parents waited outside. Lined along the tan walls of the hallway were framed portraits of white, well-fed men – none of whom smiled. They were probably grimacing, Jimmie thought, because blacks were finally able to get some of the freedoms they tried to keep locked away. Jimmie’s patent leather heels clicked on the marble floors in step with Webster’s hard-

bottomed dress shoes. They didn't speak, but exchanged glances every few moments. The closer they got to their destination, the more nervous, and giddier, they became.

"We'd like to get a marriage license," Webster said, adding a little more bass to his voice than had been there before. Jimmie looked over at him and tried not to show that she was impressed. She told the clerk that she was eighteen. Webster said he was twenty-one. Without incident, and despite the suspicious look on the clerk's face, they got the official sheet of paper they needed to tie them together for life.

Webster handed Jimmie the paper. She held it in her hands and studied their names and the word "matrimony." She thought back to her old journal where she would scribble their names together and pretend that hers ended with "Elliott." When she looked up, she noticed him staring and smiled.

Later that day, Webster and Jimmie stood in her parents' living room before the Rev. Harold Jenkins of St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal and softly repeated vows. Jimmie wrung her hands and Webster rocked from side to side.

"Y'all is married now," the minister announced. "Kiss your bride, boy."

"Ohhh..." the kids all squealed.

Jimmie dropped her head and Webster kissed her on the cheek.

The families then shared a reluctant meal of lukewarm fried chicken, deviled eggs and awkward glances. Jimmie stood beside her sisters, who were whispering jokes about what would be happening later that night on the honeymoon. Her brothers cut their eyes at Webster, who stood across the room, slyly studying Jimmie's mannerisms and staring at her belly.

When it was time to go, Alfred brought Jimmie her suitcase and her prized box of school books. Seeing that made it real for the kids.

“No, don’t leave Jimmie,” Margie said and grabbed her sister. Margie’s words triggered the other kids. They all began to cry.

“Don’t cry. Please don’t cry,” she said, trying to touch and comfort them all.

Alfred handed her a folded five-dollar bill, kissed her on the cheek and walked away before the tear forming in his eye began to fall. Then, Jessie walked Jimmie over to a quiet corner and prepared to speak.

“Jimmie,” she said, and let out a sigh. “Being a wife and a mother ain’t easy, but, uh, you can do it. You’re strong and you’re smart.”

“Thank you, mama,” Jimmie said.

“I, I, uh, love you. Now, uh, get on out of here.”

That night, they laid in Webster’s twin bed, surrounded by toy airplanes, stacks of comic books and his prized piggy bank filled with pennies, nickels and dimes. Jimmie wore an ankle length off-white nightgown with tiny roses stitched along the collar. Webster wore a white t-shirt and wrinkled, gray pajamas pants. They stared at the ceiling, not quite knowing what to say.

Every time she heard a footstep outside the door, Jimmie would jump. She imagined that Webster’s mother Agnes was outside the door spying.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

“Nothing. What about you?”

“I was over here praying that you can cook chicken better than your Aunt Maxine,” he said and winked at her.

They laughed. He turned and looked at her, seeming to smile with his eyes. She blushed and her breathing started to get slower and more pronounced. Webster cradled Jimmie and kissed her forehead. Moments later, they made love while trying not to breathe too hard or make the bed squeak, since his parents were in the next room separated by paper-thin walls.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Webster's mom Agnes told the two of them that they would have to "earn their keep" by paying \$5 a month.

"Y'all can't lay up in my house," she said. "Y'all gonna work."

His stepfather Pickle had helped Webster get a job working for Barber's Dairy helping to deliver milk over the mountain in the wealthy, white neighborhoods. He rose before the sun and looked like a soldier, dressed in his crisp white uniform, black bow tie and matching hat. He'd kiss Jimmie while she slept and then tiptoe out the door.

Jimmie, who had been in tenth grader, had to quit school so that she could work alongside her mother at the Jewish Country Club. Every morning, though, she'd get up early and peek through the curtains and watch as her former classmates walked to school. She'd spy on them and critique the way their bobby socks hung over their shoes and analyze their hairstyles and the color choices of their pleated skirts. She kept her history and science books in a wooden box beneath her bed. She told herself that she would keep up with her lessons no matter how hard things got.

While her former classmates were studying the Middles Ages, she spent her days chopping mountains of vegetables in the kitchen, and sometimes waiting tables and greeting guests. On occasion, she would linger near the patrons, eavesdropping on conversations about their fancy lives and dream jobs. She would pretend to be sitting among them and telling her own stories of fame and fortune, that is, until she'd be awakened from her daydream with a request for, "More tea."

“Pay attention, girl,” Jessie would chide her underneath her breath so the white folks wouldn’t hear.

As the baby grew inside her womb, Jimmie would often stand in front of the mirror and rub her belly that was expanding into the size of a honeydew melon. “What do you want to be called,” she’d say.

She suspected it was a girl because Agnes said that she was carrying the baby high up on her stomach. Plus, Jimmie had heartburn all the time, which was a sure sign that her baby was a girl with a head full of hair.

As Jimmie pondered a name, she knew she wanted to make a statement, to let everyone know that she wasn’t just some girl who got knocked up at 15. She was smart, and knew things. She flipped through her old school notepads and history books looking for something exotic. She marveled at the sound of “Mona Lisa” and was fascinated by the rhythms of “Isabella,” “Nefertiti” and “Joan.”

On July 31, when the bright-eyed baby girl with long eyelashes and bow lips was born, Jimmie proudly told the midwife that her daughter’s name was “Marie Antoinette.”

“Like the queen,” the midwife asked.

“Yes,” Jimmie said, “Like the queen.”

From the moment she took Marie home, Jimmie felt as if she had a real-life doll. She and Webster would lay her in the middle of their bed and stare at her as she slept, falling deeper in love with her with every rise and fall of her little chest.

“Watch this,” Webster said and would tickle the baby’s nose while she was sleeping. Marie would grimace and claw at her face.

“Stop that,” Jimmie said, annoyed by his laughter.

“What do you think she’ll be like when she’s older,” Jimmie asked.

“Smart and beautiful, like her mother,” Webster said.

“No really,” she asked. “I want her to go to school and then college. I want her to be everything I wish I could.”

Webster saw the hope she had for Marie, but was also aware of the lack of hope she now had for herself. It made him sad.

One year later, Brenda Joyce was born. She was six pounds and seven ounces. She had a serious look on her face and was high yellow like Agnes. They nicknamed her “BeBe” because that’s what little Marie called her since she couldn’t quite say the word “baby.”

With two little ones in diapers, everything doubled: the bottles, the diapers and the bills. Luckily, Brenda could wear the clothes Marie had outgrown. Plus, since she looked so much like Webster’s mother, the woman made spoiling Brenda her new pastime. She would stitch little “B’s” on her baby clothes and offer to rock her to sleep so that Jimmie could go to bed early.

On Sunday mornings, Jimmie would dress her baby girls up in the frilliest, laciest dresses she could find. The old, discerning ladies at church would swoon and remark at how good a mother Jimmie must be. Even Jessie seemed proud to see her daughter handling motherhood.

When Webster Jr. was born not too long after Brenda, however, looking just like his daddy, people were no longer happy with the growing family. They were annoyed.

“Again,” Maw Maw said with exasperation. “Where are you going to put a third child?”

Marie and Brenda slept on homemade palates on the floor. They were caged in by milk crates that lined the perimeter of the blankets so that they wouldn’t wander off during the night. Webster Jr., or June Bug as they called him, slept in a tiny crib in the corner until he was nearly taking up every inch. Webster and Jimmie had been saving as much as they could, but with each new child their stash got less and less. They had to pay Agnes a boarding fee of five dollars a week and also help with the groceries. Webster’s childhood piggy bank that held their rainy day fund only had a few pennies and a button Marie slipped inside. And, it became harder for Jimmie to work substantial hours at the country club with three babies at home.

Agnes helped when she could, but she worked a job and had two more kids of her own to raise, plus she was quick to remind Webster and Jimmie that these were babies that they made, not her.

Pretty soon, a gulf began to grow between Webster and Jimmie. She was a dreamer who loved books and worshipped knowledge, and he was a practical man, content with a hot meal and a cold Coca-Cola. Jimmie was stuck with crying babies in a bedroom the size of a closet. She envied him for being gone to work all day. At least he got a break, she thought.

“June Bug almost fell out of the bed...” she told him as soon as he walked into the room from working a long shift.

“Really...” he said and reached for his son to examine him.

“Yes,” she said. “We are stacked on top of each other. I don’t know how much longer I can take it.”

He just listened while holding his head down.

“I don’t have room to think,” she said, “and it’s not good for the kids. You work all the time and don’t want us to borrow money from my parents.”

“I just need a little more time to figure things out, to work more hours.” he said.

“Maybe me and the kids can stay with my mother until you get on your feet.”

Webster looked up from his son and then stared at Jimmie. She could tell that hurt him. He sat his son down, untied his work shoes and took them off. His feet were swollen, more than usual. She tried to rub his back. He shooed her away. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

A few weeks later, one of Webster’s friends told him about a job at American Cast Iron Pipe Company. Blacks were going to work there in droves. Men who had started out walking to work carrying bologna-sandwich lunches in paper sacks would be able to afford to *drive* to work and carry chicken lunches in newly minted tin boxes after months of getting those ACIPCO checks. A job like that paid nearly double what most of them made at other places. Webster put in an application and each night before bed said a prayer that he’d get a call.

At the same time, Jimmie found herself sick again and lying her head against the cold toilet seat in the bathroom, suffering with familiar symptoms. In 1954, it was just over a year since she gave birth to Webster. She knew what those symptoms meant and couldn’t bear to tell anyone, not even Webster. They couldn’t afford birth control pills and his creative fail-safe methods always failed.

Jimmie had heard about a woman who lived in Inglenook who could take care of unwanted pregnancies. The woman was a trained nurse, but began doing abortions on the side to make extra money. A woman who lived up the street from Agnes supposedly had been a client. While in the midst of divorcing her husband, she found out she was pregnant and got it taken care of.

As Jimmie thought about paying the woman a visit, she also reflected on all the sermons and lessons she sat through in church. She could quote endless bible verses and was a crowd favorite on Easter Sunday when it came to giving speeches. But, at that moment, she feared her husband and family's disappointment more than God almighty himself. She asked Agnes if she could watch the kids while she went downtown for an errand and then took the bus 10 miles to the east side.

Her stomach felt as if it were doing flips all throughout the ride and all along the walk to the woman's little crimson house that sat in the center of a cul-de-sac. When she made it onto her porch, which had an eerie owl figurine that seemed to stare at her, she held her breath before knocking on the door.

"Who is it?" the voice called from behind glass and wrought iron.

"It's Jimmie Elliott. I, I um need to talk to you about a matter."

She heard the woman undo the latch and then crack open the door. She was petite in statue, but rotund in dress size. She had a pudgy, angelic baby face and stringy gray hair tied in a bun.

"Come in, child," she said with a roughness that didn't match her grandmotherly appearance.

Her home was bright, airy and immaculate. She had an elegant living room set with an olive-green velvet sofa and what looked like matching custom gold and green drapes. Little owl figurines sat throughout the rooms and all the bedroom doors were shut. Jimmie thought surely that she had the wrong house.

“I’m not sure you’re who I’m looking for. I, uh, was told that...”

“Ten for an abortion or five dollars for a potion I can mix up and you take at home.”

Jimmie was taken aback by her abruptness. Then, she thought about how much she had in her purse: about two dollars and thirty cents.

“I don’t think I can afford that,” she said and began to walk away.

“How much can you spare,” the woman asked as if she were in a hurry.

“About a dollar.”

“Look, give me the dollar and I will tell you what to do,” she said and stared at Jimmie’s stomach. “You don’t look far along.” She put her warm hands on Jimmie’s womb.

“You been throwing up?”

“Yes.”

“Umm hmm... You about three months. Where’s your dollar?”

Jimmie went into her purse, fished out a dollar bill and handed it to the woman.

“This what you do: get a cup full of white vinegar and put just a cap full of Clorox in it. Go get some hard bottom shoes and get on a cement floor. Drink it all and then begin to jump up and down about ten times. Now, you need to jump high and come down hard so you can feel it in your belly. You know what I am saying?”

“Yes,” Jimmie said.

“You do this about three times a day for a week and that should take care of everything.”

“OK.”

“Alright. Bye,” she said and the woman began to usher her out of the door.

While on her way back home, Jimmie began to repeat that recipe in her mind. She tried to figure out how it would work.

“Why the capful of Clorox?” she thought, “and why hard bottom shoes?”

She also thought about all her Sundays in church and what God would think if she caused harm to the baby.

When she was walking toward Agnes’ house, she felt someone come up behind her and kiss her on the cheek. She turned around. It was Webster.

“What are you doing home so early,” she said.

“The boss let us off at two on account we finished a big job a day ahead of schedule,” he said. “When I got off, I decided to walk over to ACIPCO to see if they had looked at my application.”

“OK,” she said, becoming amused by his animation.

“Well, the manager of the crane department just so happened to come into the office. He needed to hire a man right away.”

“Then what.”

“I introduced myself and he took me back to his office to interview me on the spot.”

“And...”

“And,” he said, dancing around. “I got the job!”

He grabbed Jimmie and started to dance her around. He reached to hold her tight and then pulled away.

“You gaining weight girl,” he said.

She grabbed her stomach and held her head down.

“You pregnant?”

She didn’t say anything.

“You are pregnant, huh.”

She started to cry. They sat on the front porch and began to whisper like 8-year-olds not wanting to get in trouble.

“I know this ruins everything.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It’ll work out.”

“You think so?”

“Babe, I just got a job making twice what I do now. With overtime, it could be three times that.”

She began to smile.

“Me, you, Marie, Bebe, June Bug and that little peanut inside of you now will be just fine,” he said. “I’m going buy you a house real soon.”

“You promise,” she said, starting to smile.

“I promise,” he said. “Now let’s go tell mama about the job.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Webster was suiting up in his crisp, freshly ironed tan-and-red uniform to work in ACIPCO's crane department. Jimmie beamed when she walked him to the bus stop on his first day.

"You nervous," she asked him.

"Not at all," he said. "I feel like I am on top of the world."

Once he got there, it was hard work, though, backbreaking. Webster had to maneuver in and around machines the size of dinosaurs and alongside men twice his age. But, he had a plan. He was going to save up for one year and afterwards get his family a big house in a nice neighborhood with a flower garden for Jimmie and a backyard swing for his kids.

At the end of the day, he would come home from work spent of every ounce of energy he had. But the moment his kids would sprint toward the front door and squeal, "Daddy's home" he became brand new. He'd scoop them up in his arms and shower them with big, wet kisses.

"Who's your daddy?" he'd call out and swing them from side to side.

"Webster," they'd say in unison with a hearty laugh.

On Fridays, he would whip out a piece of penny candy from his pocket – usually some honey taffy with nuts.

While Webster navigated his new world of cranes and cast iron, Jimmie's pregnant belly began to swell until it was about to pop. On March 2, 1955, she gave birth to their fourth child, Andre Renee, a 7-pound boy who had Webster's long face and Jimmie's serious eyes.

"You were the last missing piece in our family puzzle," Jimmie said, rubbing her warm nose against his.

"I can tell he's gonna be smart," Webster said. "Look how he is already trying to lift his head."

"You won't have to have hands like this," he said to the newborn, referring to his cracked calloused hands. "You're gonna be a professor."

Jimmie smiled at the thought of that.

Visiting hours was almost over, so Webster had to prepare to leave.

"We did OK, huh, Jimmie?"

"What do you mean?"

"Remember how scared we were when our folks told us we were getting married?"

"Yeah. I wanted to climb out a window."

They laughed.

"We did OK," he said, "and we have this beautiful family. That's all I have ever wanted."

"We did good," she said.

"Tomorrow, I am gonna bring you some rib tips from that new restaurant they opened on Fourth."

Jimmie perked up.

“You know I love some rib tips.”

Webster smiled and headed out of the door.

The next day, after getting off his shift that ended at noon, Webster heard about a chance to work another four hours and jumped on it. The timing was perfect for him because he could use the extra money with the new baby. He got on the phone in the office and called his stepfather.

“Pickle.”

“Huh?”

“This is Webster.”

“Hey there.

“I’m gonna work a half shift and then you can pick me up,” he said.

“OK then.”

“Tell Jimmie that I haven’t forgotten about her rib tips and will bring them as soon as I get off.

“OK, then.”

Shortly after his call, Webster went back to his workstation with visions of swine in his head. While prepping his machine to start back up, he spotted one of his coworkers about to be hit by a speeding crane. The man operating the crane couldn’t see the worker who was standing just off to the side. The man off to the side had on earplugs and didn’t hear the vehicle getting too close.

“Hey,” Webster yelled and darted toward the man to push him out of the way.

“Hey!”

The speeding machine that was headed toward his coworker struck Webster instead. It knocked him down like a rag doll.

“Webster!” someone yelled out.

One of the workers flagged the medical crew. They rushed toward Webster, but when they saw his crushed body, their sprints halted. It was too late. At twenty-two years old, just one month after his birthday, Webster was gone.

His mother Agnes was the first to get the news. When she heard, she dropped the phone and sprinted out the front door. She ran as fast as her 50-year-old arthritic legs could take her and then collapsed in a neighbor’s yard. She sat in the grass and sobbed until her husband came to get her.

“Not my son,” she said shaking her head and squeezing her wet eyes tight. “Not my baby boy.”

The doctor tending to Jimmie in the maternity ward instructed the family to hold off telling her the news. He wanted to give her a Valium first to try to soften the blow. Even in a medical haze, however, when Jimmie learned of Webster’s death, she howled.

“No, it’s not true,” she said, trying to get out of her hospital bed. The nurses tried to convince her to get back. “He’s not. He’s not what you said he is.”

Days later, Jimmie, still healing from childbirth, got dressed in an oversized black dress and walked slowly up the aisle of the little AME church toward the wooden casket holding her husband. Little Marie and Brenda screamed out for their daddy to “Wake up!” Webster Jr. was in a daze.

Jimmie sat wilted in the front church pew. She stared at the preacher who, five years before, had led Webster and her through their vows. The man stood in the pulpit saying something. She didn't know what. The air felt thin. It was hard for her to breathe and the walls felt as if they were closing in. Little Andre was stirring in her lap as if he knew something awful was taking place.

Jimmie just stared, trying to search her brain, the church walls, the funeral program, anything, to see if she could come up with an answer to how to pick up the pieces when your world has been shattered into a million and one. She gazed at her babies, knowing she had to find some strength inside and not be crushed beneath the weight of it all. She needed a miracle, but didn't feel worthy to ask for one, especially since this all started when she got pregnant at 15.