

Sugar Bread Dreams

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...”

—James 1:27

In 1991, as a sophomore in college, I read the poem “Harlem,” by Langston Hughes for the first time. Actually, I had glanced at the lines long before then, having memorized them as part of an assignment in sixth grade. I remember standing in front of the classroom, looking up at the ceiling, and reciting the poem in that sing-songy voice that we as children so often use. Songs are easier to memorize than poems, I think, so we lyrically transform every other mode of expression into a song.

At age eleven, it was difficult for me to view Hughes’ poem as anything other than a song. It rhymed and rolled easily off my tongue. These characteristics, accompanied by a choppy fourteen-line structure, made the poem look approachable on the page. Also, the fact that many of its images conjured up food was appealing. When I got an opportunity to really *read* the poem, to scan its lines for some underlying meaning, I realized that I wanted this poem to mean something personal to me. I wanted a relationship with it:

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

My grandmother dreamed dreams often, but she referred to them as “visions,” often reciting, *Without a vision, the people perish*. She believed that we should always believe in something bigger than ourselves, even when we couldn’t yet see it with our eyes. She had spent most of her years living by such a principle. In her twenties, she left Hernando, Mississippi—a bold move for a black woman of her age and time. She moved into a house and worked odd jobs to survive, believing that one day things would get better, that something would change.

Such was the case when she legally adopted her nearly two-year old grandson Terrence. It was a decision she had contemplated for a while, praying intensely and going several hours without food. She had raised five sons and a daughter of her own, mostly alone, and initially wanted to spend her latter years free from the worries and stresses that come with being responsible for someone else’s life.

Grandma was a born care giver. I remember her spending hours on the telephone praying for her fellow church members. If someone were ill, she visited them in the hospital. She sometimes opened her home to those others would fear or label “suspect” because she was never afraid to love. Even before adopting Terrence, she would speak of the possibility of becoming a foster parent, particularly to the “crack babies” she heard about via news specials and reports. When Terrence came along, he was the fulfillment of her natural inclinations—her beautiful gift wrapped in marred paper.

Terrence was my uncle Bubba’s son. We met him for the first time when he, his mother Cathy, and Uncle Bubba stopped by our house one night. Grandma was there, too. At the time, Terrence was only a few months old and peculiar looking. His body was thin, shriveled and wrinkly, and his face bore a grimace, as though he already knew something of the world’s harshness and was eagerly awaiting the ability to speak, an opportunity to complain. A nurse who works with my sister says most babies born into poverty or other harsh conditions have such a look. “It’s like they emerge from the wound knowing something ain’t right,” she said, “as if God has pre-equipped them with the maturity they need to handle their circumstances.”

When Terrence left the house that night, Grandma commented on his appearance. “Lora, that baby is funny-looking to me,” she told my mother. “You know what he looks like?”

“What, Mama?”

“A little spider monkey,” Grandma said.

“A what?”

“A spider monkey,” she said, again. “You know . . . those little monkeys with the skinny arms and legs and a big head. I think they have them at the zoo. You know. A spider monkey.”

“Oh, Mama, you’re being mean,” Mama giggled. “He’s a cute little boy. He just needs to be better taken of.”

“I guess so,” Grandma said, reluctantly. “He mighty funny-looking to me, though.” Grandma paused for a minute. “Lora,” she said, “who does that baby look like to you? Is it Bubba or his Mama?”

“Well,” Mama responded. “He looks just like Bubba to me. He has Bubba’s small head and long, narrow face. They look just alike. He’s a cute little boy to me,” she said again. “He just needs somebody to take better care of him.”

“Well,” Grandma said, “since I found out I got another little Grandson out there, I need to go ahead and put his name in my vessel.”

Grandma’s “vessel” was a ceramic vase stocked with silk flowers that stood on the night stand next to her bed. It had been there for years. As a child, I did not know its significance and would meddle with it insipidly, arranging and rearranging the flowers according to their various shapes and colors, sometimes taking bundles of them out of the vase and scattering them along the floor. Finally, Grandma revealed to me that the vase stuffed with flowers was her prayer vessel. “Try not to mess with Grandma’s flowers, okay, baby,” she said to me one day after witnessing the mess I’d made. “That’s Grandma’s prayer vessel.” Inside were small balls of white paper, containing people’s names. My name was on one of those pieces of paper. So was that of my mom, dad, sister Keshia, cousin Tarja, and all of Grandma’s sons—Terry, Gary, Claudell, Herman, Jr., and Edison—, my granddaddy and Grandma’s ex-husband, Herman, Sr., and a slew of others, including famous people, such as Aretha Franklin and Tina Turner. Every morning Grandma awoke to anoint her vessel with holy oil and pray that God would meet the needs of each of us. After meeting Terrence, she added his name.

It was only after attending a special church service that Grandma decided to pursue Terrence’s adoption. A woman prophet was preaching that night and towards the end of her sermon, she signaled for a few people to approach the altar so that she could pray for them individually. One of those persons was Grandma. “God has specific instructions for you,” she told her. “He wants you to go ahead and get custody of your grandson. And . . . Yes, he *is* indeed your grandson. God says that if you don’t get him and get him soon, he’s gonna lose his hearing.”

We had received news of Terrence contracting numerous ear infections, but assumed it was nothing serious and that he had received proper treatments. We had also heard rumors of his cooking exploits, how he waddled into the kitchen of his mother’s tiny apartment on some mornings, dressed in little more

than a soiled, baggy diaper, in an attempt to open the cabinets and reach for a skillet. Sometimes, he even reached upwards to try and turn on the stove. When we first heard the story, we laughed, but cautiously. "What kind of child is that," Grandma asked. "He must be a smart little something . . . I ain't never in my life heard of such, have you? Why in the world would a little baby like that have to try and fix himself something to eat?"

"I don't know," Mama said. "He must be something else."

"Well, all I know is that when a baby gets to the point where he has to try and fix himself something to eat, something is wrong," Grandma said. "That means it's time for him to go."

It wasn't long before Grandma began attending court sessions and signing legal documents to get custody of Terrence. It was her labor of love and obedience towards God. She knew it wouldn't be easy, especially financially, but was once again willing to trust God and exercise her faith.

We all knew the real reason that Terrence came to live with Grandma, but we were hesitant to discuss it, at least in his presence. Grandma had prayed and fasted for years that her son Bubba would stop using drugs. *Bubba, why don't you stop using 'that stuff,' or How much longer are you gonna be on 'that stuff,'* she would ask. He had gone to a drug rehabilitation center up near Nashville once or twice, but always returned to Memphis and his familiar crowd, becoming re-entangled with his past sins.

Grandma didn't believe that Terrence should have to suffer for his dad's mistakes. So, in 1988, he officially moved in with her, a woman fifty years his senior. At the time, she lived on Inez Street, a neighborhood inhabited mostly by the elderly. Yet, there were lots of children there. In the mornings, you could spot them walking or riding their bicycles in droves to school. During the spring and summer, they ran out of their houses, frantically, chasing the ice cream truck. I didn't realize it then, but Grandma and Terrence had become part of a new trend, particularly within the black community, that of grandparents raising their grand kids.

Their relationship was not without antagonisms, particularly at mealtime. Terrence had become accustomed to eating much differently from Grandma, often demanding that she fix his favorite meal, sugar bread, which consisted merely of a slice of white bread sprinkled with white sugar. One day while Grandma was preparing dinner, Terrence vehemently insisted on having sugar bread as opposed to the spaghetti and meatballs that Grandma had prepared. "I want sugar bread, Grandma," he mouthed.

"You want what, baby," Grandma asked, moving her ear closer to his lips in an effort to better understand him.

"I want sugar bread, Grandma," he repeated, softly.

"You want sugar bread, huh? What's that?"

"I want sugar bread, Grandma," Terrence said again, becoming frustrated.

"I don't know nothing about no sugar bread, Terrence," Grandma said. "I ain't never had none of that."

"I want sugar bread," Terrence yelled. "Sugar bread!"

"We don't eat sugar bread around here, Terrence," Grandma answered, raising her voice above his. "We eat real food, not sugar bread! That's dog food!" Grandma shoved the plate of spaghetti in his direction. "Now you either eat this or eat nothing." After a while, Terrence settled into his chair and slowly began eating the spaghetti that Grandma set before him.

Terrence and Grandma spent the next three or four years getting to know one another, each of them becoming more and more intrigued by the other's behavior. "He's such an old man," Grandma said of him. "He's like a young boy trapped in an old man's body." Terrence liked to wear old polyester suits as a child. And he collected paper, plain white paper, which he carried around in a large brown paper bag. On several occasions, Grandma tried to throw out the sack, considering it clutter, but Terrence wouldn't allow it. Those papers were important to him. He used it to practice his writing, often opening the bag and pulling out a random piece to scribble his name or draw a stick-figured animal. Once he was done, he returned his masterpiece to the bag, folding down its top, and carrying it with him wherever he went. After a while, Grandma began finding what seemed like mounds of paper throughout the house. "I don't know what I'm going to do with all of this paper Terrence is leaving around the house," she said. "Why would someone want to keep and carry around a bag of paper. I just don't understand." Mama said that Terrence was becoming a packrat like Grandma who kept everything she ever owned, protecting it.

Now, she had been given the assignment of protecting Terrence.

The day that Grandma called Mama on the phone to discuss Terrence's future college plans was a funny one, especially since he was only in the fourth grade. It seemed that Terrence after watching the NCAA Basketball tournament on television, had decided that he wanted to attend Duke University. "He really likes taking things apart and putting them back together," Grandma said, concluding that Terrence would become an engineer. "I don't know when the Lord might call me home, Lora," she told my mother, "but I just wanted you to know that I do want Terrence to go to college. If I'm not here, y'all be sure to help him fill out the papers."

"We will," Mama assured her. "We will."