

## Excerpts from *Salt in the Sugar Bowl*

### Sophia's Goodbye

Sophia was trembling by the time she took a seat midway the Trailways bus. Her jaws were clamped, yet her teeth rattled as if chilled by flu. Once in the seat, she sat bolt upright, too tense to lean back. The bus had travelled more than thirty miles before she moved beyond the shock of what she'd done. She drew in a long, sharp breath, held it, covered her mouth with her hand. If she could've ended it all right there, she would have. Simply elect not to take the next breath. Have it known that Sophia Sawyer died on a bus, unexpectedly, thirty-five miles from her home. But that wasn't to be the case. She would continue to live—in spite of having left her seven children on a balmy April morning.

It was just after two p.m. when she got off at the coastal town of Norington, a place where she was certain to find a job, just as her cousin had a decade earlier. Throughout the year, tourists gravitated to the clean, matchbox town where bicycles were more commonplace than cars. Anybody who didn't mind serving the vacationers could survive if they didn't mind work. And Sophia didn't. But once she got off the bus, all she could manage to do was sit on one of the plastic chairs on the side of the building with her thoughts. Her vision was gray in spite of the dazzling sun. Sophia was oblivious to the steady stream of tourists.

She knew she was a condemned woman. No woman in her right mind could muster the gall needed to leave children ranging from the ages of three to sixteen. But Sophia knew she wasn't crazy. She knew she was smart, but powerless. That was the curse, she felt, of marrying a mismatched man. Hunter, her husband, would've been a better man to somebody else, but he was the devil to her. It had taken her years to figure it out—had squandered many nights of rest, blinking in the dark, making sense of it all. Years ago, it had dawned on her that Hunter despised her for not being enough. He had wanted a better wife. In response to her deficiency, an unsatisfied Hunter found his way to other women. Sophia hadn't a clue how many, but there were a few that she, and everybody else, could identify. She believed that the problem rested within herself. It was nothing she could explain to anyone, because they saw him as the wrongdoer. The only person who might understand was her mother. And Devora Douglas was long dead—a year after her daughter married Hunter.

It was Sophia's mother who taught her to pretend. It began when Sophia had tuberculosis, Sophia remembered. Devora Douglas dealt with Sophia's illness in a heroic sort of way. She delved immediately into the role of nurse, entertainer, and overall savior of the nine-year-old girl. To be diagnosed with tuberculosis cut a wide gap in the child's life. And as she was moved from her own childhood high-rise, and swallowed by a cushiony, pillowed, guestroom bed, Devora implored Sophia to imagine.

"Imagine who you want to be, imagine what you want to wear, imagine where you want to go, and take your mind off being sick," Devora said.

"I don't know any of that," Sophia responded weakly.

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**Angela Belcher-Epps'** work has appeared in several literary journals, *Essence Magazine*, and the *Ladies' Home Journal*. She is currently at work on a collection of short stories entitled *Salt in the Sugar Bowl*. She lives in Raleigh, NC.

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