

When the Stars Begin to Fall

Growing up, all I was ever serious about was singing. Oh, I was diligent enough about my studies. Papa and Nana made certain of that. But I never had much use for hours spent fussing about clothes and fretting about hair and worry about young gentlemen. Who was whose beau and such nonsense that Matilde and the others concerned themselves with. There were young men whose attentions pleased me, to be sure. But if I had my druthers on a particular day, my free hours would be spent at the church, where I frequently found Mr. Wells at the piano. And if I stayed long enough, he'd stop playing his stream of Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart, one piece flowing seamlessly into another, long enough to coach me on my solo for Sunday. Or he'd play scales, coaxing me into the upper ranges of my voice, where I wished I could linger forever.

Once in a while, I'd see Will loitering around the doorway. He helped keep up the church to earn a few extra pennies, sweeping around the outside yard and making sure things were picked up in the sanctuary on Saturdays, before he'd go back to his books. Always set on being a doctor. Sometimes after his work at the church was done, he would slide into a pew near the back and listen while I sang "Steal Away" or "This Little Light of Mine." It made me shy at first, but after a while, it was as if he wasn't there. Those times he would walk me home, I never thought anything of it. I never had butterflies or felt the blood rush to my face the way I did walking home with some of the other boys, like Hubert Miles, with his dark, velvety skin that begged to be touched, or Daniel Ewing, who had changeable gray tomcat eyes and teased all the girls with his devilish grin. The most I can remember thinking in those days was that Will was like a brother to me. He looked enough like Matilde and Papa and I to be blood, with his greenish-brown eyes and sand-colored skin. Sure and steady as clockwork, Will was as much a part of my world as Papa. That's probably why I never imagined he would be anything more than a bystander to me, quietly looking on as I went about my life.

The times I did take special care with my looks, darkening my eyebrows and adding a little color to my lips, then trying to evade Nana's field of vision afterward, were when I was to sing, at school or at church or a program at the colored meeting hall. Time and again as I was growing up, Nana would tell me I was musical from the start. By the time I was five going on six, when I started to sing from memory—endlessly repeating the choruses of "My Country 'tis of Thee" or "Holy, Holy, Holy"—Papa would blanch and find an excuse to leave the room, knowing I had my mother's gift for music even if I didn't have my mother. Once I reached my teenage years, whenever I did something that displeased Nana—something like darkening my eyebrows and coloring my lips—she'd press her own lips together tight, turning them into a long, thin line, and look me over from head to toe with a cold, stony stare. Then she'd say that if Mother hadn't sickened from complications during childbirth

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and died before Matilde's first birthday, she would have left us anyway.

Nana always said Papa was the reason Matilde and I were hard pressed to find any photographs, artifacts, remnants of our mother when we were little girls, not much more than tots, burrowing our way through closets and drawers like two scruff-necked little puppies. She claimed time and again that Papa was the one to take Mother's pictures from the wall and clear her knickknacks from the mantle, to pack them away with her dresses and kid gloves and lace hankies, to stow them away in a box that we were given access to later, when we were growing into restless young ladies with unrelenting questions. But even now that I'm up in age, born near the beginning of one century and around the corner from seeing the start of the next—older than even Nana was when she died—I still believe that Nana was behind it all. That she would have given anything to erase any evidence of Mother's quadroon-oteroon-never-quite-content-to-be colored existence from our lives.

The only thing dark about Mother, really, was her eyes. The color of coal or maybe a thick, starless night. That's the first thing I noticed that long, long-ago afternoon with Matilde, both of us up in the attic, under the eaves of the old homeplace, Papa's house that he mostly built himself, the first and last home he and Mother would claim as theirs after they married, the house where Matilde and I grew up and where Nana came to stay after Mother died. Matilde and I squeezed together on the window seat; I was somewhere around eleven which would make her seven—she always was grown for her age—and I felt a jolt of recognition go through me when I stared into the eyes of that unearthly beautiful woman who stared back at me from the photograph. Matilde snatched the picture away, transfixed by the frozen image of a mother she'd never really known. But I, I remembered her. I can remember now, see it in my mind's eye, how I curled up there on that window seat, staring out at the trees. I ignored Matilde's tugging at my skirts, the scrambling of her small hands through the box, her cries of "Look, Celestine, look!" for the longest time. I sat until my fingers and toes felt numb, then tingled, numb, then tingled as I closed my eyes and saw Mother's, dark but filled with light as she reached out to hold my hand and sang me to sleep.

The more Nana talked during my teenage years, the more I thought Papa might try to stop me from singing. It wasn't that he didn't like my singing. When I was about seven, he told me if I was set on singing—even if I didn't sing so much as a single note anywhere outside our four walls—I would learn the fundamentals of music. So he arranged for my lessons with Mr. Wells every other week and kept Mother's handsome, solid cherry upright tuned. If anything, Nana and some of the other old mothers of Holy Trinity Church would whisper, maybe he liked my singing too much. I never knew my papa as a very demonstrative man, but when I sang, Nana said, the whole range of his feelings swept across his face, pure and unmistakable, a reflex that he, a doctor, a man of science and logic, couldn't control. If he knew I was going to sing, whether at church, at school, or at the colored meeting hall, he'd always find a seat in back. But Nana, always somewhere near him, so she said, could still see the tears pool in his eyes. Clear and glistening, like droplets left behind after a spring shower, warm and heavy and clinging to every growing thing. I didn't look much like Mother, not as far as I could see from the pictures Matilde and I had pored over. My complexion was a trifle darker and my hair a good bit coarser; my eyes much lighter, my features narrower, more like Papa's. I didn't really move much like her, either—that distinction belonged to Matilde, expertly swaying her hips at seven, coy and flirtatious,

a mess of trouble from the time she started to crawl, Nana would say with a scowl that sometimes gave way to a grudging chuckle. But according to Nana, that all went out the window—Father have mercy on us all—when I sang. When I sang—God strike her down if it wasn't the gospel truth—it was like Otelia St. Clair all over again, and she knew Papa would be damned if he'd let her, reborn in me, slip away a second time.

Once I finished my studies at Pearl, the Negro high school—in a brand-new building then, in walking distance of our house—I went on to Fisk, all of another brisk walk away. I was still fifteen, too young to go off to school anywhere else, Papa insisted. And since my dream, one I'd nurtured for as long as I could remember, was to tour the world with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, I had no reason to argue with him. If I had to follow the course leading to a teaching degree, as he commanded; put on a show of commitment and high-minded devotion when he asked if I felt that calling to better the lives of others; answer yes when asked if I could find fulfillment in self-sacrifice, the self-sacrifice required to teach those who needed teaching most desperately, I would. And I did—feeling the thickness of the lies coating my tongue long after I'd spoken them. All that mattered was that I knew what I was after, and was determined to get it. It was 1919—can you imagine, Celeste?—and once again, Will was right there. Too young to have gone to war, since like me, he came to Fisk at fifteen, and so was already halfway through the scientific course there, his life course still set for Meharry.

Under the rules and regulations—mercy, were they strict—he could come to call only once a week, between four thirty and five thirty, before evening set in. And because of my young age, we could only talk in the presence of a chaperone. At first, I didn't much care if he called at all, preferring to say little about my plans for the future, to keep my fancies of traveling on trains and steamer ships, of singing before foreign crowds and heads of state, to myself. And his talk of experiments in chemistry and equations in physics, his volunteer work at the hospital and his ongoing studies with Papa, excellent preparation for his entrance to Meharry once he earned his BA—on and on and on he'd go—bored me to no end.

But with time, Will became my closest friend and confidant. I wasn't any more interested, not really, in hearing about his work in the laboratory or about how he yearned to take a hands-on role in treating clinic patients, the ragged poverty of some of them unlike anything he had ever seen. But I needed an audience, someone whose listening could help me navigate how things were changing, someone who wouldn't dismiss the grand design I was fashioning for my life—and Will heard everything I had to say.

At Fisk, my acquaintance with the music that I heard Mr. Wells play at Holy Trinity—Bach and Mozart and such—grew into fascination, then fixation. When I finished my rehearsals with the Jubilee Singers—the student choir, not the famous touring quartet, at which I still looked with longing—I would commandeer one of the phonographs in the music department and sit listening until one professor or another forced me to leave. Whether it was Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*, one of the few opera recordings available at the time; or Mozart's *Alleluja*, or Schubert's *Ave Maria* or the Bach-Gounod version—I thought them both equally beautiful—the trills and tremors in the music on those 78s moved me every bit as much as hearing the touring Jubilee quartet, maybe more. For me, those refined voices, singing mostly in languages I had begun to study but didn't really understand, were a world away from the voices I knew, mine and the Jubilees, yet not entirely foreign either. I could