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An Inheritance

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I told Granny, many years before she died and after a tangent she'd started about "going on to be with the Lord," that whenever she made her transition, she should leave her collection of books to me. It wasn't an outlandish or unreasonable request. She was always proclaiming her imminent death and bequeathing something that she thought was of value among the items she hoarded: the wooden ships that were lined up on ledges along the wall; the oversized leather animals that she and her sister, my great aunt, desperately collected for several years; the life-size clay heads she'd crafted in a class or the oil paintings she made in another or the many crochet-bodied dolls with their antique faces that she'd learned how to put together from a woman she met when she worked at the Glassworks factory¹. And aside from her collectibles and the things that she made with her hands were the jewels she wore against her skin: pieces with icy rocks or colored stones that were as large as the fingers they adorned or that lay splayed delicately across her chest, or those that peeked from her earlobes through the split hairs of her wig. Though she collected diamonds and sapphires, emeralds and rubies, Granny was equally enticed by lapis and red coral, raw turquoise encased in etched silver and shipped from the Navajo lands of New Mexico to her home in Alton, Illinois.

But all those fancier things didn't flatter me none. It was the words on the page that I longed for. My fondest memories of Granny are the ones where she read to me her favorites from Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. Often pulling from the books that she proudly owned, Granny gravitated towards the poetry and short stories where Black vernacular was prominent. An educated woman who died with two classes standing between her and a Bachelor's degree in English Literature, she would take a classic poem like James Weldon Johnson's "Sence You Went

¹ Owen-Illinois Glass Company operated one of the region's largest glass producing factories in the country and was located in Alton. Most folks who worked in the plant called it "Glassworks."

Away” and, with her mastery in the art of speaking Black dialect, read the words as naturally as the proper speech she code-switched into daily.

As a child, on nights when my parents made the short trek across the bridge that connected Missouri to Illinois and attended special services at nearby churches, they’d leave those of us who preferred Granny’s presence over God’s at her house for the hours they’d be in prayer and supplication. It was on those evenings in what I now remember as an orange haze in her crowded living room, under the glaring light of a muted television and while one or two of my siblings had already dozed off on the sofa or LazyBoy recliner, that I’d sit on a footstool next to her lap, leaning my small body into her oversized knees. I watched intently as she turned pages in a book she pulled from the few crammed into a shelf behind her shoulders. It wasn’t until she positioned the book just right between the folds of her belly and the softness of her large thighs that Granny would turn to a dog-eared page and read to me in her deep, bellowing voice:

*‘Lias! ‘Lias, Bless de Lawd!
Don’ you know de day’s erbroad?
Ef you don’ git up, you scamp,
Dey’ll be trouble in dis camp
Tink I gwine to let you sleep
W’ile I meks yo boa’d an keep?
Dat’s a putty howdy-do-
Don’ you hyeah me, ‘Lias -you?’²*

I was in awe of her command of our language. It sounded *right*, beautiful in a way that belonged to me...to us.

I returned to her side for the final time in the summer of 2012, a little more than two decades later and after I’d grown into an adult and lived in Philadelphia for half that time; after I’d earned

² First stanza of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “In the Morning,” published in 1913.

a degree in English writing, my success indebted to her commitment and sacrifice of buying textbooks for me anytime I called; after she'd been bedridden for years, lost feeling and movement in her fingers and, in those very last days, lost the sight of her eyes. In some quiet, medicated moments when her pain recessed behind a wall or induced relief, I found for her books buried under packages of adult diapers and cleaning wipes, latex gloves and pharmacy bags of medication, and revisited those dog-eared pages to read the familiar words back to her. She would only grunt or hum in amusement, a smile creeping upon her lips. My very last reading for her was a poem I wrote, a tribute to her for instilling the love of Black literature in my life. This time I read from a podium next to where she would be laid to rest and in front of all who joined us to bid her goodbye.

It was a few years later, in 2015, when I moved from Pennsylvania back to Missouri, when my aunt asked me to meet her at my Granny's house before it was surrendered back to the bank. "Your dad said you wanted your Granny's books. Here are the ones I could find. You can go inside and look around for some others, if you want." My dad's baby sister, equally loving as she is matter-of-fact, was in charge of facilitating a clean-out of their mother's house, which was filled with a lifetime of hoarded goods.

In the small box that my aunt handed me that day were both books Granny and I had read from together and others I'd never seen before. Most striking, though, were all the titles from Toni Morrison. It was almost everything Morrison had ever written and a couple of duplicates. There were the hardbacks: *Paradise* and *Tar Baby*, *Jazz*, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. Her paperback copies consisted of another of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and two copies of *Song of Solomon*. It seemed that my aunt had curated for me some of the best-looking books in the house, so I spent some time that day foraging through the heaps of clothing and knickknacks and found among them a couple other, less pristine gems: a tattered textbook on craft called *Effective Writing* and a dirty yet bright

yellow copy of a miniature African history book titled *Breadless Biafra*. The latter felt like a serendipitous find after having spent two weeks in Nigeria the summer after Granny's death as the recipient of a writing fellowship with Chimamanda Adichie³. Adichie, one of Nigeria's foremost writers, is the author of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is a contemporary historical fiction novel about the Igbo tribe's failed succession from the West African country in the late 1960's.

Upon getting the box home and perusing the pages of these books, every one of which Granny's hands had touched, I encountered often her name inked inside of the front covers, her lean handwriting neatly scribbled in the margins, and little scrap pieces of papers where she began writing her own stories. I remember feeling overwhelmed with emotion that night and resting my back against my desk chair, holding one of these books wide open against my chest. I believe I said a prayer of thanks, to God and to my ancestors, for this gift: a collection of books, now mine, that truly embodied every bit of this woman whose side I never wanted to leave. Each book, her promise to me that I never would. †

³ Chimamanda Adichie held an annual [Farafina Trust creative writing workshop](#) in Lagos, Nigeria for which I was selected as a participant in 2013.

Sample Bibliography (more titles available upon request)

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