

**A Lady's Heart and Soul:  
My Life as a Colored, Negro,  
Black, African American**

**A Historical Biography of  
Annie Hollingworth  
1918-1995**

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**Let Them Gossip: My Heart is in Love**

*At some juncture, doesn't it become a waste of one's energy to have to rebut, rebuke, vindicate? Doesn't there comes a time when you should just let a defamation go? Because to chase it down is to waste a piece of your life in a futile duel with ignorance, isn't one's own approval reward enough?*

-Unknown

*There is nothing more frightening than ignorance in action.*

-Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

The next morning, I made myself a cup of hot chocolate and snacked on a fried apple pie. Because of a neighbor's barking hound, I couldn't sleep. I was enjoying my late breakfast when Miss Viola Belle, better known as everybody's Aunt Belle pulled into the weedy yard. She didn't get out of her old faded dark blue Oldsmobile; instead, she decided to blow her horn loud enough to offend the peaceful dead. The entire town was aware that Miss Belle was a woman that couldn't keep her business or anyone else's to

herself—she actually believed she was a boogie mainly because she had a few dollars. From the moment she picked me up she began her chatter. I couldn't help but wonder how long before she start her gossiping about larger issues. Of course, I had a good mind to know what the real questions that were hanging loosely on her dark red painted lips. Miss Belle had a Jell-O face with outgrowths of facial hair. Her light skin was plastered with too much makeup, and her pink dress was much too tight—it barely covered her large knees—and her rolled-up cotton stockings had a ruin the length of her lower leg. Her dime store light brown wig was partially covered by her broad-brim lavender felt hat and graced with a long pink feather.

“Honey, are you okay? Are you daydreaming? Now don't you worry, your parents is truly in God's loving hands,” Miss Belle swore. “They wouldn't want you to fret your heart out over them. They probably looking down on you with all their love, and as proud as a pair of birds seeing their young one makes it on her own . . . that's the god's truth.”

I was silence for a minute or so, before I nodded my head in approval. Miss Belle continued her probing—as if I'd take the bait and spill my guts about what she had undoubtedly heard. Finally, after she decided that I wasn't going to open up, she decided she'd have to serve the main desert, and without my approval.

“The sky done cleared up some. Now only if the weather would warm up.”

“Yes Ma'am, it seems that way,” I mumbled.

“Honey, you don't looks a day older than when you use to gobble up my homemade ice cream like a kitten licking up milk. Tell me, how's schooling going for you?”

“School is okay. I'm glad you called and offered to run me over to Broken Bow. And thanks for coming to the service.”

“. . . You welcome a million. . . . Now Honey, don't you want to talk to Aunt Belle? Now you know you can git anythang off your sweet chest. You have had lots on your mind and god knows if I was you, I would want to talk to somebody wise an owl.”

“I'm doing just fine.” The old battle-ax had never tied the knot once in her fifty-odd years. People say years ago she had been in love with a Choctaw Indian, but he was killed in a drunken knife fight.

“Well . . . Honey, there is some people whose going 'round town saying that you let a young man spends the night in your house. And to complicate these matters, they say it was the likes of a white boy . . . that McCoy boy. . . . And then, there is some folks that says his pickup was parked in front of your dear departed grand mommy's house all the night long, and that the rooster had crows before he sees fit to leave. Now, you sees me, myself, I don't believe all that foolish gossip. I say that she was just having a bad moment and not thinking straight. Yes sir, I must say that Odell and Estoria raised you according to the Good Book. Me and your departed mommy belonged to the same tea club. Boy, your God-fearing

parents were the salt of the earth and then some. Odell put some real guts in lots of sorry good for nothing black Negroes.” She continued to turn her head toward me, while attempting to look ahead.

“ . . . Thank you. I loved them very much. I already miss them, and I wouldn’t do anything that would bring shame to them.” I saw no reason to directly answer her noisy probes about my personal affairs.

She turned her head toward me and strained to follow with the rest of her body, but her fat stomach was locked under the steering wheel. I looked straight ahead as if I were in deep concentration. Someone in a car behind us kept blowing, hoping to get her attention—maybe she would realize that she was driving like a blind woman. When the person finally passed her, she was given the finger.

“ . . . Lardy me. Talk about that low down sheriff if you will. I’ll tell you that rotten peckerwood is more crooked than a snake with a broken back.”

It was truly becoming difficult for Miss Belle to keep her large eyes on the road. She continued to throw new questions at me faster than a Mississippi gambler could switch cards. And I’m sure she didn’t want me to respond to her questions. She weaved from side to side, barely missing an open drainage ditch—a good thing that she was driving below the speed limit. I turned toward the door and looked out the window. Miss Belle’s dime-store perfume was becoming overpowering and I was becoming sick at my stomach.

“Yes ma’am, that’s what say, too.” A couple of minutes expired and we both were mute as two headstones.

“ . . . Are you ready to talk ‘bout the other night? Go ‘head and let it out, it’ll be good for your precious soul.” Again, she turned toward me, while attempting to navigate the narrow highway. “Honey, not a livin’ soul has to know what we talks ‘bout and you have my words on it. And folks know my words are worth more than all the gold in King Solomon’s mine.” She attempted to sound sincere.

I couldn’t stomach anymore, I had to open up. “Miss Belle, J.T. and I love each other. The Lord has called him to be a preacher. Just because he’s white doesn’t mean that he isn’t the ‘Real McCoy’.” I tried not to laugh at my own words.

“Is that ‘pose to be funny? Well I be! Now if that doesn’t take the cake! Gurl, you just bite your young pretty hot tongue. Annie, don’t you bees a little innocent fool. Next, that boy will be telling you he ain’t white.” She laughed. “Forgive me, but you’re actin’ likes you got the senses of a young hot pussycat.”

“Miss Belle, my daddy used to say: ‘Dead flies give perfume a bad odor. Just as some whites give some whites a bad name’. Respectfully, I see things my way, and I believe my way is the right way.”

She began laughing so sarcastically she nearly ran off the road. “Lord, mercy me! Do you know what you’re talking ‘bout?” She didn’t wait for my response. “You know I can feel and smell evil a mile away.”

“Miss Belle, I . . .”

“Hush up now, and just listens to me. I ain’t finished just yet. . .”

“Miss Belle, I appreciate your sincere concerns, but can we just forget about it, I will be leaving in a few days and with my head on straight.”

“Child, I’m trying my best to help you.”

“I thought everybody in the colored community knew that my parents approved of our relationship. And if you must know, J.T. and I have never shared a bed. He respects me as a descent woman.”

“Wait just a minute. Did you know that lots of big fires has started from little bitty sparks?”

“Miss Belle, I don’t understand what you are saying. But I will be very careful with the direction I am taking.” I realized I wasn’t getting anywhere—one stupid conversation after another that consumed the remainder of the trip to Broken Bow. Thankfully, I didn’t have to wait very long to cash in my parents’ life insurance policy. I wasn’t sure if I’d have a problem with it or not. I was taken back when Mr. Wright said that he was going to issue me a certified check for \$10,000 because he was submitting the claim as an accidental death—the policy value would double and this was more money than I had expected.

On the way back I played possum, pretending to be sleepy and tired; I quickly jumped in the backseat. I thanked my lucky stars that it worked. She finally shut her trap for a while, and when, she did say something—it had little to do with my affairs.

We arrived home in one piece. I offered to pay for the gas, however, she refused. I knew Miss Belle couldn’t wait to park her car, grab her phone and call half the town. However, my thoughts were about my perfect man. The faded dusty mirror on the dilapidated dresser revealed that my hair was a complete mess. I hesitantly ironed a few dresses and hand-washed some of my undergarments in the rusty bathtub. I was becoming aggravated with having to smash roaches, so I simply decided to ignore them. Suddenly, I remembered I had promised the Reverend that I’d attend night service. A member of the Eastern Star Socialites promised to come by and take me to church. I decided to wear something really nice—I put on a knee-length blue wool dress, stockings, high heels, white gloves, and a blue hat. I only wished J.T. could attend church services with me, or see how ladylike I looked.

After church, Mr. Stormy ‘Big Shot’ Gullet, an elder of the church, offered me a ride home. I decided to accept his generosity—the lady who I came with was busy gabbing and I was ready to go home and get some much needed rest. Mr. Gullet was a short, thin man of dark complexion and well into his late forties. He had smooth silky skin and a pencil thin mustache. His eyes were yellow and bloodshot, and his head was nearly bald. He was dressed in a single breasted black pinstripe suit—a black-ruffled shirt and a white silk necktie. Most people referred to him as a queer fish, mainly because he never married or hardly ever socialized with folks. For the most part, he stayed alone, except for an occasional church outing. On the other hand, he donated a considerable amount of money to the church. People said he never did a lick of laborious work in his life. No one knows where Mr. Gullet came from and how he got his money. He

owned a huge luxurious mansion made of solid stone that sat on fifteen or twenty acres of land located near the white side of town. I once overheard one of Daddy's friends swear that he had plumbing fixtures made of solid gold, and the floors were made of Italian marble. He was thought to eat his food with utensils made of sterling silver—served by his young Choctaw maid, who was said to fulfill his sexual pleasures. All the way home, he bragged about his brand new green Cadillac. He also reminded me that he was in the tall cotton—so much so, that he has bank account in various cities. Mr. Gullet didn't hesitate to let me know that he was tired of being a lone wolf, and he was looking for a young woman to warm his walnut bed and to smell sweet around him and to show-off around white people. I let him know that I wasn't interested. He didn't say another word and couldn't wait for me to get out of his car. After I changed and tried to relax, I made myself a warm cup of tea. It was nearly 11:30 p.m.—just as I got into bed, J.T. called.

Yes I am okay. A man from our church brought me home. After our most relaxing chat, I was able to fall asleep with the radio tuned to R&B music—the sound of rain has always put me to asleep.

Morning was upon me. A few ladies from the church dropped by to see how I was doing. Later that evening, my mother's best friend came by and offered to take me out to lunch. I'm sure she must have known about my relationship with J.T.; however, she didn't hash it out. We dined at Bubba's Café. Thankfully, the colored area wasn't crowded. After dinner, Mrs. Clay bought me a beautiful black full-length dress; she confessed that a lady couldn't have too many black dresses and shoes—insisted that I let her treat me to a hairdo at Gail Sharp's Saloon before I return to school. I was grateful that she gave me her telephone number—told me to call her whenever I felt it necessary. I remember when I was a junior in high school I couldn't wait for classes to end so I could go to her kitchen window and request two fried apple pies. The only reason I didn't down a dozen was because they were twenty cents each. On a brisk fall day you could smell and taste cinnamon and nutmeg mixed in her pies and rolls—I could have closed my eyes and followed my nose to her house.

Early the next morning I managed to drag myself out of bed. I caught a ride to the First State Bank to open an account. I deposited the insurance check to be added to my parents saving account. Most of the colored churches had collected a donation to help with the funeral and to help me with my schooling. I had more money than I could ever imagine. I didn't have to wait very long because there was no one in the colored line. The bank manager assured me that I would have no problem writing checks on my account in Atlanta and I could transfer the account whenever I desired—this was comforting news for me.

Just as I dozed off, a former classmate called and waxed nostalgia for a few hours. I knew it was getting late, but how late, I hadn't noticed—there was a knock at the door—it was my handsome fellow. And as soon as J.T. stepped in, I gave him a soul kiss.

“You are sort of early, now aren't you, fellow?”

“Am I? I couldn’t wait any longer. I tried to call you to tell you I was on my way.” He removed his jacket.

“Sorry about that. I was talking to Fanny Mae. That girl can jive talk forever. And she wanted to come over and try to teach me how to do the ‘Hambone’ and the ‘Hoochie Coochie’.”

“Never heard of those dances. . . . Oh, here, I have a newspaper. I thought you would like to read about your parents.” The newspaper was printed once a week.

“Oh, thank you. Mrs. Clay gave me a copy, also. I was going to get another copy. It was a good write-up and I had a hard time getting through it.” I tried not to choke with emotions. Last night was ever so painful—I cried most of the night. “Sit down and listen to the radio. I’ll be right back; I’ve got to do something with my hair because as you can see, it’s a real mess.”

“Annie, where’re you going? Your hair looks good to me.”

“Are you kidding me? Sweetie, just be patient. I promise I won’t be long.”

I dashed to the bedroom and removed the straightening combs from one of my small tattered overnight cases—and went into the kitchen and placed the comb on one of the electric burners—I had managed to leave my hot plate at school. Mr. Impatience walked into the junky and musty kitchen—unwanted guests were crawling everywhere—couldn’t the roaches see there wasn’t any food, and that I had company? J.T. continued talking and asking one question after the other.

“J.T., stop talking or you’ll make me burn my scalp.”

I ran the hot comb through my long thick coal-black hair—and by colored people standards, I had good hair because of the length—I wore bangs that reached my eyes.

“Boy, why are you smiling at me?”

“Baby, I just love everything about your ways . . . and have I told you of late, that you are precious and more beautiful than an evening sunset? And I also think you’re ‘bout as perfect as an angel,” he said seriously.

“Nice going my lover. I’m impressed. But I must say that I am the luckiest girl in the world. Did you know that I can feel your love everywhere, even when I’m eating or sleeping.” I continued to grease my hair so I wouldn’t burn it.

J.T. displayed an innocent smile, unexpectedly, he surprised me—he removed the straightening comb from one of the burners and asked me to turn my head to the other side that was still unattended—took his free hand and attempted to adjust my head so he could finish straightening my hair. I could hardly believe what was happening, but I didn’t object.

“Annie, how I wish, that your daddy was alive to see us. He could see how much we love each other and that we are actin’ respectful.”

I allowed him to continue for a few minutes—too much smoke was steaming from my hair. I rubbed

more Royal Crown grease into my hair and took control. After my hair was straightened, I combed and styled it.

I went to the bedroom and quickly put on a light pink cotton dress—I took him by one hand. “Come. Let’s go into the living room. My favorite song is playing *You Are My Everything*. Sit. I’ll be right back.” Again, I hoped he didn’t think I was being disrespectful to my parents. I was just trying to be happy, and to get my mind off my unimaginable situation. J.T. was really shy when it came to dancing, but as usual, he slowly gave into my aspirations. We held each other as if we were a pair of nuts and bolts tightly screwed together. Lil’ Mary was pouring her heart out with a slow tune called *Darlin’ I Love You So*. The radio station must have known what I yearned to hear. There’s something about romantic songs played at night that really put lovers in the mood for some extra romance.

The only light in the front room was from a single light bulb on a tarnished pole—the ceiling light fixture was broken. By the seventh song, we were dancing so close that a cardiologist would have trouble distinguishing separate heartbeats. And if I’d pulled him any closer to my five feet four frame, I’d been on the other side of him. My small hips were moving like a slow spinning top. But to my chagrin, J.T. didn’t attempt to help stir this pot of hot stew—neither did he sense that I was becoming as charged as a thousand-volt electric wire. I wanted him to make love to me more than ever, but unsure if I was in control of my mind. Nonetheless, hoping to help my own case, I grabbed J.T.’s face and stuck my tongue so far down his throat that air couldn’t enter—I could actually feel him choking and gasping for oxygen. His penis quickly expanded as it pressed against my body. It was evident that his body wanted me as much as I wanted him. I couldn’t decipher why his body and mind couldn’t get their acts together. And why couldn’t he figure out that I wanted him to have me in any manner he desired? I suppose I needed to know how it felt to make love to someone you love and they love you back. Moreover, could I do it with all my mind and heart and not think of that awful time?

Instinctively, J.T. pulled away and stated, “Let’s sit down, I want to talk to you ‘bout something.”

“Why do you want to stop dancing? What’s wrong?” I didn’t want what was happening to us to end. I suppose I knew J.T. would refuse to take me to earth-heaven, but I had to try.

He picked up his blue denim coat and began searching through his pockets. This behavior left me confused.

“Annie . . . I want to marry you,” he said assertively.

Before I could reply, he slowly removed a small ring from its box. He dropped to both knees and softly asked: Annie Hollingworth, please give me heaven on earth. Please marry me for a lifetime. Before I could answer, he took my left hand and gently placed the small ring on my finger. I wasn’t sure it was a genuine diamond; probably not, on the other hand, I didn’t care. But what do I say? I was one minute from choking on shock—he didn’t get down on his knees.

“My lady, please say something . . .” J.T. begged in a humble tone.

“WOW!”

“Is that all you can say?”

“No! I mean it is beautiful. I’d say it’s more beautiful than a piece of heaven.”

“What about the marriage part?” J.T. appealed.

“Funny. You are so funny, J.T. You should become a comedian.” I replied as I held my hand out to further inspect my beautiful gift—it was a perfect fit. My eyes were like two bright stars on a black night. Yet I couldn’t conceal my laughter, and I found myself grinning like a young happy hyena, but to J.T., it wasn’t a laughing matter.

“Annie, this is no joke,” J.T. humbly stated.

“Pumpkin pie, you know that I really, really love you, too. But are we being realistic here? Are we thinking like two sensible adults? We must agree that we have a problem bigger than you are considering.”

J.T. was in the same church, but still not sitting in the same pew with me. He stood up and started his amicable sermon before I could continue my oral thoughts.

“Annie, like you said, you love me and I love you, and we’re surely old enough to get hitched. I’m almost twenty-three, and you’ll be twenty-one soon. And after we’re married, you can continue your last year of schooling. You’ll be able to come home for the holidays. And this is your last year. Right?”

“J.T. McCoy, listen to me! I’m talking not about age or even money. I’m talking about the real issue here; that is, I’m a colored person and you’re a white person. We have enough trouble with just dating. And to think that a white and colored could get married and live together, it is unrealistic and downright insane. The law wouldn’t issue us a license to talk to each other, more-less a piece of paper for marriage.”

“Annie, won’t you at least think ‘bout it? I know this pastor, who said he would marry us, that is, if I could somehow fool the law into givin’ us a license. If not, we could go to Mexico, they marry different races.”

“Okay Sweetie. I promise to give it all my thoughts.” I stuck my hand out for him to get another look at his ring on my finger.

Finally, after much conversation and no resolution, we both decided we could use some sleep—I walked him to his pickup. Just as I was giving him a goodnight kiss, a car with two loud modified mufflers slowed down to see if their eyes were true—the driver blew his special adapted horn. Sarcastically, I waved, though I knew the driver wasn’t being friendly. After I waved bye to J.T., I nearly broke my ankle on a rotten board on the porch. And as with so many other nights, I was found it challenging to fall asleep. I kept pulling the worn covers over by chilly body, while having to constantly adjust the torn feather pillows. I thought if only Ida Mae were alive so she could be my private audience.

My thoughts were interrupted by rats gnawing in the walls of my bedroom. Invitation or not, they felt brassy enough to join me.

Morning had presented itself without my permission—and my tired body would have to make do. Somebody's rooster was fussing about having to wake up so early. I decided to walk over to my parents' house to see what was left of it, if anything. Mr. Jacobs said he'd haul the rubbish from our lot as soon as I gave him permission—there was nothing of value left, just memories mixed into ashes.

The day came and went as quickly, but not before I was able to get some house cleaning done. That afternoon, Margaret Sue and a few classmates dropped by—we went to the high school gym to play bingo. J.T. had called earlier and stated that he was going to Durant (Oklahoma), some 100 miles from Idabel to buy two prized heifers—I wouldn't be able to see him. He did not invite me knowing the vile racist people in that small town.

Another night was upon me; though, this night wasn't so taxing, maybe because I was punch drunk from the previous night—I was able to sleep through the night.

The next morning, J.T. and I tried to make up for lost time. We drove to Ashdown, Arkansas to hear a famous country singer. He wanted to teach me how to drive—I wasn't interested; after all, my mother never learned to drive.

Time did not respect us. In two days, it would be Christmas—those beautiful and spectacular Christmases gone by—those freshly-cut Scottish pine trees with decorations of icicles, angel hair, and a large blinking star at the top of the tree and large enough to guide the three Wise Men of Bethlehem to our house. And the base of the tree was accented with a nativity scene. I was seven when I asked Dad to buy me a cap gun. And for my fourteenth birthday, Daddy gave me a BB gun. I remember shooting a blue jay—I had nightmares for weeks.

Early Christmas morning, J.T. was at my house—we exchanged Christmas gifts and ideas. He gave me a badly needed luggage set, a bracelet and a new hotplate. I bought him a rawhide leather belt from an Indian leather shop, a felt cowboy hat, and a brass chain bracelet with our initials carved on the backside.

A few days passed. I decided to cook dinner for us—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, white beans and stovetop cornbread. I hadn't cooked more than a dozen meals in my life. And after eating, we decided to go to Ashdown and take in a 'drive-in' movie. Before coming back to Idabel, we drove around town and took in all the beautiful Christmas sceneries.

J.T. and I had only four days before we'd be separated again. Somebody obtained my telephone number and was very happy to inform me that I had become the town's newest slut, and confessed that my parents were crying in their graves because of my detestable behavior. One person reminded me that I wasn't raped; I gave it to those peckerwoods.

Late one evening we had the unmitigated gall to go downtown and eat at a small Indian diner. The

house specialty was buffalo tongue with corn dumplings. However, sitting in the only dining area, we decided to make a meal of spicy blue bread, grape dumplings and fresh spicy barbeque deer meat.

I was awakened by a pounding on the front door. It was none other than Rev. Green. I had a very good idea what this conversation was going to be like. I'm sure Miss Belle had spilled her fat guts all over town. Rev. Green was minister, who believed people should follow every letter of the Good Book. He'd ask members of his congregation to remove gum, tobacco or snuff from their mouths before the start of service.

"Come in Reverend. How are you, Sir?"

After standing and looking around, he slowly removed his hat and overcoat as I requested. Thankfully, I had warmed a pot of lemons and spices to deodorize the house. The Reverend was in faded overalls and high-top black boots. He had something in one of his hands. My premonition was becoming a reality. He appeared troubled and had a difficult time looking at me. His dark face was clean-shaven. Reverend was in his fifties, and his tall frame could put most professional athletes to shame. His large brown eyes seem to look right through me.

"I'm rather fine. What 'bout you, Miss Annie?" He paused for a few seconds or two. ". . . Boy, it is so cold outside, I see an old dog trying to waggle his tail and it was frozen to his behind." I managed a faint smile.

"Oh excuse me Reverend. Please sit down."

"Thank you. Oh, I almost forget that the missus sent you something hot to chew on. I don't like bragging, but that woman of mine is the best cook in the whole county if I do say so. She says that's why I marries her," he claimed as he smiled. The good Reverend extended his arm and handed me a plate wrapped in brown paper.

"Before I forget, I want to thank you and Mrs. Green once again, and also to the members of the church for all the wonderful things and praise given to me and to my parents. I don't know what I would have done without y'all help. I know Dad and Mom are so taken back by all the wonderful and caring things shown by you and the town folks."

"God knows, we all is glad to help and do what we can."

"And what can I do for you, Reverend?" I smiled. He didn't appear very comfortable.

"Was you able to cash in your folk's insurance policy? And will it be enough for you to sees your ways clearly? If not, we just might be able to git a few extra donations. Oh, the bank and Elmont Olson (a man who loaned money) gave me some finances. It was added in."

"Reverend, I'm okay with my finances, but thank you. The insurance policy was much more than I anticipated." I apologized for the drafty house.

"Well, Miss Hollingworth, now 'fore I begins giving you something to chew on, I wants you to know

that I respects your beliefs and all. And I'm aware that you is a young woman and you sees thangs in different ways." His eyebrows were raised to a semicircle as if he needed courage to continue. "But you sees the good Lord tells me you just might be in needs some good praying and guidance. Sometimes we all needs a little steering in the right directions."

"Reverend," I softly, but forcefully stated, "I don't mean you any disrespect, but I really had a bad night. However, I plan to come by and see you before I leave."

He looked at me. "Well, put this in your book. You should know that all the folks in town is proud of you tryin' to do the right thang and make something of yourself. I just wish I could talk our young people into making something of themselves. They just want to have babies by some no-good jive talking man. The Good Book says that God helps those that helps themselves. And God knows, I've done my best to put some sense in their heads, but it's like talking to an old stubborn mule."

I was becoming upset; however, I thought to myself: it would be better to be miserable than rude.

"Miss Annie, I'm here 'cause . . . well, it's probably nothing more than a rumor or just silly woman's gossip, but I hears unpleasant talks 'bout you and old man McCoy's boy." The Reverend had a slight frown on his face. "Folks says you and that boy is breaking God's laws six ways to Sunday." He leaned forward and took a deep breath. "Now you can sat me right on this situation, by just telling me that these rumors flowing through the long grapevines is nothing but silly gossip."

"Sir, I don't know what you heard, but J.T. and I are in love, and we haven't broken any of God's laws. And more so, he has asked me to become his lawful wife, if we . . ."

"My God, Almighty. It is true? Daughter, that kind of talk is right from Satan's heart and surely not from you." He shook his head with so much force that it appeared he'd break his neck.

I softly stated, "Rev. Green, I'm truly honored that you care enough about me to offer some wise and spiritual advice, but with much respect to you, Sir, I believe I'm doing the right thing."

"I don't come over here to call you on the carpet, but is you forgetting that he is a white boy, and to top it off, he's from a bad seed. His pa is as low down as they come," he vowed. "And here's 'nother thang . . . y'all will never be able to git a marriage licenses in this here county, and not even in the state."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it . . . and there are places that . . ."

"Wait a minute child; listen to me! There ain't no bridge there for y'all to cross. Do you hear what I'm trying to tell you? And don't think that mother hope will let you grab hold to her coattails, she won't nothing to do with y'all."

"Rev. Green, I have confidence that with the Lord's help, one day we'll find some place that will marry us."

"Daughter, by fooling 'round with this McCoy boy you'll brang shame to the whole town, and to yourself, and even to your departed parents," he said with authority, but with concern. "Annie, you was

raised as a Christian. I baptized you in Little River. Now I heard that Odell permitted you and that McCoy boy to socialize to some degree. But to tell you the truth, I don't for the love God understand this."

"Rev. Green, with all due respect, I do believe I'm old enough to make my own decisions." His face dropped like a cookbook cake. I never talked back to my elders, but I was very upset. After a few gulps of air, I continued. "Now I have listened to what you had to say. And I truly appreciate that you have my best interest at heart. And I'm not trying to be rude, but I do have a splitting headache that won't go away. Again sir, I can't say it enough, that is, I'm ever so thankful and blessed that you and your wife reached out to me and I could never repay you all. And nobody can argue the fact that you're the pillar of the town, and we all need and love you."

"Well, Miss Annie, I thank you for those heartfelt words. I certainly do. And heaven knows that I mean you no harm." Rev. Green stood up and attempted to adjust his pants—his face appeared to be full of disappointment. He adjusted his hat, put on his overcoat, and decided to do the proper thing and just leave. I suppose the Reverend felt that he was beating his gums. After he was gone I wondered if I was too abrasive with him.

Of course, many people believed that a white group had targeted my daddy, hoping that his death would send a clear and frightening message to other uppity colored folks. A colored man that I didn't know came up to me immediately after the graveside service and swore that he saw a black car without a license plate circling my parent's house just hours before the fire. Mrs. Taylor said she wasn't sure, but the night before the explosion, she thought she saw Daddy removing a hangman's noose dangling from the front porch. But there were all sorts of rumors swirling throughout town.

The next day, J.T. and I went downtown as if we didn't have a care in the world—knowing we could be arrested by the police or harassed by mean whites if they saw us. It was almost dark—a handful of people that were stirring, stared at us as if we were from another planet. We walked hand-in hand and into the Rexall drugstore, the only drugstore in town. I asked J.T. to buy me a strawberry milkshake with extra syrup. The clerk stared at us as if we were mad dogs. He put the shake in a paper cup and stuck a straw in it without moving the paper covering—shoved the cup to me as he rolled his eyes. I hoped he wouldn't stick his finger in my shake. Normally, if a colored person went into a drugstore or café for a soda he or she wouldn't be served from a glass—but in most cases there was a side window for colored. After we walked outside, I jumped on J.T.'s back and made him ride me for nearly a block before I fell, spilling the stuff all over his leather jacket. And on this day, I was happy as a kitten with a ball of yarn. I kept saying to myself: *I think I've found my way, and it seems ever so easy and so wonderful; I know who I am, and I won't be afraid of life, no matter what lies ahead.* But this was not the best Christmas I could have wished for because my parents were in heaven.

Christmas decorations lit up the colored neighborhoods as if it were daytime. Nearly every family in

town had some type of Christmas display. Some families who couldn't afford gifts would wrap empty boxes full of hope and place them around their Christmas trees. Of course, it really didn't matter about having presents to give—people had the greatest gift of all: *love*. Every Christmas, snow or sleet, Widow Cheney decorated a pine tree in her front yard, where she meticulously hung hundreds of holiday birds that adorned nearly the entire tree—birds were stuffed with colorful Christmas fabrics that withstood snow and rain year after year. At night she hung small kerosene lanterns on her metal fence that accented her decorations. When I was younger, I swear I could hear those birds singing and swinging in the soft gentle breeze. Of course, there was Miss Lunette, who found time to display a very large decorated gingerbread house in her very large picture window that she decorated with large cookies shaped in the form of trees and animals.

On New Year's Day at my house, J.T. and I celebrated with his closest friend and wife, and Margaret Sue and her man.

## 6

### **God, I Need You, I'm Hurting**

*If I can endure for this minute whatever is happening to me, no matter how heavy my heart is or how dark the moment be. If I can but keep on believing what I know in my heart to be true. That darkness will fade with morning and that this will pass away, too. Therefore, nothing can ever disturb me or fill me with certain fear. For as sure as night brings dawning, my morning is bound to appear.*

- (Anonymous)

*Life is not simply holding a good hand. Life is playing a poor hand well.*

-Danish saying

With a heavy heart, I was on my way back to Atlanta. It was a weekend morning and the Trailway bus was crowded—I took a seat at the rear of the bus as required; to my right were two colored Catholic nuns. A few white people were sitting past the sign reserved for colored, leaving only a few seats for colored seating. The solitude afforded me too much time—something came over me and hit me like a heavy steel ball. The more I examined my troubles, the more I turned hostile toward the Almighty. I told God I'd never worship Him, no matter what happens, good or bad. I concluded that a belief in God wouldn't solve my emotional pain, in fact, believing in God seems to make things worse. And maybe colored people should take Sundays off from attending church services; perhaps this would send a loud and clear message to God. It seems that He has little sympathy and compassion for us—nothing but bad things happens to colored folks.

After seeing tears streaking down my hollow face, a sympathetic white man, about thirty years of age sitting a few seats in front of me, left his seat and decided to take an empty seat directly in front of me. He

turned around and introduced himself—and then asked if he could have a few words with me. I said nothing and looked away. But In a warm sympathetic tone, the compassionate man said:

“God has given you more than you realize. He has given you the ability to withstand man’s vile and immoral ways. In some given ways, colored people have more fortitude than white people. But know that all people experience some kind of pain, sadness, trials and grief that overwhelm them so much, that they feel like giving up. Young lady, you had absolutely no control over your race or your environment. It so happens that you were born into a race that some people have no tolerance for. But you do have control over your happiness, and most importantly, where you end up, and what you do with your life. And at some point in every man’s journey, life breaks him into many pieces and reduces him to grains of sand. You must reach deep into your soul for salvation. Never give up nor give in; always be at peace with yourself. You will find solitude and happiness, when and where, you least expect. Where there is hatred, you will find love. And where there is turmoil and ignorance, you will gain wisdom and solitude. And when there is doubt and uncertainty, you will develop courage. This is a beautiful world. I ask you not to give in to despair and self-pity, or surely they will be your enemy for life. Try to find happiness in what you do and not what you want to do. Happiness is a state of one’s mind. God bless you.”

I looked at him, but I did not respond. However, I wondered what was his intent? Why did he tell me this junk? Could he have read my mind? I managed a smile. Most of my time was directed to looking out the window as the bus continued to negotiate numerous scenic turns. My emotions had placed a heavy strain on my soul—my mind had become lost in a thick fog—my vision blurred like an old woman—I wasn’t able to exhale. I found myself crying from the inside out. Finally, I dozed off into another peaceful world that I had believed would provide me with much needed comfort and solace. Yet I truly believed God was punishing me, for what I don’t know.

By the time I arrived in Jackson, halfway to Atlanta, I was sobbing uncontrollably—I was dehydrated. For the first time in my turbulent life, I must face my sober reality: Mom and Daddy were gone forever. I couldn’t help but wonder if they truly knew how much I loved them and just how much I appreciated their sacrifices, as well as their deep acceptance of J.T.

As the hours passed, I continued to watch the dreary scenery outside. Every time the bus stopped and pulled out from a different depot, I was finding it harder to breathe and focus.

It was well past midnight, when I arrived in Atlanta to complete my senior year. A bus from the campus drove me and other students back to campus. But as I was waiting, I was tempted to go to the ticket counter and buy a one-way ticket back to Idabel.

In the weeks to come, I kept pretty much to myself—drowning in my studies night after night. Ashley confessed that I had become as hard as a pine knot.

It was freezing this particular night and I couldn’t sleep—I decided to personally have a monologue with God: please tell me, God, how can my life be so magical and breathtaking at one moment, and so unbearably, heartbreaking, cruel and unforgiving the next? I loved my parents and You had no right to take them from me the way You did.

Mrs. Clay and Mr. Levi made time to call me a few times as they had promised and offered their words of inspiration helped me to see things a little clearer. I decided that I needed a sense of focus, perhaps a long-term goal to strive for. My goal was to be on the Dean’s List, and I did just that. Of course, my mind and thoughts were always near.

In the upcoming weeks, my letters to J.T. were less frequent, though he wrote and called every Sunday evening, instead of every other Saturday. He did his best to comfort me. He said he had begun to really

worry about me and prayed every night that I'd be able to ride out my furious storm—I'd apologize to him for my lack of reciprocation. It was as if I couldn't stop whatever was happening to me. Ashley suggested that I talk to a counselor, or at least seek help from the college chaplain. Her sincere concerns were politely dismissed—I had to work through this my way.

With every conversation, I tried to assure J.T. that I was still his woman and still wearing his ring for everyone to take notice. When we chatted, he wanted to know if I was coming home before I started my summer internship as I had promised. I reminded him that the second semester would end in a few months, and would be his sweet woman. I was honest when I told him how I truly felt about God and life, but I would always love him no matter what.

Mr. Tucker, who was a jackleg carpenter, asked to rent grand mommy Pear's house and I was overly glad to do so. He vowed to make frequent repairs to the structure and in return, I'd charge him a meager price for rent. The money certainly would come in handy. I decided to quit my part-time job—I no longer had to concern myself with money.

After several weeks, surprisingly, my personality began to change direction and I was surprised, and yet, proud that I was becoming more positive. J.T. began to enter my thoughts more often.

"Hey Annie. You got a long distance phone call," stated a girl as she banged on my door.

Clad in my robe and underwear, I darted to the pay telephone located in the center of the hall.

"Sweetheart, are you okay?" J.T. asked.

"I'm doing okay and what about you?"

"So-so. I just wanted to hear your voice. I was talking about you to a couple of friends. I was telling them that I have a lady whose breath is like hot homemade bread. And believe me, it's not a night that passes that I don't think about you. Now do me a favor, and place your sweet lips close to the phone so I can taste and feel them."

"Honey. They are touching the phone. Guess what? I miss you like crazy."

"Annie, I wish we were together . . ."

I affectingly expressed my words, "Well, I suppose I have been rather distant with you. But baby, I never stopped caring about you. I was just trying to find myself. And in a couple of months I will prove it to you. By the way don't forget that I'm coming home for Easter. Greyhound has an express all the way to Texarkana."

"That would be great."

"Now remember J.T., when I graduate, we will have forever."

"I bet your hair is still as soft as Alabama cotton," J.T. swore.

"Oh, how sweet, and how lucky I am. But guess what? . . . I've got something for you," I said with a tease.

"What?"

"Well my love, you'll find out soon enough."

"Guess what? Whenever I turn on the radio to the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville, I hear songs that make me lonely for you," claimed J.T.

"So cute. Well I promise to write a long letter every week."

Three weeks had passed, and I was becoming concerned, J.T. hadn't written or called, yet I had written him several letters. I could have called him collect, but I was apprehensive about calling because of his stupid father.

"Ashley, I'm really worried about J.T. He hasn't called or written in weeks."

“Au, you know how dudes are, colored or white, they can be asses. I just don’t trust any of them. They stay in-heat like dogs looking for a female to screw,” Ashley professed, as she opened a can of spam to eat with her crackers.

“Not this man!” I shot back with pride.

“Are you going home for Easter?”

“I had planned to. I told J.T. I would see him, but I think I’ll stay and catch up on my studies since we only have a week off. J.T. will be upset because we had planned to see each other.”

Easter Sunday was almost here, I started reminiscing about my childhood days. Anxiously, I’d look forward to helping my mother boil and dye eggs for our neighborhood hunt. When we attended church on Easter, I usually wore a cotton white dress with a belt strap located in the back. My mother always managed to buy me a new purse and shoes for Easter.

“Annie, since you aren’t going home for Easter let’s dress up and go to a classy restaurant for dinner, it will be my treat.” Ashley suggested. She had thought about flying home to Chicago, but instead, decided to scrap the idea. And I’m sure it was done out of sympathy for my situation. Before I could give her my answer she said, “Aw, Roomie that reminds me, I have two letters for you. I forgot to take them out of my purse. One is a job offer from a hospital in Jackson, and the other from someone from your hometown. Forgive me, but lately I don’t know where my mind is.”

Ashley had a bad memory, that is, when it came to the mail. When she handed me the letters, first, I opened the letter postmarked from my hometown—the return address was from Rev. Green. I wondered why he was writing me. The good Reverend extended his cordial greetings and then the flood gates of hell swung open. He wrote the following:

“Miss Hollingworth,

I don’t know if you received words about the McCoy boy or not. But if you haven’t, I feel obligated to tell you about the situation at hand The McCoy boy was in an accident and he was fatally injured about a week back It seems that he was driving home last Saturday around midnight when he hit an old meandering mule on Highway 21, just north of town. The animal came right through the windshield of his pickup and crushed him almost to death. It was daylight before he was discovered. The paper says he died more than two days later at McCurtain County Memorial Hospital. Rest assured my prayers are with you. Now I can send you a copy of the newspaper if you want me to. And as for you and your well-being, the entire congregation of Saint James Methodist Church is praying for you to fulfill your dreams and to make something of yourself. Again, Annie, I’m so sorry for your loss. Please try not to let this sad news alter your clear direction. May you go in God’s protection and in His powerful love.”

I don’t remember much else—those words suffocated my mind and heart. I fainted after reading the letter. When I awoke hours later, I was in the school’s infirmary. As I lay there frozen, I couldn’t scream or cry. All I remember sarcastically saying is, ‘Thank You’ once again, my all loving and kind and *just* God. Do You have something against me? If so, just come right out and tell me! Even better, just take me from this crazy world. It felt as if my flesh had been ripped from my tired bones—I felt I couldn’t and shouldn’t go on with my journey of life. It seemed that everybody that I love, and everybody that loves me seems to meet a senseless fate—I wanted to roll over and just die. Why didn’t I do what my heart wanted and not what my mind sought? My heart wanted to marry J.T., when I was in Idabel, but my mind said to wait.

Night after night, I’d cry myself to sleep—sometimes I just stared at the ceiling in a fetal position hoping to get answers that I knew would never come. There were times when I honestly believed I saw J.T.’s face on the ceiling—I’d drift into fairy land and write ‘Mrs. Annie McCoy’ on anything and

everything I could find. Roomie tried to do what she could to bring me out of my depression—suggested that I learn how to play tennis. However, her sympathy was appreciate but dismissed. Over and over, I would read J.T.'s carefully stored letters and smelled his scent on each page. I just wished someone had thought enough to call me when it happened; I'd have found a way to attend the funeral—I'd have walked or crawled to be there and to touch him one last time. On the other hand, I don't know if I'd had the strength to make the journey, much less the service. But why didn't his sister call me? Maybe she didn't know how or maybe she didn't care? I thought about going home to visit his grave site. Time after time I would ask: who do I turn to now? Where will my inner strength come from? Who will shield me from the scorching sun, and who will give me light on those stormy and dark nights? Faith and Hope that once flowed through my heart and blood had been drained from my soul. I could feel the despair in my mind, and uncertainty in my brain. I was one step from filing my bankruptcy papers in the moral court of humanity, hope and faith. However, someplace deep in my soul I wanted to believe in heaven—and I wanted to believe my parents, Ida, and J.T. were there, and one sweet day I would see them. Yet I remembered something Ida use to ponder: Do colored people and whites lived in the same part of heaven or is it segregated?

Weeks later, I decided to change my thinking, or at least try. J.T., my parents, and Ida would want me to go on with my life. I placed a sign on my closet door that read: *I will take one step at a time and not dwell on the negatives. Life is yours if you believe.*

Days went by ever so slowly—hope came and faded. Somehow, I was able to focus enough to keep up with my class work. However, I kept getting knocked down. I wanted to believe in myself. On the other hand, it is hard for an empty burlap sack to stand upright. A couple of times, I seriously contemplated taking my life, but I don't know if I was serious or not—and I thought I would just make a mess of it.

Time decided to be a meaningful ally; it would help me survive the painful ordeals by mitigating most of my negative thoughts and emotions. And thankfully, my sorority sisters were there to comfort me.

Late one night, I wrote myself a short affirmation to keep my spirits lifted:

*Life! I know not what [you] will offer me, but I demand that [you] serve me well—I will not let [you] draw a circle and shut me out. I will look for tranquility and directions in people, behind rocks, and in far-off places. When I fall, I will not let gravity hold me down. I'll stand as many times as I fall down, and then I'd standup as straight as ever. Life, [you] never promised me that [you] would be fair, and [you] never said that [you] give a care about me. But you have allowed me to live in [you]. I do not live in the world, the world lives in me. But believe me, I will grow from my pains and mistakes. Nothing will defeat me, not without a battle.*

Only two weeks left before graduation, not counting the summer internship. Ashley and I moved off campus into an inexpensive apartment near the hospital to do our internship. We were paid handsomely for our work at the colored hospital—it was exciting to meet so many smart nurses, technicians and handsome doctors.

Finally, the summer had ended, and I was graduating after four plus, emotional years of college. However, through it all, college had been a bittersweet time for me, and I could only thank my lucky stars that it was over—I'd have my Bachelor's Degree in nursing—well on my way to being a genuine registered nurse. I had accomplished a task that only a few people from my hometown had ever obtained. My hard work and rollercoaster rides were over. And how I wished my parents could be here, yet I tried

not to go down that bumpy and cloudy road.

On graduation day, August 1940, I graduated from Spelman with a B.S. in nursing. Ashley's parents were at the ceremony as expected. What should have been a most joyous day was like eating sweet Atlanta peaches with salt—drinking mint juleps with sugar. Nonetheless, I had to push forward and strive to do my best. Ashley had pleaded with me to come with her—but I didn't know what I would do. But I do know that I was more determined to succeed than I had ever been.

With the persuasion of Ashley and her family I was on my way to Chicago. They had reminded me that I had few reasons to remain in Atlanta or to return to Idabel. However, I thought about returning to my hometown, so people could see that Miss Annie Hollingworth had made something of herself. Maybe I could be a positive role model for dejected and frustrated young ladies, who believed their lives were like straws blowing in the wind—girls who felt they had to marry to have a man to make them feel whole—and girls, who vision that having children would bring them love and make them feel as if they were somebody. I read somewhere the following statement: *“The degree to which a person controls his or her future makes the person aware of how much power he or she has. Upper-class people carefully plan for the future for themselves and their children; on the other hand, poor people will plan only for today—when poverty is associated with one generation, it sticks to future generations tighter than bark on a tree.”* This statement could have been written for many folks in my hometown.

I treasured the congratulatory letters that I received from the people of my hometown. Mr. Levi wrote, “It has been a long and winding process. You've conquered hopelessness, and all the town folks and I are beyond thrilled that you made it. You will do well, no matter where you go, and whatever you do in your precious life. The most important thing to remember is, not to throw away your dreams, they are you.”

After lamenting my problems and self-doubt, Mrs. Sanders reminded me of the following note: The problem is not that a person has problems, the problem is expecting not to have problems—and that problem won't last forever.

In previous conversations, Ashley claimed colored folks were treated rather respectfully in Chicago—and there were white eating places that permitted colored folks to dine—and colored were allowed to attend some of the city's white public schools, as well as colleges. There were white doctors who allowed colored folks to occupy the same waiting room as white patients—and colored men drove city buses, delivery trucks and taxicabs. And if you didn't mind the stench, there were people working in slaughterhouses—and jobs working on the river docks. Roomie called Chicago the ‘Windy City’ or ‘Chitown.’ I was really amazed and proud that Ashley's father was a medical doctor.

The long, but revealing trip in their luxury motor house was like a relaxing journey into a new world—never had I ever seen such beautiful and breathtaking scenery. Everywhere I looked, I saw hills covered with thick-rich greenery. The grassy hills and mountains of the Carolinas and the Tennessee Valley were captivating.

Though, I was at peace with myself, and with the people around me. I realized that I was now about to sail through uncharted waters and with a crew that I could only hope wouldn't let me drown if I became lost on the open sea of life. I kept telling myself that my pass, as crushing as it was, it was nothing more than a bucket of sweet and bitter memories and my future would be a matter of positive expectations and expected accomplishments. I contemplated that the city of Chicago just might be the place that would permit me to dock my embattled ship and find hope and happiness on the shores of tranquility—the Bermuda Triangle would be a thing of the pass.

## The Gift of Love and Marriage

*Marriages are made in heaven and consummated on earth.*

-John Lyly

*Let all the joys be as the month of May, and all the days be as a marriage day: Let sorrow, sickness and trouble be as a stranger to thee.*

-Francis Quarles

*We are each of us angels with only one wing. And we can only fly embracing each other.*

-Luciana De Crescenzo

By Rick Newman—Chicago. Hollingworth—McCoy

On December 03, 1960, Annie Mae Hollingworth and Jimmy ‘J.T.’ McCoy were married. It was on a cold and overcast Saturday in Chicago. The nuptials took place at the Lakeview Methodist Church a historical Negro Church. Fourteen feet high antique stained windows and vaulted wooden ceiling seems to touch the heavens—this seems perfect for such a touching occasion. White and pink carnations filled the pew. Rev. Dr. Isaac Donaldson officiated over the holy ceremony. The minister as well as close friends, claim they hadn’t ever heard such warm, emotional and heartwarming vows. Every word appeared to come directly from their ravenous hearts.

The bride, 43, is a registered nurse at a local hospital in Chicago. Mrs. Annie McCoy is the only child of the late Odell and Estoria Hollingworth of Idabel, Oklahoma. She received a bachelor’s degree in nursing from Spelman College of Atlanta. Mrs. McCoy has been activity in various nonprofit organizations to assist disadvantaged youths. The bride is a board member of a nonprofit organization, the Cook County Orphanage for Girls. The bride’s elegance could well have adorned her as an Egyptian princess. She was given away by Dr. Lawrence Sanders.

The bridegroom, 45 is an ordained Southern Baptist minister. He has ministered in various cities and in southern Africa. Mr. McCoy is a graduate of the Baptist Seminary in Denton, Texas. He is presently employed as a foreman with a local meat packing plant.

Mr. McCoy is the son of the late Beth Worthy and Sammy McCoy of Idabel, Oklahoma.

As teenagers, the couple was friends in their hometown of Idabel despite their racial backgrounds. Each has had a previous marriage. A small gathering of friends and well-wishers witnessed the warm and gracious nuptials.

Following the wedding nuptial, guests were treated to an elegant evening of dinner and dancing at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Sanders, a friend of the couple. After a brief honeymoon, the bride and groom will reside in Chicago.

My wedding dress was a sleeveless ivory pin tuck jersey Boatneck sheath tulle three form fitted silhouette gown with sheer cut detail that graced my ankles. I held a fresh arrangement of Ecuadorian roses, Casablanca lilies and English ivy. My ears were adorned with small freshwater ivory teardrop pearl earrings—and a soft white veil covered my face. I wore long white gloves. My shoulder-length black hair was heavily accented with small grey streaks.

J.T. was dressed in a black double-breasted suit, white shirt, a black western necktie and snakeskin boots.

“Annie Mae Hollingworth and James Thomas McCoy, I am proud and honored to preside over this warm wedding ceremony. But first, let me say that the congregation and I celebrate the two of you for having chosen our house of worship to express your nuptials. And we certainly hope you become regular members. Now I understand both of you have your vows to be shared,” stated the Rev. Dr. Donaldson.

“We do,” Jimmy and I said conjointly.

“Well, it’s tradition for the future bride to say her vows first. So Annie, you may state your vows.”

I turned slowly and faced Jimmy—I swallowed and tightly gripped his hands.

“It has been said that love is the hardest thing to get right and the most difficult thing to understand. And perhaps this is why the wisest of sages aren’t able to give a prudent definition of love. Well, they should examine and then listen to my heart. Because I do know what love is, and it is right before me.” I held tighter to his hands. “Jimmy Thomas McCoy, I can’t promise you a colorful rainbow every day of our lives, but rather, I *can* and *will* guarantee you that with every beat of my heart, I will be part of your dreams and desires, be it in happiness or sadness. You are the face of love. And right beside you is where I belong, and it is where I will stay until the last breath is siphoned from my body. Jimmy, you are the soft dreams I have envisioned a million times over. You are my miracle in body, soul, and spirit. I will be your sunshine on the rainiest days, and your moon on the darkest of nights. For I was merely a single pebble lying motionless on an isolated beach surrounded by turbulent waters, and you found me before I was washed away.” I was finding it very difficult to maintain my composure—my wands were wet. I swallowed and inflated my lungs and then continued. “When I love you, I love everything you are, everything you have been, and everything you will be. I not only love you, but I am you. I loved you yesterday, I love you today, I’ll love you tomorrow, and I’ll love you forever. Jimmy Thomas McCoy, as long as I believe in love, I will believe in you. And as long as I believe in you, I will give my love to you and share my joy with the world. For so very long, my heart had searched for a home and now it has one. These are my solemn vows as I have stated.”

Jimmy savored and digested every word of my passionate covenant, his narrow face, pale and anxious--undoubtedly he was overwhelmed by my words—so much so, that I believe I could hear his heart pumping my words into his blood system. But now, it was his turn, and he would deliver all the years of stored emotions that he had harbored for me—his hands were unsteady.

Jimmy stated his vows:

“First and foremost, I must give glory and thanks to our benevolent and Almighty God for bringing us to the point in our grateful and humble lives. . . . Annie Hollingworth, here we are, after all those barren and uncertain years. Without a moment of doubt I was certain that one day you and I would be standing in holy union, face-to-face, heart to heart and mind-to-mind. Though it took so many years, and so many countless dreams for our seeds of love that we planted as teenagers to bloom I knocked at the door of your warm soul and you opened the door without a moment of hesitation.” His eyes were filled with tears as he struggled to continue. “. . . Lady Annie, you have lived inside my heart for so long. And the love that I have for you cannot be tarnished or destroyed; it comes with a lifetime warranty. And if ever you aren’t

satisfied, I will make it better. My Lady, your eyes may not always see the fruits of my love, but I promise that your heart will always feel it. I started out in this world not certain where I'd end up. And yes, there were times I doubted my own faith, and it was as if hope wanted no part of me. Your love is the air that fills my lungs. Your love is in every soft melody I listen to. You are more than I could have ever wished for on this earth or in heaven. I have always prayed for a heart that was true, and now, I have one. Annie, I truly hope my love will comfort you in times of trials and uncertainty. I know that if I believe in you, then my ability to love will be as endless as the universe. I am so honored to be accepted as your husband, your soul mate and the guardian of your heart, a heart that is a precious and golden gift from heaven. And I will be very gentle as I enter my stay for the rest of my life. Annie Hollingworth, these are my solemn vows as I have stated."

After our vows were exchanged, Rev. Dr. Donaldson smiled and chose to add his thoughts:

"Annie and Jimmy McCoy, as the presiding minister over your Godly and lovely matrimony, all of us thank you for sharing your spiritual and romantic souls with us. And moreover, this gives me a forum to say a few oral thoughts of my own at this heavenly occasion, and it is something I have stated to couples concerning love and marriage. Choosing to love someone is a *will* that a person decides to give to someone else for the purpose of bringing joy and spiritual growth to each other. Love is patience and love is time. And through many changing years, you will live and love together. You will share each other's gladness, as well as those bitter and uncomfortable moments of sorrow and pain. You will weep together, and at times, you will share separate tears. Mr. and Mrs. McCoy, though you will have two hearts, there will be times you will love with only one heart. Each of you will have your individual life. However, in the years that lie ahead, you will need to build unsinkable bridges to each other. Yet I caution you to be prepared to accept the sobering fact there will be times in your union when humble tears become a language of their own, and words are too feeble to convey your emotional feelings. And there will be times when compassionate words will weigh more than wealth. Like the leaves falling in autumn, the hours will quickly pass you by. And in time, your hair will blend with the snowdrift hills, and your eyes will grow fainter. But you will learn to lean upon each other for support as you climb those mountains, and as you walk with guarded steps in those valleys of uncertainty. However, you must learn to go by faith and not by sight. And finally, I must say that true love brings forth commitment and wisdom if it is to survive. Annie and Jimmy McCoy, are you ready for this journey of a lifetime?"

We exchanged rings and thereafter, we were pronounced man and wife.

The small gathering of coworkers and friends were mesmerized—I was told there wasn't a dry eye in the church. Juanita and Ashley had to control their emotions.

As I slowly walked from the church, I thought to myself; we have just signed a contract with our hearts. We will share a home and make it our nest. And with our love and faith we will clean and repair our nest many times over.

Our reception was held at Dr. and Mrs. Sander's home. A small jazz band entertained guests as they dined on roast beef and baked ham—the four-tier pink and white alternating cake was very beautiful.

Ashley gave us a touching toast. "Love is not a season but a lifetime. Annie and Jimmy, both of you have shown us what love is and what love can be like if one believes, and if one has faith. I know you will treasure the simplest things in your marriage, those such as communication or just sharing a smile. I wish you a long union."

After the reception we stayed in a luxurious hotel near the riverfront, also compliments of Doctor and Mrs. Sanders. Because of our working constraints, Jimmy and I settled for only a two-night honeymoon; a lengthy one would have to come later.

By the time we settled into our honeymoon suite, we were emotional and physically drained. Yet I knew this was my night to taste a piece of heaven and expel some of hell's waste from my heart and mind. A ray of light from the moon peeked through the window and into our bedroom—it was just enough to lighten my brown skin to an olive tone. As a newly established bride, I was determined to be as voluptuous and salacious as any goddess. Yet it was difficult for me to believe that we were here side by side as man and wife—yet neither one of us seemed anxious to engage in the final act that was necessary to consummate our union. We sat timidly on the edge of the bed, the covers undisturbed—we were unconsciously waiting for the other to make the first move. For some reason I felt I had to say something, if nothing more than to help alleviate my nervousness.

I turned to my husband, and I softly vouched, “I can't believe this is real. I can't believe it's you. I can't believe you're mine, eye to eye, heart to heart, body to body, and emotion to emotion.” My heart swelled with intensity. “Don't close your eyes tonight, just look at me and you'll see how many times I wished for this happiness. The invisible night creatures knew how many times I cried myself to sleep. Sometimes my dreams were so vivid that I was forced to cry out in earnest pleasure only to have those early morning lights eclipse my homemade dreams. I'd beg and plead with God to let them be real. My heart was wide-awake and starving like a fire without oxygen. My dreams were my warm soft blankets on cold dreary nights and my cool pillow on hot stuffy nights. But now my precious love, there will be no more fantasies, and no more surreal nights. Jimmy . . . I'm asking that you to take me into your arms and make passionate love to my starving heart.”

Jimmy looked at me with compassion. I supposed he also needed to express his deepest love as well. He took both of my hands as we sat side by side.

“Annie, my precious wife, my earthly angel, please tell me how can I love you even more, *you*, the lady of my dreams. My whole world is right here before me. I can finally see the stars, the moon, and the heaven as clearly as they are, and they are more beautiful than I could have ever imagined. I knew we were meant for each other from that very first moment our eyes first met. I love you so much. I hope I can find even more ways to love you, and I ask you to teach me how to give you more of my love.”

I walked to the bathroom and removed my clothes—I returned in a black negligee. As I lay on top of my husband, I could feel his body pleading for fulfillment. Yet I could only hope that I'd be what he wanted and hoped for—his arms held me as if I were a sack of diamonds

After a few moments, we were truly able to make love without. The long night finally came to a head—the moon gave way to early daybreak. And before we could exit from our private worlds, Sunday had all but passed us by like a shooting star. The covers on our bed were drenched with love joy and physical pleasure. The energy that carried our love on its frequency wave was enough to light up a village. We were two naked sparrows, who had just flown from earth to heavens and back many times over.

I was afraid to close my eyes and fall asleep, for fear this was merely another fruitless dream and I'd wake up all by myself, once again.

“What are you smiling about Jimmy McCoy? Tell me, am I . . . you know . . . what you thought and wanted?”

“Well my lady, I have you know that my old world turned around a hundred times in a matter of hours.” He used one of his hands to softly stroke the side of my face.

“My adorable husband, you were wonderful. I'd safely say that we were like two sponges soaking up each other's love,” I smiled.

I decided to lay my head on my husband's chest—I played with the grey and brownish hair on his

chest. I was happy that I had been able to make love to my husband, and in every manner that I chose.

For nights to come, we were like one body coiled into one nucleus—with one breath, with one heart, and with one rhythm. Jimmy would say, “My heart and body celebrate the woman you are, and my body gives homage to you for the revitalized soul you have given me.”

I was filled with hope and love. The world was dancing with me, playing with me—and singing with me—and I was truly singing with the world.

I must not forget—I was extremely proud of the article that appeared in the local newspaper, compliments of Ashley. I sent copies to Margaret Sue and nearly every person in Idabel I could think of. I wish our vows could have been printed in my hometown newspaper for everybody to read, but this was wishful thinking. Of course, Margaret Sue received a detailed analysis of the wedding. Although I knew she couldn't come to Chicago; she sent me a box full of colorful silk scarfs and matching handkerchiefs

Early December 1960, I meticulously decorated the front room with a tall-flocked spruce Christmas tree with a manger scene—I carefully placed Baby Jesus in the middle. I was sure this would be one of the best Christmas of my life. We celebrated and exchanged gifts with our friends. I gave Jimmy a black wool turtleneck sweater and topcoat, and he gave me a beautiful string of pink pearls.

I was full of confidence—I'd tell myself that together we'd climb any mountain. But more than I can ever express, I thanked God Almighty for His precious offering of happiness, love, and faith. I stopped calling my husband, J.T. as I had since high school—I thought calling him 'Jimmy' was more romantic and humble.

We decided that we'd make a list of things that brought us happiness, and those things that needed improving in our marriage. There were only a few things that we felt needed to be improved.