

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

God, I Need You and 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 and aching heart, I was on my way to Atlanta. It was a weekend morning and the Trailway bus was crowded, I took a rear seat 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 somber ambience afforded me too much time to ponder; something unpleasant began creeping into my heart and mind. The more I examined my life, the more I became disappointed with the Almighty. I told God I would never worship Him, no matter what ever happens to me, good or bad. I concluded that a belief in God had done nothing to eclipse my emotional pain and my physical suffering, in fact, believing in God seems to make things worse. And I thought, maybe colored people should take Sundays off from attending church services and throwing their faith to Him; perhaps this would send a very loud and clear message. It seems that He has little or no sympathy and no compassion for us—and nothing but bad things ever happens to good God-fearing colored folks, who only want to be respected and to be happy. Has God ever answered a person's humble prayer I ask?

After seeing tears streaking down my hollow face and feeling my empty heart, 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. After a few minutes, he turned around and introduced himself and asked if I was okay. Then he asked if he could have a few words with me. I said nothing, only looked out the window. However, in a warm sympathetic tone, the man warmly began his lament:

"Young lady, God has given you more than you can realize or even see. He has given you the ability to withstand man's vile and immoral ways. Yet, in some given ways, colored people have more fortitude than us white people. But know that all people experience overwhelming pain and raw grief that seem to never end, so much so that one feels like giving up and not wanting to witness another sun rise. And at some point, in every man's journey, life breaks him into many large and small pieces and reduces him to grains of sand. Young lady, you had no control over your environment

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that you were born into or your race. It so happens that you were born into a race that some people hate or show little tolerance for. However, you do have control over your happiness, and what is most importantly, where you end up, and what you do with your life's gift to man. I urge you to dig down into your precious soul for salvation and strength and find the will to go forward in seas of confusion and doubt. If you do, you will find solitude, goals and dreams realized 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 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. Be at peace with your soul and with others. And remember: Happiness is a state of one's mind. Now go with God's bless."

I looked at him, but I did not respond, not even a slight nod of the head. However, I wondered what was his intent? Why did he tell me this junk that I'm not interested in hearing? My emotions had placed a heavy strain on my fragile soul—my cluttered mind had become lost in a thick fog. My vision was blurred like an old woman's eyes. I found myself crying from the inside out. I truly believed God was punishing me, and for what I know not. Finally, I dozed off into another world searching for clarity that I hoped would provide me with some solace.

By the time I arrived in Jackson—halfway to Atlanta, I was sobbing uncontrollably—and not to mention. I was dehydrated. For the first time in my life I must face a sobering 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 acceptance of J.T.

As the hours passed, I continued to watch the dreary scenery outside—a light rain had begun, and the evening sun was about to hide. Every time the bus stopped and exited from various depots, 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 campus bus was there to return students to Spelman campus. 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. And the worst of all, I had stopped loving myself.

One night it was freezing and snow everywhere and I couldn't sleep or close my eyes, so I decided to personally have a monologue with God: please tell me, how can my life be so magical, so forgiving and loving, and in the next minute, so heartbreaking and uncaring? You know I loved my parents and You had no right to take them from me the way You did. Tell me, did they suffer? Are you like what Ida suggested, a God that doesn't respect colored folks? Are You as powerful as Satan? Maybe he found a way to take over. Do you want colored folks to worship you considering what you let happen to them?

Mrs. Clay and Mr. McDonald made time to call me as they had promised and offered words of comfort and inspiration, their admiration helped me to see things a little clearer. After some soul-searching, I came to realize that I needed a sense of focus, perhaps one special

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long-term goal that would help me to see and believe that I can, and I will if I don't give up. So, I decided I would try to make the Dean's List, and with self-belief, I was able to do just that.

In the upcoming weeks, my letters to J.T. were less frequent. He wrote and called every Sunday evening, instead of every other Sunday as he had. My baby confessed that he had begun to worry about me and often prayed for me. With every conversation, I tried to assure J.T. that I was still his woman and I was still wearing his ring for everyone to take notice. He wanted to know if I was coming home before I began my summer internship as I had promised. I reminded him that in a few months the semester would end, and we would be together.

It was difficult to divorce the unpleasant union of depression. It was as if I couldn't completely stop what was happening to me. Ashley suggested that I talk to a counselor, or at least seek help from the college chaplain. However, I politely ignored her suggestion. I knew that only I could move forward.

Mr. Tucker, who was a jackleg carpenter, asked to rent grand mommy Pear's house and I was 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. With the money I could quit my part-time job.

Surprisingly, after several weeks, my personality began to change direction, I was becoming more positive.

"Hey Annie. Girl, you got a long-distance phone call. You missed one earlier," stated a girl as she banged on my door. I had been watching television in the lobby.

In only my bathrobe, 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 telling my friends that I have a lady whose breath is like hot homemade bread. And believe me, it's not a night that passes that you don't enter my mind and my lonely heart. Now do me a favor, and place your soft hungry lips close to the phone so I can taste and feel them."

"Sweetie. They are touching the phone. Guess what? I miss you like crazy; the months can't come quick enough for me."

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

"Sweetie, I'm finding my way back to you and to us." I affectingly stated. "I still love you like always. We'll be together soon; this much I'm certain of. By the way JT., don't forget that I'm coming home for Easter. Greyhound has an express to Texarkana."

"Hey, that would be great! I thank the good Lord that my sweet lady is getting back to her sweet self."

"I'm glad, too. Now remember J.T., when I graduate real soon, 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."

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

"I'm glad. And I promise to try and write a long letter every week."

Two weeks slipped by and no call or letter from J.T., I was becoming concerned. I had written him several letters. I suppose I could have called him collect, but I was apprehensive about calling because of his father.

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

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“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 sardines to eat with her crackers.

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

“Annie, 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 ten days. But if I don't go to Idabel, J.T. will probably be upset with me. We had planned to see each other. The Reverend said I could stay with him.”

Easter Sunday was almost here, I started reminiscing about my childhood days; a time I'd look forward to helping 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 tied in the back—with a white purse and white shoes.

“Roomie, I was thinking, since you aren't going home for Easter, I decided I will stay. It's snowing in in the Windy City and the airport is snowed in. So, why don't we get decked out in our Sunday best and go to a real classy restaurant for Easter dinner, it will be my treat,” Ashley sympathetically suggested. 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, girl, I'm losing it. One from a hospital in Jackson, and the other from someone from your hometown. Sorry about that.”

She handed me the letters, first, I opened the one postmarked from my hometown—the return address was from Rev. Greene. I wondered why he was writing me. He extended his cordial greetings and as I read further, the flood gates of hell swung wide open. Reverend wrote the following:

“Miss Hollingworth,

I don't know if you received word 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 a terrible accident and he was fatally injured about a week back. It seems that he was driving home last Saturday somewhat 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 two days later at McCurtain County Memorial Hospital. Please be assured, my prayers are with you. Now I can send you a copy of the newspaper if you want. And as for you, and your wellbeing, 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. God is on your side and His love is all you need.”

I don't remember much else—those words suffocated my mind and heart. Minutes later, I fainted. When I awoke, I was in the school's infirmary. As I lay there frozen, I couldn't scream or cry. All I remember sarcastically saying is, ‘I thank You once again, my all loving and kind and *just* God. This proves the fact that You have something against me. But why not just come right out and tell me what it is? Even better, just take me from this crazy world, I have no objections.’ I felt I couldn't and shouldn't go on with my journey. It seemed that everybody that I love, and everybody that loves me seems to meet a senseless and doom fate—I wanted to roll over and die. Why didn't I do what my heart wanted and not what my mind sought? My heart wanted to marry J.T., when the last time I was in Idabel, but my mind said to wait and fulfill your goals.

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 deep down, I knew would never come. There were times when I honestly believed I saw the face of J.T. scribbled on the ceiling. Time after time, I'd

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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—suggesting that I learn to play tennis. However, her sympathy was appreciated but kindly and respectfully dismissed. Over and over, night after night, I would read J.T.'s carefully stored letters and try to smell his scent on each word. I just wished someone had thought enough to call me when it happened; I'd have found a way to attend the funeral. I would 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. 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 and visit his grave site for the holidays. I found myself asking: 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 seemed to be blocked. I could feel the despair in my mind, and uncertainty in my brain. I was one step from filing my bankruptcy papers in the court of humanity, faith and love. However, someplace deep in my soul, I wanted to believe in heaven. I wanted to believe my parents, Ida, and J.T. were there, and one sweet day I would see them. And I wanted to believe in life. Yet I remembered something Ida use to ponder over: "Do colored people and whites lived in the same part of heaven or is it segregated?"

Weeks later, I realized that if I was to go forward, I would have to change my negative thoughts, or at least make every attempt to do so. So, I began to tell myself that 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 will and can be mine if I truly believe. No one can sing my song or write my story but me. And I will be the one who will determine my happiness and my success.*

One Saturday evening I took a city bus to Oak Heights to purchase a few personal things at Woolworths. The salesclerk at the cosmetic counter handed me my package, and as I turned to leave, I bumped into a young man knocking the package from my hand. After he hastily gathered the contents, he introduced himself and suggested we go and have a coke and a corndog at the colored lunch counter. He lived here in Atlanta and was a senior at Morehouse College. We exchanged phone numbers—and in the upcoming weeks we bonded. I met his parents who owned a moving company. Melvin and I studied together and attended a few bingo clubs. I accomplished him to a colored country club to watch him play golf; of course, I had no idea what I was watching. Melvin was very polite—he'd open the car door to let me in and out of his convertible Ford Thunderbird. It is safe to say I was falling for him. I loved eating Sunday dinners with his family. I made his family laugh when I asked them if they had ever eaten squirrel or hog brains with scramble eggs.

Early one night, Melvin came by the dorm. He looked anxious. "Annie, I need to talk to you." He found it difficult to look me in the eyes. "This is so difficult. Boy, I just wish I didn't have . . ."

"Melvin, let me finish your thoughts." I displayed a shy smile that I hope would be sexy. He had never asked me to make love to him, so I thought I would save him the words—and I was ready to take our relationship further. "We have been an item for two months and tonight, I too want us to make it real. I want us to confirm our love for each other. And I don't have to be back to the dorm until twelve."

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“Annie, please sit down.” We sat down on a bench in front of the dorm. “Look. Annie, after tonight we won’t be able to see each other.” His head was pointed downward and not at me. His heart was racing.

“Baby, you don’t have to be upset. Weren’t you listening to me? Honey, I just told you that I want to give my body to you, if that’s what you want. I know you have needs and so do I. So why are you joking with me? You’re confusing me, Melvin.”

“Annie, please listen to what I have to say and . . . and maybe I should come straight to the point. Look. I’m getting married; I mean, I must marry a chick that I was dating before we hooked up, and she’s . . . well, she’s pregnant with my child. She was supposed to have an abortion, but she lied. I hadn’t seen her in months and just like that she just showed up out of nowhere, pregnant and all. So, my parents said I had to marry her. I swear I don’t love her. I love you, but it’s just . . .”

“You are clowning, right Melvin?” He was not looking at me—he said nothing, rather he let his head give the answer that I didn’t want to hear. “Melvin, why did you play with my emotions? I have been hurt enough. I told you this much.” I paused long enough to see that he was serious. “Go to hell and good luck with her,” I screamed. “I hope she makes you and your family very happy.” I was crushed—another disappointment in a series of hurt and pain. I felt like a withered Magnolia flower. And now, I was sure, surer than ever that God hated me or maybe He was telling me in a subtle way that I don’t belong in His world. I suppose He tried telling me when I was attacked in Idabel, but I wouldn’t listen. Well, I know this much, if I decide to move on with my suffering, I will never pray or show my devotion to You, this I will not do. I wrote a letter to God:

HOW LONG, GOD. How long must I endure so much suffering, so much pain. Have I not tried to be a good person? I ask not that You explain the pain, but that You end my suffering. Haven’t I been given so much tragedy—so much heartaches—so much hatred. I have tasted evilness and disrespect. How much love and devotion do You need to make You happy. And God, I do wonder if You have lost Your dominance over Satan, and thus You are not that power anymore. I do believe the reason man is so evil and why bad things happens to good people is because You can’t read a person’s mind before evil happens . . . How long?

Days went by ever so slowly—hope came and faded. Thankfully, my friends were there for me or I would have gladly thrown in the towel drenched with hope. I was able to focus enough to keep up with my class work. Unconsciously, there seemed to be a grain of self-determination and an extended hand for fate. Yet 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 furthermore, I’d probably just make a mess of it and induce months of suffering.

Time decided to be a meaningful ally; it would help me mitigate most of my negative thoughts and emotions. My sorority sisters continued to be my personal Wailing Wall.

Late one night I wrote a short affirmation in my diary to help 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 myself, in people, behind rocks, and in far-off places. When I fall, I will not let gravity hold me down. I’ll upright myself and stand as tall as a Georgia pine as many times as I fall. And I will be ever cognizant that [you] Life, never

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promised me that [you] would be fair, and [you] never told me that [you] give a care about me. But you have allowed me to live in [you] and for that, I'm eternally grateful. I've concluded that I do not live in the world, the world lives in me. But believe me, I will grow from my pains and missteps. Yes, I know this won't be as easy as I state, but I feel there is nothing that will defeat me, not without a fierce fight. And I know how to fight, this much I can guarantee.

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

Finally, the summer had ended and I after four emotional and tainted years, I was graduating with a bachelor's degree in nursing. No one in my hometown, that I know of, had ever studied and received a college degree in nursing. My hard work and my unwanted rollercoaster rides seemed to be over. Oh, how I wished my parents could be here, yet I quickly reminded myself not to go down that bumpy and foggy road. And J.T. could come with them.

Graduation day was a beautiful day in August 1940. Ashley's parents came to the ceremony. What should have been a joyous day was like eating sweet Atlanta peaches with salt—or drinking mint juleps with sugar. Nonetheless, I had to push forward and strive to see a ray of light that would keep me out of darkness. Ashley had pleaded with me to come with her to Chicago—but I didn't know if I would or should. There was a little of me that was afraid to live in a large city—and to be alone, too.

With the persuasion of Ashley and her family, I was on my way to Chicago. I was reminded that I had few reasons to remain in Atlanta or to return to Idabel. Yet Idabel was weighing heavy on my mind. I wanted people to stretch their brown eyes and see just what Miss Annie Hollingworth had made something of herself. I could stroll down to the hospital and say to all: I'm here for a job. Does anyone else here have a B.S in nursing? And I would hope that I could be a positive role model for so many dejected and frustrated young ladies, who believed their lives were like straws blowing in the wind. So many girls who felt they had to marry to have a man to make them feel whole—and girls, who believe if they have children, they would feel loved and respected—they would be somebody in an unforgiving world. I remember reading this 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 for 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 wonderful and loving people of my hometown. Mr. McDonald wrote: "It has been a long and arduous task, but you made it. You conquered hopelessness, self-doubt and self-handicapping and all the town folks and I are beyond thrilled that you are well on your way to a long future and prepared journey. You will do well, no matter where you go, and whatever you do. The most important thing to remember is, not to throw away your dreams, because they are you. And I must add, always make room for our Devine Father, He will never forsake you."

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After seeing me lamenting over my problems and with showing some self-doubt, Mrs. Sanders reminded me of the following note: The problem is not that a person has problems, but not expecting to have any problems—but they don't last forever.

In previous conversations, Ashley claimed colored folks were treated rather respectfully in Chicago. Colored folks were permitted to eat and dine in many white places. And colored folks could attend some of the city's white public schools, and colleges permitted colored to attend. Some white doctors allowed colored folks to occupy the same waiting room as their white patients. Colored men drove city buses, delivery trucks and taxicabs. And if you didn't mind the stench, there were colored people working in slaughterhouses—had jobs working on the river docks. Roomie alternated between referring to Chicago as the 'Windy City' or 'Chi-town.' 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 relaxing. I felt as if I was journeying into a new world. As I looked out at the scenery, I saw hills covered with thick-rich greenery—grassy hills and beautiful mountains of the Carolinas that seem to touch the sky, and there were the captivating Tennessee Valley.

I was more certain than I had been that me, myself and I would find tranquility. Yet I was vigilant 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 were to fall overboard—if I become lost at sea, they would be my compass. I reminded my myself that my previous life, as crushing as it seemed to have been, it was nothing more than a bucket of sweet and bitter memories that I would bury without a grave marker. Now my future would be a matter of positive expectations and accomplishments. I hope and contemplated that the city of Chicago just might be the place where I could dock my embattled ship, a place where I could find new beginnings. ■

I Need Love Tonight, And I Don't Need Tomorrow

Refrain tonight; and that shall lend a kind of easiness to the next abstinence: the next more easy: for use can almost change the stamp of nature and either curb the devil or throw him out with wondrous potency.

-Shakespeare

Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past.

-Thomas Eliot

The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved.

-Victor Hugo

J.T. waited a few days before asking the details of my marriage.

"Annie, now about your marriage, please tell me more." He repositioned his body on the couch.

"I hardly know where to begin."

"Why don't you start wherever you feel comfortable?"

I set down near him. "Okay then. Let me start by saying that a few years back I married this man that I wasn't deeply in love with, yet I thought I would have a happy marriage. I was wrong. On the positive side, William Adams was a great financial provider; and that's about all he was good for. And as it turned out, he wasn't what he had pretended to be. His real passion was gambling, running behind women, and God knows what else."

J.T. seemed uncomfortable with my rambling essay. I paused for a moment to gather the correct words. He slowly placed his arms around my shoulders and placed a quick kiss on my forehead.

"But he's deceased. Late one night, he was violently killed."

"Annie, please believe me when I say that I am deeply sorry for your loss. May I ask how he was killed, unless it's too painful for you?"

"Oh no, I'm good with it. Well, it was a Saturday night, a few years ago and . . . I told William that I had this weird dream that something might happen to him if he didn't change. William dismissed my apprehensions. In retrospect I should have put forth more effort to convince him that he should take the dream seriously, however, we weren't talking, and the marriage was all but over. William told me that he was born as the seventh son—in the seventh month—and on the seventh day—and at the seventh hour—and thus he feared nothing. Of course, I had no way to collaborate this. He kept a silver dollar in his top pockets. He said someone shot him when he was young, and because he had the coin piece in his shirt pocket, he wasn't seriously hurt."

"Well I be darn." J.T. shook his head in disbelief. "But you haven't said how was he killed?" His face exhibited a look of sympathy.

"William was violently stabbed to death while playing a game of craps." Again, J.T. moved his head from side to side in disbelief. "By the way, we were married for about two years. But enough of my gabbing."

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He stood up, headed toward the kitchen. "Annie, I'm sorry about all this bad stuff. You and I have certainly had our share of hog fat to eat. And yet, somehow, we managed to cut through all the mush. And I would like to thank we have become better for it. God gives us guardian angels that protects and guides us through our storms."

J.T. went into the kitchen. "Annie, do you want me to bring you something back? I wasn't hungry. He removed a quart of milk from the refrigerator and then cut a slice of sweet potato pie and carefully placed each on the coffee table and sat back down.

"Well Annie, I know this much. You are truly an earth angel."

"Thank you for your beautiful words. You do know that have always known what to say and say them at the right time. But we should get some rest. Listen. I left some clean towels in the bathroom for you. Oh, I almost forget, let me get some clean beddings, too. Now whenever you need to get into the bathroom, just holler, I never know when to get out."

"Thank you. Now lady, if staying in the bathroom makes you look as pretty as you do, then stay in there as long as you desire."

"Okay then. I better get in there and draw my bathwater. I need to get up early tomorrow morning; I work two extra hours on Thursdays. Do you want me to make an appointment with Ashley's father?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm getting better, thanks to your cooking and your tender care. But I will give it some thought."

"Okay. But you must promise me, if you feel poorly, you'll call me, or you'll get a cab to the hospital. Now all you have to do is have me paged. Oh, I almost forgot, if you will look in that hall closet, you'll find a large trunk that contains some of William's clothes. Please take what you need. The man did believe in looking handsome for the women folks. His suits and shirts were tailored made. I think you will find them rather comfortable and appropriate. I never got around to donating any of his clothing to charity. The pants may be too large around the waist. This weekend I will make the adjustments that are needed."

"Annie, are you sure about this?"

"Yes. And that reminds me, we're going shopping Saturday if you're up to it."

"Annie, you're too kind to me. I swear you're an angel."

"J.T., now I want you to stop always thanking me. I want to be needed by you, and you being here give me the chance to see how much I can give. My goodness, I better get going or I'm going to be late for work."

Juanita had an emergency and hasn't been home in weeks. She went to Milwaukee to visit with her sister who is ill. I had introduced J.T. to Ashley and her husband over dinner at her house. She and Calvin seem receptive with our relationship.

A few days later, J.T. was startled by a heavy bang at the door—he looked at me for an answer.

"Come on in here girlfriend; you took your own sweet time in coming back to Chi-town. And girl you'll never guess in a billion years whose here with me!" I replied boastfully.

"What are you talking 'bout?" Juanita asked. As usual, she was on her guard against anything and everything that inhaled and exhaled. I took her by the hand and proceeded toward the kitchen where J.T. was eating breakfast. And before I could do the introduction, Juanita took over.

"Well, hello there, I'm Juanita . . . and you'll be?" She looked discombobulated.

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The guest of honor graciously stood up. Before I could extend the honors. "Hello ma'am. I'm Jimmy Thomas McCoy. But my friends call me J.T. And I must say it is indeed a pleasure to meet another one of Annie's friends. She has mentioned you many times over."

"Wait a New York minute! No way! This isn't real! Are you kidding me? I don't understand."

"Listen to me Juanita. We've been waiting for you to come back so I could explain."

"Y'all can blow me to the heavens above. From the day I meet Annie, she has spoke about you, and I might add nothing but good stuff. But we thought you were dead. I mean . . . well, she thought you were killed. How did you come back from the dead? I wish you tells me how you do that trick." Juanita smiled, but her thoughts were confused.

Grinning from head to toe, I said, "Look girl, it's a complicated and long story; meanwhile, J.T. is going to be living with me unless he runs away."

J.T. appeared to be out of place. He politely excused himself and darted into the bathroom.

I continued. "Girl, we're going to be late for work unless we get going. I will fill your plate on the way." Juanita looked toward the bathroom to see more of J.T.

She waited until the two of us were on the bus to make her true feelings known—she removed her chewing gum.

"Start talking. And I hope it's something good. And I hope I don't needs the mind of King Solomon to make sense of all this here going on. I leave town to tend to my older sister and all this stuff happens with you."

"Girlfriend, it's not like that." I was smiling with pride. I explained the mix up concerning J.T.'s death.

"Look here Annie, you just be careful. Believe me, lightening do strike twice in the same place, I saw it happen before."

"Now I got to ask you this: is his race a problem for you? And do you think Calvin will have a problem with J.T.?"

"Gurl, why are you asking me that? You knows better than that. And I speak for Calvin, too. But Annie, are you sure 'bout this thang? I don't mean him being white and all that stuff."

"Yes. I'm a thousand percent sure of my decision. He's the real thing. You'll see. Once you get to know him, you'll see that he is the real McCoy." I waited for her to explode with laughter. Instead, she smiled. "Come on Juanita. You know you want to laugh."

"Okay, that's funny. Now I don't wanna seem mean and nosy, but he looks kind of, well, kind of . . . strange. . . . But then they says you can't judge a book by its covers."

"You're not listening to me Juanita. I told you he has been down on his luck lately, and furthermore, he has a few health issues.

"Have you told Ashley? And what does she says?"

"Yes, last Sunday. We had dinner over at her house. She and her ole man are good with us."

"We're here. Come on Juanita, let's go and put some elbow grease down for the 'man'."

A small group of people were stationed near the main entrance to the hospital.

"Annie, look over there! Look at them fools. They call themselves Black Muslims. They don't even have last names anymore; they just use an 'X'. Can you believe this shit?" Juanita was verbally animated.

"I know. But they're very strict about their religion. They . . ."

"Hold on now. I wouldn't listen to nothing they has to say. They're making Saturday night fools of themselves."

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

“I read where Muslims do many wonderful things for underprivileged people, especially for our youths. I believe they have various educational programs for children, such as, after school tutoring. And one more thing, they establish educational centers to teach parents how to conduct themselves with their children. And what's more importantly, they encourage people not to depend on the government for things they can do.”

It was early September 1960—racial demonstrations around the country were springing up like wildflowers after a hard rain. After listening to the depressing news regarding civil rights and the mass beatings, I turned off the television and snuggled up to J.T. Lazy Sundays are God's best days and perfect for doing nothing but fun things. We managed to relax and share a few smiles and kisses. I was glad the long hot summer was cooling down.

Morning came in carrying a cool breeze from Lake Michigan. J.T. was resting peacefully on the couch and unaware that I made several trips to the medicine cabinet in pursuit of my daily medication.

However, the sound of the alarm clock did not escape him. He awoke and observed me as I did a turtle crawl to the bathroom.

“I do say somebody is up bright and early,” J.T. stated. “Can I help you with something?”

“No thank you sweetie. I'm running late. Sorry, but you'll have to make your breakfast.” He nodded.

In the upcoming weeks, J.T. and I grew closer. Each night we waxed nostalgic about everything that could be recalled from our minds—we drew much-needed strength from each other. At times, our oral thoughts brought forth gut-wrenching emotions, so raw that steam seemed to engulf the atmosphere; other times, our ruminations seem to give rise to love clouds.

As dawn follows night and night follows dawn, I slowly began to observe something about J.T.'s disposition that was sort of disturbing. During the evening news he'd conveniently dismissed himself. I decided to set down beside him and put my concerns to him.

“J.T., tell me what is troubling you? Now you must tell me the truth. Don't forget you're a man of the cloth.” I smiled. “Is it something that I did or said, or maybe something I didn't do?”

“Annie, it's hard to stand by and watch people being mistreated as if they were diseased animals. I'm here to tell you that this is pure insanity. Farm animals are given more respect. People treat their pets with more respect. It just burdens me to watch vicious dogs being sicced on people. It makes me ashamed to be a human being.”

“So true. I hear talk that next week there will be more demonstrations at various lunch counters throughout the city and the country. And there's talk amongst the Negro workers at the hospital about starting a boycott of our own because we aren't treated with the respect white workers. We are paid less money than white nurses. And we are seriously talking about starting our own union.”

“It ain't right! It is insane.” He shook his head.

“No, it ain't. It's hard, but I suppose one must try and adjust and stomach the racism as best one can. One can only hope that one day things will become equal or at least better than

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

they are now; however, one never gives up or gives in to hatred and racism. But sometimes I just want to leave this country, yet I've been told other countries aren't any better."

"You know there must be something that me and you can do 'bout all this inhumanity. Just sitting around talking 'bout it is like an old dog that wishes his fleas would leave him."

"I have thought about joining the local chapter of the NAACP, but I just keep putting it on the back burner. Ashley and her family have membership status. My parents, God rest their souls, would be proud of me if I became involved in some way."

"All these so-called religious people have made a habit of worshiping the Lord every Sunday, and then turn around and hate and mistreat folks that don't look like them. What a bunch of hypocrites," J.T. opined.

Frequently, Ashley and Juanita, and their men went out with us to dinner and to the theater. On some Sundays, the six of us ate dinner at Ashley's house. Girlfriend can't cook a lick, but she didn't have to, she had a part-time cook and maid. Everybody seemed to go out of their way to make J.T. and me feel at home.

The month of October came in with little warning. One evening, I came home early and thought maybe J.T. and I could do something special. I was surprised and alarmed by J.T.'s absence. Whenever he left the house, he would always leave a note or called me at work to say he had to run an errand.

About two hours went by before J.T. walked in. And before he could state his reasons for not being home, I asked, "Where have you been, Rev. J.T. McCoy? I was going crazy with worry." This was the first time I had been demanding. J.T. always made a habit of confessing that my voice was as soft as rainwater and relaxing as cold buttermilk in July.

"Well Miss Beautiful Detective, I have something special to tell you." He placed a butterfly kiss on my lips.

"It's like this my impatient one. . . . I went to look for a job and guess what?"

"Excuse me. But would you like to repeat that statement? Now I know I didn't hear you correctly!"

"Please let me explain. I got a job at a packing plant. I saw an opening in the newspaper. Now, if things work out, I'd be promoted to an assistant foreman in a couple of months and my work will be much easier."

"Are you joking with me? This is not funny."

"Annie, the Hampshire Meat Packing Plant is located on Seventy Street, right off Desire Avenue. Now as I said. I won't be doing any heavy work. I can start right after I get a health certificate and I don't think this will be a concern."

"J.T., are you pulling my leg? No, I think I should ask if you're lost your mind. And tell me, how long have you been contemplating this move? You know you're not well, and what crazy place is going to give you a health clearance to work. But what is most important, why didn't you discuss this with me? Don't you think my two-cent matters at all?"

"Because I wasn't sure I'd get the job. And if I hadn't gotten it, I'd have been embarrassed. Now Annie, I really feel good enough to work," J.T. explained as he walked toward the bathroom.

"How are you going to get to and forth to work?"

"I'm sure I can get someone to show me how to catch the trolley. And then, I might use the bus service. Whichever is more convenient."

I reluctantly came to terms with his decision—yet it was a double-edged blade. On one side, I was worried about his health and his wellbeing; on the flip side, I realized he would

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

feel better about himself if he was involved in something that he believed was worthy and made him feel independent. His place of employment is on the east side near the river—miles from downtown where I work. He got a work lease certificate and started working the next week.

Time continued to slowly slip away from us—J.T. displayed only a few signs of his previous malady. I was spending less time with the girls.

In ten days, it would be Thanksgiving. And as always, this day brought back vivid and relaxing memories. I invited the gang over to eat baked ham. After dinner each of us said what we were grateful for, and each made a personal wish for the future. Ashley took us for a ride along the waterfront in her new convertible Lincoln Continental.

Nearly every Friday night we bowled at one of a few integrated facilities. Occasionally, J.T. and I would play bingo with Juanita and Calvin. Some Sunday evenings, J.T. and I attended softball games with my Negro and white colleagues from work. We visited different Negro churches, but we were unable to decide on which church we wanted to join—I wasn't too keen on joining any.

I was now a teenager falling in love. J.T. was a perfect gentleman. The little things that he did for me proved how much he cared. He made homemade cards and mailed to me at my work. I felt like heaven was slowly coming my way. We were like teenagers, tentatively and harmlessly searching each other's desires and thoughts without being physically intrusive. There were only a few passionate kisses.

"Did you miss me? I stayed longer than I had planned. I had to wait forever for a taxi. And I ran into an old friend that once worked with me at the hospital. Her husband had a stroke and he is totally helpless. They have three young kids. I feel so sorry for her. He just wouldn't stop smoking. How long have you been home?"

"Not long. I hope they will be able to weather their illness. But yes, I always miss you. And I worry about you working so hard."

"Thank you. Sweetie, did Juanita come by? I could swear I smell her perfume. She's the only person that I know to wear 'Sassy Me.' Truth be told, I'll never tell her that I don't fancy to that fragrance."

"She sure did. I was going to tell you after you settled in. She dropped in to see how you were doing. And maybe to see if I were being kind to you."

"Ah, don't pay her no mind. She's sweeter than a lollipop when you get to know her. By the way did you take your medicine?"

He nodded his head. "She said she would get back with you. Your friend is quite an impressive lady."

"She truly is. I need to call Ashley and see if she and her ole man would like to come and visit this weekend, and maybe Juanita and Calvin could join us. It's been a few weeks since all of us were together to chew on the cud and play cards, and I could bake something sweet."

I began preparing supper, although my arthritis was killing me. I was glad J.T. hadn't heard me the night before, when I had collided with the ironing board and sent the iron to the floor and only a few feet from the couch where he slept.

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

"Hi, sweetie. You beat me home today. You're always an hour and half behind me. I wonder why?" I asked inquisitively.

"I wasn't feeling up to par, so the manager allowed me to leave early."

"Boy, do you smell refreshing and then some." I added as I gave him a butterfly kiss.

"I just got out of the tub. I stunk of raw meat; sometimes I don't know how you can stand me."

"Guess what? I wouldn't care if you skinned skunks for a living." I smiled. "J.T., are you feeling okay? And did you take a cab instead of the trolley?"

"Oh, I'm okay. I have a slight headache, that's all."

"Are you hungry? I can cook you something."

"I'm fine right now. What about you?"

"Au, a little tired, but I'm not hungry. I ate a snack at work with Juanita. Thank goodness we weren't too busy."

"Why don't you get off your feet so I can rub them?" J.T. asked, "And I will draw you a tub of warm water with Epson Salt."

"Oh, Rev. McCoy, how thoughtful of you. A woman could get use to all this sweet pampering."

"I hope so; 'cause I'm counting on just that."

I hadn't dried the water from my body before there was a familiar thump at the door.

"Hi, J.T., is she in?" Juanita whispered.

"Hello butterfly. Get dressed and put something casual on. I want you to come over to my crib so you can meet some big shots that me and Calvin knows," Juanita claimed.

"Do I know any of these people?"

"Maybe. But you have come and see for yourself," stated Juanita.

"Oh God, my hair is a mess. I can't go anywhere like this." I stated with concern, "And what about J.T.? You know I'm not leaving my man behind."

"Your hair looks just fine to me. But maybe you better check with your man," Juanita said with a giggle. "Of course, bring your ole man with you." I knew something wasn't on the table. Then it dawned on me, Juanita was aware that my birthday was a few days away. So, I pretended I wasn't knowledgeable that the two of them might be planning a surprise party—I didn't want to spoil the effort.

"J.T., are you coming with me?"

"I'm going to go on ahead. I'll be there waiting for you."

"Okay sweetie. I'll catch up with you all in a minute or two."

When I finally arrived, J.T. had already made himself known. Most of the partygoers made us feel at home, of course, Ashley and Tellus were there. Juanita baked me a large lemon cake. She smiled and apologized for not being able to put forty-three candles on the cake.

As we walked back to the apartment, J.T. whispered, "Annie, you look ever so beautiful in your pink dress, and it was a wonderful party. Don't you think so? And those beautiful gifts were so thoughtful."

"Thank you. It was indeed a wonderful gathering."

Once in our apartment, we stood and simply hugged each other for a few minutes.

"Sweetie, the Timex watch you bought me is the best birthday present I could have wished for. Thank you so much. But tell me this, how did you know it was my birthday?" I didn't wait for his answer. "You don't have to answer that, it was Juanita."

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

"Yeah. She told me your birthday was just around the corner. But I'm glad you like the watch."

"I must say that it was thoughtful of Ashley and her husband to give me an autographed copy of *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E. Du Bois. You know he was the founder of the NAACP. And the fancy electric iron from Juanita and Calvin will come in handy. I was going to buy a new one."

"A man can never have too many caring and loving friends," J.T. assured.

"Yea, I am fortunate and blessed."

While I was changing my clothes, I noticed that J.T. appeared to be locked in a conundrum. After putting his hands together, he said, "Look at me, Annie, I have nothing to offer you, nothing at all. And for months I have been imposing on your hospitality, and to tell you the truth, I feel bad about it and . . ."

"Stop it! And I mean it. Now I thought we had settled this concern. However, J.T., if you don't feel comfortable being here, well . . ."

"No, that ain't what I was thanking. What I'm trying to say is that I feel bad 'bout imposing upon you."

"J.T., you know what really bothers me? You not knowing how much I care about you. And you have never asked if I'm falling love with you? I do wonder why."

"Well, I apologize. I thought you might tell me you couldn't stand me," he said laughingly.

"Well what about this! Let me prove to you how much I love and need you right now, at this very moment." I wasn't sure what I was doing. "How can I say this? Tonight, I want to show you how much I love you. I want you to share my bed. And tonight, and more than I can say, I'm yours, body, soul and heart." I tried to be seductive, but I didn't want to sound as if I were a sex craved woman.

J.T. was caught off guard by my passionate request. He had shared my apartment for nearly five months, and we hadn't slept together. He slept on the hideaway. I pulled up a chair and faced him. However, before I could continue, he chimed in.

"Annie, I want you more than words can say, but I'd like for us to be married before we become intimate. You must know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I love . . ."

"Oh really? I'm confused."

I quickly went into the bedroom and changed my clothing, and decided I best tone down my declaration. In a seductive manner I reopened my plea as I had in Idabel as a young girl. I could only hope that my near see-through silk gown would be the enticement I needed.

"Sweetheart listen to my pleas. I need love tonight. And I don't need money and I certainly don't need forever. My heart needs your love more than it needs blood. And my mind needs your love more than I need wisdom or hope. Baby, I'm like a rose that needs water and nourishment, and I need it from you at this moment." My eyes had wailed—my heart began to flutter uncontrollable. I pulled J.T. to his feet and quickly wrapped my arms tightly around his waist, he kindly returned the favor. I continued. "Please give me the kind of love I have always wanted from you." I stopped just short of getting down on my knees. "Baby, please take all this love I have to give."

"Annie, I don't know how many ways I can say and show you that you are the only woman I have truly loved. Now you must know that I desire your love. I love you so much that I could love you without ever laying a hand on you." He slowly pulled away from me and placed his hands in mine. "I want to be with you until the twelfth of never. But I would like to wait . . ."

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

“Wait! Wait for what? What are you talking about? Man do you know what you are saying. God knows we both know we may not be able to ever get married . . . for whatever reason. And who knows what tomorrow will bring? But we do have tonight. I’m a real woman, a woman who is bursting with love. Can’t you feel my love?” I said with little shame. “Quite frankly, I don’t even think of tomorrow anymore, all I got is what’s before me, and that is tonight. Listen to me. We’re just one-kiss, just one sweet act away from tasting and feeling a bit of our heaven. Can’t you see that I love you?” Since he was lefthanded, I placed his hand to my heart. “J.T., baby, I’m tired of chasing dreams and to have them fade before they are realized. Please, just listen to my heart, feel my heart; I deserve to taste and feel the warmth of happiness like everybody else.”

“Annie, I want to understand . . . what I’m trying to say is that . . .” He did not complete his statement before slowly sitting down on the couch where I joined him. J.T.’s face was crimson red. He seemed to be taken back at my forwardness, but I didn’t care. He took a deep breath, then turned and choked with emotions. I had shamed the both of us. I started crying, I felt I had overstepped my boundary.

He paused briefly. “Annie, now as I said, I do want to make love to you as much as you want, but I’m not sure . . . well, the fact is, I’m not sure I can fulfill your desire. . . . You see my health . . . I’m not sure I can . . . can you understand what I’m saying?”

I stared at him with sympathy before apologizing for my behavior. A minute thereafter, J.T. and I went into the bedroom and laid on the bed; our emotional drained bodies rested, but our minds stayed awake, thinking and wondering and saying, ‘what if’.

When morning came, I felt comfort and real in his arms.

“I’m sorry, Annie. I just keep messing up, and you keep putting up with me,” he said as he held my hand. I quickly assured J.T. that I was satisfied with just lying in his perfect arms.

“J.T., sweetie, I was the one that was being selfish and foolish, and I ask for your forgiveness. I am so fortunate to have a man of your stature. I know plenty of girls who would pray all night just to have a man like you. I love you for respecting me, this is golden of you. And I love you all the way to the heavens for just being you, *you*.”

“Annie, I almost forgot. This evening, Curtis and me are going downtown to Benny’s to shoot a few games of pool.”

“Okay. Would you please stop by that discount drugstore on Second Street, right off Lake Avenue and bring me some B.C. powder . . . and a large jar of Vicks Vapor Rub ointment . . . oh, and a large can of Royal Crown hair grease?”

“Your arthritis actin’ up again, ain’t it? I’ll make sure I hurry back so I can rub your arms and legs.”

“Don’t concern yourself about me. Just take your time, I’ll be just fine. You have a good time with Curtis. I hope you beat him. By the way, if I’m not here, I’ll probably be in the utility basement. I need to do some washing and drying; that is, if I can find a machine that works or aren’t already being used. Saturdays are just too crowded. I wish the ‘Y’ had the necessary connections so we could buy a washer and dryer. Don’t forget to wear your hat. December seemed to be a brutal month.”

As it came to be, J.T.’s main business of the day was not to play pool, rather, his business was to purchase a set of rings from a small Jewish jewelry store. Curtis knew the proprietor. He settled on two white gold twisted-ribbon shaped wedding bands.

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

I was resting on the couch dressed in my night robe with a sheet covering me and contemplating whether I should straighten my hair or just let it be when he came back.

"How's my earth angel?" solicited J.T.

"I'm just missing my sweetie pie like crazy. Oh, you bought me some yellow roses, how sweet of you. And for being such a sweet honey, you will get a sweet kiss with brown sugar mixed in." I had to blush at my words. "Do you remember when I use to say that?" I got up and placed the flowers in an antique vase, J.T. surprised me from behind and kissed my neck and nibbled on one of my ears. He wrapped his arms tightly around my waist as if he was holding a newborn.

The next Saturday night. "Annie, I was thinking, why don't we go out and eat this evening? Maybe we could try out that new steak house on the north side near Pontiac Street and Canton Boulevard," J.T. suggested.

He dressed in his new suit I had purchased for him. Of course, he had a long wait for me to complete my attire.

"Wow! Sweetie, if looks could kill, I'd be deadlier than a doornail in about two seconds," he said with a sincere smile.

"Thank you. Sorry I took so long. I don't know why it takes me so long to dress."

I dressed in a burgundy floral peplum waist dress with a deep vibrant hues allover waist sheath, and my high-top French leather shoes. My neck was draped with a double row of teardrop white pearls twisted necklaces. My hair was pulled back into a large topknot that partially covered the streaks of grey that had taken up residence.

"Sweetie, your charcoal-grey flannel suit fits you like a Main Street banker. I've always said that a double-breasted suit makes a man look so masculine, yet it humbles him.

The food at Mandy's Italian Steak House was fancy and always crowded. The food was delicious, but grossly overpriced. J.T. ordered beef liver, a baked potato, and steamed carrots and peas. I settled for a large seafood platter and salad. We cleaned our plates—we were too stuffed to enjoy the coffee and bread pudding.

And as usual, inquiring heads were turned toward us. It appears that some people just don't take kindly for the mixing of races. Obviously, Jim Crow's relatives live up here, too. J.T. made every effort to assure me that the stares were due to my unmatched beauty. With my sweetie in my life, I was feeling as comfortable and excited as a little girl in her mother's closet.

After we were secured in our apartment, he began to put his secret plan into operation.

"Annie, come sit by me. . . . Now I'm going to ask for your undivided attention."

"In a minute. I'm changing into something a bit more relaxing."

"Sit right here, please," J.T. requested with a sexy-silky tone. "Annie, I'm not a man of many words, as if you didn't already know this much."

He interrupted his oral thoughts—walked over to the phonograph and placed the tone arm on a Lena Horne LP record. He did not ask me to dance. He continued his thoughts.

"Now, before you answer my plea, I must say that I realize I'm not in the best of situations to ask for this, but I'm still bold enough to ask. ***Annie Hollingworth, will you please marry this old man and a gracious man that loves you?***"

I was overwhelmed with joy, and for a few moments, I didn't say a word—I was absent of mind and consciousness; just as I had been when William proposed. But this time, I could feel love in my heart. With one hand in mine, he continued to validate his request. I looked at him with stretched eyes and a heart wide open. I said nothing. After waiting a few seconds, he continued.

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

"Annie, you know Negroes and whites do marry up here; I think the slang is 'grey hounding'. And this means we don't have to travel to California or New York. I'm told that the city has lots of mixed couples," he said.

I came back to earth. "J.T. McCoy, did I hear you correctly? . . . You want to marry me?" I was filled with untapped emotions. After gathering myself, I responded. "Are you sure you want to marry me? . . . J.T., you know that it will be forever and ever."

"Like I said, I ain't got much, just myself, but you will have to tell me if what I have is enough. And I don't have an engagement ring like I'm supposed to have. I could only afford bands."

"Oh, that's fine with me. We aren't youngsters. And let me say this to you. Rev. Jimmy McCoy. You have your perfect heart and it is worth more than diamonds. And moreover, we have faith and hope in each other and that is golden."

"You still haven't said . . ."

"Oh *Yes, Yes, Yes* my love. I will marry you. I would be honored to be your loving wife," I said with admiration and confidence.

"What was that? Say it again, please"

"I WILL MARRY YOU." I'm sure the neighbors heard my second reply.

"Thank you, Almighty." He looked toward the ceiling with eyes stretched and gleaming.

"Sweetheart, if I had the opportunity to be born again and told that I couldn't have you, well, I would pass up the opportunity in a heartbeat. I am hopelessly in love with you. J.T. McCoy."

I spent the entire night on our couch in J.T.'s arms, just relaxing and thinking inside out. He rubbed my legs and placed a warm moist kiss on each knee. On that wonderful night, I dreamed that my parents were alive and congratulated me; Mother cried, and Daddy gave his blessings.

I couldn't wait to share the good news with my girlfriends. At six the next morning, I was at Juanita's door faster than a duck can pluck a June bug. I wanted to catch her before she left for church.

"Juanita, guess what?"

"I can't. So, suppose you tell me what? But Calvin did say that I could be a fortune teller." She burst out laughing.

"Girl, J.T. asked me to marry him and I said yes before he could change his mind."

"What did you just say? Are you joking with my mind?"

"I said that my man wants to marry me. And I will be getting married in a month or so."

"Gurl, I was just kidding with you. I kind of knew it probably wouldn't be long before y'all tied the knot." She closed the door to the bedroom and offered me a cup of coffee.

"No thanks. I'm already high as a kite. Any caffeine and I would be arrested for being drunk. Girl, I'm marrying J.T., and I'm so full of happiness that if I consume anything I will explode."

"Okay. I hear that. But I'm thinking that I just might need something a bit stronger than coffee." She poured herself a cup. "Okay then, but what does Ashley have to say?"

"I haven't told her yet. I wanted to tell her in person. I can hardly wait to report to work tomorrow so I can make the announcement on the PA system. What about this? I'm thinking about asking Ashley's daddy if he'd give me away." Juanita was smiling as if she believed the whole thing was a setup. "Girl, I have never felt as good about life as I do now. My heaven has come to me and it's sweeter than molasses and honey combined, and as refreshing as the aroma of jasmine early in the morning."

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

After Juanita determined I was serious, she said, “Gurl, go on with your bad self. I can’t believe my ears. Annie, my best friend, I am so happy for you.” She took a bite from her plate of cold scrambled eggs and sipped another drink from her cup of black coffee. “See. I had been telling you that God is looking out for you bigtime.” She had a wide smile on her face. “Calvin, did you hear the wonderful news? . . . Annie is getting married.” He offered his congratulations. “But when will you start planning your wedding? You know I’m gonna help you.”

The next evening, J.T. and I arrived home at the same time—I felt this was an omen of things to come.

“Annie, were you serious about taking our vows at City Hall?”

“Yes, sweetie pie. Why not? A simple ceremony will do. My first wedding was at City Hall.”

“May I ask, why at city hall?” inquired J.T.

“Well I just thought it would be less trouble for us.”

“Look here. If it’s okay with you, I would prefer to be married in a church. God knows I have waited for this moment all my life. We will do it right and receive our blessings in God’s house, but it’s really your call, Annie. I will be happy either way.”

I grabbed his hands. “Okay sweetheart. We’ll do as you wish. What about that old and very elegant church on Washington Street on the Southside?” We had taken in a few services after a coworker invited us to attend service there.

“Yea I remember, the Methodist Church. The minister invited us to join and help with Sunday school. He seemed like a nice fellow and I enjoyed his sermons. And the folks didn’t stare at us too much. Tell me, are you going to have a bride of honor and bride maids?”

“I thought about it. And then I decided that I want to keep it simple and forgo the traditional wedding. And I wouldn’t know which of my buddies to choose as maid of honor without offending the other.”

“I suppose I could ask Calvin to be my best man. I would need someone to hold on to the rings or I would misplace them for sure.”

One night, I asked J.T. why he was staring at me like he had never seen me before. He moved in closer, looked me in the face and then smiled. “Lady, I was wondering how do you talk to an angel? How do you love an angel? I’m not even sure I will even know how to live with one.”

I grinned with pride that filled the room. “I don’t know. But I bet you’ll figure it out and do just great. And by the way, I will have to figure out how to love an earthly saint.” We both laughed heartily. “I am the most fortunate girl in the world. And I am truly happy. You make me feel so secure; you give me a feeling that I haven’t ever had. It’s good to be alive and with the one you love and who loves you. Thank you, sweetie.”

J.T. slowly approached the phonograph and began digging through my record collection—the sweet smooth sounds of Ray Price’s *For the Good Time* filled the room—it was one of J.T.’s favorite songs.

He gently pulled me from the couch and asked me to do the honor of dancing with him. We slow danced. He whispered in my ear: “Lady, it is me that is in heaven. This is truly a gift from above; we will make each other happy for a lifetime and more. Our marriage will be like two pillars of a porch, separate, but equal, and supportive of each other’s souls,” he swore. As we slow-dragged for minutes upon minutes.

A Lady's Heart and Soul:

Early December, I took a week off to prepare for what would be the most important day of my life. Juanita and Ashley surprised me with a most wonderful bridal shower. And the boys gave J.T. a nice bachelor's party.

D'Haenens sent me an unusual gift that he called 'The Magic Gift Box'. He has asked me not to open the box unless I found myself depressed or unhappy. D'Haenens had called Juanita to check on me and she informed him about J.T. and me. I honored his request and didn't open the small box. And there was a side of me that was glad to know that he had always loved and respected me for being me. ■

Trials and Tribulations: So Many Roads Less Traveled

When you ask God to send you trials, you may be sure your prayer will be granted.

-Jean Paul Sartre

We are present on every side of trouble, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

-2 Corinthian 4:8-9

Come what may, I have been blessed.

-George Byron

“Jimmy, why don't I have one of the porters get you some water so you can take your medicine? We should be in Chicago in a good eleven hours or so. Better, why don't you go to the sleeping car and try to rest; I think it would do you good.”

“Aren't you going to lie down with me? You need to get some rest, too.”

The Negro porters were sons of sons who had worked for the train lines years gone by. After carefully observing us, a young porter convinced himself that I was from a foreign country or was just plain crazy for being with a white man. I overheard another porter vouch that I must be a famous singer and the white dude is my manager. An older porter joined in. “I know her, she's famous singer and dancer, however, I just can't recall her name.”

Jimmy finally took my advice and went to the sleeping car—after taking his medicine, he quickly dozed off. I returned to the viewing car where I noticed a couple of babies sleeping so gently in their mothers' arms. A physically generous lady was breast-feeding her newborn. Nearby, a woman was changing her baby's diaper. She gently cleaned the baby's bottom and carefully covered each cheek with talcum powder. This reminded me of what Mommy Pearl claimed: “A newborn baby smells like promises and hope for mankind, and loving mothers put their fingerprints on their babies that last a lifetime, and this alone proves the existence of God. That is, a caring mother puts her love and morals inside of her baby.”

I could only ask myself: what if things had been different for me. Would I have been a good mother? But as quickly as my mind had sunk into the past, I snapped back to life with the realization that you can't have it all—just be thankful for what you do have and not angry and depressed for what you don't have or believe that you needed.

Later, the train stopped and took on two Negro passengers dressed in faded overalls. They set down in two empty seats in front of me. I quickly noticed the men sharing contents from a soiled paper bag; each man frowned when he sipped from the paper bag. A woman and a young boy were eating food from a soiled paper bag. Negroes were prohibited from entering the food car; passengers had to bring their own food. The train rhythmically danced on the iron rails as rain pounded the rooftop and washed the windows. Hours later, the train slowed to a creep and came within a few feet of a graveyard with fallen headstones and—we had passed the rain.

I dozed off for a few minutes, when I awoke; my attention was diverted to a group of porters. Five men moved into the aisle and started singing. It was commonplace for porters to sing *Jericho* in acapella style for the benefit of passengers—they used the swaying and striking of the train's wheels against the rails for their musical beat. The men received generous tips for their effort.

When I returned to our sleeping quarters, Jimmy was asleep. He gave off a faint groan before he woke up—I sat at his feet and massaged them. He looked at me but only spoke a few words.

“My dear husband, have I told you lately how much I love you? I have but one regret and that is: I wish I had forever and forever with you. If God stored upon me the ability to make you over, I would add nor subtract nothing.” I affirmed with all the emotions I had. “Sweetie, I'm not sure I believe in reincarnation, but given a choice of coming back to this earth and being without you, well, I'd pass. *You*, Jimmy, nobody but you, could have shown my heart how to sing songs of joy and love. And I adore you with all the love inside of me.” I couldn't complete my declaration. Tears started to wash away my makeup. Yet, my mind and my experience told me that something was seriously wrong with my husband. I started

crying uncontrollably. Jimmy asked me why I was crying, I didn't say anything. He decided to say a few words to try and console me. I was really scared about what was happening to us. Would our world go up in flames? All I could do was try and keep my sanity and try to be positive. Moreover, I've heard that if you dwell on negative things you will inherit them. Furthermore, it would do little good for Jimmy to see me like this.

"Annie, please don't you worry 'bout me, I'm going to be just fine. I hate to see you like this . . . you got to take care of yourself. Now I mean this much. I'm sorry we won't be able to stop in Hot Springs. I so wanted you to soak in those healing waters. It might have done you a world of good."

"I'm okay with it. But as for you Jimmy, I know that you are in pain and it's not that you haven't eaten. The minute we get back, I am going to make an appointment for you to see a doctor. Do you hear me?"

"Butterfly, I wish the world could see what joy and happiness you give me. When I say my nightly prayers, I thank God for giving me a lady like you. I couldn't want any more than what I have here on earth."

Finally, we arrived at the train depot in Chicago. As we patiently waited for our bodyguard, Moses, I noticed a card reader or as we call them in my hometown: fortunate tellers. Cautiously, I asked her to read what the cards said about Jimmy and my future. She put a few cards on a table and stared at me as if she had seen a ghost. The woman told me to keep the fee of \$5.00; she said, please leave. I asked her why. The woman said: "I pray that God will have mercy on y'all." ■