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A Walk

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Sleepwalking · *Ruth McCollum*

Nap

I WANT BACK the long afternoon naps which I resisted so angrily then: my grandmother's voice trailing off as she walked away from the room where I had been "put down" for the afternoon, a pool of quiet surrounding me, the strains of the theme songs to "Days of Our Lives" and "The Secret Storm" muted by the walls between me and the kitchen where she and Es-dale ironed, the creak of the iron on the board, the hiss of the steam and the smell of hot, clean cotton wafting back, the rhythm of the trucks in the distance whooshing like waves, the immediate silence of my room washing over me, drowsiness overcoming will, eyes closing, whisper-breathing and sleep.

A Walk

"We'll walk," my grandmother Noby insisted, and no amount of arguing from me would dissuade her: it's too far—she needed the exercise; it might rain—not likely; it'll take too long!—she had all day.

We walked.

Our destination was Es-dale McCurdy's house. Es-dale was my grandmother's maid for about eighteen years—my first eighteen years. Although it is less than a mile—no problem for my eighty-six-year-old grandmother who walks routinely, smartly attired in lilac jogging suit and white, spanking clean "Rest-a-bout" tennis shoes—it is still a substantial piece of ground to cover in Bay Springs, Mississippi, in March, 1988.

"There are blacks, and then there are niggers," the grown-ups would say over our heads. As kids, my sisters and I talked this over every once in a while, and after some discussion we usually agreed that Es-dale was definitely not a nigger.

"Blacks" (my parents' term) were good; they were educated, like Martin Luther King, who got shot during the middle of "Hogan's Heroes." My

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parents were saddened by such an-atrocious-act-against-a-great-human-being, but found the rioting in Memphis—five hours north of our Mississippi home—disconcerting, another shameful act to be blamed on our misunderstood region. "Niggers" were lazy, poor, filthy-mouthed, and exasperatingly hard to understand. Es-dale, we rationalized, must be a black, however uneducated, because she just was not a nigger. To my grandmother, she was a "negra," a softer word in sound; to my grandfather she was a "N-e-g-r-o," a spelled word which he couldn't bring himself to utter in the presence of children. We were taught, early on, never to say the word "nigger," because only ignorant white trash (or occasionally vexed adults) used that word. We absorbed this complex vocabulary, and the subtleties of its usage, in a place where blacks and whites lived and worked more intimately than any other part of the United States.

Some people, to whom I have mentioned Es-dale, immediately envisioned Scarlett O'Hara's "mammy,"—the eye-rolling, sassy, buxom Hattie McDaniels—without listening any further. Because Es-dale is a black woman, a maid, in Mississippi, someone who looked after white children for a living, people assume they know her before I can even begin to describe her, much less understand her, myself. Her relationship to my family was warm, her work valued, but it was a familial connection born out of the intimacy of a business transaction. She did not "live in," a significant act of independence by domestic workers back then. She did not work in the yard. She did not "fetch" herself to Noby's house, rather Noby picked her up and dropped her off at Es-dale's own home. But she was also warm and loving with us, and we were grateful for her affection.

She bathed us as children, piling the three of us into the cool tub on summer afternoons before dinner, soaping first one little girl, then another. "Open the pocketbook, close the pocketbook; y'all don't never let the bad mens open your pocketbook," she warned as she gently washed our privates.

"Get on up out of the bed. Mister Rube be home for lunch soon and I got to get this house picked up . . ." she would rattle off at the three of us snoring teenagers, our still-wet bathing suits from last night's pool party drying on the floor. At noon, the men would come home from the office for a big meal: roast beef or fried chicken, butter beans, okra, black-eyed peas in vinegar. Something was always fried, but never "shake 'n bake," with fresh vegetables, nothing from a store-bought can.

"Ruth, you help me now," she'd instruct. "Get the water glasses on the table, then ring the bell for lunch." The bell, a prized task, was a tiny hand-held Aunt Jemima, red-kerchiefed and wide-eyed in blackface, the clapper underneath her bouffant apron.

My grandmother, like most middle-class southern white women, had always had "help," and was adept at delegating the housework, cooking, and laundry with no apparent haughtiness. Noby and Es-dale spent their days together, sorting and folding the table linens, moving the furniture out of the way of the vacuum cleaner, shelling peas in the afternoon as they watched their t.v. "stories." I never heard her ask Es-dale to do anything, and certainly there were no cross words or reprimands or little digs. No words were necessary. Not a thing was said, every noon, when Es-dale, after making sure we had all been served, took her plate out to the service porch until time for dessert. There was no time-clock, either, nothing to officially terminate the work-day. They just agreed, somehow, when the day was done, and my grandmother drove Es-dale home to her own family, the two of them talking in the front seat, Es-dale's lap filled with left-overs, my sisters and I in the back, not bothering with their quiet, occasionally whispered gossip.

"I do believe Es-dale has white blood in her. She's just so much more intelligent . . ." After ten minutes at a comfortable pace, we had cleared the pavement and were walking down a red-clay, graveled road toward Es-dale's. Looking over at my grandmother, her face moist from the steamy March humidity, I tried to think of an appropriate reply. We talked, instead, about the wild dogwood blooming in the woods.

I tried to see Es-dale every time I went back to Mississippi, but it was usually within the context of dropping by with Noby, who was delivering a Christmas ham or a few of her used pots and pans, which Es-dale may or may not have needed. On these past visits, we would drive over on the way to the post office, Noby steering her mammoth white Mercury Marquis into the yard, parking it between the miniature azalea bushes and a rusting vehicle, up on blocks, disintegrating in the side-yard. Standing next to the car, leaning on the horn through the open window, she honked until someone appeared, usually one of Es-dale's numerous grandchildren.

"Es-dale here?"

"Yes ma'am, just a minute, she comin'" "Grammaw, Miz Noby here to see you," they yelled, running back into the house.

"Please don't honk this time," I pleaded with her once—around the same time, I guess, that I asked her to use the word "black" instead of "negra."

"Well how else will they know we're here?" she replied pragmatically. Usually Es-dale would come to the car, fussing over my surprise appearance. We'd stand together, catching up for a few minutes, before going on with our errands.

But on this visit, twenty-five long years since afternoon baths with my sisters, we were standing on Es-dale's front porch—the first time we had ever been invited in, the first time we had ever called before dropping by. She is a big woman, not fat, with large hands and fingers, light-skinned and freckled with Caucasian facial features. Her hair is pulled back in a bun, napped and frizzed around her face. And her brown eyes have their same bloodshot look, only now I see the milky beginning of cataracts. When Es-dale cleaned and cooked for Noby, she wore a white uniform, and a surgical stocking on her right leg from ankle to knee. When her leg hurt, it was a sign of impending bad weather. Today, in her own home, she wears a house-coat, and slippers on what I can see are badly swollen feet.

"Ooooooh Ruth," she singsongs, starting in a high key. "Look at you, lawd, all growed up. She look good, Miz Houston, can you believe it, all growed up." Shaking her head, hugging me, she holds on in a strong embrace. "I know Miz Noby be proud to have you home. Ya'll come in and see my house that the government done build for me." This was to be a real visit.

At seventy-four, she is a widow with three grown children. In her house, with walls and surfaces covered by family photographs, I wanted to know more, had questions about things I had taken for granted, was struck by the fact that here was someone, like my grandmother, who could tell me stories about the town. She was born in Bay Springs, too, to Bob Berks and his common-law wife, Linnia. Es-dale didn't use the word "common-law" though, when I tried talking about her childhood.

"What was your maiden name?" I asked, and she faltered in the story of her growing up. "Your name before you married," I clarified, mistakenly thinking that she didn't understand.

"Well, Bob Berks my daddy," she said quietly, but I didn't catch her

evasion until later when Noby explained.

"Bob Berks, I declare I didn't remember that, Es-dale," Noby said, politely taking up the slack in the conversation. "He used to work for Uncle Leon, didn't he, driving the store's delivery cart?"

"Yes'm, that's right," laughed Es-dale, glad to be off the subject of her parents' marital status. "He carry the coffins, too, to the graveyard. He drive a white horse and wear a tall hat. He carry the coffins to the graveyard," she drawled in the Black English dialect of the Piney Woods.

"I had forgotten all about that, but I sure do remember him," my grandmother added, the two of them conjuring the same picture from different points of view.

Once, after my grandfather died, after Es-dale had retired, she and her daughters, Maxine and Grace, then in their thirties, came calling on a Sunday afternoon as our family was finishing lunch. Nothing had changed much in twenty years except that Es-dale was no longer in the kitchen slicing pie. PaPa wasn't there teasing her about something.

"Oh Mistah Rube," Es-dale would have played along, trying to get dessert served so that she could start on the luncheon dishes and get home to her own family's Sunday meal.

The adults—my parents, aunts and uncles, and Noby—sat around the dining room table, under the dusty chandelier, plates pushed back to make room for elbows, sipping ice tea, telling stories. The grandchildren sat at the kitchen table in the next room doing much the same. Later everyone would lie down for a nap, dressed in slips or robes, until time to dress for the Sunday evening service.

As everyone lazily enjoyed the talk and disorder of a Sunday, the side door bell rang.

"Miz Houston . . . Miz Houston," Es-dale called out as she walked through the service porch and into the kitchen.

"Es-dale!" we shouted, gathering around her. She and Maxine and Grace had stopped by on their way home from church, they said, which meant they had come out of their way to see us because the black church was in the black section.

"Miz Noby," she started laughing, in her high-pitched exclamation. "You got all your chilluns home. Andruh, you done growed into a pretty girl. You got bosoms now." My little sister Andrea was at once embar-

rassed and yet redeemed by her notice. Es-dale and her daughters were dressed in their Sunday clothes, a style unlike any I had ever seen of Es-dale: bright colors, hats with feathers, shiny patent-leather high heels, and purses.

"You all sure are dressed up," someone joked.

"That's right, we celebratin' the Word," replied Maxine, everyone laughing. But in that moment, when hugs and greetings had been exchanged, and all twenty of us gathered in the door between service porch and kitchen, it became apparent that another move needed to be made.

"Come on into the den," my grandmother would have said to any other visitors. "Have some cake, have some coffee."

We all waited.

"It's so good to see you Es-dale," my mother filled in in the sudden silence, aware of my grandmother's inability to invite them in.

"Yes, oh yes," the rest of us buzzed back and forth.

An invitation to sit and talk was an invitation that Noby was not ready to extend—a tricky walk through uncultivated territory. The South's battleground is not so much in the schools and the county clerks' offices anymore. It is in a much more difficult place to maneuver, black and white, where rules of skin color lie deep beneath—in prayer meetings and parlors, in the lives of people we love and respect, in our silences, ourselves.

"I'd like to visit Es-dale," I mentioned to Noby not long after I had arrived in Bay Springs last year for my week-long visit. "Have you seen her recently?"

"No, she doesn't get to town much. She has that bad arthritis, you know, and that leg, she can't walk well anymore. But I talk to her on the phone every once in a while. She's getting along o.k. Her children look after her." Noby filled me in on the McCurdys, who was doing what, about the brand-new HUD-subsidized houses built in the "quarters."

"It's nice-lookin'. Maxine got one too." She seems uncharacteristically resentful. Her own house is old and its upkeep a constant, expensive worry.

A few days later, when Noby was watching t.v., I went to the kitchen and looked up Es-dale's number. How would I identify myself, I wondered. I had never called her before. What would I say? Why was I even

calling? Making an appointment in that small town was an unnecessary formality, but I didn't know the tacit rules anymore. Es-dale seemed glad to hear from me and, the engagement scheduled, I cleared it with Noby, who just looked at me, smiling, puzzled by all the fuss.

"Since we're close, why don't we pick up the mail on our way home?" I said to Noby as we walked back down the road, away from Es-dale's house.

"I can't go into town lookin' like this. I need to change into a dress."

And I understood then, looking at my grandmother in her jogging suit, how she had reconciled our visit to Es-dale's. It was not quite a social call after all. That was one step further than Noby could go, no matter how highly she regarded Es-dale, or how deeply she loved me.

("I called Es-dale," I'd said. "We'll walk," she'd said.) My insistence that we make a proper visit, and hers that we walk, enclosed, like parentheses, the text of a dialogue which would remain unspoken between us during a brisk jaunt on a warm spring morning.