

"Don't call the dead if you aren't serious."

Grandmother's words were unexpected. We'd been sitting for a good half hour, quiet on the steps, enjoying a slight breeze of cool air. Clouds hung overhead, making the sky seem moonless and starless. There was a kaleidoscope of lights, flickering behind our neighbors' curtains. Inside houses, the play of shadows told puppet tales, while outside, others were nothing but shadows on false porches. Sometimes a cigarette tip would burn red in the dark. Or a pipe would shine a small bowl of embers. Mainly it was dark; and I was one of the few kids, unafraid. Even porch voices spoke in whispers.

I scratched a mosquito bite on my thigh.

“Did I ever tell you about the time your Aunt Hattie brought her momma back from the dead?” Grandmother’s voice was dry.

“Naw. It’s not possible.”

“All things possible.”

“With Jesus. Isn’t that what you taught me?”

“Yes. But where you think our people come from? We go way back to roots, herbs, hoodoo, voodoo. To far, far away on an African shore. Christianity is but one kind of faith. For black peoples, yellow peoples, orange peoples, all kinds of peoples, there are other traditions too. All kinds of faiths preserve mysteries.”

“Like ‘Scratch a wall, somebody die.’ ”

“Yes.”

“ ‘Burn the hair from your brush, for if a bird snatches it, uses it for its nest, your hair will fall right out.’ ”

“Yes.”

“ ‘A broken-winged bird means trouble.’ ”

“Yes, trouble and sorrow.”

“ ‘The world is full of signs.’ ”

JEWELL PARKER RHODES

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"That's right, Jewell, girl. Dreams bear witness to our lives."

I let out a big whoosh. Grandmother was full of wonders. Unlike the night, she scared me some. For I felt her power, and sometimes she seemed larger than life, but then I'd blink and she'd just be Grandmother, tired from worry and chores. An ordinary woman. But, of course, she wasn't ordinary—no more than any grandmother is ordinary. She had wisdom, born deep from her experience.

"Some of this might seem like nonsense. But always remember, slaves weren't blank slates. They didn't just give up their African beliefs. When they were forbidden to praise their gods, their faith went underground. Blended with Christianity. You know how folks sing, in church?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You know how they get the spirit and sometimes fall to the floor?"

"And the ushers have to catch them, fan them 'til they're better. Mrs. Watson does it all the time." I cringed, for I was embarrassed by short, squat Mrs. Watson's trembling, like she had some tic or fire ants in her pants. She'd sway, shout,

“Praise Jesus. Praise Jesus.” Everybody would be watching her as she left her pew and seemed to skip up and down before the altar. She’d dance, clap her hands, and shout out to God. Before you knew it, and every time it seemed like a surprise, she’d just fall over. Like a marionette’s strings getting cut. Most times, ushers were there to catch her. But once she fell and had a huge bump on the back of her head for days.

“Mrs. Watson is *feeling* what Africans believed. That only music could call spirits, encouraging possession. Maybe it’s the Holy Ghost that rides her? ‘Holy Ghost’ is a Christian name. But Africans thought there were all kinds of spirits—gods of water, war, and earth. A god spirit for almost everything. Maybe the sea god is possessing her?”

“Like Poseidon?”

“Or maybe the goddess of love?”

“Like Venus?”

“Or Mary. Names don’t matter. What matters is that Africans believed spirits could enter them, and as far as I know, anywhere that slaves practiced faith, music was important because music calls the gods, spirits, the Holy Ghost, whatever you want to call THEM or IT to enter a believer’s soul.”

I clasped my hands, muttering a quick prayer that one day

I'd feel the spirit inside me. So far, I'd just enjoyed singing gospel, being among other choir children. I didn't always listen well to Rev's sermons. I promised never to laugh or squirm because of Mrs. Watson again.

I touched Grandmother's knee. "So, what happened to Aunt Hattie?"

"Aunt Hattie was low on money. She thought if she could hit a number, she'd be able to catch up. Pay her rent. Maybe even buy a new dress."

"How'd she do it?"

"Call the dead? It's really simple, and I'm not going to tell you the whole truth, else you'll try it."

I grinned silly.

"Curiosity killed the cat."

"I'm no cat."

"A kitten, maybe."

"Gram!"

"Nonetheless, I mean it, Jewell, girl. Even grown folks like Hattie get into trouble. Calling the dead is serious."

"But how? Do you do a dance?"

"Simple, really. You put the name of your ancestor and the contents of your wish under your pillow. Then, you put a glass

of water under the bed, under the pillow, under your sleepy head.”

“What’s the water for?”

“Two things. It’s easier for spirits to move through water. Connect from their world to ours. When they arrive, they’re thirsty. So, a glass of water is plain good manners.”

“Then what?”

“That’s what I’m not going to tell you. It’s important that you say some words.”

“From the Bible?”

“Some. But they’re also from long ago. Like the words the slaves misremembered, didn’t remember. Come from our African souls.”

Why tell me all this now? It was just another too-hot night. Way past midnight. Not enough time to wheedle more information from Grandmother. My dad had already crawled into bed. Tonie and Aleta were inside sucking on oranges, watching *Topper*. Grandpa was dozing in the dining room chair, hunched over his bitter coffee.

Grandma looked at the sky. “The stars are miracles. Part of God’s alphabet.”

“Stars mean something?”

JEWELL PARKER RHODES

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"You bet. Ancients been reading them for forever. Slaves read them too. See the big dipper there?"

I squinted.

"Pretend you're connecting dots. You see a big dipper, then a smaller one."

"My, I do," I felt awestruck.

"Follow the drinking gourds. That's another name for the Big and Little Dippers. One star, in the handle of the Little Dipper, is the North Star. Slaves used it to guide themselves to freedom."

"What about Aunt Hattie?"

"I'm telling you. Connect the dots, Jewell, girl."

"They don't make sense."

"Pay attention. Did you know down South everybody cherishes dreams? In dreams this world and the next mix like sugar and grits.

"Aunt Hattie put a glass of water under her bed, right beneath her pillow, quoted from the Bible, and chanted some slave prayer. She took a slip of paper and wrote, 'Give me a number,' then she slipped it on top of the water glass and slept."

"She dreamed it all," I shrilled with understanding.

“No, this world and the next mixed. She called her momma back. Her momma gave her the number 337. Then she slapped her. Full on the cheek, saying, ‘Never call me back for such nonsense again.’”

“In the morning, Aunt Hattie ran to the numbers runner to place her bet. Folks in the barbershop stared. Aunt Hattie felt like her slip was showing, or her dress wasn’t buttoned up. Finally, the barber asked, ‘What happened to your face?’”

“ ‘What you mean?’”

“Hattie looked in the mirror and saw her mother’s handprint on her face. Saw a deep black, kind of burnt flesh that marked her.”

I shivered.

“She ran home and didn’t come out for half a year until her mark faded. Faded, but never left.”

“Did her number hit?”

“Of course it did. But that’s not the point. You can call the dead. The dead are with us everywhere. Every good-bye ain’t gone.”

Grandmother took my hand, pushed it into the night air. “Feel it?”

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“Naw.”

“As you grow, you will. The very air is alive with spirits. From long ago. Or from yesterday.”

“Don’t they”—I looked about, squinting, trying to see between air—“go to heaven?”

“Sure they do. But it doesn’t mean they’re gone. They’re elsewhere and can travel when they choose. Like guardians. See that tree? It’s alive. The stars, moon . . . even this road has tales to tale. The universe is alive. Everything. There is no end. Respect the world around you, Jewell, girl. Respect the dead, for they ain’t gone.”

“If you die, will you be gone?”

“Never.”

“Can I call on you?”

“Sure thing, baby. All the time. I’ll probably be walking beside you most times. Or else watching you from on high. But don’t call me back and ask me to make my self visible for foolishness, for money. You’re meant to live your life well—call when things are most bleak. For your soul, not money or things.

“Calling the dead is serious. But every life in this world goes on. Every life signifies. And when you need help, call on

God, but every person that's ever lived is part of you—an ancestor. All good spirits are ready to help."

"And the bad spirits? Are they in hell?"

"Yes. But they wander too, whispering foolishness in weak people's ears. Causing harm."

"But you won't let them harm me?" I looked up into her face. High cheekbones. Wide eyes and a wide mouth. The only face of a mother/grandmother I'd ever known. Could ever remember.

"Call me. I'll always be near."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Like an invisible telephone, I thought. I'd talk with Grandmother as long as she was alive and beyond.



A year later, I learned the truth of Grandmother's porch story. I was in bed (a school night, not a summer's night) and restless, for a thunderstorm racked the sky. No rain—just noise—and, in the dark, my riding horse seemed to shudder on its wire rings. I heard Grandmother rise from bed, but it

was too early to be rising for laundry and chores. Grandmother walked, no, truly floated past my bedroom door. Tonie and Aleta didn't stir. I swung my feet to the cold floor, peeked round the door, and watched as Grandmother walked down three flights of stairs and sat at the telephone stand in the hall. She picked up the phone though it didn't ring, and I heard her say, "Yes, yes." Then she hung up and climbed the stairs. I scooted into bed and raised the covers to shield my face.

Grandmother was opening the closet in the room beside ours. "What are you doing, woman?" I heard Rev ask. "What are you doing?" Grandmother didn't answer, or if she did, it was too low for me to hear.

The phone rang, loud and wailing. Over and over. Rev was in his long johns, getting ready to climb down the stairs, when Grandmother, all dressed, her best coat on, passed him (Rev, openmouthed) and went and lifted the phone. "Yes, yes," she said. "I know and I'm ready."

"Woman, what is wrong with you?" Rev shouted. By this time, even my Pop was leaning his head over the second banister and the boys were poking their heads through banister bars. Tonie stole behind me. Aleta didn't stir.

“Aunt Hattie died. ’Bout an hour ago. Ernie’s coming to pick me up.”

“But you’re already dressed, Momma? How could that be?” shouted Pop in jeans and bare feet.

Grandmother looked down at herself. “So I am.” Then she looked up at all of our awestruck faces just as another thunder crack rattled the sky.

“Hattie called. Told me she was dead.”

Nobody believed her, or if they did, they didn’t say so that night. Rev got dressed and clutched his Bible. Pop looked after the boys and Tonie. They were scared. “From thunder,” they said, lying.

After Ernie, Grandmother, and Rev left to take care of Aunt Hattie’s body, I stole downstairs in my slippered feet and sat at the telephone stand, waiting for Aunt Hattie to call me. Not expecting the phone to ring, I lifted the receiver every five minutes, knowing that any second, I might hear a voice: “Jewell, is that you? Jewell?” instead of static.



*When your soul aches, speak to the dead.
Ancestors who loved you, still do.*

Be thankful.

*They're always listening.
If you let yourself hear, they'll guide you.*



*W*hen I was twelve, like ants were in my nose / play
ing football on an open field was my sister's fault.
"Leave it, let's go home," she'd scold, and I'd been disciplined
that my mother never had wanted to do something with me. I'd
puffed off their nose and said, "Sure?"
We didn't garden at Grandpa's house, but instead, we went
two blocks over on a vacant lot with a street light that
had set aflame. Long, dozens of black and white flowers
blossomed in the sun, but most of all, he was a good, honest, and
caring man of his own. I'd been told that even though I
had doubts, I plucked right in down my pants just "Dad" as