

35

Soul Cleansing

her mother and sister were buried. "Take one of me and my sister by her and my mother grave," she said. "It'll be the only picture in the world with the three of us almost together."

Finally we ended up at Henrietta's sister Gladys's house, a small yellow cabin with rocking chairs on its porch. Inside we found Gladys sitting in her dark wood-paneled living room. It was warm out, sweatshirt weather, but Gladys had her double-wide black wood-stove burning so hot, she sat beside it wiping sweat from her forehead with tissue. Her hands and feet were gnarled from arthritis, her back so bent her chest nearly touched her knees unless she propped herself up with an elbow. She wore no underwear, only a thin nightgown that had ridden above her waist from hours in her wheelchair.

She tried to straighten her gown to cover herself when we walked in, but her hands couldn't grasp it. Deborah pulled it down for her, saying, "Where everybody at?"

Gladys said nothing. In the next room, her husband moaned from a hospital bed, just days from death.

"Oh right," Deborah said, "they at work ain't they?"

Gladys said nothing, so Deborah raised her voice loud to make sure Gladys could hear: "I got a Internet!" she yelled. "I'm going to get a web page up about my mother and hopefully be getting some donations and funding so I can come back down here put a monument up on her grave and turn that old home-house into a museum that will remind people of my mother down here!"

"What you put in there?" Gladys asked, like Deborah was crazy.

"Cells," Deborah said. "Cells so people can see her multiply."

She thought for a moment. "And a great big picture of her, and maybe one of them wax statues. Plus some of them old clothes and that shoe in the house. All that stuff mean a whole lot."

Suddenly the front door opened and Gladys's son Gary came in-side yelling, "Hey Cuz!" Gary was fifty, with that smooth Lacks skin, a thin mustache and soul patch, and a gap between his front teeth that the girls loved. He wore a red and blue short-sleeved rugby shirt that matched his blue and red jeans and sneakers.

By later that day, the hives had spread across Deborah's back, her cheeks were splotchy and red, and long welts filled the spaces beneath each eye. Both lids were swollen and shining like she'd covered them in blood-red shadow. I asked again and again if she was okay and said maybe we should stop somewhere so she could see a doctor. But she just laughed.

"This happens all the time," she said. "I'm fine. I just need some Benadryl." She bought a bottle that she kept in her purse and swigged from all day. By noon, about a third of it was gone.

When we got to Clover, we walked along the river, down Main Street, and through Henrietta's tobacco field. And we visited the home-house, where Deborah said, "I want you to take a picture of me here with my sister."

She stood in front of the house, turned both photos of Elsie so they faced me, and held them to her chest. She had me take pictures of her and Elsie on the stump of what used to be Henrietta's favorite oak tree and in front of Henrietta's mother's tombstone. Then she knelt on the ground, next to the sunken strips of earth where she imagined

Deborah squealed, threw her arms around Gary's neck, and pulled the photo of Elsie from her pocket. "Look what we got from Crownsville! It's my sister!" Gary stopped smiling and reached for the picture.

"That's a bad shot," Deborah said. "She's crying cause it's cold."

"How about showing him that picture of her on the porch when she was a kid?" I said. "That's a good one." Gary looked at me like, *What the hell is going on here?*

"That picture's got her a little upset," I said.

"I understand why," he whispered.

"Plus she just saw her mother's cells for the first time," I told him.

Gary nodded. Over the years, he and I had spent many hours talking; he understood Deborah and what she'd been through more than anyone else in her family.

Deborah pointed to the hives on her face. "I'm having a reaction, swellin' up and breakin' out. I'm crying and happy at the same time." She started pacing back and forth, her face shining with sweat as the woodstove clanged and seemed to suck most of the oxygen from the room. "All this stuff I'm learning," she said, "it make me realize that I *did* have a mother, and all the tragedy she went through. It hurts but I wanna know more, just like I wanna know about my sister. It make me feel closer to them, but I do miss them. I wish they were here."

Keeping his eyes on Deborah, Gary walked across the room, sat in an oversized recliner, and motioned for us to join him. But Deborah didn't sit. She paced back and forth across the linoleum floor, picking the red polish off her nails and talking an incoherent stream about a murder she'd heard about on the news and the traffic in Atlanta. Gary's eyes followed her from one side of the room to the other, intense and unblinking.

"Cuz," he said finally. "Please sit."

Deborah raced over to a rocking chair not far from Gary, threw herself into it, and started rocking violently, thrusting her upper body back and forth and kicking her feet like she was trying to flip the chair over.

"You wouldn't believe what we been learning!" she said. "They injected my mother's cells with all kinds of, uh, poisons and stuff to test if they'd kill people."

"Dale," Gary said, "do something for yourself."

"Yeah, I'm tryin'," she said. "You know they shot her cells into murderers in prison?"

"I mean to relax," Gary said. "Do something to *relax* yourself."

"I can't help it," Deborah said, waving him off with her hand. "I worry all the time."

"Like the Bible said," Gary whispered, "man brought nothing into this world and he'll carry nothing out. Sometime we care about stuff too much. We worry when there's nothing to worry about."

In a moment of clarity, Deborah nodded, saying, "And we bring our own body down by doing it."

"You don't seem so good right now, Cuz. Make some time for yourself," Gary said. "When I get in my car and drive, don't have to be going nowhere, circles is fine by me. Just got to have time to relax with the road under me. Everybody needs something like that."

"If I ever get any money," Deborah said, "I'll get an RV where I can go back and forth and I don't have to be in the same place ever. Can't nobody bother you when you're movin'."

She stood up and started pacing again.

"Only time I really relax is when I'm drivin down here," she said. "But this time I just be drivin along the whole time thinking about what happened to my sister and my mother."

The moment Deborah said the words *sister* and *mother*, her face got redder and she started to panic. "You know they shot my mother cells into space and blew her up with nuclear bombs? They even did that thing . . . what do you call it . . . um . . . *cloning*! . . . that's right, they did that cloning on her."

Gary and I shot each other a nervous glance and both started talking at once, scrambling to bring her back from wherever she was going.

"There are no clones," I said. "Remember?"

"You don't have to be fearful," Gary said. "The word of God said if we honor our father and mother, we can live long upon the earth, and you doing that, you honoring your mother." He smiled and closed his eyes. "I love this scripture that's in Psalms," he told her. "It says even if our father and our mother fall sick, the Lord take care of you. Even if you lose everybody like your mother and your sister, God's love will never turn His back on you."

But Deborah didn't hear any of it.

"You wouldn't believe it," she said. "You know they mixed her with mice to make a human-mouse? They say she's not even human anymore!" She laughed a loud, manic laugh and ran to the window. "Holy cuss!" she yelled, "is it raining out there?"

"Much needed rain," Gary whispered, rocking back and forth.

Deborah grabbed the blue ribbon keychain that always hung around her neck. It said W/WJD. "What is this," she said, "a radio station? I never heard of W/WJD." She started yanking it off her neck.

"Come on, cuz, it means 'What Would Jesus Do,'" Gary said. "You know that."

Deborah stopped fussing with the keys and collapsed back into the chair. "Can you believe they even gave her that AID virus and injected her into monkeys?" She stared at the floor, rocking violently, her chest rising and falling fast with each breath.

Gary sat, calmly rocking in his chair, watching Deborah's every move, like a doctor studying a patient. "Don't make yourself sick over something you can't do nothin about," Gary whispered to Deborah as she rubbed the welts on her eyes. "It's not worth it... you got to let the Lord handle it." His eyes drooped closed as he mumbled, "What is Deborah doing for Deborah?"

When she didn't answer he looked at me and said, "I was talking to God just now—he's trying to make me say stuff, trying to make me move." Deborah called Gary The Disciple because he had a habit of channeling the Lord in the middle of a conversation. It started about twenty years earlier, when he was thirty—one minute he was busy

with booze and women, the next he'd had several heart attacks and bypasses, and he woke up preaching.

"I been tryin to keep Him out of this because we've got company," he said, flashing me a bashful grin. "But sometimes He just won't let me keep Him out."

Gary's brown eyes went vacant, unfocused, as he stood slowly from his chair, spread his arms wide, and reached toward Deborah, who struggled to her feet, hobbled toward him, and wrapped her arms around his waist. The moment she touched him, his upper body seized like he'd been electrocuted. His arms thrust closed, hands clasping each side of Deborah's head, palms to her jaw, fingers spread from the back of her skull to the bridge of her nose. Then he started shaking. He squeezed Deborah's face to his chest as her shoulders heaved in silent sobs, and tears rolled from Gary's eyes.

As they rocked back and forth, Gary tipped his head to the sky, and began singing in a hauntingly beautiful baritone.

*"Welcome, into this place... Welcome, into this broken vessel"  
His singing, quiet at first, grew louder with each word until it filled the house and poured into the tobacco fields. "You desire to abide in the praises of your people, so I lift my hand, and I lift my heart, and I offer up this praise unto ya, Lord."*

"You're welcome into this broken vessel, Lord," he whispered, squeezing Deborah's head in his palms. His eyes shot open and closed, and he began to preach, sweat pouring from his face.

"That you said in your word Lord, that the BELIEVER would lay hands on the sick, and that they shall RECOVER!" His voice rose and fell, from a whisper to a yell and back. "I REALIZE God that TONIGHT there's just some things doctors CANNOT DO!"

"Amen Lord," Deborah mumbled, face pressed to his chest, voice muffled.

"We thank ya tonight," Gary whispered. "Because we need your help with them CELLS, Lord... we need your help lifin the BURDEN of them cells from this woman! Lift this burden, Lord, take it away, we don't NEED it!"

Deborah started convulsing in Gary's arms, weeping and whispering, "Thank ya, Lord . . . Thank ya, Lord." Gary squeezed his eyes tight, and yelled along with her, "THANK YOU, LORD! THANK YOU FOR TONIGHT!" Their voices grew louder together, until Gary stopped, tears and sweat pouring from his face onto Deborah as she screamed, "Thank you Jesus!" and let loose with a chorus of hallelujahs and praise Gods. Gary swayed back and forth, breaking into song again, his voice deep and old, as if coming from the generations who worked his tobacco fields before him: "*I know the Lord been good, yoooooooooooooh . . . I know the Lord been good.*"

"Real good," Deborah whispered.

"*He's put food on my table . . .*" Gary dropped his voice, humming as Deborah spoke: "Show me which way to go, Lord," she said. "Show me where you want me to go with these cells, Lord, *please*. I'll do anything you want me to do, Lord, just help me with this BURDEN. I can't do it alone—I thought I could. But I can't TAKE it, Lord."

*Mmmmmmm mmmmmmm mmmmmmm*, Gary hummed.

"Thank you Lord for giving me this information about my mother and my sister, but please HELP ME, cause I know I can't handle this burden by myself. Take them CELLS from me, Lord, take that BURDEN. Get it off and LEAVE it there! I can't carry it no more, Lord. You wanted me to give it to you and I just didn't want to, but you can have it now, Lord. You can HAVE IT! Hallelujah, amen."

For the first time since Gary stood from his chair, he looked straight at me.

I'd been watching all this from a recliner a few feet away, dumbfounded, terrified to move or make noise, frantically scribbling notes. In any other circumstance I might have thought the whole thing was crazy. But what was happening between Gary and Deborah at that moment was the furthest thing from crazy I'd seen all day. As I watched, all I could think was, *Oh my god . . . I did this to her.*

Gary stated into my eyes as he hugged Deborah's sobbing body and whispered to her, "You're not alone."

Looking at me, Gary said, "She can't handle the burden of these

cells no more, Lord! She can't do it!" Then he raised his arms above Deborah's head and yelled, "LORD, I KNOW you sent Miss Kebecca to help LIFT THE BURDEN of them CELLS!" He thrust his arms toward me, hands pointed at either side of my head. "GIVE THEM TO HER!" he yelled. "LET HER CARRY THEM."

I sat frozen, staring at Gary, thinking, *Wait a minute, that wasn't supposed to happen!*

Deborah stepped away from Gary's embrace, shaking her head, wiping her eyes, and yelling, "Phew!" They both laughed. "Thanks, Cuz," she said, "I feel so light!"

"Some things you got to release," Gary said. "The more you hold them in, the worse you get. When you release them, they got to go somewhere else. The Bible says He can carry all that burden."

She reached up and touched his face. "You always know what I need. You know how to take care of me."

"It's not so much that I see it, but He sees it," Gary said, smiling. "I didn't know all that was coming out my mouth. That was the Lord talking to you."

"Well, hallelujah," Deborah said, giggling. "I'm comin back tomorrow for some more of this! Amen!"

It had been drizzling outside for hours, but suddenly rain pounded the tin roof and turned to hail so loud that it sounded like applause. The three of us walked to the front door to look.

"It's the Lord saying he heard us," Gary said, smiling. "He got the faucet turned on high to clean you out, Cuz!"

"Praise the Lord!" Deborah yelled.

Gary hugged Deborah good-bye, then hugged me. Deborah grabbed her long black raincoat, opened it wide, and raised it above her like an umbrella, nodding for me to come under with her. She let the coat fall onto both of our heads, then put her arm tight around my shoulders.

"You ready for some soul cleansing?" she yelled, opening the door.