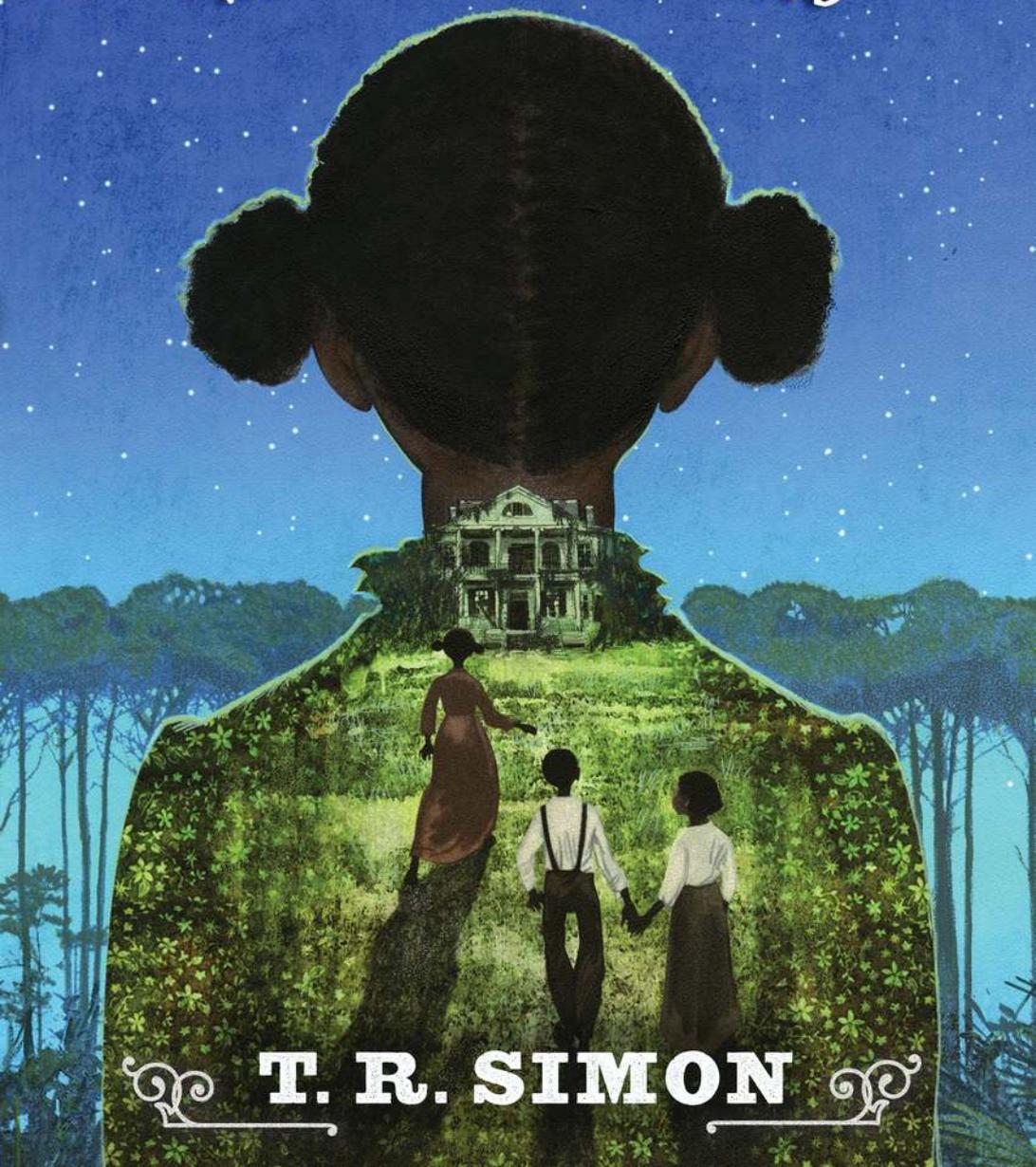


Zora & Me

THE CURSED GROUND



T. R. SIMON

ZORA AND ME



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For Richard Jonathan Simon and Viviana Mireille Simon

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There are years that ask questions and years that answer.

Zora Neale Hurston

PROLOGUE

There are two kinds of memory. One is the ordinary kind, rooted in things that happened, people you knew, and places you went. I remember my father this way: laughing, picking me up, singing lullabies in his gentle bass. I see him swinging my mother in a half circle, the hem of her blue skirt flying up to show the rough white thread she used for mending, like a bed of stars along a ridge.

The second kind of memory is rooted in the things you live with, the land you live on, the history of where you belong. You tend not to notice it, much less think about it, but it seeps into you, grows its long

roots down into the richest soil of your living mind. Because most of us pay this second kind of memory no mind, the people who do talk about it seem to us superstitious or even crazy. But they aren't. The power of that memory is equal to any of the memories we make ourselves, because it represents our collective being, the soul of a place.

After losing my father, after nursing myself to sleep nights on end with glimpses of the past with him, I was well enough acquainted with the first kind of memory. But by twelve I was still too young to pay much mind to the memories held by the town we lived in, by Eatonville itself.

That all changed the night we found Mr. Polk, his blood soaking into the earth. When I look back, I wonder how it had never before occurred to me that Eatonville, America's first incorporated colored town, might have a history that stretched back beyond its name and my twelve years. How could I have thought our town began with Teddy, Zora, and me, that it had just opened into the infinite present of our young lives? In fact, we were living out Eatonville's history as blindly as pawns in a century-old chess game. We were no more new or free than the land itself, but like all young people, we confused our youth with beginning

and our experience with knowledge. It wasn't until that night—when we heard the town mute speak to the town conjure woman—that Zora and I began to forge a real connection with the land, a connection that let us know ourselves through a past we hadn't lived but was inside us all the same.

EATONVILLE

—
1903

CHAPTER ONE

I lay wide-awake in the dark, watching the flares of faraway lightning light up the hand-hewn beams of my best friend's bedroom. It was well past midnight. Light rain drummed gently on the tin roof, nervous fingers anticipating the storm that hadn't quite reached us yet. Zora was next to me in the narrow bed, deep asleep.

I was staying with Zora's family for the week while my mama tended her employer's sick baby over in Lake Maitland. After Daddy died, there was just me and Mama. I was an only child. Alone with Mama I might have felt lonely in the world, but I had Zora,

my best friend, my secret keeper, and my talisman against sorrow. From the time I was old enough to have a conversation, Mama always liked to tell how my three-year-old self toddled over to Zora, who was squirming and fussing one pew away from us in her father's church, grabbed her hand, and didn't let go for the next hour. Zora took a long look at me, tried once to shake me loose, then settled right down to the idea of us being joined. Zora's mother liked to say that after I took a hold of Zora, Sunday morning service once again became a place of worship and peace for her. I don't remember that at all. In fact, my own first memory of Zora has the roles reversed: instead of me grabbing her, she's grabbing me and pulling me with her as she scrambles after a lizard that turns out to be a baby diamondback rattler. My screams brought our parents running, and Zora was praised for saving me. Only, I knew there would have been no need to save me if she hadn't taken hold of me in the first place. But I never held the scrapes against Zora. She made life in a town no bigger than a teacup feel like it held the whole world.

Thunder cracked softly in the distance. I had just closed my eyes when the shrieking began. It came

from right outside—high-pitched and truncated. A shiver ran through me before I recognized the sound: horses!

I slipped out of bed and went to the window. Two horses were in the yard below. One whinnied again and they both galloped away, jumping the low garden fence almost abreast.

A hand touched my back and I jumped.

“Shh,” whispered Zora. She was just behind me, staring after the retreating horses.

Still spooked, I gave her arm a squeeze. “You about scared me out of my skin!” Zora held a finger to her lips and pointed to her older sister, Sarah, and her little brother, Everett, who shared the bedroom with her. She took my hand and pulled me out of the room.

“Those are Mr. Polk’s horses. How you reckon they got loose?” she whispered.

“Something scared them.”

We crept down the stairs, careful to avoid the tattletale creaking spots. Zora motioned for me to keep following her. At the front door she cloaked her nightgown with her brother John’s work jacket and handed me her father’s work shirt.

“Something’s wrong if those horses are loose.

Maybe we should go see.” Her worried whisper didn’t match the glint of excitement in her eye—the one that spelled adventure and trouble all at the same time.

I hesitated. Zora’s plans often led me to do things that went against my inclination, not to mention my better judgment. Tonight had *trouble* written all over it, and nothing in me ever caught a thrill from courting trouble.

“Wait,” I said. “Let’s wake your daddy. He’ll know what to do.”

Zora shot me a scathing look. “Daddy will tell us to go back to bed.” I sank back on my heels and crossed my arms. Zora shook her head. She knew my posture meant that I was closed for business.

“Carrie, you sitting at the feast of knowledge, but you don’t want to eat. Now, I want to pull up a chair and have a heaping plate—only I don’t like to eat alone. Come on, don’t make me go over to Mr. Polk’s by myself.”

Her sorrowful pleading was weakening my resolve, but I still shook my head.

Unfortunately, Zora had caught the split second of my ambivalence and used it as a shortcut across the field of my will to the junction of our compromise.

“OK, let’s make a deal. If there’s any trouble, we’ll

get help.” She hooked her arm through mine, but I didn’t budge.

“Promise?”

“Promise! I promise! Now, come *on*.”

Oh, how I wished Zora couldn’t lasso me so easily with her words! But before I could add another condition to her promise, she was opening the front door and yanking me through.

The night was surprisingly cool for late June. The storm clouds hovered over Eatonville but didn’t break, sending down a bleak drizzle instead. Not even the moon had gumption enough to peek out from behind the thick curtain of indigo clouds as we carefully picked our way through the dark.

I followed Zora, as close as her own shadow.

“Scaredy-cat,” Zora mocked. From behind her back, I could feel her smiling.

“Am not. And don’t laugh at me.”

Zora snorted. “Are too.”

“Am—OK, you know what? Not everybody thinks trouble is an invitation. Some of us think it’s a skull and crossbones sign, saying, *Keep away if you don’t want to get hurt*. And then we go anyway, even if we are scared.”

Zora glanced back at me with a smile. “I know you do. I know you go anyway, even though you’re scared. And you’re right—watch that root sticking out—it doesn’t make you a scaredy-cat. It makes you brave.”

“Hm!” I doubted that, but it was nice to hear her say so.

“But you think I’m never scared, and that ain’t true neither.”

“You scared? I’d like to see that!”

“I’m scared plenty. It’s just not that important to me, being scared.”

We reached the towering canebrake that marked the southernish boundary of Mr. Polk’s land. Mr. Polk was the town mute, and our friend. No one knew how old he was, but it wasn’t a day under sixty. He lived alone with his horses. And he took a pride in them same as most other folks took pride in their children. People came from all around with their horse troubles, donkey troubles, mule troubles, and Mr. Polk helped them, one by one. He didn’t talk with hand signs except to raise his palm for *Stop!* whenever someone tried to explain to him what the problem was. Most folks knew better than to try. They just brought their animal in, let Mr. Polk take it, and came

back in a few days to pay—money, for some folks, but mostly whatever they could pay in, chickens, salt meat, vittles, what have you.

In terms of sheer acreage, Mr. Polk was the biggest landowner in town. His little cabin, the paddock and stables, and the big pasture behind them took up maybe four or five acres at least, and behind them sat a few hundred acres of overgrown woodland that went all the way to the resort town of Winter Park, and it all belonged to Mr. Polk. Folks in Eatonville gave the land no never-mind, since, thick with giant cane, all manner of pines, and knotty scrub brush, it offered nothing and enticed no one.

As we neared the cabin, we saw a shape crouched on the ground. Zora sprinted over, me at her heels.

There, right in front of his cabin door, doubled in half, was Mr. Polk. We knelt beside him, and the smell of burning cedar reached my nose.

“Mr. Polk,” I cried, “something’s burning in your cabin!”

I ran into his one-room abode. A small eating table was overturned, and a kerosene lantern, lying on its side, had begun to burn the straw mat that covered his earthen floor.

I couldn’t stamp out the fire barefoot, so I grabbed

the quilt from his bed and smothered the flames. Within a minute, all that was left of the small fire was smoke strong enough to burn my eyes.

I pushed open the door and the single window and went back outside. Zora had helped Mr. Polk prop himself against the cabin wall. He was holding his left arm, and even in the dark we could see it was bleeding through his shirt, the blood pooling onto the fabric of his pants. He tried to stand but sank down again.

“Hold his hurt arm,” Zora commanded.

In a heartbeat I was on his other side. I put my hand flat on his chest. “Mr. Polk, we’re here.” He was so thin I could feel his heart flutter like a butterfly wing under my palm. He nodded to me.

Zora offered him her shoulder and he pulled himself to his feet, with her supporting him under his good arm and me helping him cradle the wounded one. He stepped toward the cabin door. A last flicker of lightning lit up his face, making invisible all the wrinkles of age for a fraction of a second and revealing the face of a troubled boy.

“It’s still smoky in there,” I said, but Mr. Polk shook his head and we all went inside.

He sat on his bed while we found and lit a lantern.

Its light revealed a long, jagged wound running down the side of Mr. Polk's left arm. The fabric of his shirt was torn the length of the wound. All three of us stared. I couldn't imagine how he could have hurt himself so badly.

Zora suffered no such limits of the imagination. "You've been cut, Mr. Polk. Someone cut you." As she uttered the words, their truth was undeniable. Now that I knew it was intentional, his wound looked worse.

A shadow fell across the doorway. We looked up to see Old Lady Bronson. She was wrapped in a dark-gray shawl, her giant black cowhide bag hung against her right hip. With soldier boots that stopped below her knees and the dissipating smoke rising around her, the town conjure woman looked every bit the part of a witch. The steel-gray hair I'd only ever seen her wear in a single tight braid down her back blew wild behind her, gleaming with droplets of rain. Her freckled skin glowed in the lamplight. Silhouetted against the lightning-filled sky, Old Lady Bronson looked electrified.

She took in the situation with one sweep of her piercing black eyes, set her giant bag on the ground, and started pulling things from it.

“Carrie Brown and Zora Neale Hurston, don’t just stand there. Fetch me a basin of water and some rags.”

The presence of a grown woman, especially one with healing power, pushed away some of my fear. Zora and I set about collecting what she needed. I set the basin of clean water beside her, and Zora handed her a white shirt made of rough linen, the only cloth we could find in the little home.

Old Lady Bronson’s wrinkled and arthritic hands belied their strength: she ripped the shirt as easy as shucking corn.

We watched her clean the wound and tie it closed with the strips of cloth. Then she pulled out of her bag a spool of silk thread and a crescent-shaped needle, which she quickly threaded and ran in circles over the gash faster than my eyes could follow, undoing each cloth strip as she reached it with a flick of her finger. It was clearly not the first time she had tended to such a stark wound. Mr. Polk watched her work. Other than the slightest wince as she pulled the thread taut, his face showed Old Lady Bronson nothing but tenderness. After tying off the last stitch and covering the wound in the last of the linen, Old Lady Bronson

wiped the sweat from Mr. Polk's brow and placed a pillow stuffed with Spanish moss behind his back.

Mr. Polk took her hands in his worn and wrinkled ones. Then he turned his crinkled face to her and did the impossible: the town mute began to speak. Just like that, he opened his mouth and sound came out of it. Except that the sounds that flew out of his mouth made no sense to me. At first I didn't even recognize them as words; they were light as birds and so full of feeling. As he spoke, tears ran down the creases of his face.

Old Lady Bronson nodded as if she understood his sounds perfectly, as if he were speaking in plain English. Were we witnessing a miracle? It was as if Mr. Polk's wound had given him the gift of speech, but he spoke in a secret language only Old Lady Bronson could understand. Zora must have felt the same way, because she reached for my hand and held it tight. Neither of us uttered a word.

And then the conjure woman did something that surprised us as much as Mr. Polk's suddenly gaining the power of speech: she spoke back to him in that same strange tongue. She spoke slowly, each word weighted with what I took for sorrow, and her words

seemed to calm him. He nodded, and then he looked deep into her eyes, his soul bared. I shivered.

Old Lady Bronson patted Polk's leg and stood up. "I'll be back with salve after daybreak. Rest up till I get back." Speaking English again seemed to remind her that Zora and I were still there, and she turned her stern gaze on us.

"Since you two little pitchers have the biggest ears in Eatonville, I'm sure you've taken this all in." Her words were a statement of fact, not a question. "And since you're grown enough to find yourselves here, I expect you to be grown enough to keep this to yourselves. All of it."

My lips parted in protest, and she silenced me with a gesture of her hand, but Zora would never oblige so easily.

Old Lady Bronson was a small woman with a big presence, and Zora stood only half a head shorter than her. Raising herself up to her full height, she looked almost eye to eye at the witch. Old Lady Bronson extended her hand and perched her slim fingers on Zora's shoulder. I would have screamed to have her touch me, but Zora didn't even flinch. She just went on looking her in the eye.

“How did you two come to be here, anyway? I know it wasn’t Carrie Brown’s idea to come strolling out way past midnight—and with a storm threatening, no less.”

I bobbed my head in agreement, eager to get Zora out of the conjure woman’s clutches and both of us back on the road toward home.

“Two of Mr. Polk’s horses ran through my yard,” Zora answered calmly. “We knew something was wrong.”

Old Lady Bronson raised her eyebrows. “I always tell folks that twelve is a changeling year, and it looks like you starting to have some sense with your twelve years. You did right to come and check on Mr. Polk, but now it’s time for you to go home and forget about all this.”

“So who attacked him?” Zora acted as if she hadn’t heard a word.

Old Lady Bronson tightened her grip on Zora’s shoulder and leaned in. “Child, you are nobody’s fool. And you tell a tall tale better than half the grown men in this town.” She smiled just a little. “But this ain’t no tale I want told.”

There wasn’t a grown-up alive who could stay

Zora's curiosity once it had been piqued, not even Mr. Hurston with a fresh-cut peach hickory in his hand. Old Lady Bronson was no exception.

"Miz Bronson, I don't want to tell nothing you don't want told, but Mr. Polk is our friend and I want to know what happened to him. How can he talk all of a sudden?"

I practically swallowed my tongue to hear Zora speak like that to the scariest person we knew, but she was as nonchalant as if she had just asked the time.

Old Lady Bronson's eyes flashed fire. "Child, you have mistaken me for someone who is bound by the everyday. Folks far and wide would travel a long way to avoid courting my temper."

Her tone made me ready to abide by any command she made. Not Zora. She stood there cool as a July cucumber.

"I just want to know the truth!" said Zora.

The old witch cocked her head. "I'll make you a deal, Zora." Her tone was softer than before. "You keep a lid on your pot till I tell you to lift it off. In return for your discretion, I will tell you a story worth hearing."

Zora's eyes widened at the prospect. "Will it have hoodoo and magic?"

“You just worry about keeping up your end of the bargain. I’ll give you all the story you could ask for.”

Her glance took us both in, and that rattled me. I most certainly did not want to hear her story or know any more about her hoodoo ways than I already knew! Zora, however, was over the moon. If there was one thing she couldn’t resist, it was a deal traded in the currency of story. Her eyes lit up like shooting stars. She spit in her hand and held it out to Old Lady Bronson.

If that took the conjure woman by surprise, she didn’t show it as she gave Zora her hand in return.

On the way home, Zora bounced like she had springs in her feet. “I wonder how long we got to keep quiet about this. You think a week? A month? And, mind you, just ’cause Old Lady Bronson told us not to tell anyone else, that don’t mean we can’t speculate between us. What do you think happened in there? I know you’re thinking something.”

I wanted to share in her excitement, but I just couldn’t. The secret Mr. Polk shared with Old Lady Bronson didn’t excite me; it frightened me. “Honestly, Zora, maybe it ain’t for us to know. Maybe there’s some secrets folks just ought to keep.”

She looked at me incredulously. “Carrie Brown, you can’t be serious. How on earth are we gonna suck the marrow out of life if we just sit by and let questions stroll down our street without inviting them in for a glass of lemonade? Mama always says, ‘Ain’t no one ever got dumber trying to answer a question.’ And I intend to answer all life’s questions. Anyways, Old Lady Bronson made me a deal. If we don’t tell, she tells us a story.”

I reached out and grabbed her hand. “You made a deal with the town witch. She’s as likely to cast a spell on us as tell us a story. Ain’t nothing free when you dealing with folks who talk to the living and the dead!”

Zora laughed at me. “You’re just letting lowly Sir Coward get the best of brave Dame Courage. Old Lady Bronson won’t hurt us. Besides, we’re the ones who found her when she fell fishing by the Blue Sink. She’s got no reason to cast hoodoo on us.”

“Maybe . . .” I said slowly. “But I don’t want to know things folks don’t want me to know. Just like I don’t want them to know things I don’t want them to know!”

Zora kicked a stone down the road and started walking again. She was quiet, but I knew it wasn’t

because she agreed with me. Mr. Polk was our friend, and Zora understood friendship as a pledge made up of equal parts loyalty and honesty. She wasn't going to put the matter out of her mind until she had answers.

She put her arm in mine. "Maybe it's because I don't really have secrets. You know how my mind works—once a question starts a fire inside me, I have to answer it, no matter how bad I get burned. There ain't no pain more painful than the pleasure I get from the light of truth."

If I carried a secret right then, it was fear that my friend's curiosity would show her that some pain couldn't be lessened, no matter how bright the truth shined.

CHAPTER TWO

Come on, Carrie. Daylight's tired of waiting for you."

I woke up to Zora shaking my shoulder. For a second I thought she had two heads, until I realized the other one belonged to Everett, who was riding on her back, grinning. I sat up, even though everything in me wanted to go back to sleep. "Don't look like daylight even knows its way here." Outside, dark clouds were still threatening thunderclaps and heavy-driving rain, although not a drop was falling.

"Seriously, though. We got to go check on Mr. Polk as soon as we can get out of Mama's way. If we don't, we're not worth a lick of salt."

“I want a lick of salt!” Everett crowed. He was four now, but I had been holding him since he was born and I couldn’t help but still see him as Baby Everett.

“You want what, now?” Mrs. Hurston came in from the landing, a big ball of bedsheets on her hip. “Carrie, what you still doing in bed?” She gave me a once-over. “You feeling poorly? You sleep OK?”

Zora, back of her mother’s shoulder, widened her eyes at me.

“No, ma’am. Yes, ma’am. I slept fine.”

“Oh, no you didn’t,” said Zora. “You were just complaining I keep pushing you off the bed all night! Mama, we’re getting big and this little bed ain’t growing with us.”

Mrs. Hurston sucked her teeth. “You ain’t any bigger than you was two nights ago, and Carrie didn’t look all worn-out like this yesterday morning. I think she’s coming down with something. . . .”

That was my signal to wake up on the double. “No, ma’am!” I popped my eyes open and plastered on a big old smile. “Zora just woke me out of a dream, but I feel real good!” I sprang out of the bed like popping corn just to prove my words, still smiling like a fool.

That got me a sideways look. Mrs. Hurston set the ball of sheets on the bed, sat down, and motioned Zora over to the floor in front of her for the morning hair ritual. “You two about the worst fibbers I ever met. If you’re gonna stay up half the night jibber-jabbing about Lord knows what, you can leastways have the decency to be honest about it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” We both lowered our heads with the shame we really did feel about lying, even though—or especially because—it wasn’t the lie she thought it was. But neither of us set her straight. I reckon we figured lying to Zora’s mama was safer than breaking our word to a witch.

“I want a lick of salt! I want a lick of salt!” Everett had turned his silly demand into a song and was bouncing around the room with it, occupying himself without our help.

Mrs. Hurston quickly rebraided Zora’s hair for the day.

Lucy Hurston had a big litter of children, from little Everett up to Bob, who no longer lived in hailing distance, but I doubt any of them ever felt the sting of having to share their mother. Whenever one of them caught her attention, her focus was undivided. I was happy to catch some of that love shine when my own

mama was away. It eased the homesickness I felt every time she had to leave me for more than a day.

Finished with Zora's hair, she gave me an appraising look. "Your hair need fixing, too, Carrie?"

"No, ma'am!" I answered with a sprightliness I definitely did not feel. I smoothed my ruffled head before her nimble fingers found their way into it.

"All right, then. You girls feed the hens and then help Sarah knead dough for the biscuits." She picked the sheets up under one arm, grabbed Everett under the other, and escorted Zora's youngest sibling back down to the main room.

"No," Everett was shouting. "Zora promised me a lick of salt! Zoraaaaaa!"

Zora pulled a clean dress over her head. "Wanna split my chores? We'll get done faster that way." I nodded, running my hands over the wrinkled front of my dress. I ran some grease from the jar on the dresser over my knees and gave my dress one last halfhearted tug.

"And keep those eyes looking bright," she said. "At least until we get out of Mama's sight!"

"I'm trying," I said.

"Try harder," she said, then she pinched my arm hard and ran down the stairs, me close behind to pinch her back.

Sarah was at the foot of the stairs, lying in wait for Zora. “Mama says you’re supposed to help me with the biscuits! What took you so long?” Zora pulled a face behind Sarah’s back and I headed out to feed the hens.

Sarah was a backward mirror of Zora. Where Zora was bold and honest like a bumblebee asking to nectar on springtime flowers, and loud and fearless like a bobcat, Sarah was quiet and calculating, demure and ingratiating, already versed in pleasing for the sake of winning other people’s favor. The apple of her father’s eye, she was everything Zora’s father thought a girl should be. Zora was everything but.

With the chickens clucking around me, pecking frantically at the seed, I wondered how it would be to have a sister so different from me. I could see why my friendship meant so much to Zora. Unlike with Sarah, our differences complemented each other. Zora was always searching for new worlds, and when she couldn’t find them, she made them up, while I was content to stay in one world and share it with Zora. I was enlivened by the new worlds Zora made, and she was comforted by the familiarity of mine.

The chickens were done feeding, their feverish pecking followed by an aimless and sated meandering.

I scattered my last handful of seed in a circle around me and walked back to the kitchen.

I heard Zora before I saw her. “Tattletale should be your middle name!”

“Don’t act holier than thou with me, Zora Neale.” Sarah always added the Neale when she was lording something over Zora. “I know you’re up to something, and you best cut it out before I tell Daddy.”

I walked in to see Zora sticking her tongue out at Sarah ferociously.

“Zora Neale Hurston! I will not tolerate ill-bred children in my house.” It was Mr. Hurston, walking out of his bedroom and adjusting his workday suspenders. “Instead of telling Sarah about her business, you best be keeping your own business on the straight and narrow. As it is, you more trouble than a runaway mule!”

“I’m sorry, Daddy! I didn’t mean to make trouble.” Sarah was, as always, quick to play herself up in her father’s presence.

Not Zora. She looked her father dead in the eye. “I’ll try not to be a mule, Daddy; although, if I am, I know Mama won’t want to be the donkey half of my parents.”

I couldn’t help noticing that what put her father

so often at odds with her was their sameness, not their difference. A storytelling preacher with a restless nature, who, in spite of being one of the most in-demand citizens of Eatonville, opened another congregation up in Sanford, over in Seminole County. One church wasn't enough for Mr. Hurston any more than fitting the mold of the "good daughter" was enough for Zora.

Mr. Hurston flashed with rage just as his wife stepped into the room. "That's right, John Hurston. If you call my child a mule, it's 'cause I'm the one who went and married a donkey."

Mr. Hurston muttered, "Lord have mercy," sat down, and stuck his nose in the family Bible. Mr. Hurston might have believed himself the thunder of righteousness in the Hurston home, but we all knew that it was quiet and steady Mrs. Hurston who was the law. When her protection enveloped her favorite child, not even John Hurston could touch Zora.

Mrs. Hurston fished a nickel from her apron and handed it to Zora. "You two go get me a cone of salt from Joe Clarke's store. And while you're at it, you can pick up a few more nails for your brother John to fix the henhouse."

John, who had been lost in the Sears catalog, sat

upright. “But, Mama, I was fixing to go fishing with Buford at the Blue Sink!”

“John, if a weasel gets in my henhouse again, you’ll be out there guarding it yourself come nightfall. Be grateful I don’t send you to get the nails, too.”

Zora usually got on well with her older brothers, and she felt John’s pain. “We’ll help you, John. You’ll be done in no time and still have plenty time for fishing.”

“That’s right, John,” scoffed Mr. Hurston, “let your sister do your work. Just be careful you don’t find yourself working for her one day!” He laughed loudly at his own joke.

I watched the comment slowly work its way under John’s skin. “Aw, forget it, Zora,” he said. “I don’t need your help. Girls just get in the way!”

Zora’s nostrils flared. “John, you’d be lucky if I let you work for me! Everyone should have a boss who’s smarter than they are. You might even finally learn a thing or two!”

John jumped to his feet. “You can’t talk to me like that! Mama, tell her she can’t!”

“I’m just giving you right back what you gave me—only I’m so sweet I stopped to put a nice shine on it first. You can thank me later!” She grabbed my

hand, grinning. “Come on, Carrie. We got chores to do!” Then we were flying out the door, Mrs. Hurston’s laughter ringing behind us.

Zora skipped out the gate, then broke into a run. “Faster we get to Mr. Clarke’s store, faster we get to Mr. Polk. And John can go suck an egg while he’s waiting on those nails!”

Coming up the dusty road to Mr. Joe Clarke’s porch, we saw a fine horse and wagon out front, the kind we usually saw only in Lake Maitland or Winter Park, or just passing through. It being fairly early yet, the porch had only three men instead of the usual full afternoon chorus. There was Mr. Chester Cools, Mr. Bertram Edges, and Mr. Luke Slayton.

“How much you want to bet that wagon cost way past a hundred dollars brand-new?”

“Come on, Luke. There ain’t no wagon worth a hundred dollars, no how. I don’t care how shiny they make it.”

“Are you kidding me? The harness alone had to cost twenty-five dollars if it cost a penny!”

“Tell you what, if I had twenty-five dollars, I would not be spending it on no harness!”

“Why, hello, girls!” Mr. Cools, who had a little

farm out by the railroad tracks, always greeted us with a big old grin.

“Morning, Zora. Morning, Carrie,” said Mr. Slayton. “What you think of my new horse and buggy? I just bought ’em for two hundred silver dollars—and that was a bargain!” Mr. Slayton could see the funny side of anything and anyone, make you laugh at yourself or him or both, and splash cold water on a hot temper about to combust. Unfortunately, he mostly needed to use that power when tempers were about to combust on him. Mr. Slayton was an incorrigible gambler. He would bet on anything just for the thrill of betting, and, like as not, he’d pick the losing gamble. He owed money to near on every man in Eatonville. When one of his creditors got to where he wouldn’t be put off another day, Mr. Slayton would borrow money from a more patient creditor to pay him off. He had four kids, all small and skinny as scarecrows because, no matter how much Mr. Slayton worked, his pay never seemed to make it all the way home. And then there was poor Mrs. Slayton. We called her that because she was married to Mr. Slayton and had to raise four scarecrows on account of his bad ways. She was as silent as he was voluble; the only words we ever heard her say were “I thank you for

your kindness,” which she said every time someone couldn’t stand the thought of her and those kids wasting away and had brought her a tin of milk or a sack of cornmeal or a hunk of fatback. When Mr. Slayton’s sense of humor wasn’t enough to stay the anger of an impatient creditor, it was probably only the thought of poor Mrs. Slayton and the scarecrow kids that kept him from getting rode out of town—or worse.

Mr. Edges, the town blacksmith and mechanic, was the only man in Eatonville who was serious all the time. If you said, “Hot as the devil today, ain’t it, Mr. Edges?” he would stop what he was doing, think on your words, and say something like, “It is hot. I grant you that.” Leaving you to fill in for yourself the rest of the thought: *Well, now, “as hot as the devil.” Now, that’s just an exaggeration, obviously . . .* He and Mrs. Edges never had kids, but they were sweeter to us kids than any parent, and they were probably responsible for half the vittles that made their way to poor Mrs. Slayton’s table.

Mr. Slayton now regaled us with the details of his imagined wealth.

“See this horse?” Mr. Slayton said to us. “This is an Arabian horse. I had it shipped to Eatonville straight from Arabia.”