

NAFISSA THOMPSON-SPIRES:

HEADS OF THE COLORED PEOPLE

(2018)

## WASH CLEAN THE BONES

**A**lma kept her eyes shut as she sang inside the church and later at the burial site. There was something about a closed casket that made her anxious, left too many gaps for her imagination to fill in. She tried to focus on her song. Thirteen. The boy was the same age as the number of bullet holes in his body, from head to torso.

The January wind whipped around her cheekbones but did not dry her sweat. She dabbed at her forehead with her silk scarf and caught her breath and sat in the white chair marked with her name. She did not feel her usual release at the pronunciation of "going up yonder," nor did the deep guttural sounds purge her grief. This was her fifth funeral in two months. Watching the pallbearers place white roses onto the silver casket, she felt guilty, suddenly, that she should be paid for participating in this intimacy. She didn't know this boy, though she knew three of the others she had sung for recently. Her fees kept her and baby Ralph outfitted in insulated winter coats, including the navy dress coat and matching beret she wore that day. Composed on the outside, inside she was falling apart. Her pelvis hurt; sweat dripped around the hairline of her best wig, and she couldn't

warm herself inside the church or out on the sunlit lawn near the hole where they placed the boy and his box with finality.

"You sang," Bette, Alma's coworker from the hospital, said, meeting her with baby Ralph near the last row of chairs. "It was a nice service, lovely florals. And you sang."

The boy's mother, Mrs. Madison, approached and gripped Alma's hand silently, nodding approval before she departed with the rest of her family in the recessional line. She and her husband were in their early forties, and the boy was, or had been, their second-born son of four kids.

"Beautiful job. We'll see you at the house for the repast," a tall man, one of the uncles or cousins who helped with the burial, said from the moving line.

Alma smiled. She had worked the crowd; that was her gift, ironing out their sleepless stirring from the night before, if only temporarily. She performed "See You When I Get There" along with standard funeral fare. The boy's parents specifically requested that she avoid "I Believe I Can Fly." Funeral singing required the same skills she used to soothe friends in waiting rooms or console husbands at the bedsides of their wives. The crowd had "mmhmd" and "amen" and sung along with "Since I Laid My Burdens Down" and waved their respective right hands in agreement with "sick and tired of being sick and tired." It had been a dignified funeral, without loud wailing or weeping, but something about the lack of the usual tensions—the absence of wailing or obvious signs of physical trauma—made Alma feel sick, the cold bloating her stomach like a fibroid, tying knots around her knots like so many adhesions.

The medications had caused her to gain twenty pounds in

two months, on top of the baby weight she hadn't lost from Ralph, and her original face floated in her new face. The gonadotropin and antidepressants her OB-GYN and colleague Dr. Brown prescribed weren't working to ease her pains, but she took them anyway to feel like she was doing something. She woke up drenched in cold sweats, kept fresh sheets and a clean gown in the nightstand next to her bed for 3:00 a.m. changes, could time the palpitations in her chest and the pains around her hip bones. They had induced early menopause at thirty-five to stop the growths, and these symptoms she had anticipated. What she didn't expect was the intensity of the night terrors, keeping her up after the sweats dried, creeping into her waking hours. And what was she to do about the baby, draped over Bette's shoulder, who was also sick and tired of being sick and tired and whose snot had caked and crusted around both of his nostrils so that all he could do was wheeze from his mouth, the baby who was appearing more frequently in her terrors?

"Let's get out of here," she told Bette.

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At the diner on Ashland, Alma and Bette settled into a booth and sat Ralph perpendicular to the table in a high chair. He whimpered, and Alma gave him the box of sugar and sugar alternatives to play with.

"You get his nose checked yet?" Bette said, stirring creamer into her coffee. She was a year older than Alma with no children of her own and often babysat Ralph when their shifts in the critical care ward didn't overlap.

"Same old thing," Alma said, staring into her tea.

Bette was saying something about how cute Ralph was and how his little dress shirt and burgundy tie made him look like an old man and how she could just eat him up.

You could have him, Alma thought. Then she said it out loud. "You could have him."

"And I would take him, too," Bette cooed at Ralph. "Yes I would, yes I would." She reached for one of the yellow sweetener packets, which Ralph had spread out on the high-chair tray. He grunted at her, snatching it back. "Be nice, Ralphie." Her voice sounded like the pink packets. "Be nice to Auntie Bette."

Alma made her own voice go high and light to affect the air of a hypothetical question. "But what would you do if I just left him, like at your doorstep?" She laughed a little.

Bette stopped smiling as she worked a packet out of Ralph's fingers, quickly emptied it into her coffee, and returned it to him. "I would take him, but I'd be concerned. What is it, Alma, the funeral, the funerals?"

"But how would you keep him safe?" Alma said.

"We live in a good neighborhood," Bette said, the other half of "we" referring to her husband, Justin. "Heck, you live in a good neighborhood."

"But how would you protect him?" Alma said.

"To the best of my ability," Bette started, but she finished with, "Maybe we should get back so you can get some rest. It's been a long week. I can take Ralph for the evening if you need a break."

Alma shook her head.

When they parted, Bette gave Ralph an extra hug and a "Be nice to Mama, sweetie," and said she would check in on Alma later.

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In the terror from two nights before, Alma's brother Terry appeared with the boy from room 26, playing a guitar duet and singing a mish-mash of Terry's favorite old songs. Patches of dried blood checked the boy's faded green hospital gown like gunshot wounds, and though his dark skin looked pallid in the fluorescent lights of the room, he played the electric guitar vigorously, howling with demented fervor.

*Oh, what's a man to do?*

*What's a man to do*

*If I can't have you?*

*If I cant—*

They sang with none of Terry's typical levity when reciting the medley, their faces angry. The boy put his guitar down suddenly, and reaching into the breast pocket of his gown, pulled out a scalpel and approached Alma.

"I'm going to make an incision on your right side from about here to here," the boy said, pointing from one of his narrow hips to the other. "I'm going to pull you out a baby, name him something old-fashioned, like Ralph."

Alma looked to Terry for help, but he lay in the boy's bed with his eyes closed and his hands clasped together, as he had in his coffin. She tried to scream, but all that came out was a song. The nightmare ended abruptly with Alma drenched in her own blood, but when she touched her hips, there was only sweat.

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Alma carried Ralph into her apartment, which overlooked a small man-made lake, and took off his coat. Ralph, eighteen months

old and stocky, had stuffed four yellow and two pink sweetener packets into his pockets. He clutched a red coffee straw the entire ride home and even now in the house, and while she undressed him and wrestled with his nose and the aspirator, he sang in shrill but contented tones. "Go play with some of your toys, Ralphie," Alma said after she changed his diaper. She left the door to his bedroom cracked and settled into the eat-in kitchen.

Bette would think she was crazy; she should have told her about the lack of sleep, at least from the medication. The night terrors she would keep to herself. Terry frequently visited her in them, but increasingly lately so did her patients from the critical care unit, and even trauma patients she'd only heard about in the hallways but didn't actually work with were making appearances. They—Alma, her mother, her sister, Lisette, and Terry's girlfriend, Katrina—had buried Terry seven years ago at age twenty-nine after a shoot-out with the police. That was the term the papers had used, "shoot-out," but Terry had been unarmed. The legal cases were closed, his casket open, his nighttime visitations to Alma frequent but no longer alarming. He didn't seem to be trying to tell her anything she didn't already know about the circumstances of his death. She kept a piece of his femur wrapped in acid-free parchment in the downstairs closet. She had washed it clean herself, a personal request she had made of the coroner. Her mother and sister and Katrina had kept his other remains, clothes, books, guitars.

But why was he visiting with the children, the ones from the hospital? Three weeks earlier, it had been the boy who ran in front of the police car, two months ago a girl whose brother was playing with their mother's gun.

Ralph cried from behind the cracked door, wanting her to pick him up. And though he could walk—he was just stubborn—Alma picked him up and carried him into the family room, presenting him with two shortbread cookies and a paper plate full of cheese crackers.

Alma used to imagine her life something like sensual, frets and strings and wires that in the right combinations produced beautiful chords, slow, whining blues. Now it was also shrieks in the middle of the night and whimpering at a moment's notice. It was all bodies—the ones that came into her unit with bullet holes, kids as young as eleven and twelve, hoodies soaked—and the ones dressed for the funerals, their holes plugged and covered with their finest dress clothes, often purchased at the last minute by mothers struggling to keep spaghetti noodles with butter on the table.

When Alma first started at the hospital, some of the nurses taught her to pray for the children according to severity. A level one meant pray that the child would be well; level two meant pray for decreased pain. Alma was slow to understand level three—praying that the children would die, that mercy and grace would shorten their suffering—but she had come around to it a few months into her job, when the boy with the shattered face was wheeled in. His mother's eyes convinced Alma that sometimes you suffered more the longer you lived.

THERE WERE SO many bodies in Alma's everyday life, even Ralph's undersize one, alternately leaky then stopped up with bronchitis, bronchial infections, chronic sinus congestion that colored his nostrils green and yellow and made him throw up in the

middle of the night to keep from suffocating. Alma would bathe him and try to go back to sleep, grateful that he hadn't choked.

THE PHONE RANG, and Alma debated ignoring Bette's call before she answered it.

"I'm okay," she insisted when Bette offered to come over. "I'm going to get us ready for bed early and enjoy my day off before it's over."

His birth certificate read Ralph Boaz Parr, but Alma called him her Samuel, because while her womb was still contorted around her bowel, she promised the Lord that if He blessed her with a child, she would offer the baby back up to Him. After two laparoscopic surgeries—one to remove a six-centimeter fibroid with teeth and hair—a D&C, and a round of fertility treatments, she conceived Ralph with the help of her friend Danny, who'd agreed to serve as a sperm donor but not a parent, as a father but not a dad. That was fine with Alma, then. Now the adhesions were back—she could feel them pull in her left side—and Alma took the drugs to delay another surgery. She wondered what might have happened if she had chosen to have a baby the traditional way, if Danny had been the dad, even the husband, and not just the father. She might have more support, or maybe Danny, finding the caretaking of Alma and Ralph unbearable, might have left her as alone as she was now.

Ralph had worn a white suit and bonnet to his christening, which Danny did attend, three months earlier, around the time the night terrors intensified. At the christening they hadn't fully immersed Ralph but sprinkled him with water and anointed his head with blessed oil, in the Pentecostal tradition. Alma kept a

portion of the blessed olive oil in a narrow glass bottle etched with swirls under her bathroom sink.

Alma didn't go as far as her mother in her use of blessed oil. Her mother applied it to the posts of the house, walked around muttering incantations, and suggested that the baby could use a dab on his forehead if he started to act fussy. Still, for her performances, Alma anointed her own head with oil and said a quick prayer that she would, in humility, comfort these families and friends, that they would remember the encouragement of the lyrics, and be settled by the melodies. Without the oil—though she couldn't be sure of any of this—her performances seemed less palliating, and left grit in what should be salve. It's not that her songs sounded any less beautiful, but after she sang without the anointing, the families smiled at her and clasped her hands as though she were the one who needed consoling. Yes, she must have forgotten to use the oil before she sang her set at the Madison boy's funeral. That must be why, despite their compliments, she felt so unsettled.

"Let's get you in the bath," Alma said, turning on some music and carrying Ralph to the second bathroom.

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That night, she applied castor oil to her abdomen, starting with her right side, massaging the liver, and working her way down her belly to each hip and then back to her flanks. As with the blessed oil, her body reminded her when she forgot to complete the ritual. The toxins seemed to accumulate faster, her digestion became sluggish, and the pain—which never fully left but liked to remind her it could become worse—wrenched around in her abdominal and pelvic cavities. The castor oil packs were supposed to shrink all the growths, the Internet said, and despite



her research training and her misgivings, Alma coated herself with the cold, viscous oil each night and waited for signs of improvement. She laid a heating pad over herself and wrapped her torso in old cloths. The oil stained her sheets anyway, leaving a thick smell behind. That was her life, the residues you could wash out and the ones you couldn't.

She didn't sleep. She could never sleep after performances, no matter how well they went and especially now. She anticipated Terry and thought the Madison boy, under the lid of the casket, would accompany him. But it was Ralph who appeared with Terry in the terror this time, not singing but crying with a gravely voice, "How will you keep me safe?" His face and clothes were soaked, as though someone had submerged him in water.

Alma got up and checked on Ralph, who lay wheezing softly in his crib. When she returned to her room, she knelt at her bedside and said an extra round of prayers. She turned her television on mute and played music from her phone with the volume low. She sat upright in her bed and worried over her shift four hours away, her life, her pelvis.

WHEN ALMA STARTED as a wedding singer, single and childless, business was slow, but it was her passion, not just a side hustle; she didn't need the money. Some of her clients—who learned about her through word of mouth at the hospital and the sample CD she passed out during consultations—found her riffs and runs too much for the occasion, preferring something more Episcopalian than Church of God in Christ on their special day. As a funeral singer, she had more gigs than she wanted and paid for

the fertility treatments on her own with the profits, though it seemed wrong to call them that.

Her sister and mother couldn't understand why Alma would go through the rigorous treatments to prep her womb only to be a single parent. But they never brought up the untraditional means by which Ralph was conceived once they saw "that precious baby boy, looking just like his uncle Terry."

Even detached as he was from her uterus, and even with her solid network of supportive family and friends, Ralph felt sometimes to Alma like another adhesion, a growth on her future happiness.

Alma gave up on sleep and sat in the kitchen after she sensed Terry and Ralph coming to her once more. It was still dark out, and the lake rippled under a distant streetlamp. She checked on Ralph in his crib again. His diaper and the bottom half of his onesie were soggy, and something white and oozy curdled around his chest. Alma thought she might cry as she made her way to the second bathroom and drew a bath.

She should call Bette or maybe the hospital, or even her mother.

She did not pause to pull the baby tub that sat inside the larger one out of the cabinet. She ran water, testing the temperature with her elbow. She took Ralph from his crib, and he fussed and whimpered for a moment, then looked into her eyes as if to say, "Why did you wake me?"

She attempted to compose a text message in her mind, some sort of explanation or apology, but she couldn't settle on the right words. Ralph clapped his hands together before and after she

pulled his shirt over his head. She undressed him and then dressed him in a white linen suit she had bought for an upcoming vacation trip. She blessed his forehead with olive oil.

A song came to her, something Terry used to play on his acoustic guitar when she was six or seven. She would get ready for work when she finished with Ralph—she could work on less sleep than this—and tend to the boy in room 47, maybe pray a level three for him and a level two for herself.

When she covered Ralph's head with the warm water, she reasoned that at least it wasn't freezing. At least it was shallower than the plunge from the side of a slave ship. At least it was more comfortable than forcing him to float down the Nile in a woven basket. She dunked him once and counted to five. Had there been time for Terry to cry out as the bullets shattered his right leg, his chest? Would she preserve any part of Ralph? Their faces were blurring together. She wept in terror and allayed her guilt by singing soft phrases, "his bones will be unbroken," "there'll be no more crying there." She could do this—eleven, twelve, thirteen. By fourteen, doubt had begun to creep in. Shouldn't Ralph have a choice, now that he was already here? Who was she to snuff out his life for fear that someone else would? Would Terry want this for his nephew?

She yanked Ralph from the water, his eyes wide, her count long lost. She feared the damage was already irreparable and listened to his chest. Alma was frantic, but the muscle memory took over, and she began pumping for CPR. What if her baby did not wake up, and even then, would he be vegetative for the rest of his life?

She had only pumped once when Ralph gurgled, spat water, and cried. He was used to barely breathing.

Alma exhaled for the first time in months.

She didn't know how they would get through the night, let alone years; one or both of them might end up with their heads underwater some other day. For now, she would monitor Ralph and herself, perhaps call Bette. She gently pinched Ralph's chubby leg. She felt something like sunlight on her neck and torso, saw a hot flash of heaven or hope in that baby's wet face, and redressed him and herself for bed.