

One

Gran's vegetable garden has been a pure delight this year. I am sitting in the middle of it, and even though it is September, I am surrounded by bush beans and cucumbers and carrots and peppers and peas. We put the peas in early this year, Gran and me, so early that we had one good crop, and then we put in some more and had another good crop.

Gran, she is amazing, even if she has become a little forgetful. She can figure out how to do just about anything. And she can always see the good in people and situations, like in that song about accentuating

the positive and eliminating the negative. Sometimes when our radio is not on, I hear Gran making her own music in our kitchen. She sings, “You got to *ac-cent-tchu-ate* the positive, *e-lim-mi-nate* the negative, and latch *on* to the affirmative. Don’ mess with Mr. In Between . . .” Now me, I would sing at the top of my lungs, but Gran says that is not ladylike and she always sings nice and low and soft.

My journal is spread across my bare knees, but at this very moment I am not writing in it. My head is so stuffed full of birdsongs and insect music and thoughts about the last day of summer vacation that there is no room for concentrating on writing. Also, the sun is hot. Beating down hot. It has been one long, simmering summer. I don’t remember a summer quite like it, here in our hills. Mama and Gran and me, we sleep most nights with the windows wide open, not caring about all the flies and mosquitoes and no-see-ums that fly inside to escape the heat with us.

I wiggle my toes in the dirt and inspect a scab on my knee. I wish Mama was home for my last day of summer freedom, but she went into Coker Creek this morning to begin her new job. Mama, she starts jobs like I start library books — one right after the other.

I think she is overlooking one of the key things about having a job, which is sticking with it. A library book is meant to be finished, but a job is meant to be stuck with. Mama means well, though. She just wants more for our family.

Our family has been Mama and Gran and me for as long as I can remember. Daddy, he died before I turned one, and Grandpop was gone before Mama married Daddy. But Mama and Gran and me make a very cozy family. And I like a family that is all women. Me and Gran are real close. We spend a lot of time together, since apart from switching jobs so frequently, Mama also usually works two to three jobs all at once, depending on the time of year. Waitressing, bartending, whatever she can find. This new job in Coker Creek, it's a maid's job, at that motel off Old Route 28, at the edge of town. If I know Mama, it won't satisfy her for long.

I pat my stomach. It is full from the lunch Gran just made. Also it is on the puffy side. I have increased in size over the summer. I wonder how I am going to fit into my first-day-of-school dress, which was also my last-day-of-school dress in June. Oh, well. I am not going to dwell on that. I am going to eliminate the

negative. I believe I'll head on over to Clarice's house for the rest of the afternoon. I have done all my chores except for the evening ones, and anyway Gran, she has already said, "Belle Teal, you just enjoy today. Tomorrow your school responsibilities start again." Actually, she said that twice this morning, the second time with almost the exact same words she used the first time around, as if she didn't remember she had just said them half an hour before.

I ease back inside our little house and hide the journal under my mattress. Then I slip off my dirty shorts and pull on a pair of jeans. "Gran," I say as I poke my head in the kitchen, "I'm going to Clarice's."

Gran is mixing batter for corn bread. She is at the table, and the kitchen is so hot, I think I could suffocate in it. I can feel sweat forming under my hair and starting to slide down my forehead. But Gran stands there looking all tidy and cool-like. I hear her humming a tune I recognize as "G.I. Jive."

"Gran?" I say again. "I'm going to Clarice's."

Gran emerges from some kind of fog in her head. "Okay. Home by dinner . . . honey."

For just a second I have this spooky feeling that she might have forgotten my name. But I shoo the

thought aside and run out our door, across our yard, and down to the dirt road. It's a two-mile walk to Clarice's, and I haven't bothered with shoes. By this time of summer the soles of my feet are so hard, I wouldn't need shoes for anything but warmth, and that is not an issue.

Clarice, she once told me she sometimes gets bored on the walk between our houses if she is alone. I can't imagine that. I always use the walk for thinking. Today I am thinking about tomorrow — about the first day of fifth grade at Coker Creek Elementary, the new colored students, and wonderful Miss Casey.

Clarice and me, we have been best friends since the beginning of kindergarten, which was way back in 1957. And we have been waiting since 1959 for Miss Casey to be our teacher. We have wished for her since the moment we set eyes on her, her first day at Coker Creek, when she arrived at school all dressed up and smelling of perfume that was probably from the country of France. None of the other teachers looked like Miss Casey. Or smelled like her. I fell in love with Miss Casey that day.

I walk along the dirt road, trying to avoid the bigger rocks, watching as grasshoppers zip ahead of me

in the heated air. This is the easy part of the walk, going down our hill. Coming back from Clarice's will be another story. Tomorrow I will cover part of this trip on the school bus. I wonder if any of the new colored students will be on our bus route. I don't see how, but you never know.

It's funny. The only thing me and Clarice have been able to wrap our minds around this summer is the joyful thought of sitting in Miss Casey's class for a whole year. The only thing most other folks have wrapped their minds around is the notion of letting the Negro children into our school. So far those students have been going to the colored school over in Peapack, but starting this year, some of them will be coming to Coker Creek. It makes more sense. Coker Creek Elementary is much closer to those kids' homes than the school in Peapack is.

Mama says, "You be nice to those children, Belle Teal. They'll want to see smiling faces."

Why wouldn't I be nice to new students?

The road widens slightly toward the bottom of the hill. And when it meets up with Route 518, which if you turned left on it, would take you into the center of Coker Creek, it becomes a paved road. I cross 518

and soon I reach Clarice's father's auto body shop and then Miss Wanda's beauty salon, where sometimes I stop in for a grape soda and a chat with Miss Wanda. And then one, two, three houses, and there's Clarice's.

Clarice Baker meets me at the screen door before I even get to the top of the wooden steps. Those steps are painted a deep green, which I think is a lovely color, as lovely as the rest of Clarice's house. I wouldn't ever want to live anywhere except in our house in the hills with Mama and Gran, but there is something delicious about the Bakers' home. I step inside, into the dark coolness. Our house sits in a clearing and the sun beats down on it all day long. Clarice's house is surrounded by big shade trees, and in the summer the ceiling fans, one in almost every room, turn slowly, stirring the air.

Clarice and me, we step into the living room and the first thing I set my eyes on is the television. The Bakers got it almost three years ago. It is some invention. I have learned so much about life from what I have seen on it.

"Hey, Belle Teal," calls Clarice's sister from the kitchen.

“Hey, Shari,” I reply. Shari is fifteen and will be a sophomore in high school.

“You ready for school tomorrow?” she asks. She is sitting at the table, putting pink nail polish on her fingers.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I reply.

“Do you girls want any help with your outfits?”

I glance at Clarice. “Well, no, I guess not. I think we’re all set.”

Now Shari, she is sweet to be so nice to Clarice and me. She always offers to help us with our looks, and I know she could do a good job because she is a real fashion plate herself. She is pretty and has a chest that she needs to contain with a bra, and boys call her on the phone all the time.

Me and Clarice never take her up on her offers of fashion help, but Shari doesn’t seem to mind.

“Want a Coke?” Clarice asks me.

“Yes, thanks,” I reply, all polite, since Shari is sitting there.

Clarice snags two bottles from the refrigerator and we take them back into the living room, where we sprawl on the floor.

“Is it time for *The Edge of Night*?” I ask.

“Not quite. I’ll fill you in on the last few days.”

Clarice watches *The Edge of Night* and *As the World Turns* as often as she can. I am not as interested in *As the World Turns*, but *The Edge of Night*, now that is really something. When Sarah Lane Karr died while saving her daughter, well, Clarice and me were breathless. We talked about it for days.

Four-thirty finally rolls around and the show starts. Shari rushes in from the kitchen, waving her fingers in the air so’s to dry her nails, and Mrs. Baker hurries inside from the back garden, where she has been weeding in her straw hat. We all sit absolutely silently for one half hour, until five o’clock when the show ends and we can breathe again. Clarice and me have been grasping hands, and now we let go and wipe off the sweat on our jeans. Those Karrs are quite a family.

Shari switches off the television and a few minutes later Mr. Baker steps through the front door, kind of grimy from his day at the auto shop.

“Hello, Bakers!” he greets us, and he means me as well as the others. He says he considers me an honorary Baker and his third daughter.

“Hello!” we all reply.

“Mama, can Belle Teal stay for dinner?” asks Clarice, even though she knows she isn’t supposed to ask right in front of me in case her mother doesn’t want a guest for some reason.

Before Mrs. Baker can answer, though, I say, “Thanks, but I better get on home. I don’t want Gran to have to eat alone.”

“Where’s your mama at?” Shari wants to know.

“New job,” I tell her.

Nobody asks any questions. They are used to Mama.

I stand up. “Thank you for the Coke,” I say. “See you in the morning, Clarice.”

“I’ll save you a seat on the bus,” she replies.

“You all are going to have some day tomorrow,” says Shari thoughtfully. “I wonder if any of those Negro children will be on your bus.”

Mr. Baker sits down on the couch next to Mrs. Baker. “Doesn’t matter whether they’re Negro children or not, Shari,” he says. “They’re all just children.”

Mr. Baker says this so gentle that it doesn’t sound like a scolding.

I scoot out the door then and begin the walk back home.