

GOD'S WILL

Maybe it is the lull of evening creeping into my aging bones evoking memories of Bessie. Or perhaps it's the chilled air whistling through these drafty windows quickening my sense of loss and loneliness. Gone are the moments my childhood friend filled with laughter and strangeness.

I sit in my chair facing the decay of what once was Bessie's home thinking about the marvelous mornings we shared on our way to do maid's work across town. With the deftness of a seasoned seamstress, Bessie weaved the mosaic pieces of her nighttime journeys into blankets of answered prayer. I remember our last ride together before she was fired.

"Hurtha, I had a real strange one last night, but I've figured out how to help Alma Dean. You remember her? She lives on Bottom Road down near the creek," said Bessie.

"Bessie, I know Alma Dean. What's her problem now? That child hasn't had anything but trouble since she was born."

"Well, she came to me a couple of weeks back and asked if I could dream her some help. You know she lost her oldest son to a machine accident out on Clayton Farm. He'd been her only help since her husband up and left.

"Hell, we all need help. Remember, when we stopped going to grade school because we were tired of our shoes flapping all the way there and back. Shoot, things aren't too much better now. Every time I think it's going get better cause of Dr. Martin Luther King, I see another sister with a broke back from carry the entire world on her shoulders. Only good news is we ain't slaves anymore or so they keep saying."

“Hurtha, you want to hear the dream or not? It’ll be my time to get off soon.”

“Yeah, you know I do.”

“There were five black winged horses standing in front of three houses. One house was real fine and big, another was medium size and sturdy and the last one was a shack, just like Alma Dean’s. Two suns were shining in the sky when one horse flew over to the shack and pooped right in front of it. A farmer came by and scooped it up and spread it in the field. All of a sudden, little pots of gold started popping up. I’m figuring Alma Dean needs to get her a little money together and play the numbers 5321.”

Bessie went on to tell me how she came up with the numbers before she got off the bus that day. Five horses, three houses, two suns’ and one farmer was a winning combination for Alma Dean. She hit the numbers, 5321, opened up her own little dress shop in town, and bought her and them kids’ a real nice house. Alma Dean was just one of many helped by Bessie’s dreams.

Whether her dreams came from her own sleeping mind or were the result of divine intervention is anybody’s guess. The fact that they were a special gift was undeniable. She was the one everybody sought, even more than the preacher man, when things went real wrong. In this town she was a legend for freeing folks from worry, pain, poverty or whatever kind of sorrow presents itself to poor folk all the time.

It was the commotion surrounding the naming of Bessie’s last living child that turned her life inside out. Let me start by saying, the naming of Bessie’s children was not within her control. You see, every time Bessie got pregnant she stopped dreaming for the nine months except the night before the births, when she’d have a nightmare. Out of those night terrors came the names of her children, Anna, Othello, Zulu W (the W stood for warrior), and Mary

Magdalene. Her husband, Will, always went along with the naming process because he'd believed in Bessie and her dreams. However, when their minister and his constipated congregation heard about Mary Magdalene's naming, all hell broke loose. Downright sacrilegious they screamed. They refused to have the child baptized and Will told Bessie that they'd have to change the child's name. She adamantly stated that if they altered the name in any way, they'd be spitting in God's face. After that Will changed.

He became mean and sullen. Will took to drinking hard, occasionally beating up on Bessie and eventually staying out all night until he left for good. Bessie never talked to me about those beatings. I tried to tell her she needed to dream herself out of that mess, but she told me a gift is for giving, not keeping. I begged her to either throw him out or move in with me, but she said we all have our crosses to bear. Through it all, as if in absolute defiance, her dreams became even more vivid.

Not long after the beatings started, Bessie got fired from her employer, Mrs. Wilson. She said she couldn't have anyone working for her that looked like something the cat dragged in. A short time after that she found out she was pregnant and her dreaming stopped. Isn't it incredible how some men can still perform physical love with someone they've beaten to a pulp and not vomit from the experience?

That pregnancy was brutal for Bessie. She was always sick, so Doc Simmons confined her to bedrest. She'd laugh telling me how it was such a waste to spend so much time in bed and not be able to dream. Will stayed away completely, started living with some young girl across town. He never spoke to Bessie, after he found out she was pregnant, and Bessie never spoke about him.

. It was the most precious time I'd ever spent with my friend. I'd race over to her house after work and sit by her bed as we went over some of our favorite dreams. Despite the still dark waters surrounding her life, buried treasures floated to the surface, untarnished and undaunted.

I was there the night Doc Simmons pulled the mangled dead baby from her womb. I cried so hard the doctor told me to go home and let Anna watch over her. As I turned to leave the room, Bessie called out to me. "I didn't have a nightmare this time Hurtha. I had a dream. Know what the baby's name is?" Staring into her watery brown eyes, I said, "What Bessie?" She responded, "God's Will, God's Will Watson". I took the wrapped child and sat out on the porch rocking until the doctor took the baby away. There are a lot of things in this world that don't make any sense, but why this woman enduring so much pain after giving so much joy was one damned important question I was determined to ask God on judgment day.

Bessie didn't recover like after the other births. She walked with a slight limp and overnight her dark brown hair turned a static snow white, framing her ashen face. She was a forty-five-year old woman who looked every bit of seventy. I would often see her roaming through her backyard like she was in one long prayer session. I never bothered her, it'd be like walking up to a someone at the altar.

One-day after Christmas, Will banged on my door yelling at me about Bessie's whereabouts. He said the kids told him she'd disappeared. I told him I'd just got back from a weeklong visit with my son and his family in Washington, DC and hadn't been over there yet. He screamed at me, "When's the last time you seen her". I closed the door, after I told him the last time I talked to Bessie was last Friday afternoon. I wish you could have seen that fool standing in front of my closed door calling Bessie a "crazynogoodtriflinbitch". I hollered out my window that I would call the police, if he didn't get on his way.

Sitting in my rocking chair after he left, same one I'm sitting in right now, I smiled and rocked thinking about what Bessie told me about the dream she'd had the night before I left. She said she saw herself lying in water wearing a purple gown piped in gold being baptized by a flaming red hair woman in a white robe. Bessie said she'd never felt such a feeling of pure joy as she did waking from that dream. She told me she hadn't figured out what it meant, but she was working on it. I figured it meant a nice refreshing rest was coming to her. God knows she needed one with a fool like Will trying to hold her down, sucking out her life force.

At seventeen, Anna was old enough to care for the younger ones, so she went out and got a job washing clothes, while she waited for her mother to return. I stopped smiling when Anna told me her Momma had just disappeared without a word. Bessie loved those children and I knew she wouldn't just leave them without some instructions. I mothered them as best I could, but it wasn't the same for them or me, we missed her so much.

That following spring she still hadn't returned, and the sheriff kept giving us the same "no news" answer. Without Bessie, I didn't have much reason to move about with any vitality. Worry and loneliness kept me to my bed for a full week after Bessie left. Mrs. Sanderson, my employer was clamoring for me to pick up my pace, but I just ignored her until my boy said it was time for me to stop cleaning other people's houses, stop worrying about Miss Bessie and concentrate on myself. So, I quit and let him help me with getting my GED and enroll me at the City College. At first, I told him I was too old to go to school, but he threw my own words back at me and said, "You're never too old to learn something new". School turned out to be what I needed to occupy my mind, instead of rocking with my constant wondering if Bessie was all right, and if she was still dreaming.

On my way home from putting flowers on God's Will's grave sometime in early April, after winter's thaw, I saw a commotion down near Ambrosia River. Averill Johnson, the sheriff, Lacey Johnson's oldest son, was with a whole bunch of officers standing near the edge of the water. A growing crowd of onlookers drew me closer to where I could see them pulling something out of the river. Chatty Emma Evans ran past me shouting they'd found a body. A streak of dread struck me out of the clear blue sky and I began to cry on the spot. I knew before seeing that it was Bessie. I knew before I heard about the body with no eyes, bloated skin and white hair in a tattered purple dress that her dream had lead her to the water.

Bessie's children left a few weeks after the funeral. Anna married Rebecca Sammons son and they moved to Norfolk, Virginia. She took the other children with her. I tried to tend to her yard and clean the abandoned house that the town folks had begun to call cursed. Neighborhood kids spent many hours throwing everything imaginable into Bessie's yard and house. Finally, after repeated calls and threats of setting it on fire, the town officials came out and boarded it up, since Will had let it go to taxes. Too many reminders of the kind of man he'd become.

After five years, the last visible signs of my beloved friend have been replaced by shattering false laughter and alcohol induced apparitions of a seedy bar and grill. Tattered curtains blow through the open windows of the second floor like obscene specters of fate. The pleasure palace is what they call it. The irony does not escape me.

Tomorrow is moving day for me. I am leaving to live with my son and his family. I've graduated from college with a degree in English Literature. It took a while, but it's mine and nobody can take it from me. I became something of a guru with the young college kids telling them my stories of Bessie and her dreams. I started my own writing circle and one day I'm

going to write a book about her. I feel like I've got to pass on Bessie dreams and what they meant to people. It's my gift to Bessie. I understand what she meant about gifts being for the benefit of others.

Now, mind you I'm not one for dreaming, but every time I close my eyes at night, I wait for Bessie to appear to tell me that God does exist, and heaven is just like a dream.