

A Long Line of Women
(an excerpt)
by
MJ Perrin

CAST

NYA, an African-American female; 17ish.

CHARLOTTE/MOMMA, an African-American female, Nya's mother; early 40's.

DR. LI, an Asian-American female, Nya's psychiatrist at the hospital; 30's.

PEARL/GRANNY, an African-American female, Nya's grandmother; 60's.

INTRODUCTION

This excerpt takes place when Nya, who is under a 72-hour suicide watch, is in a session with Dr. Li, the psychiatrist there. This begins with the stage direction introducing the conversation. It is part of the play's structure to have sapient text inherent to the stage directions offering insight for the scene and characters.

We try to maneuver through our hurt and pain using a light that shines barely enough to show us where we're going. This is problematic because we constantly trip over what we're trying to step around.

NYA's session with DR. LI is a chance to shed some light on what has been kept dark for years.

DR. LI

Tell me about your grandmother. She played a big role in your life. Even when you weren't living with her. What makes your feelings about her so strong?

NYA

She's the cage.

The ghost of a younger GRANNY appears, behind the scrim sitting in a rocking chair, working on a quilt.

DR. LI

Can you give me context for that?

GRANNY

Come here girl, let me tell you 'bout who you are.

NYA

She would tell us these stories. Well, try to anyway.

GRANNY

Yo momma, she don't want me telling you stories 'bout yo family history, but I think you old enuf, that you should hear this one.

NYA

It was hard figuring out what to do. Sometimes when Granny came over, I would hide.

GRANNY

Come on girl and hurry it up.

NYA

It was never a good situation. I'd get in trouble with my mother if I listened to Granny. Or I'd get in trouble with my grandmother if I didn't come like she told me. One-way-or-another, I was gonna get into trouble.

GRANNY

It's one story I'm telling you, but it's the most important one of 'em all. Now come here and let me tell you it.

NYA

Yes ma'am.

GRANNY

This here is a story about a bird, a slave master, his wife and a gentleman. On occasions, the Master would slink on down to the chicken coup, grab hold of his favorite bird and then enjoy himself. Now mind you, she fought with him, even though it seemed he liked it more when she did. But she couldn't help it, 'cause it was in her blood to fight. (beat) Do you know what I'm talking 'bout, girl?

NYA

The chicken knew he was gonna cook her, so she tried to get away from him.

GRANNY

No, girl, that ain't it. The Master had a favorite female slave he would use for his pleasure. He would force her to lay with him. You understand me now?

NYA

I think so.

GRANNY

All right then. Now, the Missay, that there's the Master's wife, when she see'd how the bird's sweat was capturing the sun, reflecting off her rich dark skin, causing her clothes to cling tight to her body, she couldn't help but turn evil. She demanded the Master put that "damn niggra whore" on the block. You remember me telling you what we were called back then and what the block was?

NYA

I remember.

GRANNY

So to quiet her down, he sold the bird to a gentleman passing on through who said he couldn't help but stop, cusin' she was such a fine-looking niggra girl. The next day, the gentleman stops by to see the Master, thinking he might buy himself another slave or two. But the Master didn't wanna sell no mo'e slaves. The gentleman tells 'em he's going up north to set the pretty bird free. Well, the Master got awfully mad at the Missay for making him sell his prize bird only to have it set free. And the Missay, she's turning red as a beet, cusin' the damn niggra whore she wanted gone, was gonna get freed. As the gentleman went on his way, the bird turns around and... what do you think that bird did?

NYA

She became a crow so she could fly away free.

GRANNY

No Nya. She ain't turn into no crow. What she did was turn around and wave bye to the Missay, smiling the biggest smile she could with all her teeth showing, cusin' it was a happy day for her. And that there was yo great, great, great grandmother. The gentleman was an abolitionist. I know you know what that means. The two of 'em were part of the underground railroad helping other slaves find their freedom. She's the start of this here family line. And ever since, there's been strong women keeping it going. Now it's yo turn. Be a strong woman, hear me? It's in yo blood to fight for family, for kin, for ancestors. Don't you ever forget that.

NYA

Yes, ma'am.

DR. LI

Did you like hearing the stories?

NYA

She only got to tell me a few of 'em and they were okay.

DR. LI

Did your mother tell you stories too?

NYA

No way. She refused to do anything like Granny. If Granny did something one way, Momma was sure to do it the opposite way. That's why they always fought.

The memories become more intertwined with reality, allowing NYA to go back and forth freely; it's an evolving state of transitions.

This memory is Nya's childhood, around 8. She's in the front yard when MOMMA enters.

MOMMA

Nya, you to stay out here and play.

NYA

Why momma?

MOMMA

Just do what I tell you.

It's a strange state to be in when you feel compelled to do something you know is unwise. For NYA it's the compulsion to listen to what she knows will be ugly.

MOMMA

I hear you been telling Nya yo stories. I dun told you enuf times not to fill her head with that shit.

GRANNY

The history of this family, that's what you call it? Shit?

MOMMA

Yeah, momma, that's what it is. It's old shit that you need to quit telling. Them stories don't do nobody no good.

GRANNY

You got no respect. Not for me, or the women of this family, or yo'self. Is this what you gonna teach Nya? To disrespect what's in her blood?

MOMMA

Oh my god, you can't help yo'self. Believe me momma, our blood ain't nuthin special. Women been strong ever since man first laid his hands on her.

GRANNY

That's where you wrong. This blood running through us makes us fighters, just like my mother, her mother, and every mother before, right from the start. We ain't afraid to hold our ground for a righteous cause. Who you dun helped girl? All you ever do is think about yo'self.

MOMMA

Um-um, momma, don't turn this around to be about me. I'm talking about yo past, having nuthin to do with Nya's future. For all yo talk about being a free bird, ain't none of us children ever been free. You ain't gonna do that to Nya, you hear me? I'm gonna make sure she knows how to fly away from you.

GRANNY

It ain't right to keep her from her heritage.

MOMMA

How's that gonna help her today? Ain't a one-of-em lying in their grave, gonna get up from the dead and stand beside her.

GRANNY

They ain't gotta rise from no grave, if they living inside who she is. That's why you pass-on the stories. To keep 'em with you so you know you ain't never alone.

MOMMA

Those ain't nuthin but memories. They yo memories, momma. They ain't mine, and they sure as hell ain't gonna be Nya's.

GRANNY

You're not hurting me like you thinking you are. You hurting that child. You might as well put her bare naked in the street and set her off to find her own way back home. She needs the guidance you ain't giving her.

MOMMA

Momma, she got what she needs! She ain't gone a day without 'em. Food, shelter, clothing, and love momma. The kind of love you don't ever gotta doubt.

GRANNY

If you truly love that child, any of 'em, you'd teach 'em what I taught you.

MOMMA

That's ass-backwards, momma. My love is keeping them from yo craziness.

GRANNY

Oh, I'm the crazy one. God knows, I ain't the craziest one here. Not when you look at yo choices.

MOMMA

Oh, here we go. Let's drag Dre into this, as if it's gonna make a bit of difference.

GRANNY

Staying with him, you putting those kids at risk. Ain't no telling what he'll do. He ain't right in the head, girl. What's it gonna take for you to see that?

MOMMA

Momma, I'm gonna tell you this, and then I'm dun. Don't tell Nya nuthin 'bout all those dead women you keeping alive.

GRANNY

She needs to be told.

MOMMA

Okay momma, you tell her. When my body is nuthin more than cold ash, and not a minute before. Hear me? Them my children and I'll raise 'em like I wanna. You just keep yo damn stories to yo'self.

DR. LI

You've been living with your grandmother for a little while now. How's that been for you?

NYA

Not all that good. When she looks at me, she sees my mother fighting with her. When I look at her, I see my mother angry and sad.

DR. LI

What about your older brother, Marcus? You haven't said anything about him. Any particular reason for that?

NYA

He's tight with Granny.

DR. LI

Care to say more?

NYA

Him and Granny like to organize rallies and marches and protests. He's trying to organize a boycott now. Pretty much all he talks about is the gun replacing the rope, blue is the new white, and how if you don't fight for someone else, you're not fighting for those you love. It gets him excited, doesn't do much for me. We barely talk anymore.

DR. LI

So, Granny and Marcus, one in the same. Are you willing to talk about Jason?

NYA

Jason was Jason. Ain't much more to say about him.