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HARLEM RHAPSODY

a novel



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Harlem Rhapsody

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HARLEM RHAPSODY



VICTORIA CHRISTOPHER MURRAY

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*To Jessie Redmon Fauset, upon whose shoulders I,
and thousands of other writers, proudly stand*

CHAPTER 1



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1919

I thrust open the taxicab's door, and the moment my T-strap heels hit the pavement, a cacophony of city sounds welcomes me. The music enraptures me first.

I can't sleep at night...I can't eat a bite...

From a Victrola perched near an opened window, the lyrics from "Harlem Blues" float down, and then Mamie Smith's contralto drifts into the breeze. The joyous sound of two giggling girls skipping past draws me from the song.

"You're just bumping your gums," a man shouts, and uproarious laughter rises from the circle of men dawdling in front of the barbershop a few doors away.

I stand, absorbing it all: the patter of a thousand footsteps of men and ladies and kiddies rushing past...motorcars chugging and clanking and clicking behind me...honking horns squealing into the air.

'Cause the man I love...he don't treat me right...

It isn't a cacophony, it's a rhapsody, and my heart races to match its beat.
"Jessie!"

I face my mother and am surprised to see her brown eyes framed by a frown. She points to my valise on the sidewalk next to hers. “Are you expecting me to carry both?”

“Oh.” I laugh, and a smile fills her face. “Apologies, Maman. But we’re in New York.” I twirl in front of her, and my wrap coat billows at my ankles.

“We are.” She gives me a short nod. “You’re behaving as if you’ve never lived in a big city.”

“You can’t compare Philadelphia and Washington, DC, to this. New York is everything. It’s music and theater and...come on, Maman.” Carrying my valise, I rush toward the sienna-brick brownstone.

At the first step, I glance over my shoulder. My mother stands in the same spot. In her pale gold overcoat and matching cloche, she is as fashionable as any New Yorker. But her eyes are as wide as mine as she soaks in the city’s vivacity.

My heart swells for the woman who didn’t birth me but who, for the last twenty-five years, has nurtured me with love. “You were born from my heart,” she’s told me since I was twelve.

Over the city’s music, I call out, “*Allez, Maman!*” in the same tone she’d used with me moments before.

At the front door, my hand trembles with excitement as I try to steady the key. We step into the vestibule and then through another door before we enter the hallway and I move to the only door on the first floor. But before I insert the key, the door swings open.

“Will!”

“Welcome to New York!”

I study the man I’d first contacted when I was a student at Cornell University, some sixteen years ago. His mustache has been trimmed since I last saw him in August. And there is a bit more silver blending with the jet-black hair of his beard. As always, he’s dressed impeccably in one of his brown three-piece, wide-lapel suits. Tonight, though, he wears a more formal bow tie rather than the neckties I know he prefers.

The twinkle in his eyes and his wide smile draw me closer. However, just as I reach for him, I remember. My mother. How had I forgotten her so quickly?

That is the effect of W. E. B. Du Bois. His mere presence emits a magnetic force that is difficult to deny or resist.

This is a reminder that now, living in New York, I must be measured in my actions. This will be different from seeing Will on his occasional stopovers in Washington, DC.

I shift so my mother can enter our new apartment, but she doesn't take a single step. She expects an introduction. "Maman, allow me to present Dr. William Du Bois."

"Mrs. Fauset, it is my absolute pleasure to finally make your acquaintance." He takes her valise.

My mother's smile has vanished. She steps over the threshold and greets Will with a curt "Good afternoon."

My mother strolls around the parlor, taking in the regal Victorian-style room decorated in crimson and gold, and runs her hands over the oak edge of the sofa, then the matching damask-upholstered wingback chairs.

"This is a nice apartment." I hope my mother agrees. I turn to the bay windows facing Seventh Avenue. "But look at this, Maman. This...will be my favorite place."

The windows jut out of the brownstone like a pair of owl's eyes keeping watch over the neighborhood.

Will says, "This is the largest apartment, the only one in the building that hasn't been split."

"What do you mean?" My eyes are once again on my mother as she rounds the room.

"With so many people flocking to New York from the South, landlords are reconstructing the spaces, dividing apartments in half, then doubling the rent," Will explains. "I know the owner of this brownstone, so I secured one of the best furnished spaces in Harlem for you."

My mother's steps are silent against the Oriental area rug as she saunters toward the back.

"Some of the gals from the office prepared the apartment. Then, of course, Helen," he says, referring to my sister. "We wanted to make certain you had everything you'd need until your belongings arrive."

My mother pauses where the parlor spills into the kitchen. Even with the icebox, stove, and sink, there is space for a hutch and a small dining table.

"Would you like me to show you the two bedrooms and the water closet, Mrs. Fauset?"

"No." She waves her hand. "I'm certain those rooms are sufficient."

I nod, Will nods, and my mother says nothing as she lowers herself onto the sofa. She sits—back straight, shoulders squared, her coat still buttoned—as if she hasn't determined whether she'll stay.

After a moment, I sit in one chair and Will in the other. Maman speaks first: "Dr. Du Bois, thank you for not only finding us this home, but for securing this job with *The Crisis* magazine for my daughter."

"No thanks is necessary. I wanted to make certain you would be comfortable, and Jessie...I mean, Miss Fauset has earned this position as the literary editor. I expect that section of *The Crisis* to thrive under her leadership."

"I agree; my daughter will be a credit to your magazine. Jessie has always been a writer, and has been educated well. She's not only a Phi Beta Kappa graduate, but she's proficient in several languages. And in her teaching career, she has already—"

"Maman," I interrupt, dismayed. My glance shifts between her and Will. "I'm certain Dr. Du Bois doesn't desire a recapitulation of my credentials."

"Yes, I was quite impressed with your daughter when I interviewed her for this position."

"Is that when you first became"—she pauses—"impressed?" Another pause. "With my daughter?"

If Will hears my mother's derision, he gives no indication. "I was very impressed. Beyond Miss Fauset's writings is her understanding that

literature is a venue that must be utilized to display the best of the Negro race.”

“On that, we can agree, Dr. Du Bois. Literature can be useful in this fight for equality. That’s what I tell my daughter. She can change this world with words.”

My mother’s sentiments are no surprise to Will. I’ve shared her background, especially the two factors of most interest to me when my widower father, the Reverend Redmon Fauset, introduced Bella Huff as the woman he was going to marry. Bella, herself a widow, was Jewish and a staunch integrationist.

At twelve, I understood Judaism, but had no understanding of an “integrationist.” I came to understand the term more by my stepmother’s actions than by explanation. She supported the complete social integration of the races, something she spoke about often in my father’s church, after she converted to Christianity, and at local NAACP meetings. But she didn’t just speak her belief, she lived it. Bella had married a Negro—twice—and in those unions, she’d birthed six mixed-race children.

Will’s voice draws me back. “I’m excited for Miss Fauset to be with us at this propitious time, Mrs. Fauset. The war is over, the world is changing, and we not only need to be part of that change, but must also facilitate that change. This is the time for the new Negro, and literature must play its role. At its best, literature is a useful form of propaganda.”

My mother tilts her head. “That’s an interesting concept.”

Will says, “I am not interested in any kind of literature that isn’t propaganda. Any art by Negroes must serve one purpose alone—to uplift the race and present Negroes in a way white folks have never seen. Art must serve to change more than minds, art must change hearts. Through literature, stories can be shared that recognize the contributions colored folks have made in just fifty years, post-emancipation. The written word can be more powerful than any speech I can deliver.”

“I hear your passion, Dr. Du Bois, and I am inspired by your words.”

I release my apprehension about Maman and Will finally meeting. Here, the two can agree. William Du Bois and Bella Fauset possess the same fervor for equality.

But then my mother abruptly says, “How old are you, Dr. Du Bois?”

“Maman!”

Will sits up straighter. “I am fifty-one,” he proclaims, with a bit of grandiosity. I do not fault him for this. In his fifty-one years, there are few—colored or white—who can match the accomplishments of W. E. B. Du Bois, the professor and civil rights leader. From his two college degrees, to being the first Negro to receive a PhD from Harvard, along with all of his teaching and writing and speaking, his achievements precede him.

My mother knows this. Yet when he tells her his age, she hums and smirks, and I am at once embarrassed. She says, “It seems you are closer to my age than my daughter’s.”

Inside I pray to the almighty God above to open the floorboards below and swallow me whole. But it appears I am the only one perturbed.

“What you say may be true, Mrs. Fauset.” He responds with an innocence that makes me question how he’d missed the edge in my mother’s tone. “That is one thing I admire about your daughter. Her youthful exuberance.”

“At thirty-seven, I’m hardly youthful.” I laugh through my jitters.

“Perhaps then I’m the exuberant one. Mrs. Fauset, the poetry, essays, and even the book reviews your daughter has contributed to *The Crisis* are some of the best writing we’ve published. She will bring that excellence to the magazine.”

My mother’s smile returns. “You have chosen well, Dr. Du Bois. I understand why you are impressed with my daughter.”

Again, my mother and Will have reached a respite...until: “Dr. Du Bois, I’m certain you’re a busy man.”

Will nods. “My schedule is quite full.”

“Which is why I’m surprised you’re here. You knew my daughter had the keys. I understand you’d personally delivered them to her weeks ago.

Although, I cannot conjure up a single reason as to why you'd make a trip all the way to Washington, DC, just to give my daughter...the keys."

Heat warms my cheeks, and I make a mental note to give Arthur quite a talking-to. I am certain it is my younger brother who shared those details with our mother, since he was visiting when Will came to Washington.

"Yes." Will's eyes are wide. My mother has finally surprised him, and he scrambles for an explanation. "I wanted to make certain, in case I was not available, you would have access to the apartment, as I knew Helen and her husband would be away. However, when my schedule opened up, I thought it best to greet you myself."

My mother asks, "Do you live in Harlem, Dr. Du Bois?"

"Yes. I love it here. This part of New York isn't just a neighborhood. Harlem is a character, with its own personality. I plan to make this place my permanent home."

"Do you and your wife live close by?"

I wince. Will stiffens. "Yes. About a mile away."

"So close," she says, then adds, "It won't take you very long to get home." My mother stands, and Will does the same. "I'm going to look at the bedrooms while Jessie shows you out, Dr. Du Bois."

When she disappears into the hallway, I am both astonished and mortified.

I whisper to Will, "I'm so sorry."

His volume matches mine. "She doesn't like me."

"That's not true," I deny and lie. "She doesn't know you."

He chuckles. "It seems your brother has shared some stories about us."

"No." I shake my head emphatically. "Arthur would never discuss such things, and besides, what does he know? Anything he's heard about us is merely rumor."

"*Ma chérie*," Will begins, making me smile, "every rumor about us is true." He reaches for my hand, and although I should pull away, I don't. Weeks have passed since I've felt his touch, and I want to slow time.

“I’m so glad you’re finally here, Jess.” His voice remains low. “This is quite an endeavor. I’ve built *The Crisis* into the most important periodical for Negroes, and now, with you, it will become the preeminent magazine for Negro writers. Everyone with a poem or a story will want their name inside these pages.”

“I’m looking forward to it all.”

His voice is thick when he adds, “I’m looking forward to the magazine... and much more.”

I want to draw closer, but we aren’t at the Whitelaw Hotel in Washington, DC, and my mother is not even a stone’s throw away.

When I hear my mother’s footsteps, Will and I move apart. He takes an envelope from his jacket. “Here is the address and directions to the office. Everyone on staff is looking forward to meeting you.”

There is so much more that I want to say and know and ask. But I feel the heat of my mother’s stare, so I only thank Will before he exits.

If Maman hadn’t been standing so close, I would have rushed to the window to watch him. Instead, I paste on a smile and face her.

She says, “So, that is your Dr. Du Bois.”

Her statement is designed to set a snare, so I press my lips together and say nothing.

“He’s not at all what I expected.”

I am unable to resist. “What do you mean, Maman?”

“He has the reputation of being such an important and grand man.” A beat. “And yet, he’s rather short.”

CHAPTER 2



MONDAY, OCTOBER 20, 1919

I stand transfixed in front of the alabaster-colored brick building. Behind me, the trolley car creaks and whistles. Around me, people hasten to their jobs.

Yet I scarcely hear a sound. I just stare at the twelve-story structure at 70 Fifth Avenue. Five floors up are the offices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—and where I’ll be working, as *The Crisis* magazine is the NAACP’s premier publication.

Although I’ve written for *The Crisis* since I submitted my first What to Read column in 1912, I have never visited the headquarters. In the ten years since its founding with the aim of combating the savagery of lynching, the NAACP has taken legal battles to the Supreme Court, fought against President Wilson’s resegregation of federal agencies, and even organized the Silent Parade two years ago, the largest mass protest by Negroes in this country.

When I enter the lobby, the elevator operator nods his greeting. I step into the cage, and he drags the wrought iron gate until it clinks shut.

“Fifth floor, please.”

The chamber creaks and groans on its ascent until it shudders to a stop. In front of the fifth-floor office with the letters NAACP stenciled onto the frosted glass panel of the door, I take a second to appreciate this moment.

Inside, the space is charged with energy. The large room is abuzz with clacking typewriters, clicking adding machines, and the rhythmic tapping from an incoming telegraph.

A young woman, perhaps eighteen, stands from her desk. She wears a simple white lace-collared blouse atop a black skirt. Her striking straight black hair is pulled into a single braid draped down her back. “May I help you?”

“My name is Jessie Fauset and I’m here to see—”

“Oh, Miss Fauset. I’m Pocahontas Foster, Dr. Du Bois’s stenographer. He said I’m to show you to your office.”

She leads me around the perimeter, and we stop outside a small room with sufficient space for a desk, two chairs, and an empty bookcase.

“Dr. Du Bois is in a meeting. He’ll be with you shortly.” I thank her and she turns away, but in an instant, spins around to face me once again. “Miss Fauset, I hope I’m not being too forward, but all of us girls are so excited. It’s remarkable that a Negro woman will have such an important position at *The Crisis*.” She beams when she adds, “We’re so proud.”

I clasp my hands together. “Thank you, Miss Foster.” When I’m alone, I remove my coat and settle behind the desk. The room is bright, the light filtering in from the huge window across from me. This is *my* office.

I sit, and try to picture the days, months, and years ahead, before I reach for my canvas bag and my small Bible inside. My father had given me this when I was just seven. I close my eyes and recall his words:

I may not always be by your side, little lamb, but as you carry this holy book, always remember that my love for you is everlasting and my belief in you is resolute.

Papa’s belief in me is why I believe in myself. Just as I tuck the Bible into the top desk drawer, Miss Foster taps on my door.

“Miss Fauset,” she says, “we just received this for you.” Her tone is suffused with awe. “We’ve never had flowers delivered here.” She hands me the vase with three roses. “I asked the messenger, but there isn’t an accompanying card.”

“Thank you,” I say before Miss Foster exits once again.

I inhale the flowers’ fragrance, and at once, I’m taken back to the only other time I received flowers as a gift—a single rose. From Will.

Just then, a rather short man with broad-set eyes and a wide smile peeks into my office. “Miss Fauset, I’m Augustus Granville Dill, and it is a pleasure to meet the woman who has honored *The Crisis* with some of the finest poetry and prose I’ve ever read.”

“That is quite the welcome, Mr. Dill.” I laugh.

He sits in the chair beside my desk. “I’ve been reading your writing for years, and it makes sense to have you join us.”

“Dr. Du Bois,” I begin, remembering to speak of Will properly, “has told me you’ve been an asset to *The Crisis*. No organization is successful without a competent business manager.”

For a few minutes, we chitchat. I tell Mr. Dill about my time in Washington teaching Latin and French at Dunbar High School, and he shares how he and Will met at Harvard and have been working together at *The Crisis* since 1913.

“I hope you’re prepared for this, Miss Fauset,” he says. “We’re a lean staff.”

It hadn’t occurred to me to ask Will about the people I’d work with. “How many work for *The Crisis*?”

“Well”—his brow furrows—“there’s W. E. B. and me. And now you.” He grins.

I wait for him to continue, and when he doesn’t, I ask, “Just the three of us?”

He nods. “Of course, the stenographers assist, and even board members and others will help when needed. And we work with outside operators like the printer, who assists with everything from the layout to the printing, and then the distributor.”

The three of us? Has Will been publishing the magazine for the last almost ten years with no assistance?