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HAPPY



A NOVEL

LAND

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *TAKE MY HAND*

DOLEN PERKINS-VALDEZ

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Happy Land
Take My Hand

HAPPY



LAND

DOLEN PERKINS-VALDEZ

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CONTENTS

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*Readers Guide*](#)

[*Discussion Questions*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

Dedicated to my beloved sister. A queen among queens.

Jeanna McClure

1962–2021

OUR LAND

*We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold,
And not this land
Where life is cold.*

*We should have a land of trees,
Of tall thick trees,
Bowed down with chattering parrots
Brilliant as the day,
And not this land where birds are gray.*

*Ah, we should have a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong.*

LANGSTON HUGHES

PART ONE



ONE



Nikki

The only thing I know about my grandmother's home is that it's in an isolated area of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Zirconia, North Carolina. And the only thing I know about Zirconia is that it's right outside Hendersonville. And what I know about Hendersonville is that it has a lot of apple orchards.

A shame, I know.

The old 25 highway is two lanes without a line in the middle. I pass a wood-frame house that must be at least a hundred years old, a neat and tidy brick rambler with rockers lining the front porch. Stuffed fairies hang from tree limbs, and a motionless cat stares at me from a front yard.

I wind the rental car around a series of camp entrances. Camp Greystone. Camp Arrowhead. Houses on tall wooden piles perch around a sign labeled LAKE SUMMIT. Just a few miles past the lake, I pass the granite cliff Mother Rita mentioned over the phone, and just after that I reach the entrance to her property.

Lovejoy Lane.

When I was born, I was given my mama's maiden name hyphenated with Daddy's name—Lovejoy-Berry—in a gesture I'd always attributed to Mama's feminist pride. When I married Darius, I didn't change it. So seeing that Lovejoy sign does something to me. It looks official, as if the county provided it. I've never seen it before.

I'm almost forty years old, and this is my first time ever visiting my grandmother.

As I turn into the dirt drive I wonder how long my family has lived in this house. The siding is in need of a paint job, and the green shutters are faded and weather-beaten. I know Mama grew up here, and as I note its wide front porch and gabled roof, I imagine her, an only child, running down the front steps. It's morning, but the porch lamp is on, moth carcasses stuck to its dimly lit dome. I can't find a doorbell. I hesitate, then knock softly on the frame of the wooden screen door. A couple of minutes pass before I knock again.

Maybe she's asleep. The elderly do tend to keep their own hours.

Finally, the door opens and a tall lady with a shock of gray hair peers through the screen at me. "Yes?"

"Mother Rita?" I've always called her that, following Mama's lead.

"Veronica? I was expecting you later this evening."

"I'm sorry. They offered me a travel voucher, so I took a morning flight instead. I should have called."

"Yes, you should have." She pats her hair down.

Inside, the house is well kept—brighter and airier than I expected considering the condition of the exterior. Actually, I'm not sure what I expected, perhaps a dusty house filled with relics that haven't been moved in years. Instead, the rooms are sunny, cheerful. I spy a settee too delicate for sitting in the living room, a tarnished silver tea set on a sideboard in the dining room, a Persian rug too big for the space. Everything is old, worn to the threads, but it's clean.

Mother Rita wears a pair of jeans and a neat, collared shirt turned up at the elbows. Despite her unruly hair, she looks pretty, especially for seventy-eight years old. It feels like forever since I've seen her. Actually, it's been eight years. I remember because when my daddy died, Mother Rita drove all the way to D.C. for the funeral, only to turn around and drive home the next day.

"You ate yet?"

“Yes, ma’am,” I respond politely, though the truth is that I’m starving.

She glances down at the rolling suitcase I’ve just parked in the middle of her living room. It’s as if she can see everything at once—my uncertainty, my curiosity, my fear.

“Bathroom is down the hall on the left. When you’ve finished, I got some leftover navy beans from yesterday. I’ll warm those up with a little corn bread?” She uses a questioning tone, but I know there is no need to answer. This is her extension of hospitality, and I’m grateful for it.

A fuzzy pink rug covers the bathroom floor, its matching cover on the toilet seat. Behind the shower curtain, fish tiles rim the walls. Above the towel bar hangs a faded picture of a young man dangling a fish between his hands. My grandfather passed away when I was in elementary school. I lean closer to better make out his features.

I wash my hands slowly, taking my time. When Mother Rita called and asked me to come, the timing wasn’t great. My daughter, Shawnie, graduated high school last year and still doesn’t have a full-time job. We’ve been fighting about it all summer. I’ve got a house on the market, but in the last couple of years I’ve lost my joy for selling real estate. I haven’t sold a single property in months, and I’m about to run out of savings. If I don’t get my act together, I’m going to be in real financial trouble soon. The truth of the matter is that my life is a mess right now.

When I hesitated, Mother Rita was insistent—*I need your help and if you come down here I will tell you everything your mama hasn’t told you about our family*. It wasn’t exactly an invitation I could refuse.

In the kitchen, she stands before the beans warming on the stove. I sit at the table, my eyes tracing her shoulders. I’ve seen Mother Rita only a handful of times in my entire life—my tenth birthday party at Crystal Skate, my high school graduation, Daddy’s funeral. Even when Mother Rita did come to D.C., she and Mama were painstakingly polite, not like mother and daughter. I have always quietly believed they hated each other’s guts, even before their final falling-out. All that to say that this is my first opportunity to spend time with my grandmother one-on-one without Mama’s feelings

running riot in the air. I want to ask her so many questions, but my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. Maybe after I get some food in my belly and we're seated across from one another, we can talk.

"You don't have a microwave?" I ask as she stirs.

"What's that, honey?"

"A microwave. To warm the beans."

"Oh, I don't fool with microwaves. Never have. Don't trust them."

I nod, wondering what other old notions she holds. I want to get up and help her, but she doesn't seem to invite the second pair of hands.

She spoons the beans into a bowl. "See, that didn't take long, did it? This fire suits me just fine."

"Smells good."

"I hope you don't mind the taste. I don't eat meat."

"I'll eat whatever is in that bowl," I say, though I am surprised to hear this. I wonder if she has always been vegetarian and if I just never realized it on those few occasions I've seen her. I know so little about this woman. My own kinfolk.

She slides a piece of foil out of the oven. The corn bread triangles are browned, edges crisped. She uses her bare fingers to drop the hot slices on the plate next to my bowl.

"Eat up. There's plenty," she says.

I want to talk more, but my stomach has other ideas. The beans aren't just salted. They contain something else that gives them depth, replacing the taste of a meaty bone.

"That's fresh fennel from my garden. I like to put it in my beans. Make a difference, don't it?"

My mouth is almost too full to respond. "It's really good. You ate already?"

"Don't worry about me none. There are more beans in the pot. Your room is the second door on the left. When you finish settling, come find me. I'll be in the yard out back."

I am awash in gratitude for this simple but hearty meal. I eat in silence after she leaves me.

• • •

I FINISH EATING and wash out my bowl before placing it in the empty dishwasher. Thank goodness my grandmother owns some of the other modern conveniences. The kitchen isn't large, but it's neat with an everything-in-its-proper-place kind of feel. A well-loved cast-iron skillet hangs from a nail on the wall. An old-fashioned bread box on the counter. A butcher's block of knives. The floor appears freshly swept. I am humbled by her tidiness, by the thought that this woman lives alone but keeps her house as if someone impressionable could drop by at any moment.

Or maybe I'm the impressionable person. Maybe she cleaned up knowing I was coming. The thought flushes me with unexpected warmth.

Mother Rita is an only child, Mama is an only child, I'm an only child, and so is my daughter, Shawnie. Granddaddy Herbert's people were from South Carolina, and he was a Jones, but Mother Rita kept the Lovejoy name and gave it to her daughter, an unusual choice for women of her generation.

I'd always wondered about that.

I know the Lovejoys have deep roots in the Hendersonville area, but beyond that I don't know much of the family history. Truth is, I've never been that interested in these mountains. Other than when Mama reminds me she was born and raised in Appalachia, I haven't thought about it much. To me, Appalachia is a concept. Something on television specials. Something I associate with old-time music.

But Mama's silence about her family has deepened my curiosity. She has rarely returned to North Carolina, and she never brought me or Shawnie with her. I'm curious how Mother Rita keeps herself entertained in this quiet neighborhood, living alone at her age. I hope things never get so bad between me and Shawnie that I end up alone.

I unpack in the small guest bedroom and go in search of her. The coffeepot warmer is still on, and I stop to pour myself a cup. I need to call Shawnie and check on her, but before I do, I'd like to go to the supermarket. I want to get some things for Mother Rita, whatever she needs. I look around to see if there are other tasks needing to be done. The house is what we would call "cozy" in the real estate world. Just two bedrooms and a back sunroom that looks like an addition to the original house. For the first time, I see there isn't a leak or crack in the ceilings anywhere. The paint is fresh.

My grandmother has help. So why on earth does she need me?

"You like your room? I can't remember the last time I had a guest in there." Mother Rita appears in the doorway, a green scarf tied around her hair now. Her smooth brown skin is sun-kissed, eyes bright. She carries a basket with purple flowers hanging over the side.

"Was that Mama's room?"

"Course it was."

I'm surprised at the sudden coarseness of her tone. I don't remember her being sassy. "I love it, thank you. You've been outside?" I point down at her basket.

"Just picking a few wildflowers out back. Something about the way they follow their own mind out there makes me happy."

"I was thinking of finding somewhere in town for dinner. I want to treat you tonight."

"Oh, I don't really go out to eat these days. There used to be a place I liked in Hendersonville when my Herbert was alive. But they closed down, I heard." Her voice trails off.

"Okay."

"I do like to cook, though. Ain't no meal like the one in your own kitchen."

"Sounds good to me." I watch as she fills a vase with flowers. "What do you usually eat for dinner?"

"Sometimes I eat with my neighbor Maddie Mae. She has a grandson, and she cooks for him. If I don't feel like cooking, I call her up. But it's more

likely I have something here. I've got a decent garden that push something out all year long. And I love fresh bread. You like bread or you one of them low-carb people?"

"No. I mean, yes. I love bread."

She smiles at me. "You're looking at me kind of funny. I like being out here, Veronica. I enjoy my peace and quiet. This is my home, the home of my ancestors. Our ancestors."

I put my cup down. "I still go by Nikki," I say, remembering that I've always had to correct her about my preferred name.

She blinks at me as if hearing this for the first time.

I don't want to appear rude, but I only have a week with her and I've got questions. Being here, it feels urgent, suddenly, that I know what happened that day she and Mama exchanged words for the last time. Long ago, I left them to stew in their corners, but since I'm here I may as well smoke Mother Rita out of hers.

I look her right in the eyes. "Mother Rita, why did you call me down here so suddenly? Are you going to tell me what happened between you and Mama?"

She fiddles with the flowers for a moment, as if trying to think of how to answer.

"There's time enough for that, Veronica. You'll know everything in due time, I promise."

"It's Nikki," I say softly, but she's already walking away.

TWO



Mother Rita asks a lot of questions. She knows I have questions of my own, but she seems determined to have hers answered first. *Is Lorelle dating anybody? Is she still in that same house in Michigan Park? Did she retire yet?* From the sound of it, Mother Rita misses Mama. She's just too stubborn to call her up and ask these questions directly.

We're sitting at the kitchen table. "What's our plan today?" I ask. "You need to go somewhere?"

"No, I got to do some cleaning up outside," she says. "Flower market is on Thursday."

"Flower market? You planning to buy some flowers?"

"Child, what kind of question is that? I'll show you my garden."

"I'd like that," I say. "Since you don't want to go out, I'll cook dinner tonight. Anything we can make out of your garden?"

"I do have a taste for some collards. There's a stockpot underneath that cabinet right there." She points.

"Alright," I say. We sit for a moment, the silence hanging between us awkwardly.

Mother Rita gets up from her chair. "Do you like to read?"

The question comes out of nowhere. "Y-yes. Sure I do."

"Oh yeah? What's the last book you read?"

I pause, trying to remember.

"You should read more," she says.

"It takes time to read, Mother Rita. I work a lot. D.C. is kind of a busy place to live."