

1. WALKING UNAFRAID

Every evening, in the tiny kitchen of the old frame shotgun house where I grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, my grandma Rachel marked the day's end by a ritual etched in my memory with a clarity that belies the eighty years since then.

She ceased to rush, as she did endlessly in the hours between dawn and darkness, and she commenced to draw water and lay out clean towels and mix an ointment she made of turpentine and mutton tallow. I would stand, quiet, watching her heat the water on the wood stove, pour it into a metal pan, then remove her stockings and hoist her skirts as she lifted her feet into the steaming bath.

Her feet were broken. They were gnarled and twisted and horribly misshapen, with the bones sticking out in strange ways. As she lifted them into the steaming water, she winced. And I would know, though she had spoken no word and given no sign, that all day long her feet had been paining her.

How frightened I was the first time I saw those poor broken feet. I was five years old, and my mother and my three sisters and I had just moved to my grandparents' home after the death of my father, James Eliot Johnson, in the influenza epidemic of 1919. My grandmother had scooped us up and taken us under her wing, whisking us from my parents' house to the little parsonage where she lived with my grandpa. All day long, she hovered over us, even as she flew about the house and garden, baking communion bread and hauling water and starching altar linens. Like a tiny whirling dervish she moved, and so, when I first saw her grow quiet, I was startled.

Then I saw her feet, so large and misshapen they seemed to belong to another woman entirely, and I drew back, frightened. Every night after that, I'd look at her scarred, twisted feet, at the skin stretched taut over

the jutting bones, and I'd want to ask her what had made them that way. But something in her silence warned me not to.

Over time I grew to cherish this part of the evening, for it was one of the rare moments when I could actually be of help to my grandmother, who appeared in daytime hours, so far as I could tell, to hold the whole earth and sky under her command. I learned to wait by her side as she began the bathing process and watch for the moment when her face began to relax, the sign that the steaming water had done its work. I'd stir the ointment, and gently as I could, I'd rub her feet, taking care not to hurt the sores and bruises and bleeding places. The salve, like most of my grandmother's homemade medicines, smelled worse than sin itself, but it had mighty healing powers. For in the morning, she was moving once again about the house and garden, swaying and swinging on the outsides of her feet, awkwardly, but swiftly.

The day came, finally, as I was just beginning to mature into womanhood, when Grandma took me to her in private and spoke to me of what had happened to her feet.

A white man had broken them.

It had happened a very long time ago, Grandma said, when she was a young girl, just coming into womanhood herself. She was only thirteen years old, but she had developed early, and she had seen the man watching her with a look that told her he meant to do her harm.

"The slave master," she called him, though in point of fact the days of slavery ended ten years before my grandmother was born. He was the overseer on the farm near Henrietta, North Carolina, where her father worked, and when she spoke of what he had tried to do to her, a look of anguish crossed her face unlike any I had seen before or would see after.

"He was meanin' to bother me, Dovey Mae," she told me, in the delicate way she had of speaking about things sexual. "I ran and fought every way I knew how. And I hurt him. Then he grabbed hold o' me and he stomped, hard as he could, on my feet—to keep me from runnin' for good, he told me. But I kept on runnin'.

"Wasn't nothing to do but fight him, hard as I could," she said. "He wasn't goin' to have his way with me."

Grandma's mother had wrapped her smashed, bleeding feet in cloth and rubbed them with the mutton tallow and turpentine ointment Grandma would use for the rest of her days. But the bones had been so crushed that her feet were forever misshapen, and so twisted that for

a while she could not walk at all. When she did, it was with a swaying awkwardness that late at night became a limp.

And yet, for all of that, she had won. He had not, as she said, had “his way” with her.

I saw my grandma Rachel fight everything with that same fierceness—poverty, sickness, injustice, and even despair. Like a mighty stream, her courage flowed through my childhood, shaping me as rushing water shapes the pebbles in its path.