

June 3rd, 1910

Macon, Georgia

I've been meaning to write for a while now. There's been so much weighing on me lately that I figured putting pen to paper might help me breathe a little easier. At least these words are mine, and no one can take them from me.

This morning started like most others. I woke up before the sun rose, my back aching from another restless night on the old, stiff cot. Mama was already awake and in the kitchen, stirring the pot of grits for breakfast. My younger siblings were still asleep, curled up under patched blankets and quilts, unaware of the long day we have ahead. Outside, the fields stretched wide and they stood still. The only sound that shook the static air was the creaking of the porch steps, as Papa stepped out with his Bible in one hand and his worn work boots in the other.

I teach at the colored school down the road. It's hardly more than a wooden shack, with only one rusty stove that barely heats the room in winter, and a leaky roof that leaves rainy days damp and miserable. We have no proper school desks, just benches, old tables, and slabs of wood that we've nailed together ourselves. The books we use are worn, pages torn or vandalized and defaced by white children who had them first and used them as something to scribble on. Unaware of all the school supplies we lack and taking that privilege for granted. It angers me for my students who must craft an education from White tablescraps, but I must also remember these children also know nothing the better.

Sometimes I get tired. Sometimes I wonder if all this struggling will ever lead to anything. But then I look at my students. I look at little Ruthie, who reads better than anyone her age, and Thomas, who dreams of being a doctor even though he's never seen a hospital that would treat someone like him. They are the reason I keep going. If I can give them even a piece of what they deserve, then maybe it's enough.

And it's due to their resilience I will keep writing, keep teaching, and keep believing in a better day.

Still, the children come. Sometimes barefoot, sometimes hungry, nonetheless neglected and needy, but always ready to learn. They remind me why I stay. Why I work so hard to provide them with a sense of normalcy. They ask questions about the world, about history, about what life might be like if things were different. I tell them the truth, but I also tell them they have the right to dream. To make a better future for their children the same way my Papa works long days and longer nights to make a life for my family.

Living in Georgia as a Black woman isn't easy. Every day is a reminder that we are not treated as equals, or even as humans. The signs are everywhere. Impossible to ignore. "White Only." "Colored." The train station has separate waiting rooms. We are told where to sit, where to eat, how to look, even where to walk. Prejudice feels like a weak descriptor. I feel alien-like walking amongst all of this hatred. Monstrous. Last week, a white man pushed my neighbor Mr. Henry off the sidewalk because he didn't step aside quickly enough. No one did anything. Not even the police. In fact, they laughed. Laughed at something they, as devilish white men, would never come close to grasping. It filled me to the seams with angry fire. But that's all these incidents ever do to me. There's nothing I can do to change it.

This life is hard. There's no pretending otherwise. But there is power in knowing we are not powerless. We resist in the way we raise our children, in the way we teach each other, in the way we survive. And that is no small thing.

Voting is something we talk about a lot in our community, but few of us have ever been allowed to do it. Papa tried, years ago. He studied for weeks, memorizing the Constitution and practicing his reading. When he got to the courthouse, they gave him a literacy test with questions designed to confuse and fail him. Then they told him he had to pay a poll tax. He didn't have the money, and even if he had, they would have found another excuse. They never intended to let him vote. They never intend to let anyone vote. Their system is designed to push out Black folk in such a manner that is discreet enough that the White men can make excuses for it. The pain of that day still sits heavy on him, even though he doesn't talk about it anymore. All of us in that house share it with him. It weighs heavily in the air on all of our shoulders.

The reality of Black life in rural Georgia is a truth so consistently disappointing it's almost as if none of us want to acknowledge it out loud. We all know, in silence.

It's almost more frustrating when they aren't so upfront with it. Rather than a huge sign that pushes us out they give us a false hope of some sort of freedom and chance at a better future. The first prisons in the states weren't built for justice or for rehabilitation. They were built to put away Black folk and control every aspect of their environment. Nine out of ten cells in a predominantly White state will have Black men and women sitting on the dirt floors. White folk like to explain this away, and claim melanin has some sort of irrefutable correlation with violence and sticky fingers. That it's us that are filthy thieves and wife beaters. Not to be trusted or associated with. That's why they mustn't let us vote. Why we shouldn't share their waiting rooms, sit next to them on the train, sit at their bars, teach their children, marry into their families. Why we should be treated as some sort of contagious, exotic illness.

If Black folk are the monsters underneath White Folks' bed, I see them as greedy, slithering snakes. Boa constrictors. It's just like the voting polls and the penitentiaries, you see? They keep us out of so many spaces, keeping us from food, water, human necessities. You can feel the suffocation of it around your neck as you try to

live. It becomes tighter with every sign and every hurdle. Then, Black families become malnourished, in every sense of the word. They keep every aspect of normal American life that much farther from you, until both the disappointment in your iris' and ribs are visible. And finally, when mothers and fathers want normalcy and finally reach the end of their ropes, and they are left with no choice but to steal means, we are painted as criminals. A position the White folk maliciously created. If they don't force you into hopelessness and these evil labels are stuck to your chest, they lure you into it. "Don't you want normalcy for your families? Food and education, a roof over their heads?"

The White snake hisses once again. "What would you do for the ones you love?"

Even they know the answer to that question.

We live under the constant threat of violence. Last month, there was a lynching in a nearby county. A man named Elijah Jackson, a loving father of four, was accused of stealing from a white-owned store. No trial. No evidence. Just a rumor, and he was dead within days. His body was left hanging for all to see. A symbol. An innocent Black man turned into a martyr. And the message was clear. Stay in your place. Don't question the order of things. And again, I hear it. The white man's rattle.

And yet, we do question. We resist, even when it's dangerous. Even if progress is made impossible, I would rather die trying. I attend meetings when I can. Quiet gatherings in church basements or people's homes. There's talk of the NAACP, an organization formed to fight for our rights in the courts and in public life. It gives me a bit of hope, knowing there are people out there trying to make change happen, even if it's slow and torturous. We pass around writings by W.E.B. Du Bois, and I've read *The Souls of Black Folk* more than once. More times than I would like to admit. Rather, if I wanted to admit I simply couldn't tell you. Far too many to count. His words stay with me. He says we deserve more than scraps, that we have the right to be fully human, to be educated, to be heard. I believe him. It tends to that fire in my soul I almost begin to forget exists.

Others in the community look to Booker T. Washington. He believes we should focus on trades, build our own communities, and not stir trouble. I understand his way—it feels safer, more practical—but part of me believes we can't wait forever. How many generations will pass before we are free in truth and not just on paper? The Church is the heart of our resistance. It's where we pray, but also where we plan. The women in our congregation organize sewing circles and raise money to buy school supplies. The men discuss how to protect each other, how to avoid the traps that are always being set. When one family is in need, we rally around them. There is strength in our unity, even if the world refuses to see it.

Mama says things won't always be like this. She says the Lord is watching, and justice moves, even if it moves slowly. I want to believe her. I have to believe her.

Sometimes at night, after the children are asleep and the house is quiet, I sit by the window and watch the stars. It's the only time I allow myself to feel everything at once—anger, sadness, pride, hope. The world is changing, but not fast enough. Not for us. Still, we plant seeds, even if we may not live to see them bloom.

Last Sunday, after church, I stayed late to speak with Reverend Amos. He told me that a group of young men from Atlanta had started traveling to nearby towns, encouraging people to register to vote despite the risks. They carry pocketbooks of the law and advise our people how to answer the questions the clerks ask. They've been turned away more times than I can count, and one of them was even beaten last month. But they keep showing up. That kind of bravery reminds me that the fight is not over. Not as long as my fire lives on. As long as all of our fires burn.

We're also raising money for a new school building. There's a retired mason in the congregation, and he offered to help us build it brick by brick if we can gather enough funds. The white county officials won't help us, but that's nothing new. We'll do it ourselves, the way we always have. We've started holding literacy classes at night for adults who never had the chance to learn. My uncle, who's nearly sixty, came to his first class last week. He sat in the back, nervous and quiet, but when he spelled his name out loud for the first time, the whole room clapped. He cried. I did too.

I don't know what tomorrow will bring. Maybe more hardship. Maybe more injustice. But I do know this—our people have endured worse, and we are still standing. Not because we were allowed to, but because we demanded it. Even in the face of fear, of retaliation and White venom.

Because even in the face of hatred, we are still here. We are still building. Still loving. Still teaching our children. Still hoping.

And hope is a powerful thing.