

Neil T Greenidge

AN ACCEPTED CHILD



“Don’ believe them things,” Flossie said. It was at once a statement and an admonition. She gazed at the young girl sitting across from her at the old wooden kitchen table.

“But that is science,” the girl said. “How can you not believe it? How can I not believe it?” Tears trickled onto her face and there was distress and desperation in her voice.

Miss Flossie, as she was known to everyone in the small tropical village, was an old woman in her eighties, small, thin and frail. She was the village midwife and had been performing this duty for almost sixty years. She had delivered almost all of the young people in the village, not to mention many of their mothers and fathers, and had in fact delivered the young girl sitting before her. She was an unofficial one-woman social service and adoption agency, keeping the babies who had been abandoned by scared, desperate mothers, and either raising them herself with the help of the villagers, or sometimes a well-to-do, childless family would take an abandoned child as its own. During the bloody civil war that followed independence, she was an icon to both sides, protected and respected, and both factions threatened dire penalties to any one who would harm a hair of her head. After the war ended and order was established, she had been honored by the Government for her valuable services and been all the more thrilled at the honor because the presenter of the award, Mr. George, was one of her abandoned babies who had made good. He had given a memorable speech and from time to time she would recall his words.

“Miss Flossie,” he said in his remarks, “ you brought me into this world, you gave me life and sustenance and hope and it is in large measure due to everything that you have done for me that I have attained the success I now have. And as I give you this medal, this hard earned and richly deserved medal, I say to you, in the presence of this vast crowd assembled here today for this presentation ceremony, that there is nothing within the law that I would not do for you if you ever need my help. That is a solemn promise, publicly made and sincerely meant. I will always be grateful to you; and the Government and people of this island will always be mindful and thankful for your good works and enduring influence over so many people for more than half a century. May God bless and keep you always in his grace.”

“What can I do?” The girl broke into sobs.

“God will take care of things,” Flossie reassured her. She held the hands of the girl and looked lovingly at her. The girl was young, barely out of her teens, with a large pregnant belly. Flossie knew her well, having followed her progress through the years. She had grown into a beautiful and polite young woman. She had lost her parents at a young age and been raised by a grandmother. She had hoped to pursue higher education but lack of money stood in her way. She had casually dated one or two local boys her age but was turned off by their lack of ambition. Then about two years ago, an older widower with two daughters moved into the village. She worked for him as a maid. He was kind and respectful towards her and gradually a love and tenderness developed between the two lonely people. They married.

“My husband will be so upset. He will leave me, I am sure.”

“I tell you again,” Flossie said, “God will take care of things.” She thought of how the girl had come to her, tearful and disconsolate and had recounted the source of her unhappiness. The week before, she had gone into the city to shop and to visit her cousin at the hospital where she worked as a medical assistant. Her cousin had as a lark done an ultrasound examination of her abdomen and exclaimed with great glee, “You are going to have a beautiful baby girl! I will

buy her gorgeous dresses and take her for walks and will she break boys' hearts when she grows up!"

"Oh my God!" the girl said and hurriedly took leave of her cousin, sad and dejected. For several days she bore her unhappiness alone and finally came to Flossie for comfort and solace and advice. Flossie held the girl to her and wiped her tears.

Soon a knock on the door interrupted the scene. Flossie opened the door and the girl's husband entered. He was a serious man, domineering, a mixture of husband and father, Flossie always thought.

"Good afternoon, Miss Flossie," he greeted. "I heard my wife was here and I come for her."

"Come in," Flossie said, "and sit down for a few minutes."

By this time the girl had composed herself and she leaned against her husband as he sat next to her at the table.

"Congratulations," Flossie said, "I see you going have a baby. God bless it and you and your wife. I can see she due any minute now."

"Thank you. We are so happy. I tell you, he will be one pampered young man!"

"But how you know it will be a boy?" Flossie asked, softly.

"Of course it will be a boy! I already have two daughters. All my family has boys and I have none yet. I have become a butt of jokes among my relatives. They claim I have weak seed. Of course it will be a boy. It has to be. My name must be maintained. A girl is entirely unacceptable!" Flossie sensed the irritation in his voice. After a few more minutes of uncomfortable silence, he left with his wife.

Flossie walked to her small drawing room and took her bible from a drawer. She went to the porch of her modest wooden shack, set among luxuriant flora and sat in her old rocking chair. Her gaze settled on the front garden, attracted by the soothing aroma of the flowers drifting reassuringly towards her. The hibiscus and bougainvillea were in bloom. Butterflies flitted

among the flowers and a humming bird hovered on a desert rose, its iridescent green contrasting against the delicate pink color and crimson outer edge of the flower. A lizard darted nonchalantly among the greenery, its hen-pecked tail partly re-grown, oblivious of the chicken lurking expectantly nearby. Caterpillars, fat and healthy, nibbled on the leaves of shrubs.

She leaned back in the chair, bible in her lap, and closed her eyes and her thoughts drifted away to the past. She remembered her childhood, the hardships and the poverty, several siblings dying in infancy for lack of money and medical care. She was smart and did well in school but opportunities for substantial work were limited at that time, especially for women. She had been jilted in a relationship and had never married or had children of her own. She went into midwifery and savored the rewarding experience. She felt great pride in the successes of her abandoned charges: doctors, attorneys, and civil servants among them. If there was an occasional miscreant, she consoled herself that one could not expect a hundred percent success and good or bad, all were God's children. Now she was getting weak, and exertion brought on a shortness of breath. She was not one to visit doctors but a grateful villager had persuaded her to do so and had himself taken her to a doctor who had diagnosed progressive heart failure. How long, she wondered, could she carry on her work? Who would take over her work? What had become of the world? Children not wanted...Girls not wanted...Didn't people realize that all children are God's children? Just two days ago a young girl had come to her in tears, ready to deliver, and had asked her not to let her see her baby, to keep it and care for it...And she a dying woman.

Flossie thought how similar these two young women were. They were both young and could be sisters, both desperate and unhappy. One wanted no child; the other wanted no girl. Flossie read several chapters of her bible, closed it and placed it gently on the floor beside her, and then rested for several minutes, rocking gently in the rocking chair, lulled temporarily by the rhythmic creaking of the wooden floor.

She arose slowly and walked towards the back room of the house. This was the birthing room, clean and orderly. There was a bed and a table with a basin. On another table there were three rectangular wooden boxes. They had been constructed and donated by a carpenter, a former protégé, as a gift to replace decrepit cardboard boxes. They were arranged in a row and lined with blankets. The first two held sleeping babies, a girl in the first and a boy in the second. She bent over the babies and kissed each one gently on the forehead. “Sweet things,” she said.

She went to her bedroom just off the birthing room and lay, weary, on her bed. She knew she was a dying woman. The doctor had intimated as much although he had not predicted a time. But she could feel the increasing difficulty in breathing and she knew the end could not be far. She was not afraid of death. She was at peace with God and prepared to meet her maker. She tried to sleep but she could not get the young girl out of her mind. How unhappy she was, this child whom she herself had delivered, it seemed, just yesterday.

She recalled how happy the girl had been at her wedding barely over a year ago and what a beautiful bride she had been. Her husband was a prosperous businessman and by all accounts seemed to love her sincerely, Flossie thought. As she witnessed the ceremony as an honored guest, he seemed somewhat stern, but businessmen must be business-like and beneath that stern exterior Flossie sensed a fatherly protective love and devotion. He had the means and spirit to care for this young girl and they would surely stay together till death did them part.

The wedding was an elaborate affair, a great diversion and entertainment for the community, with lots of food and drink and music and the church gaily decorated. She remembered some unkind comments from some onlookers. There had been gossip regarding the age differences.

“What a way that old man love young stuff.”

“Boy, she so tiny, he not ‘fraid she break when he jook she.”

“Chuh, man, you never hear the closer to the bone the sweeter the meat.” Lots of laughter and giggles silenced by Flossie’s stern and disapproving stare followed by sheepish apologies.

And now, so soon after those vows of for better or for worse, how could things have come to this? How could educated people in these times prefer one sex over another in a child? And what did these new fangled machines know anyway? Couldn't they make mistakes? And why would anyone want to know the sex of a child before birth? Wasn't 'not-knowing' a great part of the thrill of childbirth? And if these machines turn out to be accurate, what is the next step, killing all the unwanted girls? Flossie prayed, and as she prayed, a glimmer of hope illuminated her consciousness. She had heard rumors that recently Europeans and Americans sometimes came to the island to seek children for adoption with the assistance and approval of the Government. Over the years she had heard all kinds of rumors, but always her hopes of help had been dashed, and she had had to carry on the best she could. Perhaps, now, desperate and in failing health, she could ask Mr. George to use his position and influence to look into the matter. He was a good man and he had made a public promise of assistance. She would get a message to him in the city as soon as she could. He would help with her babies.

As she lay restless in bed, rain began to fall with gradually increasing intensity. She knew that on this small island the weather was uniform and that it was raining throughout the island. She wished that these rains could be showers of blessings that would cleanse and fertilize, would wash away the evil and unhappiness in the world, would bring love and affection and desire to all the children of the world, boy and girl alike. She prayed again for God's blessings and for peace and rest and forgiveness.

Above the steady drumming of the rain Flossie heard a shout and went to the window that looked onto the path to her house. She noticed two figures in the distance, approaching hurriedly. A man was holding a woman around the waist and shouting, "Miss Flossie, Miss Flossie, help!"

As they got nearer, Flossie recognized the girl and her cousin who lived in the village. She opened the front door and they entered wet and excited.

"She ready to have baby," the man said. "Her husband not home so I bring her but I going back to wait for him till he get home."

He left and Flossie took the girl into the birthing room. She removed her wet clothes, put on a dry nightgown and laid her on the bed. The labor pains were coming more frequently. Flossie put a pot of water on a coal fire and while the water heated she attended to the girl, calming her fears and anxiety.

Flossie poured the hot water into the basin, took some clean towels and placed them on the table beside the bed where the girl was lying. The contractions came more frequently and the girl screamed with each one. Flossie knew that as a first pregnancy, labor would be prolonged and difficult. She was prepared but she was feeling weary. During the long labor, the girl became exhausted and lapsed into semi-consciousness. In this state Flossie delivered the baby. She cleansed it, wrapped it in a towel and placed it in the third box. Exhausted herself and with the new mother asleep from her travail, Flossie went to the next room to her bed.

The rains continued steadily, drumming on the metal roof, and pouring from the gutters into the rain barrel at the corner of the house. Flossie tried to sleep but despite her exhaustion and weariness she could not sleep. A kind of nervousness enveloped her. She felt uneasy. "God forgive us sinners," she prayed.

A knock on the door startled her.

"Miss Flossie, let me in!" She recognized the voice of the girl's husband. She opened the door and he entered. He was agitated and loud. He removed his dripping raincoat and threw it on a chair.

"Quiet, man," Flossie scolded, "she exhausted and sleeping. Everything is OK."

"Where is my son?" he demanded. "I want to see my son!"

Flossie walked slowly back to her bed and sat on the edge. She felt breathless and light-headed and the room seemed to be swaying.

"I so tired," she said. "Lord, have mercy."

"I thank you for everything, Miss Flossie and I can see you tired. Just show me the baby and then you can rest."

Flossie rose slowly from her bed and led the husband into the birthing room. She expected that at the sounds of the voices from the bedroom next door, the girl would begin to stir and when they entered the room, she was not surprised that the new mother was almost alert. “Where is the baby?” Even in her weary state Flossie could detect the difference in the enquiries by husband and wife. The girl’s question was quiet, tentative, apprehensive. The husband’s was assertive, demanding, confident.

Flossie went over to the girl and placed her arm around her trembling shoulders. “Your beautiful baby is over there,” she said and pointed, hesitantly, to the second box.

She felt a wave of nausea come over her as the husband walked toward the box. She left the room and walked weakly to her bed. She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes and prayed. And suddenly while the rain and the winds raged outside, she experienced a strange and spiritual energy, as she heard clearly, above the tumult of the storm, unrestrained peals of laughter and merriment from the birthing room, an expression of happiness that she imagined by some mysterious hand would escape the house and rise beyond the swaying tree tops, past the onrushing winds and rain, upwards into the heavens and on to the smiling, forgiving and approving face of God.

And then she fell asleep.