

THE
COLORS
OF THE
RAIN



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America preaches integration and practices segregation.

—*Malcolm X*

*The legal battle against segregation is won, but the
community battle goes on.*

—*Dorothy Day*

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Rain

Most nights
I sleep just fine
because most nights
it doesn't rain.

The last time it rained like this
we drove past that curve
Gran always called dangerous
and saw lights flashing red and blue
and people walking around
and a body covered
with a white sheet
that glowed in the dark.

Mama didn't slow down long enough
to look at the twisted car.
It was too dark to see, anyhow.
We didn't know who was
under the sheet, but Mama said
a prayer for their family
as we drove on by.

Earth

Granddad came over last month
and planted cabbage, yellow squash,
peppers, and okra
in the little square of dirt
my daddy marked.

Me and Charlie
tried to tell him
we don't like cabbage
or yellow squash or peppers.

We didn't mention the okra,
on account of Gran's fried okra,
which is the best fried okra
you've ever tasted.

Granddad said those are
the only vegetables
that will grow in a Texas garden
this time of year.

He said, *You never know
when you'll need
something to eat,*

and he just kept digging
with his pale, spotted hands.

Granddad says
things like that
all the time.

Mama says he lived
through the Great Depression,
back when a whole lot of people
went hungry.

I watched him
the whole time he planted.
He looked a lot
like my daddy,
long legs folded up,
head bent so I couldn't see
the white of his hair,
overalls pulled tight
across his back.
He touched the earth
like it was alive.

Night

The night my daddy left us,
after we drove past
that dangerous curve
and thought it had
nothing to do with us,
a black sky dropped
cold-water blankets
on me and Charlie
and Mama
while we stood
in the dark
trying to understand
what those flashing lights meant.

I didn't sleep
for twenty-seven hours.

BirthDay

My aunt Bee
calls me Paulie,
no matter how many times
I tell her I'm too old
for that nickname.
John Paul Sanders, Jr.,
is my real name,
but Paulie is what
she'd called my daddy.

Tonight, she's brought us supper,
since it's Saturday,
and Mama works late
waiting tables at a diner in town.
She spreads it all out on the table—
greasy chicken and
mashed potatoes and
rolls so buttery
they leave gray rings
on the white bag.
She tears off the receipt
with today's date,

April 16, 1972,

Mama's birthday.

She missed the Apollo 16 launch,
just like she's missing supper.

Aunt Bee knows

Mama won't be home

until later. She says,

Go on, then, and I dig in.

Milo sits underneath the table,
his long pink tongue hanging out,
ears cocked toward Aunt Bee.

She doesn't like it when
we feed him with food
from our table.

She says it spoils dogs.
I slip him a roll anyway.

A chocolate cake waits for Mama
in the icebox.

Divorce

Aunt Bee's husband divorced her
a long time ago,
so she comes to see us a lot.
Sometimes she washes dishes
and sometimes she
sorts the clothes.
Most of the time,
she brings us suppers
she didn't cook.

When I asked,
Mama said that
Aunt Bee's husband
didn't divorce her
on account of
her not knowing
how to cook.

Charlie

Charlie's hung some lights
on the walls of the family room.

Mama won't like the holes,
but even I think the lights
are pretty.

Every other minute,
Charlie looks at the clock,
her white face glowing
red and then blue in the lights.

*Shouldn't she be here
by now?* she says.

She only works 'til seven.

Her voice shakes a little,
and I feel it shake my chest.

Once a parent leaves,
you wonder if it might
happen again.

She'll be here soon, Charlotte,
Aunt Bee says.

Mama says Charlie's
a terrible nickname for a girl.

I think it fits her just fine,
since Charlie's the only girl

I know who climbs trees
higher than me and
drives Granddad's tractor
and swims in a dirty pond
full of snakes.

Aunt Bee puts her arm
around Charlie,
and even though she's twelve,
Charlie looks real small.

Aunt Bee smiles at me.
You'll lead the song? she says.
She's asked me once already.

I think she's just trying
to fill the space where
Mama should be by now.

Sing

My daddy used to sing all the time.
Mama called it loud and obnoxious,
but me and Charlie
loved to hear him sing.
He'd sing in the morning
when he turned on our light
to wake us up for school,
and sometimes he'd sing in the evening
when he turned it off.
He was a good daddy
on the nights he sang.
I try not to think about
the nights he didn't.

*Your daddy had a
one-of-a-kind voice,
Aunt Bee says. Lucky he
passed it on to you.*

She whispers the last words
like it's something great to sing
like my daddy.

He was in a band once.
That's how Mama met him.
He used to tell us the story
back when we all
ate supper together,
how she showed up
the night his band
was playing at a bar
and he fell in love
as soon as he saw her.
He'd always wink at Mama
when he said that.

Fight

I do know
my daddy liked bars
too much.

He was in a bar the night he left.
I heard Mama tell Aunt Bee he was
so drunk he beat a man to death.

The man's friends chased him
around that wet, dangerous curve.

And when his car left the road,
they shot him,
right in the heart, three times.

I guess they wanted to make sure
he didn't get back up.

I wasn't supposed to
hear this, of course.
But nobody ever tells
me and Charlie anything,
so we've learned to listen
real good in doorways.

I never did hear why
my daddy fought in the
first place. I sure would
like to know that.