

## Flooding Gifts

The door had never been locked before. “Jahzara!” Momma shrieked as she clamped her dirt caked hands around my forearm, pulled, as I struggled to yank the door open.

“Momma, Momma. Why?” I fell into her grasp and she collapsed onto the floor. I wrapped my arms around her neck and followed the line of the door with my eyes, the imprint of the keyhole pressed flat.

Momma ran her hand up and down my cheek, brittle and brown.

“They brown too, Momma. The dirt, it stains their skin. We’re just darker, Momma, darker.”

Momma leaned back limply against the wall. “No, Jahzara. We’re from Africa. Your great-great-granddaddy, he was from Africa.”

“Not here, too, Momma! Not here, too...”

I pressed the top of my head against her arm and sobbed, in rhythm with Momma’s heartbeats. “Stop,” Momma whispered. “You’re fifteen. Too old to cry.”

Momma pulled me up by my fingers. “Come on, little girl. We’re going home.”

Silently, we walked the Eastonville streets. Momma didn’t speak, and I didn’t either. I thought secretly about Texas. Of the inequality, the mistreatment. Momma and I picked the mountains, the kind of place they don’t have down south.

“Pikes Peak,” Momma muttered.

“It was so promising!” Back then, when we first came, everyone thought we were oddities. Now, it was just a quirky fact that a tiny Colorado town happened to have blacks.

The door had never been locked before, not here. It was in Texas. The door is always locked down south.

The stamping of boots pulsed in the air behind us. Momma dug her heels into the dirt road and swiveled around. Mr. Johnson’s face was set in a grim line as he stormed in front of a honking automobile. “Sallie,” he bellowed in Momma’s direction, “don’t come to work tomorrow. You’re fired.”

The air spun as I took in Mr. Johnson’s words, gripped Momma’s arm tight. She pulled hard on my clasped hands, falling into a limp heap.

“Momma,” I whispered firm in her ear. “Momma, stop it.”

She blinked, hard, fast. “Jahzara. Jahzara. My job. What did I do wrong?”

I clenched my fingers tighter around her arm and felt the coldness of her skin. “Home, Momma. Home.”

We stumbled through the streets. Momma tripped, and I pulled her up. When we got to the house, I set my shoulder against the door, pushed, holding tight to Momma with both hands.

The dank interior fell like a harsh slap against my stinging eyes. I set Momma on her mattress. The pail next to the stove was filled with potatoes; I set two of them to cook. The rough peel casings were dry in my hands.

Momma began wailing. I ran over to the bed and took her two dirt splattered hands in mine. She had just returned from the fields, from the potatoes, from her job. Her job, gone. Her job, past.

Calloused hands, like gloves over the soft skin beneath. I rubbed them between my fingers, moving out the pain. Momma quieted, like a little child.

“A reason, Momma. Mr. Johnson liked you fine. There must be a reason.”

Momma shrunk away and curled up into a ball. I eased her overalls into a smooth line, like they were just ironed.

Running my fingers over her heaving cheek, I whispered, “I’ll be back soon, Momma.”

The door squeaked open under my touch. *Our* door was not locked, never was.

The street was abandoned, lost in the world of silence. A man walked by lips clenched tight. It was like a plague had spread over all the homes. Frightened, I pushed into Mrs. Andres large house, next to her husband’s blacksmith shop.

Mrs. Andres gasped when I stumbled toward her. She rose from her seat next to the humming refrigerator. “Jahzara, my goodness! What will Thomas say when he finds out you came into our house in such a state?”

I rubbed my potato-stained hands on my skirt. “Please, Mrs. Andres. Why is it silent? Why was Momma fired?”

Mrs. Anders sprang toward me. “Your momma fired? You poor girl.”

Her hand against mine was sugar next to chocolate. “Why, Mrs. Andres?”

Sighing, she waved at the floor next to her old fireplace. I gingerly sat on the curled rug. Reclaiming her rocking chair, she turned it toward me.

“It’s the blight, Jahzara. It’s come here, to Eastonville. First Elbert, Peyton, and now us. God knows it can’t spread to Colorado Springs. That’d be a full spread disaster.”

Tears were running down my cheeks. “How will we survive, Mrs. Andres? Momma won’t be able to get another job...”

Mrs. Andres bowed her head.

“And the bookstore—”

“I know,” Mrs. Andres choked. “I saw. And you, who read so much...was the door locked, or did he chase you out, that old Mr. Pope?”

“It was the door.”

Mrs. Andres face scrunched up tight, and before she could yell insults against Mr. Pope, I pushed to my feet and said, “I’m going back to my momma now, Mrs. Andres. Thank you for talking.”

I fled out the door. Instead of going to the house, though, I trudged into the business section. There was the bookstore, faded and rough. I walked straight in the front door, even though I had only been allowed in through the back.

Mr. Pope scowled at me. “Jahzara, don’t you get the message? You are not allowed here.”

“Mr. Pope, I don’t care. I’m gonna come in whether you want me to or not.”

Bracing his hands on the counter, Mr. Pope leaned forward and stood on the balls of his feet. “You get out of here, girl, or I’m calling the police. With that.” He nodded saucily at the crank phone in the back of the room.

Running my hand down my arm, I backed out into the street. Dust kicked up behind me, and suddenly my skin became damp. The sky had turned gray while I was in the store, and it poured fat drops.

Ducking my head, I sloshed home through the fast gathering mud. When I toppled through the door, Momma stood up.

“Jahzara, good. Flash flood...Mrs. Andres told me to stay inside today when she brought a basket over a few minutes ago.”

We sat down and watched the water pour in torrents down the window. “Second rain of the year,” Momma said. “Maybe it’ll help get rid of the blight. Mrs. Andres said...”

“Momma, you don’t know anything!” I yelled. “Your job is gone, but the blight won’t leave! Stop being so optimistic.”

I gripped the wicker basket from Mrs. Andres off the counter and slammed it to the ground.

“No!” Momma cried. Shattered egg shells were swimming at my feet.

“Momma, we’re not accepted. Anywhere! Not even in twenty years. We’ll never be accepted.”

Momma kept her mouth shut tight, and I squeezed behind the old plant pot and into the corner.

Sighing, Momma dropped onto the bed.

I stayed curled up for hours, ignoring my moaning stomach. Momma moved around periodically. I pressed my head against my knees and tried to forget her.

After the sun had been down for hours, the torrent slowed to a mournful drizzle. By the morning the rain had stopped.

I pushed into the middle of the room and arched my cramped back. “What do we need today, Momma? To make food?”

“We can’t buy anything. No money. There are five potatoes left.”

I threw myself against the wall. “No breakfast today, then.”

The door creaked open and I marched into the street, determined to get away.

The mud sucked at my feet and water poured around my ankles and up my legs, a river formed over night.

Mr. Johnson was roaming the streets, coming closer. He muttered under his breath and flipped his wet hair side to side.

“Jahzara!” he said. “The railroad...the bridges are down. Flooded.”

“Mr. Johnson?”

“Don’t you get it girl? The railroad might not be running for months, and my cattle and potatoes will have no way of getting out to the world.”

“Will we starve?”

“We? You don’t understand, little black girl.”

I recoiled, pressing back toward the house.

“I won’t starve,” Mr. Johnson snapped, “but if anyone is going to get run out of town with supplies low like they are, you and your momma are going to be the first to leave.”

He ran his hand through his hair and stomped impatiently. “You understand?”

“Yes sir.”

I bit the words back as soon as they were out. Anyone running us out of town – or even mentioning the idea – was not a sir.

I ran inside, into Momma. “Mr. Johnson, Momma. He says he’ll run us out of town if supplies are cut off.”

Momma gripped the edge of her apron. “Not again. Oh God, not again.”

“Should we leave, Momma?”

Shoulders shaking, Momma ran her hand over the walls. “Our home, Jahzara...our home.”

“Momma, we got to leave. To be safe.”

Sinking onto the bed, Momma untied her apron and folded it in her lap. “Go tell Mrs. Andres we’re leaving. She has a right to know, with all her kindness.”

I ran the whole way to Mrs. Andres house. Mr. Johnson was no longer on the road, but the old man from across the street spit at me when I rushed past.

Not even knocking, I threw open the door. Mr. Andres looked up, startled, from his newspaper.

Taking an ancient pipe out of his mouth and resting it on the table, he stared at me quizzically.

“You’re the girl from down the street...Jahota, right?”

“Jahzara, sir. Is Mrs. Andres here?”

“In the parlor,” he said, tilting his head toward a door.

I entered cautiously. “Mrs. Andres?”

She was on tiptoe, dusting the top of an old portrait. “Jahzara! My goodness, girl, I was worried.”

“We’re leaving, Mrs. Andres. Mr. Johnson doesn’t want us here. It’s like Texas,” I said, rubbing the arm of a silk covered chair. “The threats start small, but then it’s too late. Too late to get out.”

Mrs. Andres shook her head softly. “I’m sorry, Jahzara. I’ll get you some food for when you leave.”

“We don’t even know where we’re going,” I wailed. “Where will they not hurt us?”

Mrs. Andres sighed, leading me through the door back into the kitchen. Mr. Andres looked up. “What’s going on, ladies?”

“Momma and I are leaving, sir.”

Letting his shoulders rise and fall, Mr. Andres nodded. “Probably wise. They won’t want you here while the train is down. You’re one more problem to them.”

Packing a basket quickly with her worn hands, Mrs. Andres beckoned me closer. Leaning conspiratorially near my ear, she whispered, “Jahzara, wherever you go, count gifts.”

“Count gifts?”

“Yes. Like now, I count: the sun on Jahzara’s warm skin. The basket filled with food. Water swirling right at the doorstep.”

I shifted. “Anything? You want me to look for good, even when we’re being run out of town?”

“Jahzara, there’s always good. Look for it, and you’ll be joyful wherever you go. No matter what.”

Taking the basket from her, I said, “Yes, Mrs. Andres.”

With a quick wave, I slipped out the door and sloshed home. If Mrs. Andres said to be grateful, I would obey. Cheerful Mrs. Andres knew.

“Jahzara?” Momma peered at me as I set the basket next to the charred stove.

“Yes, Momma?”

*Momma’s hair combed back*

*Clean water for washing dishes*

“You look happy.”

“We get a new home, Momma! And you and I, we’re together.” I opened the basket. “Look what Mrs. Andres sent us. We can eat that cake on the way to wherever we go.”

“Peyton,” said Momma. “I hear there is another black family there, and they own a store! Maybe they’ll give me a job. And there can’t be too much hatred against them, if they stay in business.”

“Momma, when can we leave? I’m ready.”

Smiling, Momma pointed to the old quilts and pile of clothes. “Get those things in a box, and we’ll hitch a ride over.”

*Clothing all colorful*

*Momma’s grandma’s handkerchief, still bright*

The boxes filled, and Momma wiped her hands off on the old towel. “We’re ready now, Jahzara.

A farmer from Peyton was going back into town after visiting some relatives. I recognized his crinkled face.

“Can we ride with you, sir?” Momma asked.

When he nodded quietly, I lifted the three boxes into the back of his wagon and climbed up to the seat. Momma sat next to me.

We rambled through the six miles to Peyton in two hours, passing a grumbling Model T as we stuttered into town.

*Waving grass*

*Puffed-up clouds*

The farmer dropped us off in front of the store, the one owned by our fellow blacks. “Good day,” he said, tipping his sagging hat and setting off toward the housing.

Squaring her shoulders, Momma knocked on the door. A train hooted, sliding into the station at the end of the street.

A kindly old woman smiled at us from the doorway. “Why, you don’t have to knock. Welcome to the store!”

*Understanding faces*

*A friendly doorstep*

*New beginnings*

The gifts, all flooding in.

*Historical note:*

Eastonville was a real town in Colorado. It was about seven miles north of current Falcon and east of the Black Forest. In 1935, a severe potato blight struck Eastonville, hugely injuring the town’s main industry. That same year, the Colorado and Southern Railway was damaged by flooding, and the company abandoned the tracks that led through Eastonville. Without the railroad, the people of Eastonville quickly sprawled out, some beginning to commute to Peyton and others moving to Elbert or Colorado Springs. When a fire destroyed the rest of the town several years later, no houses or businesses were rebuilt. All that remains today of the actual town is a crumbling building off Sweet Road. Eastonville’s legacy lives on in the winding dirt road named for the town, following the path of the Colorado and Southern Railway’s skeleton. In addition, Eastonville Cemetery off Latigo and Meridian still bears the town name.

Jahzara and her momma, Sallie, are fictional characters, although segregation and prejudice against blacks is a very true reality in Colorado history during the time this story takes place in 1935. Mr. Johnson was really a land owner on the outskirts of Eastonville: Mr. Charles Johnson. Mr. T. C. Andres was also a real person; however, there is no solid evidence that there was a Mrs. Andres. Mr. Pope is a fictional character.

Thank you to the Carnegie Special Collections for providing digital newspapers from Eastonville’s active years.