

Belonging.

Angel Forrester woke up on the morning of her twenty-first birthday and made a resolution even though New Year's Day was well behind her. She even said it out loud to the empty room. (Waking in an empty room was a rare occurrence for Angel these days!) Standing at an open window, barefoot, wearing a threadbare knee-length nightgown that she could wrap around herself twice—a hand-me-down from Rose, the old woman—Angel spoke these words: “I’m tired of waiting. I’m taking charge. I’ve waited my whole entire life for something good to come my way. It’s not going to happen if I don’t make it happen.”

Maybe her decision was made out of exhaustion from getting three, tops four, hours of sleep each night. Maybe it was made out of frustration from sharing a room with a demanding infant and an old lady who snored. Loudly! Maybe it was from the monotonous routine of day-to-day living in a small house in the country with three aging adults and a baby who was content to eat, sleep, and poop. Nevertheless, Angel had had it!

She pulled on her jean shorts, wrapped her one nursing bra around her beginning-to-sag boobs, pulled a t-shirt over her head, and, still barefoot, opened the bedroom door. The serenity that greeted her in the large gathering room caused her to pause briefly, reconsidering her resolution. She glanced at the baby, sleeping soundly in her little Moses basket. Her darkening skin and the little circles of hair that were beginning to form on her tiny head were proof that her father was black. Angel breathed in deeply and sighed. The baby would never look like her; the genes that had given her brownish blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin had been trumped by the genes of the father. The dark-skinned woman in a nearby rocking chair glanced up at Angel but continued shelling English peas fresh from the garden.

“Mornin’,” she said as her hands continued to swiftly zip open the pods. “Coffee and biscuits in the kitchen. Plenty eggs if you want to make yourself some. Honey on the shelf.” The old (to Angel) woman’s hallmark: economy of words.

Angel wavered. The baby slept. Rose shelled peas.

“I can’t do this no more, Rose.” She spoke in a whisper.

“Speak up, girl,” Rose said. “Can’t hear you. But don’t wake the baby.”

“I’m leavin’,” Angel replied.

Rose continued to open pods and empty peas into a bowl, the same noncommittal expression on her face. “Go have yourself somethin’ to eat. This sound like a conversation about to happen, and serious conversations want a settled belly. Go eat.”

Angel stood for a moment in the open doorway, then slowly made her way across the large room to the kitchen. She had been with Rose long enough to recognize her commands and to understand that there were consequences for a command that was not followed.

Rose finished shelling her peas, set the bowl of perfectly formed green spheres on the table beside her, and walked over to check on the sleeping baby. Satisfied that she was sleeping soundly, Rose turned and collected the empty pods and bowl of peas which she intended to cook later that morning for lunch. *Dinner* her people called it, the main meal of the day. On the days Rose didn’t work she always prepared a big dinner for herself and her parents. Angel joined them sometimes if Rose insisted, but just as often foraged for whatever might be available in the kitchen after the family finished eating. She resisted, in as many ways as possible, falling into the established routine of her hosts.

Angel sat at the kitchen table with a biscuit dribbled with honey on a napkin. She’d poured the last of the coffee into a mug and was sipping from a glass of water. Both women

continued in silence until Rose had rinsed the peas, placed them in a pan and covered them with water. She then went to join Angel at the table.

“What is it you can’t do no more, Angel?” she asked after several seconds of silence.

More silence ensued as Angel chewed her biscuit, and Rose waited for a response. Waiting did not come easily for Rose, but she’d learned in the past few months that silence following a question to Angel was a necessity. She waited. Impatiently, but not obviously so. She had learned to hide her impatience by concentrating on her fingernails or a spot on the wall or staring out the window at whatever scene presented itself. This had not been easy for any of them.

“I ain’t cut out to be a mama,” the girl finally choked out.