

The Last Parade

Nadria Tucker

She'd lost control of the house. She didn't know this room. Pink everywhere—pink couch, pink pillows, pink wallpaper. Didn't remember where any of it came from—didn't even remember coming in here to sit down. Here she was, just the same. Maybe she'd come in here to crack a window. She eased one up a touch to let in some early air. Hadn't got too hot outside yet.

What time was it? She stripped the sheets off the bed (pink flowers) and threw them in the basket, on top of a pile of clothes that smelled like mildew. She pulled the cord on the ceiling fan twice. Dust balls flew off the blades as they spun, but she left it on high to air out the room. Everything smelled wet.

She washed her hands while she sang “Happy Birthday” twice in her head—what she used to tell her students to do before lunch and after the bathroom. Always something to catch. Bird flu, Hong Kong flu, Asian flu. Drying her hands, she thanked Jesus that she had woke up today. Today was her birthday—the fourth of July.

Went to the Fourth of July Parade every summer, Cotton Queen riding down the street on a wagon done up with bows and cotton blossoms, waving and smiling and throwing Tootsie Rolls at little black children scrambling for candy on the ground. The little black children couldn't be in the parade, but could watch. More blacks than whites; more black children than white children, but the white children were there. Except they weren't down there, scrambling for Tootsie Rolls. Soon as a little pinkish hand would reach down, a big pinkish hand would snatch it up. “Don't touch that. It's dirty. I'll buy you candy later.” The candy wasn't dirty—it was still in the wrappers. Now they integrated the parade, so there's a black marching band high stepping down the street, playing

boom-boom music, those shake-your-booty girls jiggling up front. 'Course the Cotton Queen's still always white. When was the last parade?

Drip, drip, drip.

She pushed the knob on the sink as far as she could, then she jiggled it. The faucet still drip, drip, dripped and water had filled up the sink. It was about to overflow.

“**M**ama,” Dez said. “No leak in the bathroom.”
The drip, drip, drip had stopped.

“You fixed it?”

“Nothing to fix. There was no leak.”

She walked over to the sink. No sign of water. “I heard it. Saw it.”

“I believe you,” Dez said. Didn't sound like it. “You left the stove on again. You gotta be careful, Mama.”

“You coming to church today?”

“I stopped going, remember? All those old folks with nothing better to do than get in each other's business.”

“Folks are like that outside church, too. You ought not to worry about it. You ought to be worrying about your soul.”

“Okay, Mama. Happy birthday. Eighty-five. We'll see you tonight, okay?” Dez gave her a hug and headed out the door. “Turn the stove off when you get done cooking, next time. Lock the door behind me.”

She did no such thing. Had to go out and get the gardening done before it got too hot. She stuck her feet into a pair of house shoes and walked out. The street was quiet.

The garden was dead. Yesterday it wasn't. Her rosemary and basil were green, her peppers nearly ripe, her pansies smiled up at her as she watered

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them. Or was that the day before yesterday? Or the day before that?

She checked to make sure all the knobs on the stove were turned off. The drip, drip, drip had started up again. She checked the bathroom sink—no water coming out. Checked the shower, and the kitchen sink. Nothing. But all the clothes in the basket were wet.

Got in trouble for picking up Mama's sewing machine, making dresses out of burlap sacks for play-pretties to wear. What if the machine broke and Mama couldn't fix the white folks' clothes anymore? Turned into a little business, though, making burlap dresses for dolls. On down the line making real cotton dresses. All the neighborhood girls parading around in fashions by Jessie Jo. Couldn't even pick up a needle these days, let alone thread one.

She shut herself in the bedroom, turned the television on and the volume way up to where she couldn't hear the water dripping anymore, opened her Bible to the scriptures for today. This was going to be a sermon about church—not enough folks were coming these days. Couldn't hurt for Reverend Brown to pour a little guilt on those folks who missed more weeks than they came. Couldn't remember the last time she'd missed church.

She got to church early, so she could sit a while alone behind the organ and practice before service started. Seemed harder to remember all the chords these days.

The doors were closed—the doors were never closed this time Sunday morning. Reverend Brown always propped them open. And there was a sound—thumping. Music? Sounded like the shake-your-booty music. It took all she had to pull one heavy wooden door open. A blast of hot air hit her—air conditioning out again—but what made her catch her breath was the sight of two boys, a keyboard and a set of drums beside the pulpit, where the organ used to be—where *her* organ used to be.

Reverend Brown came out the door leading to the private parts of the church, suit clinging to his fat belly even more tightly than usual today, bald head covered in more sweat than usual. He went over to the young musicians and nodded his head.

She walked toward the reverend, and the smile faded from his lips for a second before he stuck it back up there again.

“Sister Wilkins,” Reverend Brown said and walked down the aisle to meet her.

“What’s going on, Reverend?”

“Changes, Sister Wilkins. We need to go into the community and bring back those folks who have fallen from the fold, and bring in those folks who have never accepted Christ as their savior.

“Amen,” she said. “But, what’s that got to do with my organ?”

“That’s why I’m glad you’re here early today.”

She started to sweat.

“Now, you play the organ beautifully—”

“Thank you.” She pulled a handkerchief from inside her bra and wiped her forehead.

“Sister, you’ve played beautifully. Your commitment to the church is unparalleled, but ... I’ve talked to some of the deacons, and we just ...”

“Spit it out, Reverend.”

“Everyone loves the organ ... but it’s old fashioned.”

She was old-fashioned. She took her hat off and fanned herself with it. Other members of the congregation were filing in, the old women careful not to trip in their orthopedic church shoes and the old men trying to stand as tall as their bad backs and hips would let them. They were all old-fashioned.

“So the church is gonna have shake-your-booty music instead of hymns?”

“We need new blood. We need to get people in the seats and money in the collection box. I’m sorry. Do you know, Sister Wilkins, that those two boys on those instruments are the first folks under 50 to come through those doors all year long? I’ve told half of Birmingham about the church’s new style.”

She kept fanning herself. The inside of the church was nearly too hot to bear, but only she seemed to notice.

Two more folks came in. They weren’t regulars, and they were under 50. When they chose a spot near the front of the sanctuary and sat, the reverend’s eyes lit up. These were the folks he coveted so. They were a couple, well dressed, the young man with new, nice-looking shoes and the young woman with long, fake-looking hair, and probably not on a fixed income, with plenty of money to give to the church.

“New blood,” the reverend said, his eyes glowing. “New blood. New blood. New blood.”

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That's when the fire started.

Behind the reverend's eyes first, then spreading fast, until he was breathing fire out his nose and spitting flames from his lips. The fire caught hold of the tapestries behind the pulpit and crept down to the floor until the red carpet between the aisles of pews melted black. It swallowed up the two young musicians mid-song.

The reverend kept on. He stood there talking at her, spitting fire in her direction until a flame caught hold of the collar on her dress and she had to turn and run.

The rafters were burning now, and the pews too. The old folks and the young couple who'd wandered into the church just sat there, smiling and chatting as the fire crept up around them.

"You have to get out," she told them as she headed for the door, but they stayed right where they were and just looked at her like she was crazy.

"Sister Wilkins," the reverend called after her. "I know you're set in your ways, but hubris is sinful. Don't let your pride push you away from God. Especially when He's so close to calling you back home."

By the time she made her way down the aisle, flames had consumed the church doors. She held her breath and pushed them open, not caring whether she burned her hands. She made it out onto the road home, and she didn't look back. No need to. She knew Norwood Baptist Church was burning from the inside out, and soon her old church would be gone.

The faucet was dripping again.

She pulled off her church clothes, put her housecoat back on, turned on the TV and flipped through the channels until she found a televangelist whose suit she liked. At least her house had air conditioning. And she could turn down the volume when it got too loud—not like when Reverend Brown got worked up and started yelling into his microphone.

The TV church was full of old folks and young folks, and it didn't just have a keyboard and a drum set; it had a full band, with guitars and trumpets and all. It sounded good, but it didn't sound like church. What nice old lady had the televangelist kicked to the curb to get that full band?

She started on a batch of collard greens: thawed the ham hock, cleaned the greens, and stuffed them in a pot of water. She fried a batch of corn bread fritters, broke off a piece of one and tasted. Perfect. If she knew anything these days, she knew her recipes. She set to baking the layers of a German chocolate cake, and by eleven, she was through cooking for the party, the cake iced and ready to cut, greens in a plastic container in the fridge, and the corn bread fritters wrapped in foil, ready to travel.

Everybody strut down the aisle like they'd never been let out the house before. Everybody said "Woo" at the kiss. Everybody laughed when the bouquet landed in the ditch. Everybody threw rice at the big black getaway car, and the driver stopped and got out and yelled at folks not to scratch it up. Everybody loved the dress she made out of white satin and lace. Everybody ate so much they

could hardly dance. Everybody danced. Everybody said “Congratulations” and “Good luck” and meant it. No party would ever top that one.

The ceiling fan had to be cleaned. She grabbed hold of a chair from the kitchen and dragged it through the house. She set it up under the fan and threw some pillows down on the floor around it, to catch herself if she fell. Then she climbed up on the chair with an old feather duster and wiped the dust off the blades. She pulled the cord—no dust flew off this time. But something hit her in the face. She touched the spot where it had landed. She looked at her hand—water. She looked at the fan. A gray spot on one of the blades. She watched it spin around and around until she got dizzy and had to sit down. It dripped again, on her head. The drips were coming from the spot on the blade. A cloud. Couldn't be.

She pulled the vacuum out the closet and used the hose to vacuum the pink couches in the living room. She dusted the pink plastic flowers on the coffee table and then vacuumed the whole carpet. She put the vacuum away and sat down on the couch to rest.

Next second she was on a train headed to Gulf Shores. Her Sunday hat flopped and bounced in time with the clackety-clack of the train. A sunny day filled with trees and hillsides rushed past out the window. She turned her head away and looked into the face of a man sitting next to her. He was old, in his 80s, maybe, like her, and his skin was whiter than cotton. He wore a hat, too, a black one, like the one her father wore when she was a little girl to keep the sun out of his eyes on long days in the field.

“Mrs. Jessie Jo Wilkins,” the man said. His voice was friendly.

“Yes?” Did she know him?

“What in the world are you doing on this train?”

“Going to the beach, I reckon. Same as you.”

“Your family’s throwing you a party. You don’t want to be the guest of honor?”

She shook her head. “Nobody has any use for the likes of me. Old and half crazy.”

“Can’t be true.”

“I used to be somebody,” she said. “I played organ at that church for forty-something years. I was a teacher. I used to make clothes for the neighborhood girls. Folks used to come to me for advice on all types of problems—best time to plant collard greens, best way to keep a cut from getting infected. Can’t even fix a sink no more.”

“That’s not true. It stopped dripping, didn’t it? Listen.”

She listened. No drip, drip, drip of the sink. Not even the clackety-clack of the train. Dead silence.

“See,” the man next to her said. “You ought to go to that party.”

She said nothing. She turned back to the window. It was pouring out now, and the sky was black. Rain sheeted across the window, started to seep through the rubber seal.

He was grinning now, a smile that had more gaps than teeth. He leaned close to her face. “Or you could stay here with me,” he said. His face was shriveled now, like a dead man. “Let’s go to the beach. Let’s kick our shoes off and walk right into the ocean and never come back out. What do you say?” Maggots fell from his eyes.

She turned back to the man next to her. He was grinning now, a smile that had more gaps than teeth. He leaned close to her face.

“Or you could stay here with me,” he said. His face was shriveled now, like a dead man. “Let’s go to the beach. Let’s kick our shoes off and walk right into the ocean and never come back out. What do you say?” Maggots fell from his eyes.

She shook her head and closed her eyes tight, and when she opened them, she was on the pink couch again.

She put on her white hat and Sunday dress and sat in a chair by the door waiting for Desiree to pick her up. More than likely Dez already knew that she had skipped church today, because Dez was friends with just about every busybody in town, and somebody was sure to have told by now.

Sure enough, Dez showed up wearing a frown along with her too-tight dress. She got into Dez’s minivan, with her cake and greens and corn bread fritters, and they hadn’t even pulled out of the driveway before Dez started up.

“I heard you missed church today, Mama.”

She didn’t say anything.

“You didn’t go?”

“You already know I missed church. You probably already know why, too.”

“You didn’t skip service because they replaced you with a keyboard and drums, did you, Mama?”

“It was the fire.”

“Getting fired hurt your feelings that bad?”

“No, the fire.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Her other daughter, Sandra, didn’t live too far away, and now they were there.

She made an effort to get out of the car without any help, but when Dez offered her hand, she grabbed it.

She let herself be sat in a chair in a corner of Sandra's house and told to rest while the family arrived. There was Dez and her daughter Ebony. Sandra and her son Wes. Cousin Theodore and his wife Teresa and their daughter Tanya and her kids, Shaun and Shauna, the twins. Cousin Arlene and her son Nathan and his wife, white Teresa, and their boys Noel and Cassidy. They all made sure to remind her of their names.

Eighty-five didn't feel important enough for such a big party.

"Every birthday is important at your age, Mama," said Sandra.

The party started at four. Somebody joked, "We don't want to keep you up all night. You probably have other plans," but she knew it was about their plans, not hers. Four o'clock and they could be back home by seven or eight with plenty of time to spend the rest of their Sunday night doing anything else. She was old, but she wasn't stupid.

And her hearing wasn't gone either. With the food laid out on the table and everyone in line with paper plates, she heard, clearly, her grandbaby Ebony say to her grandson Wes as he reached for a corn bread fritter, "Don't eat that. Grandmamma made it."

She got out of her chair in the corner, went over to the child and asked, "Why not?"

The whole party went quiet.

"Mama," said Sandra, finally, "you just.... You cook with lard, and it's full of saturated fat, and we're sure it tastes very good, right?" The family nodded and mumbled agreement. "But everyone here is kind of watching what we eat these days."

"I've eaten this way my whole life and I've stayed thin. Thinner than that child who doesn't want to eat my food. Not to mention alive and healthy for 85 years."

"You really shouldn't worry about cooking for the family anymore," said Dez. "Sometimes you leave the stove on all day. You could burn your house down. Besides, we long ago figured out how to cook for ourselves."

After dinner, she went back to her chair in the corner. Folks came to greet her, like a receiving line or a funeral viewing, under the "Happy Birthday" banner, and nodded or gave her a short hug. They asked how she was doing, but they didn't mean it, so she didn't tell them. She said, "I'm fine, fine," and kept quiet about all the pink in the house, and the water in the house, the burnt up church and the man on the train.

"You ready to go?" Once most everyone had left, Desiree helped her into the minivan again, and drove her back home.

"Did you have a good time?"

She didn't answer.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm just tired."

"You've had a long day."

She nodded. It was like she was the faucet and she was tired of dripping. She was just ready for the water to run out.

The house smelled even more like mildew than before. She got undressed and stood in front of the bathroom mirror to put the foam rollers back in her hair. Then she stopped. No point in putting them in. Not when she wouldn't be going to Bible study tomorrow, or ever again. Not when the curls would just get frizzy from the wet air in her house.

The faucet in the kitchen was dripping now, too. She jiggled the knob, but there was no stopping it. She went into the bathroom. The water wasn't just dripping; it was flowing, full blast out of the faucet, filling up the sink, flowing over the edge. She grabbed towels and laid them on the floor to try and soak up the water, but it just kept pouring.

She rushed to the bedroom and stood in the doorway. It was raining in there. Water poured from the ceiling. She couldn't see the pink flowers on the bed for the rain. Water crept out into the hallway and lapped around her house shoes. Was this it?

Rain poured down onto Sandra's face as she took her first steps. It soaked through Desiree's first walk to school. Muddy water flowed up through the floorboards everybody walked on in their tiny two-bedroom house. And now, it was taking over her new house.

She went into the living room and picked up the Bible. She almost turned to the scripture about Noah and the flood, but this wasn't like that. She was too old to save anyone or be saved. She sat down on the pink couch and clutched the Bible to her chest, and waited. When water flowed out from under the couch, she picked her feet up off the floor. When the couch started to float, she laid down and closed her eyes.

When she opened them, she was on the train again, headed to Gulf Shores. Only this time there was no rain, no man sitting next to her. Just sunshine and her family and friends and the folks from church, all gathered in the seats around her, smiling, clapping.

She straightened her Sunday hat and smiled back, waving to everybody as she walked up the aisle.

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