

Finding Langston

by LESA CLINE-RANSOME



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“Homesick Blues,” “One-Way Ticket,” “Evenin’ Air Blues,” “Daybreak in Alabama,”
“The Negro Mother,” and “Red Clay Blues” from THE COLLECTED POEMS OF
LANGSTON HUGHES by Langston Hughes, edited by Arnold Rampersad with
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Note to Readers

You may notice that Langston and his father, Henry, use the term colored,
while the librarians use the term Negro. The distinction is intentional and
demonstrates the divide that existed at the time between the older
traditions of the South and the racial progress of the North.

For Kathy White, we love hard

*In memory of Michael White (1984–2017),
friend, son, artist*

NEVER really thought much about Alabama's red dirt roads, but now, all I can think about is kicking up their dust. I miss the hot sun on the back of my neck and how now the racket of cicadas, seems like no sound at all. At the end of a school day, 'fore I had to get home and do my chores, I could take my time walking just as slow as I pleased without someone pushing past and cutting their eyes like I was a stray dog come asking for scraps.

The school bell rings loud and I remember I'm a long way from Alabama, dirt roads, and slow walking. I grab my satchel and make my way fast down the stairs, through the school yard, past block after block of the cracked sidewalks of Chicago's South Side. I step quick past Binga State Bank, the Jackson Funeral Home, and Saul's Butcher Shop with rows of baloney lined up in the window like a curtain. I wish it were home I was rushing to. Instead, I'm hurrying to get as far away as I can from Haines Junior High School.

I sidestep a group of loud-talking women outside the Luxe Beauty Parlor, and a tired old man with round shoulders. Just

like in Alabama, folks here are in all shades of brown, so many they call this part of Chicago the Black Ghetto, or the Black Belt. But of all the names this place is called, I love the name Bronzeville. A place filled with people, each one some color of bronze.

Finally I reach 4501 Wabash Avenue. At my building I sit on the stoop and catch my breath, waiting before I have to climb the broke-down stairs and walk hallways smelling like two-day-old garbage and fried onions. Waiting alone for Daddy in our kitchenette apartment. Landlord calls it an apartment but it ain't nothing but a room tucked in between and on top of a lot of other rooms. Nothing here belongs to us, just whoever pays the rent. The two beds, two old rickety chairs, one table, the bureau missing a drawer—nothing. And walls covered by the last tenant with old newspapers to hide the holes. When we first moved in I tried to read the headlines but there's so many layers, all I could make out was a few words and pieces of dates: *July 12...November 7...1945*. Didn't really matter 'cuz news from a year or two ago ain't really no news at all.

This room is so small, it feels like I'm being squeezed from all sides. Daddy ain't the best company, but ain't nothing worse than being alone. Not used to coming home to an empty house. The smell of last night's dinner and Daddy's sweaty work clothes hanging in the air. Every day I open the door, it takes just a minute 'fore I remember I won't hear Mama getting supper started, or hear her humming—*His eye is on the*

sparrow, and I know He watches me—and just a little bit longer to remember I won't see Mama ever again.

Our downstairs neighbor comes out, her two kids hanging tight to her. Looks like she's got one more on the way. The one in her arms is crying so loud, I gotta cover my ears. Daddy says folks in the North like to keep to themselves, so I guess that's why they never speak. I wouldn't know what to say if they did. Been here months now, and we still only know one neighbor by name. Sometimes I wish we didn't. Miss Fulton comes up the steps, struggling with a bag.

"Come help me," she says when she sees me sitting. Looks like I'll be going inside after all. Her plump hands pass me her bag. She lives on the top floor, across from us, and only time she talks to me is when she's asking for my help. More like *telling* me to help. *Get over here* and *I need you to* . . . I don't think she even knows my name. In Alabama I was raised on *please* and *thank you*. Ain't no way Miss Fulton's from Alabama.

Daddy says she's a teacher in a high school across town. Bad as my classroom is, I'd hate to be in hers. She's just about my mama's age, just as pretty, but she's as wide as my mama was narrow. Her freckled light skin nothing like my mama's smooth nut-brown. Mean as my mama was kind. And she's missing Mama's gap-toothed smile. "Uppity" is what folks back home would call her. And other words I ain't got no business thinking.

Following her up the stairs, I can barely see around her wide behind, swaying from one side to the other. She puffs all

the way up the four flights. Every once in a while she stops to catch her breath.

“You okay, Miss Fulton?” I ask, almost wishing she don’t make it to the top floor.

“Mmm-hmmm,” she answers, grabs onto the rickety banister and keeps on going. Me right along behind her.

Miss Fulton takes her sweet time getting her key out her purse, like I ain’t standing there with heavy groceries. Finally, she opens the door, and I barely make it to the kitchen table.

“Careful with my things!” she says, loud.

“Yes ma’am,” I say, half dropping the bag.

I look around wishing our apartment were this neat. It’s only one room, with a small table pushed against a wall with flowery oilcloth spread on it. Smells like the lavender that grew along the edge of our road back home. A lace curtain hangs at the window and pictures of people with smiling faces in frames hang above the table. Daddy keeps a picture in his wallet of him and Mama all dressed up. He’ll show if I ask. And if he’s in the mood for showing. The other corner of the room has her bed and quilt, bright with patches of color. Even with the big stove that sits in the middle, black and ugly with who knows how many years of other folks’ grease and dirt cooked in, it still feels like a home. Like what I used to have.

“Good day, ma’am,” I say, backing out of the front door ’fore she finds something else for me to do.

I pull the key to our apartment out of my shoe and wriggle it in the lock. After I lost two 'cuz of the holes in my pants pockets, Daddy said I lose another, I just wait outside till he gets home. The metal scrapes my foot all day, but least I'm not waiting outside. Back home, never had a key. The door stayed open. Every day in Chicago makes it harder to remember Alabama. Like a candle fighting to stay lit in the wind. But I do remember the porch and the front door with no lock, creaky on rusty hinges. And of course I remember Mama, pulling me in close and burying her nose in my hair soon as I walked in the door.

I pull a chair up to the window and watch the goings-on downstairs. Bet there's more action on my street than in Cab Calloway's show at the Regal Theater on Saturday night. The cart man rolls by with his busted wagon collecting trash and tossed-out furniture. Two soldiers stroll past, looking like they're still on duty when everyone knows the war ended a year ago. Jackie and Shirley from school are turning the ropes for double Dutch on the sidewalk. "*Here comes Sally, sittin' in the alley,*" they sing to two girls in the middle jumping fast. Shirley's ponytail bobs in time to the ropes hitting the sidewalk. Jackie looks bored with her head tilted to the side, eyeing boys passing by. Some people are moving in across the street. The mother wears a dress too thin for the weather, reties her head-rag and lifts her two young ones out of a truck onto the sidewalk while a tall, skinny man and his boy, just about my age,

untie the chairs and pots and everything else they own from the back of the truck. The boy looks as scared as I did the day we moved into 4501 Wabash.

Daddy comes walking tired and slow from the el train that rides on a track above the city. He nods to folks as he passes. He's so tall, folks gotta look up to see his face. Some nod back, some keep walking. I move the chair back and shut the window. By the time Daddy opens the door, my books are open wide and spread across the table. I take out my pencil and pretend I'm doing my schoolwork.