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Birmingham's Little Angels

*See that host all dressed in white?
God's a gonna trouble the water.*

It was nine a.m. when Divine came knocking on my door saying her mama wanted us down at the community kitchen. It was Saturday, which meant Divine's mama would be seeing all of Birmingham at the kitchen. Though her mama insisted she didn't need our help, Divine signed us all up for kitchen duty. She's what our teacher, Miss Newton, called an overachiever. Overachiever: someone who tries too hard to be perfect. My Daddy was an overachiever. He went out with hordes of midnight colored men claiming they're trying to change the world. Stop the race war, they'd say. Mama knew better. Mama knew there wasn't no stopping it. She's seen enough to know. She was here when the bombs first started going off around Birmingham.

I met Divine outside on the porch. Her thick hair was braided down her neck. When she was born, her skin was light and shiny like a porcelain doll. Her father nearly ran off thinking that white baby wasn't his. With time, Divine's complexion came into its own. She wasn't mixed with no white, Divine was as dark as the burnt parts of Mama's fried eggs. She sure was beautiful though, if you stared at her long enough. Her big brown eyes were adorned with long eyelashes and her cheeks were plumped like they were stuffed with something. When she spoke, you'd swear she was about to break into song. Sometimes she did. "At last my love has come along, my lonely days are over," she sang in the highest note, trying to copy Miss Etta James.

Divine didn't listen when I told her that Pretty's gonna say something real mean about her singing. Instead, she continued singing loud and swaying her hips.

"You ain't got no lover," Pretty said when we reached her door.

Pretty was thirteen, a year older than the rest of us. She liked to think that being six months older than Angel, who was two months older than me, and five months older than Divine made her the leader of our group. Her run for Queen of the seventh grade was solidified when she kissed Tommy Tucker by the swings during free time. That kiss made Pretty's head blow up like a real balloon. Her mama named her Priscilla when she was born, but the nurse in the room kept calling her Pretty, so the name stuck.

"I got me a nice lover," Divine said. "He's got curly hair and light brown skin. His eyes are gray."

"You got you a mulatto boy?" Pretty asked.

Divine nodded. "Yep, met him when I visited up north with my mama. It's real nice up there in New York. The streets are wild."

"Wild like your daddy after a sip of whiskey."

We laughed and trudged down the road to Angel's house. Angel had the nicest house on the block. It was painted yellow with a white porch. That's why the older folks on the block called Angel's house "Sunshine." Her house resembled the sun on a good day. It's funny though, Angel had a house called Sunshine and she had her a biblical name, but Angel was far from any of those nice things. She was the sourest in the group.

"Angel baby, time to go feed the homeless!" Pretty shouted as Angel came out in her little pink dress.

Angel pulled at the bows in her hair and frowned. "Why so early? Are people really that hungry this early, Divine?"

Divine frowned. "Of course, silly girl. Can't leave my mama with all those hungry-bellied folks. She's at the kitchen all by herself. Plus, my daddy snores so loud, you can hear him through the floorboards."

Angel wrapped her arms around mine. "Save me from her madness," she whispered to me.

I smiled at her and we walked hand in hand to the kitchen. Divine's mama, Mrs. Della, started the community kitchen a few years back when a storm destroyed a few of the houses. The kitchen was known all over Birmingham. Joe Carpenter, one of the few black writers at the newspaper, said the kitchen was "spectacular!" and Mrs. Della was a Godsend, a real black woman of class.

"Mama," Divine yelled when we met Mrs. Della in the kitchen. "Mama, look. I got all the girls."

Mrs. Della pulled Divine into an embrace. Her large breasts engulfed the girl's head.

“Divine, I told you that I didn’t need the girls. It’s their one day to sleep in.” Then she looked at the rest of us. “I’m so sorry, babies.”

“It’s alright, Mrs. Della, we don’t mind being up this early,” I said.

Pretty groaned. “I guess we don’t.”

“Well, I suppose it’s good you’re all here. People are gonna start coming in by the dozen now. How about you go on up front and start setting up the tables quickly? Let me know when people start coming in.”

We nodded together and grabbed the items we needed for the tables. The bag of forks, spoons, table cloths, and napkins. Divine ran ahead of us, eager to show that she was the queen of table setting.

“Turn on the TV!” Pretty shouted to Divine.

“I’d rather sing for all of you,” Divine said.

Pretty groaned again. “No, no, none of that. Turn on the TV.”

“You always wanna watch the TV like you know anything, Pretty,” Angel said, staring fiercely. “Ain’t nothing happy on that TV. You know, I asked my Daddy yesterday if we could move. I said ‘Daddy, please, I don’t wanna live here any longer. I don’t care about this stupid yellow house. I just wanna go somewhere that people like me.’ People got to be protesting for stuff to happen. Stuff that shouldn’t need protesting.”

“We like you,” I said, holding her hand. “I get it. But there ain’t no getting out, alright? You got me, and Pretty, and Divine. You got your family. Ain’t nobody leaving you, and you ain’t leaving us.”

“Can I sing a song now?” Divine asked.

We laughed together.

“Go on, girl,” Angel said, forcing a smile.

Divine grabbed a spoon and brought it to her mouth. She closed her eyes and leaned her hips to the side. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the spoon and opened her mouth.

*Down in my heart
Down in my heart
I have the love of Jesus, love of Jesus
Down in my heart*

We all joined her, hearing our Sunday school teacher’s voice in the back of our heads. *Sing it girls, sing for Jesus!*

*Down in my heart
Down in my heart
I have the love of Jesus, love of Jesus
Down in my heart*

When the singing ended, we returned to our chores. Divine and Pretty took the left side of the room. Angel and I took the right. We decided that the fastest way to finish Mrs. Della's task was to turn it into a game. First team to finish their side would get the first scoops of chocolate ice cream Mrs. Della got in the fridge. Divine loved chocolate ice cream, so she was gunning for first place.

"Alright, girls," Pretty said. "On your mark, get set, go!"

We each took off to a separate table. I laid the sheet across the first table, smoothed out the edges, placed a folded napkin at each corner, and finished it off with a fork and spoon on each. I repeated this with two other tables as Angel rushed around me. One last fork in hand, I reached towards the napkin.

"We're done!" Divine yelled, standing back to back with Pretty, "Losers."

"Oh, shut up!" Angel said, tossing a leftover fork at Divine.

"Love, stop her!" Divine shouted at me, as Angel tackled her to the floor.

"Get her, Angel," I said.

Pretty hurried back over to the TV. She tinkered a bit with the buttons and the screen lit up. We watched as Martin Luther King Jr. stood up at a podium, waving his hand at the crowd, his confidence beaming across the thousands of white faces. His hope. *We cannot walk alone. And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back.* Thousands of people stood at his hem, feeding off the words piercing from his microphone.

"I wish I was there," Divine said, rising from the floor.

"Do you think he knows about us? About Birmingham?" I asked.

Pretty kissed her teeth. "Of course he does. Everyone does. It's hell we live in, that's what my mama says. She reads the Bible every day, says you'll see Birmingham in there, right in Revelations."

She turned from us and sat at one of the tables.

"You think Mrs. Della would mind if we went to the park and came back? We finished up here pretty fast," I said.

"Come on, Mama won't mind. By time we come back, this place is gonna be all filled up." Divine always spoke for Mrs. Della.

We followed her out the front door onto Main Street. The streets were always alive on the black half of Birmingham. Mr. Henry, the town's drunk, sat on his stool outside the smoke shop. He waved at us before leaning back against the wall. Mr. Henry had probably been in our town the longest. Been here since his mama who was a slave got free and moved to Birmingham where not much changed for her. We all understood why Mr. Henry drank as much as he did; he saw more than most of us. He saw buildings fall to the ground 'cause of the explosions, men hanging from trees, and every other nightmare we could imagine. Even heard angry men in white hoods curse the

day he was born. Mr. Henry said nobody should be sheltered from the truth, not the newborn baby or the oldest man.

Divine ran ahead of us over to the park, so she could claim the first swing.

"I remember when I kissed Tommy here," Pretty said, twirling the short curly lock hanging in the front of her face. "He said he's gonna marry me some day."

Angel and I smiled at each other and followed her over to Divine on the swings. I sat on the grass beside the swing and watched as they moved in the air back and forth. Divine laughed like she'd never been happier. I wanted to tell them about what Daddy does. That he's gone for days, and he comes back looking a little older and sadder every time. I wanted to tell them that there ain't no changing the world cause people don't want to be changed. Yet Pretty gave them hope. She showed them Martin Luther King waving his hand on TV, and that was supposed to change everything, supposed to make it all better somehow. Ain't nothing changing.

"You want a turn?" Divine shouted at me.

I nodded. "You outta breath?"

She slowed on the swings and brought herself to the ground. She staggered to a leveled position before wrapping her arms around me.

"Swing got me dizzy," she said.

I laughed. "Sit down before we gotta run back to Mrs. Della."

I slid onto the swing and kicked against the ground. My body lifted into the air and I brought my head up to the sky. I wanted the sky to take me. I wanted God to reach his hand to the Earth and pull me into the heavens.

Wouldn't it be nice if the sun was always in the sky? If the storm never came and took away the homes of the men and women in town? If I could walk to the other side of Birmingham and tell the little blonde girl on the swings there that we were friends?

I closed my eyes as the breeze hit my face. I kicked deeper into the earth. Soon, I could no longer feel the ground beneath my feet. I pushed my chest in and out, so the swing went higher and higher each time. I wanted the swings to reach the heavens, so I could bring myself a little closer to God, just for a second.

"Love," someone yelled, and my eyes flickered open.

"Come on, girl!" Divine yelled. "The hungry bellies are waiting for us!"

They were already heading down the street. I slowed my swinging, and let my feet touch the gravel again. I stood there for a second, inhaling and exhaling. I should've stayed there. I should've kept on swinging, until God had no choice but to bring me up.

When I turned back onto Main Street, the girls were gathered in the center of the road. I ran up behind them and pushed myself into the circle.

“Someone ran it over,” Divine said, a crystalline tear rolling down her cheek.

“It’s Mr. Henry’s dog,” I said, looking up at the smoke shop. Mr. Henry’s stool was still there but the old man was gone. “Where’s Mr. Henry?”

“He must have left when we were at the swings,” Pretty said.

“But why wouldn’t he bring his dog?” I asked. “Mr. Henry don’t go nowhere without Ike.”

“Let’s go tell Mrs. Della,” Angel said. “Somebody’s gotta find Mr. Henry.”

We ran inside the community kitchen. There were families sitting at each table, and people gathered around the main room. We pushed through the crowd, twisting our heads looking for Mrs. Della.

“Mrs. Della! Mrs. Della!” We were all shouting for her. “Mrs. Della! Mrs. Della. Where are you?”

An older man with blue-black skin stopped in front of us. “She’s in the back,” he said. “Making that good soup I look forward to every Saturday.”

We continued pushing through the crowd, until we were in the back room. Mrs. Della was standing by the stove, an apron wrapped around her waist. Her hips were moving to the soft jazz coming from the radio in the corner.

“Mama,” Divine said. She was breathing real heavy, like she’d just ran a marathon. “Someone’s killed Ike.”

“What?” Mrs. Della said. “Was Mr. Henry out there?”

“No, he’s gone.”

Mrs. Della kissed Divine’s forehead, caressed our arms, and disappeared out the kitchen. There was a moment of talk and laughter, until the door swung shut behind her. Then there was just nothing but silence.

My stomach growled. Not because I was hungry or because I drank milk the night before, even though Mama says it’s bad for you. It’s because I knew. It’s because I knew something was wrong. Mama called it the pre-bad-happening feeling. It’s when something bad gonna happen and your body starts warning you. Said she felt it the day I was born. She knew something was wrong with me. She wasn’t hurting, but she could feel me hurting. She said she sat down in the pool of water and started talking to me. *I love you. I love you. I love you.* She must have repeated it a hundred times. When I came out silent and remained silent for what felt like forever, she prayed for God to bring me back. *I love her, God. I love her so much. She’s mine. Only mine. You can’t have her yet.* I started crying a second later, and Mama said my name appeared to her in the form of a whisper: Love. I would be loved more than any other child. She’d make sure of it.

“Somebody gonna get that?” Divine asked, and I looked at her.

“Get what?” I asked.

I heard the ringing then. It was coming from the gigantic rotary phone Mrs. Della had on the wall.

"It's your mama's building, Divine. You get it." Pretty said.

Divine rolled her eyes at us before walking over to the phone. We stood still, anticipating whoever was on the other line. The only person that ever called was the landlord. He was a nice man, never made Mrs. Della pay more than she could handle.

Divine stood numbly in front of the phone, her hands trembling at her side. "Mama never lets me answer the phone. What do I say?"

"I'll answer it," Pretty said, pushing past Divine. She lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

A puzzling look glazed over her face. She dropped the phone, letting it dangle in the air. I listened to the dial tone as Pretty turned her attention back to us. She opened her mouth to speak, but a rattling sound came from the stove.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"A man."

"What'd he say?"

"Said we got a minute."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Angel asked.

The rattling became too loud to ignore. We followed it over to the stove. As I opened the door, the rattling suddenly stopped, and a silence fell across the room. We waited to see if it would start again.

"Shouldn't we call someone?"

It was Angel. I felt her hand on my shoulder, her small, warm hand. I wondered if she felt it too, the pre-bad-happening feeling. Did it move in her stomach, her heart, and her legs? When the room erupted beneath and around us, I felt nothing. Not at first. We didn't even have enough time to scream. Instead there was just white. White spots. White nothing. Just a bright white light.

When I woke up the next day, I was lying in a soft bed, in a room that wasn't my own. My leg was gone. The skin around my thighs was blacker than the night sky. I couldn't feel my hand or any movement in my fingers. My parents were sitting on the opposite side of the bed, both fighting the sleep trying to take over their body. Before I could speak, or move, or think, I cried. Not for me. Not for my leg. Not for Mrs. Della kitchen. For my girls, because I knew. They were gone, and I was here.