

# ON THE MARCH

A Novel of the Women's March on Washington

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The present was an egg laid by the past that had the future inside its shell.

-Zora Neale Hurston

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# Table of Contents

PART I – SOROS, KANSAS

PART II – SOROS TO KANSAS CITY

PART III - KANSAS CITY TO ST.LOUIS

PART IV – ST. LOUIS TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

PART V – WASHINGTON, D.C.

PART VI – WASHINGTON, D.C. TO SOROS, KANSAS

PART VII – SOROS, KANSAS

**AUTHOR’S NOTE**

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR READING GROUPS**

**CREDITS**

# PART I – SOROS, KANSAS

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Before she began to pack, Henrietta stood in the middle of Oldham’s Antiques and looked around. At the stacks of faded quilts and lace doilies on tabletops. At the sets of dull brass andirons by the fireplace. At the atomizers atop glass vials of perfume, their fragrances long dried out. She lingered over the abandoned brooches in the glass case, feeling a sisterhood with those stones no longer worn: garnet, onyx, marcasite. The shop reminded her of herself: faded, dull, orphaned.

It was time for a change.

There were only two things she *had* to pack: her rosary and her knitting needles. She’d been fingering the rosary since her first communion, kneeling in the sanctuary before Father Cochran, her white-gloved hands trembling, the net of her petticoat scratching her knees, the incense from the censer stinging her lungs. She’d been fingering the knitting needles since Sister Florinda, the cook in Father Cochran’s kitchen, had taught her to knit many decades ago. Henrietta would sit on a stool while Sister Florinda, sweat beads gleaming on her black forehead, supervised a stove bubbling with soup, a cloth-covered bowl of rising bread dough, and a young girl struggling with casting on and adjusting the tension of her stitches. As a result, Henrietta’s fingers were never far from either her rosary or her needles. They were twin parts of the same impulse: bulwarks against anxiety. Dark-Light. Chaos-Harmony. Doubt-Faith.

Henrietta hoisted her yarn tote onto the red velvet seat of a rosewood chair. She peered inside, double-checking the new knitting project she hoped to work on during the long ride. She checked the hard-boiled eggs rolling around in a plastic newspaper sleeve, her mind floating to that Dr. Seuss story of the patient elephant endlessly sitting on an egg while the lazy Mayzie-bird flew off to Palm Beach. “I’ll be Horton no more,” she swore under her breath. Then she stuffed in a blanket, a clean pair of underwear, her drugstore supplies, and a couple of pairs of alpaca socks she had knit specifically for this journey. It was January, after all, and alpaca was seven times warmer than wool.

She peered out the shop window. Her taxicab was idling at the curb. For a moment the ache in her heart surfaced. The ache was a longstanding one: she had no child, no companion, no intimate, not even a pet to bid her goodbye. There would be no parting kiss on the cheek, no squeeze of the hand, no arm around a shoulder, not even a wag of a tail. She wondered, “Would the ache ever go away?”

Henrietta turned off the lights, picked up her tote, and checked the lock on the door of the antique shop. She lived by a lifelong muscle memory like the stitches that informed her knitting. Trash on Tuesdays. St. Catherine’s on Wednesdays. Mass on Sundays. It was as repetitive as knit, purl. Gripping the handrail, she took one slow step at a time. Reaching the sidewalk, she experienced a little shiver of victory. Nowadays, with her knees, it was a daily miracle to get down her own steps, and she, Henrietta Oldham, was doing *this*.

The cab driver hardly noticed Henrietta; he was checking something on his phone. A gaudy cross was tangled in the chest hair peeking through his open Hawaiian shirt, and he was wearing one of those hats that airline pilots wore. She wondered why men always felt the need to act like a big shot.

The driver didn't get out to open the door or help her with her tote. Henrietta rarely expected to be helped with anything: her life had taught her that. But wasn't she paying for this ride? Couldn't she expect some courtesy?

She backed into the seat fanny first, steadying herself on the door frame and then lowering herself down. Old age, she had learned, was a series of unexpected humiliations: struggles with getting into a car, troubles with standing too long, difficulty seeing the fine print in the Medicare statement.

The driver had tipped his visor back and gawked as she finally sagged into the seat.

"Where you off to, little missy?"

"Trailways," she muttered, determined to stay quiet during the ride. She had no intention of making chit-chat with anyone who called her "little missy," much less a driver who let his cab smell of stale cigarettes while trying to look like some kind of professional pilot.

Quiet came easily to Henrietta. It was another lifelong pattern. She kept quiet at the bedside as she nursed her father, fetching ice water or arranging pills in the weekly pillbox; she kept quiet in her St. Catherine's sewing circle as she bent her head over the walker caddies and adult bibs for the nursing home; she kept quiet about her soundless readings about noisy women: Alice Paul, Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth; she kept quiet as she genuflected before her pew on Sundays, making the sign of the cross over her chest. Isn't that what St. Timothy decreed? Let your women keep silence in the churches? Well, let your women keep silence in the taxicabs, too.

But since November, she had begun to reassess her life, and she had decided she'd been playing the fool. It had infuriated her to see those men swaggering on political stages urging their followers to take up the chant of "Lock Her Up." She knew all about that feeling.

It had scared her to be told she'd need another scan before she had really lived her life. She was angry with herself for having lived each day by certain creeds: Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; let me seek not to be consoled as to console. Well, St. Francis, you can go to hell.

The familiar brownstones of her neighborhood seemed sadder from the passing window of a taxi. They had once been elegant, but their awnings now announced shoe repair shops and thrift stores, bail bond businesses and pawn shops, their owners guarding their businesses with bars on the windows and Shepherds and Rottweilers chained in cramped backyards.

The driver swiped at the neighborhood with a fling of his wrist. "That's what you get when you let certain folks move in."

'Certain folks.' Is that what the cross on your chest teaches you, Mr. Pseudo-Christian Airline Pilot?

"I hear there's a bunch of gals here at the bus station. Planning to go on some kind of march." He smirked.

They were pulling up to the bus station now. "See?" He wagged a finger in the direction of the crowd of women gathering in groups before the bus door. "Bunch of angry gals planning on riding to Washington."

Then he pushed back his pilot's cap and flashed her a toothy grin, the kind men flashed when they patronized. "Seems they're all fired up about the election. They're ready to go, ain't they?" He gave a snort and a shrug.

Henrietta rooted around in her tote bag. She paid the exact fare.

Little missy. Gals. Fired up. Ready to go.

She was going to stop playing the fool.

*No to Horton.*

No to St. Francis.  
No to a tip.



Birdie considered the buttery scrambled eggs Aunt Lou set in front of her.

She had always liked eggs. In a way, she envied them. Eggs were ordinary, but they still had potential: they could be hard-boiled, poached, over easy. Eggs had possibilities. *Unlike me*, she thought, poking at her plate. *Do eggs have a secret life?* she wondered. *Do they dream about what they one day may become – part of a fluffy omelet? Blueberry pancakes? Something for a special occasion, like a wedding or birthday cake?*

“Eat, Birdie,” said Aunt Lou.

Birdie was too anxious to eat. Soon she and her aunt would be leaving for the Women’s March in Washington, D.C. – the first and only unusual thing she had ever done.

Her mother and aunt were having one of their usual half-hearted arguments.

“I see you’re still buying these white eggs,” Louise said, waving her hands around. Whenever she got agitated, Aunt Lou talked with her hands.

“Eggs is eggs,” Mama said. She was gulping her breakfast. She was late to work. “Brown, white. All the same inside. What I eat for breakfast ain’t a political statement, sis.”

Aunt Lou shook her head and poured Mama a cup of coffee.

Birdie knew what Lou-Lou thought. To her, everything was a political statement. The hair style you wore. The cracked sidewalks you walked over. The color of Band-Aids at the Walgreens.

Aunt Lou had a desk in her little house she called her Protest Desk. It was not a desk, exactly. More like a utility table. It took up her whole dining room. When the family came for meals, there wasn’t room to eat in the dining room, so they ate off of her wobbly aluminum tray tables with pictures of African-American heroes on them.

Lou’s protest desk had piles of banker’s boxes on it with various labels: Ferguson/Michael Brown, New York/Eric Garner, ADAPT, Voting Rights, Black Lives Matter, and Soros. The Soros box contained her local work and file folders filled with lists: lists of the people who worked for the school levies; lists of local people to contact when there were problems with the schools or police, the city or the county; lists of people who could be counted on during a political season when she wanted to draft poll workers or door-to-door canvassers.

Aunt Lou was always holding up signs or passing petitions or going door-to-door with flyers. One of Birdie’s earliest memories was of playing on the floor under Aunt Lou’s protest desk, wrapping herself in banners and sashes, t-shirts and sweatshirts with slogans about peace and civil rights and fair wages that she couldn’t even read yet.

Lou had even gone all the way to Ferguson to protest the killing of Michael Brown. She said, “What’s a few hours out of your own life to stand up for someone who lost his?”

Birdie took her last bite of the eggs they were still wrangling over.

“White eggs usually cheaper anyway, Lou,” Mama said. “I gotta watch my pennies.” Then she snapped, “Unlike you.”

Birdie knew Mama had to watch her pennies. She wondered what she would do with a few extra bucks. Put a down payment on new brakes for the van? Send it in as deposit on Antoine’s graduation cap-and-gown? Buy the family a big chuck roast for Sunday dinner?



Birdie also knew Mama was being unfair. Aunt Lou worked in nonprofits, and her job paid even less than Mama's. But Aunt Lou had no kids. Birdie's mama had four.

If you still counted Shanice.

Birdie's aunt had organized this trip. She'd called the families in Soros, connected with other families across the country, bought Metro tickets in advance, taken Shanice's wheelchair to the bus station. They were going to leave the wheelchair in Washington as part of the protest and also as a kind of closure for their family.

*Closure.* Birdie was sick of that word.

One reason for the trip had to do with Shanice. When Shanice entered fourth grade, Aunt Lou started up a chapter of ADAPT, the first one in Kansas. The organization worked for rights for the disabled. The idea was to get Shanice to meet other kids like her, so she wouldn't feel so lonely. No doubt about it: Aunt Lou was a get-up-and-do kind of woman. Birdie was a sit-around-and-think-about-it kind of girl.

Shanice loved the ADAPT group, and that was the point. Kids like Shanice and Armando Rodriguez and Nicole Snyder did crafts together or met at the coffee shop and just talked. Once Lou-Lou organized a trip to Topeka so they could hold up signs and get lawmakers to pay attention to them. ADAPT helped Shanice feel normal.

Thinking of the ADAPT group reminded Birdie that she wasn't even sure she wanted to go on the march. She would miss Friday night's basketball game and a chance to see Jamil Washington, a friend of her older brother Antoine. Birdie's heart pounded whenever Jamil stopped by her locker now and again to ask her something about Twanny.

Jamil was four heads taller than Birdie, and he had long, curled lashes that gave his eyes a soft, sleepy look. But those sleepy brown eyes didn't match the wide-awake moves he made as a point guard on the varsity team. Aunt Lou always said appearances were deceiving; in Jamil's case, Lou was right.

But Jamil had a girlfriend now. Sabrina Banks stood closer to him than was necessary in the lunch room and tucked her pretty head up against his collarbone. Birdie didn't know her, but she hated her anyway. Sabrina Banks's breasts were shaped like the jumbo eggs Mama bought at Easter.

Jamil Washington was one reason Birdie had started stuffing her bra. Toilet paper was cheap, and when she looked at herself sideways in the cracked mirror in the bathroom, she liked the rounded slope she saw. She hoped appearances *could* be deceiving.

"I vote with my pocketbook," Mama said, ending the egg conversation while Aunt Lou drained the bacon grease. The grease was still spattering and popping as it crackled into a coffee can. It reminded Birdie of her mother's anger.

While Birdie chewed on her bacon, Aunt Lou stood at the stove, sipping her coffee and gazing at the pictures on the shelf above the canisters. The pictures were in cardboard frames from the Dollar Store. Aunt Lou had given the set to the family one Christmas, hoping they might study them from time to time, but they never did. Birdie knew some of the pictures. Martin Luther King, Jr. Nelson Mandela. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Thurgood Marshall. Lou-Lou had debated putting the picture of Thurgood Marshall up there because she'd heard he was a womanizer, but since he'd been on that special case in Topeka, he was too important to leave out. Aunt Lou had added a couple of pictures of women. Other than Rosa Parks, Birdie didn't know who they were.

Aunt Lou stirred some extra cream and sugar in her coffee and turned to Mama. "Do you remember what MLK said that time?"

Mama squinted, annoyed. “MLK said lots of things, lots of times. A preacher’s never at a loss for words.”

Birdie glanced up at the framed picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She thought he looked young in the picture. And handsome. His hands were folded quietly, the fingers of his left hand spread outward, his eyes gazing off into space.

Louise ignored her sister. “I’m thinking of the time he said, *‘If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk. If you can’t walk, then crawl. But by all means keep moving.’*”

That was Birdie’s Aunt Lou. She was always saying things that were just above your head, something like an apple on a tree branch that you had to stand on tiptoes to pick. Mama said things that were straight out in front of you: oil the wheelchair, run up to Mims’s for bread and milk, ask Antoine to see if it’s the starter or the battery.

Mama stared into Aunt Lou’s dreamy face. “I wouldn’t call that one of my favorites,” she said, scowling at her sister. “Wish he’d said something about sitting down now and again.”

Birdie’s mama never sat down. She didn’t have time. Either it was one of the four kids, especially Shanice. Or Beanie. Or it was the girls at work. Or the toilet that was stopped up. Unlike Lou, Mama didn’t have time to take her coffee any way but black.

“Well, even Martin Luther King had to eat,” Mama said, rapping the spatula on Aunt Lou’s plate. Aunt Lou had cooked everything but hadn’t taken a bite herself. Birdie’s mama always said Lou preferred dreaming to eating. “Get going, Princess Lou, or you’ll be late for the ball.”

Birdie took her plate to the sink and headed to the living room, observing its daily chaos: the stray pajama bottoms and headphones; the plastic bowls, cups, and glasses, dried milk or juice lining their lips; the empty cereal boxes spread around the room. Fruit Loops. Lucky Charms.

The ventilator.

The living room had once been neat. Her mama’s tours of duty in the Army had taught her about order: shoes were to be slipped off by the door, backpacks were to be hung from the coat tree.

“Yes, Mama.” The kids did everything but salute.

Mama had gotten rid of much of Shanice’s equipment, but the ventilator still sat in the corner next to the plywood bookcase Antoine made in shop class.

Birdie thought the ventilator looked all lonesome there in the corner without Shanice; she missed the in-and-out rhythm of its sucking sound that made her feel like it was something alive, something breathing. Mama would be donating the ventilator to the Sunny Days Nursing Home while Lou and Birdie were away. Birdie crossed the room, knowing it would be gone when she returned, wanting to somehow kiss it goodbye. She ran her hand over it instead.

Then she grabbed the framed eighth-grade picture of Shanice that sat next to it on the bookcase. She zipped open her backpack, laying the picture right on top of the purple shawl and the crepe paper and garlands and mementos they were taking to the ADAPT protest in Washington.

Mama and Lou were standing by the front screen door. They had finally finished talking about eggs and Martin Luther King. Even in her work clothes and heels, Mama looked like someone dressed in camo. Mama was pinning something to Aunt Lou’s jacket. Birdie heard her say, “Remember what our mama taught us. ‘A lady don’t leave the house without a pin or a scarf.’”

While they were laughing and cutting up, Birdie met them at the door. Then Mama surprised her. She threw her big wide arms around both of them, mashing them into a great big hug. When Birdie turned to head out the door, she read the words on the round black pin Mama had stuck on Aunt Lou’s jacket. “Black Lives Matter,” they said.



Emily Messer was eager to leave. She knew her parents were also eager for her to leave. “My parents are sick of me,” she muttered. “But I’m sick of them, too.”

“Get yourself out of that basement!” her stepfather shouted daily. “A college graduate, and you can’t find a job?”

“I *have* a job, Dave.”

She did. She worked part time at the coffee shop, making lattes, espressos, chais, and fancy coffees. Dave had assumed her communications degree from a third-tier college would be a ticket to success.

“At least it gives me a chance to get out of your basement,” Emily snarled under her breath.

It also gave her a chance to keep in touch with people her age. Most of them were addicted to pleasures like sex and cappuccino.

“Then at least try to find a job at a Starbucks, Emily,” he yelled. “They pay health benefits to part-timers.”

Emily started to shout back that she still had four more years to stay on her parents’ health plan. Instead, she mumbled to herself, “Thank you, Mr. Obama.”

She bid goodbye to the basement room. She had tried to brighten it with pictures from college. There were Sonia, Jenny, and Katie, toasting each other with red plastic Solo cups full of beer. She’d snapped a few pictures of the cute mustached bartender at Roosters, the bottles of Gray Goose and Bailey’s behind him. And she had dozens of pictures of her dog: Bravo at the beach, Bravo on her lap at Great Clips, Bravo swinging on their back porch swing.

Victoria Stewart peered around the basement door. “Aren’t you going to fix your hair?”

Emily was familiar with her mother’s complaints.

She wore her hair gathered on top of her head and fastened with a claw. Her mother thought the way her hair fell every-which-way over her crown was ridiculous. “Take some pride in yourself, Em,” she said. Not for the first time.

Another complaint was Emily’s clothes. She and Jenny and Katie and Sonia had decided to dress alike for the trip. Yoga pants. Stanton College sweatshirts.

“Aren’t you going to wear a *coat*? It’s *January*, Em!”

Emily shrugged. Her weather app had said the temps would be around fifty.

“Here, Mother, *see*?” She stuck the weather app in her mother’s face. “I don’t need a coat.”

Emily turned away from her mother. She didn’t need to face her. She knew too well the way Victoria Stewart rolled her eyes.

Emily had packed only her phone, her charger, and her earbuds: all of it would fit in the pockets of her sweatshirt. Maybe that would be all she would take if her parents split up. They’d been screaming about it for years. She wore her earbuds to bed to drown out the shouting and to escape from what it meant for her future. That’s why this trip was so appealing. Sonia, Jenny, Katie, and she were thinking about getting an apartment together in Philadelphia, where Sonia was from. They were going to make plans in Washington. Maybe she could finally escape.

Emily Messer knew one thing: she was stuck. Stuck with debt. Stuck in her parents’ house. Stuck with few job prospects. The Internet had shown her all kinds of stimulating possibilities: elephant preserves in Africa, river rafting companies in Brazil, tranquil monasteries in Tibet. And here she was. Stuck, stuck, stuck in a basement in Soros, Kansas.

She couldn't wait to hook up with her college friends. Even though Katie and Jenny lived in towns not far from Soros, somehow they never really connected anymore. And of course Sonia was all the way across the country in Philadelphia. This trip would be their first reunion. Emily was reminded that she hadn't attended a really good party since graduation. The drinking sessions at the Lucky Duck and the predictable people at the karaoke bar in Soros were lame compared to the parties at Stanton College. Still, a guy at the karaoke bar had been texting her some. He had backed her against the wall and thrust himself close to her, breathing in her ear when he'd asked for her number. Emily wasn't sure how she felt about that. Whatever. At least something interesting might still happen to her.

As her mother headed to the garage, Emily followed from a shuffling distance. It was humiliating living at home. But it was scary to imagine anything else. Maybe Sonia, Jenny, and Katie would be the answer.

As always, it was comforting to look down and see Bravo bouncing behind her. The terrier was always on her heels, and she was amazed by his devotion: it was the only thing that came to mind when people mumbled about "unconditional love."

Emily opened the car door to let Bravo jump in ahead of her. As Emily slipped into the car, Victoria Stewart noticed her daughter's feet. "It's January, Emily," she scolded, her voice icier than the weather. "You're wearing sandals?"

"Don't freak, Mom. I *told you* I checked the weather app." The weather app had said it would be unseasonably warm, and that was good enough for her.

On the way to the bus, the only sound in the Lexus was of Bravo panting. Emily kept her eyes fixed on her phone. That way she wouldn't have to talk to her mother.

Whenever she drove through her neighborhood, Emily was reminded that she was sick of that, too. The parents with Lexuses. The kids with Grand Cherokees. The lawns that sported parallel green lines that looked like vacuum cleaner marks and told you they'd just been mowed by a family gardener.

While they drove in silence, Emily scrolled the Facebook posts. There was a new one about a Fattest Cat contest, and she private-messaged Cheryl at the coffee shop about the liqueur-laced coffees that were trending in Australia. Then she uploaded the new photo of her and Bravo at the lake onto Instagram.

When they pulled up to the bus, Emily kissed the dog square on the mouth, slammed the car door, and headed to the bus line. It was better for her mother to think her rude than scared.



Standing in line at the Trailways station, the first thing Birdie noticed was the shoes. Sneakers and high-tops and clogs. Leather loafers and Mary Janes. Beaded Indian moccasins. Doc Martens. Crocs. Old lady shoes that laced all the way up the ankle. Boots. Lots of different boots. Rain boots and hiking boots. Ankle boots and knee boots. Boots that zipped. Boots that laced.

There was one kind of boot that was missing: Army boots. The kind that Mama wore.

Snatches of conversation swirled around her.

"Did you hear they've got a permit in Antarctica?"

"No!"

"It's true. That makes all seven continents now."

"And I read that they have over two thousand bus permits."

Aunt Lou handed Birdie her phone and said, “We can share it on the trip.”

Birdie was astonished. Mama wouldn’t allow her kids to have phones. Not just because they were expensive, but because of what happened to Shanice. Most of the white girls had phones, of course, but if Black girls had phones, they were the cheap kind like you get at Wal-Mart. Birdie beamed: her Aunt Lou’s phone was the expensive kind.

She studied the phone lying across her open palm. It was light as an egg; yet it seemed heavy with possibilities. It wasn’t the first time Aunt Lou had done something for her.

Birdie pressed the camera icon and found the round white button. She aimed the camera at the dozens of different shoes on the asphalt and pushed.

“Good idea,” Aunt Lou said.

Birdie looked back at the photo. She liked what she saw. For once she was glad to be a shy person, the kind of person who looked down a lot, the kind of person who silenced her questions. *If I had been looking up, I might have missed this picture.*

She passed the camera to Aunt Lou. Lou pointed to all the different shoes in the picture and nodded. “You’re not the only one trying to get free, Birdie.”



“Lines are stupid,” Emily thought. She eyed the bus driver with his ancient clipboard, pencil behind his ear, and wondered if this trip would be stupid, too. You ought to be able to gather any which way and use your phone app to check in. Lines were for kindergarten.

Emily was impatient. Where were Katie and Jenny? She wished they’d hurry up and get here. A lot of the women were her mother’s age. You could tell by the Coach bags, the Kate Spade wallets. She felt out of place.

Emily was also anxious. She had texted that guy she’d met at the karaoke bar. “Gd Mrning. How R U?” She went back and added an emoji of a yellow sun before she hit “Send.”

He hadn’t replied. “Where was he?” she wondered. “What was he doing?”

Emily looked around. If Jen and Kate didn’t hurry, she’d be the youngest rider on the bus. Except for a gangly Black girl who looked about junior-high age. The girl’s lips were clamped tight as if she was either angry or super-shy.

Emily perked up when she heard another woman introduce herself.

“Jessica Walters.” She had long braided pigtails draped over her shoulders. She was probably in her early thirties. “From Wamego.”

Emily thought Jessica Walters reminded her of someone. It was something to do with the pigtails.

“Oh! That’s where they have the Oz Museum,” squealed one of the ladies.

Ahhhhh. Dorothy. The Wizard of Oz.

Wamego was only half an hour northwest of Soros, but Emily had never been there.

“I waitress at Toto’s Tacos,” the braided young woman said proudly. “And no, we don’t serve dog meat.” She laughed. The others joined in.

Emily thought the rose tattoo at the nape of Jessica’s neck was really cool. She remembered what fun she and her friends had in college getting tats together.

To her relief, she spotted Katie and Jenny, skipping across the parking lot to greet her. They hugged and giggled. Emily realized how much she had missed these friends. “After college, she had often wondered, “if you don’t get married, what are you supposed to do?”



Henrietta waited patiently in the long line snaking beside the bus. She thought for a moment about how patiently most people waited in line. “Not people,” she corrected herself. “Women.” They waited. They took their turn. Then some man butted in front of her. Like that scraggly bearded fellow who stepped ahead of her at Elmer’s Drugs: He was only buying one item, and she had three. She wondered how his pouch of chewing tobacco trumped her denture paste, her pocket pack of tissues, and her bag of peppermints.

Henrietta took in the conversations of the women chatting together.

“Thank the Lord this January weather is warmer than usual,” said a woman wrapped in a red-white-and-blue crocheted sweater-shawl. “January usually means ice dams on the roof.”

The woman next to her nodded. “And all the kids with the flu.”

Knowing smiles flashed from face to face. Henrietta knew about sickness too. Just not with kids.

Over in the brown grass, three young women were doing yoga. They were wearing identical blue sweatshirts and black yoga pants. They looked to be in their early twenties, like girls just graduated from college. Henrietta wondered why they were wearing sandals without socks in January.

“Gretchen Tsongas. Topeka,” another woman said. “I hate to admit it, but I’m still worried about security. Any of you?”

A few of the women tucked their heads, looking sheepish.

“My husband Tom didn’t want me to come,” Gretchen went on. “We fought about it for a week. Finally he said, ‘Don’t call me to fetch you from the jail or the hospital.’”

Henrietta patted the money bag tucked tightly inside her blouse. She had no doubt she needed it to guard against robbers, thieves, or worse in a big, crowded city like D.C.

A woman from Tecumseh said she got a flyer telling her only clear plastic backpacks would be allowed at the march. “To guard against explosives,” she explained.

The women eyed each other’s bags suspiciously. As if one of them might be hiding dynamite right now. “I tried to buy one,” another woman moaned, “but they were all sold out.”

Henrietta worried that her yarn tote might prevent her from getting in.

A woman in a camel coat and a Burberry scarf who reeked of money blurted, “Any signs attached to a two-by-four are going to be seized as a dangerous weapon.”

Henrietta tried not to worry. Still, her St. Catherine crafters had raised her concerns. They met every Wednesday to sew: walker caddies for nursing home residents; turbans for chemo patients; blankets for newborns at the charity hospital. Henrietta found the stitching dreary, and ever since November, she’d found the crafters themselves even more dull and uninteresting. Over the years, she had tried to involve them in new projects, but they preferred the familiar. Somehow after November, their passivity annoyed her.

Naturally none of these women would have been interested in the march. But they loved to yak about it. If only to scoff and fearmonger.

“What if there’s an emergency? Say, someone has a heart attack? Or a bomb goes off?”

Henrietta tried to stifle her own fears. “Martha Hodges,” she said to herself, “you may make exquisite embroidered hankies, but you’re a master of worst-case scenarios.”

She reminded herself that the St. Catherine crafters were afraid of lots of things. Traveling. The devil. Anything new. Sharon Sikorski, for example, always rambled on about the latest horror. While she worked on her drawstring tote bags, Sharon swore that the new e-cigarette shop was going to jack up neighborhood crime. And those new chip readers were just as vulnerable as the old swipe-cards.

Henrietta had kept her head down over her work. Her Wednesday crafters would know nothing about this trip. Like everything else, she would keep things to herself.



Birdie was impatient to board. The smoke billowing out the back of the bus made her think of her brother Beanie. Mama had begged him to quit smoking, but like most boys she knew, not listening to their mother proved they were men. But it wasn’t just Beanie who was smoking; Birdie kept a clean t-shirt stashed at Destinee’s house so she didn’t have that piney skunk grass smell when she snuck home. Birdie knew if Mama found out, she’d be in trouble, but she was too shy to say “No” to the few friends she had.

Mama was always so tired she was easy to fool. But not Aunt Lou.

Birdie knew they both worried about her. But Mama was so distracted that she didn’t see Birdie as clearly as her aunt. Birdie overheard them whispering when she was supposed to be doing homework.

“She doesn’t smile much, sis,” Aunt Lou said. “Girls her age are supposed to smile more.”

Birdie was familiar with Aunt Lou’s complaint. She was always urging Birdie to smile. Birdie lied and said she was ashamed of the gap between her teeth that needed braces.

“And just look at her eyes, Ronnie,” Louise said.

“Yep. Birdie’s got those long black lashes. Just like Shanice. When I look into them I remember too much.”

“I don’t mean that. I don’t mean the remembering. I mean do you manage to look into them *at all*, sis? They’re always downcast. They’re like store awnings shuttered for the night.”

“I look into them plenty, girl. I see the way those brown eyes are snapping with questions that I can’t answer.”

Birdie knew Mama was right about the questions.

“You don’t have to answer them, Ronnie. Just listen. You just let her say them out loud. That girl’s got her lips stapled shut.”

Birdie didn’t realize that things about herself showed up in her eyes and mouth. But she did realize there were a lot of things her family kept clamped down about now.

“Well, you better start paying more attention before it’s too late,” said Lou. “Birdie’s starting down the wrong path. Wrong friends. Slipping schoolwork. Too much focus on the boys. And those long legs of hers are starting to fill out. Some boy’s sure to notice.”

Birdie grimaced. She was pretty sure no boy was going to notice a girl with skinny legs and a flat chest.

“I heard,” said another woman in line, “that only poster board signs were being allowed. Any signs attached to a two-by-four are going to be seized as a dangerous weapon.” Birdie could tell

the woman was rich. She was wearing a plaid wool scarf with a tan coat the color of Lou-Lou's coffee when she put in two creams.

Aunt Lou and Birdie listened to other women reciting their fears. Birdie knew neither Lou nor Mama scared easy. *Me? I'm not so sure.*

"Don't worry, ladies," Louise said, cocky as a rooster. "We've got a Cousin Marvin who's a police officer in Maryland. We've got his number in our phone. Open your phone," Lou ordered Birdie.

*Your phone. If only.* Birdie opened the phone and swiped to the Contacts page. She held it up. "Sergeant Marvin Banks." She didn't add that you never want anything to do with police. Even if it was a relative.

Birdie was well aware that she and Aunt Lou were two of only a handful of Black people in line. Black people knew things white people didn't. That police were nothing but trouble. Trouble if they called *you*. Trouble if you called *them*.

The white ladies looked relieved. But Birdie hoped they wouldn't need Cousin Marvin.

Aunt Lou introduced herself all around. "Louise Marie Franklin. From right here in Soros. And this is my niece, Alberta Sankofa Jackson."

Birdie winced. She wished her aunt had just said "Birdie." She hated being called "Alberta."

The ladies smiled and nodded.

Birdie looked down at all the shoes again.