

NO ORDINARY LOVE

An African-American Migration Story

Imagined by Meres-Sia Gabriel

Inspired by interviews with Meaghan Conner and Deborah Griffin



ONE

MEAGHAN

“Come on Meaghan.”

Grandma Rosie reached for my little five- year-old hand and helped me climb out of the back seat of Grandpa Bus's '75 blue Chevrolet Caprice Classic. That car was almost 20 years old, but my grandpa loved his classic car and he loved driving us around in it. Sometimes when my grandma ran errands, I would stay in the car with him and he'd let me get in the front and pretend to drive or we'd play patty-cake, but grocery shopping was mine and grandma's special time. So, off we went into the Safeway for our weekly shopping adventure.

Once inside the store, Grandma Rosie made sure to keep me close so no one would snatch me. Our shopping ritual went something like this: I would follow behind her with the shopping cart while she penciled items off her grocery list. Then, when she marked off the last item, we would go down aisle six to grab my two favorite snacks— a bag of fortune cookies and goldfish crackers. But this time, something different happened on aisle six.

“Oh no!” I accidentally dropped my bag of fortune cookies, crushing them all inside. “Can I get another one, grandma?”

“Hurry,” she said and I scurried.

“Sophie!” I heard a woman shout. I turned to see who was so familiar with my grandma that they knew her by her other name. Only certain people knew my grandma as *Sophie* and *Red*. “Oh Sophie!”

I saw my grandma in a tight embrace with a short, dark-brown woman. I moved cautiously toward them to put my new bag of cookies in the grocery cart when the lady's eyes landed on me.

“Who's this Sophie?” the strange woman asked.

“Oh,” my grandmother turned and rubbed her hands down the side of her pink dress before nudging me forward. “Vernetta, this is my granddaughter Meaghan. Debbie's daughter.”

The woman looked like she was around the same age as my grandma, in her 70's. As short as she was she didn't have to go far to lean down and get a good look at my face. I swear I saw a million stars twinkling in her eyes when she held my chin gently and said, “Baby, I'm your grandmother's homegirl, Mrs. Jackson. I've known your grandmother since we were little bitty girls like *you!*”

Wow, I tried to imagine Grandma Rosie at five years old.

Mrs. Jackson straightened up and hugged my grandma again. “Oh, Sophie. It's *so* good to see you! We made it, Sophie. We made it.”

“ Yes we did, Vernetta. We sure did.”

My grandmother brushed a few tears from her cheeks and we went on to make our purchase at the cashier stand.

“Why were you crying, grandma?” I finally asked when we got outside.

“You don't know what we went through.”

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TWO

ROSIE

Sometimes our tiny little stories get us caught up in a whole big old whirlwind of events that we don't even know are historical at the time. That's how it was for me in 1939 when I packed my two bags and left Monroe. I wasn't trying to be a part of a big movement or follow a crowd. I just wanted to get out of the cold. My mother and I could never see eye to eye. Trying to love her was like tossing those rings on bottles at the carnival. As hard as I tried, I could never quite get it to land right — always close, but no prize. It seemed like my mother blamed me for being born and I resented her for not letting me love her. So, on my 17th birthday, I made my bed, packed my bags and walked out of that cold, miserable house for good.

I didn't expect my life to be easy sailing just because I left Monroe; but it had to be *easier*. Whispers of a milder climate, better jobs, and no lynchings made me feel that California was a place where I could bloom. How could any Black person truly *grow* in Monroe, Louisiana where they still answered to *boy* and *girl*? And the same white folks who despised you, hunted you down if you tried to leave. They didn't want us to stay and they didn't want us to go. So many people had to *sneak* away from Monroe. They couldn't just walk away like grown men and women do; like *free* people do. They had to sneak and hide like children. Slavery was a moral sin against *us*, but we were made to carry the burden of it and it seemed like every time a Black person wanted to leave Monroe, white folks could smell it. As soon as they caught a whiff of us trying to live a better life, they'd run to head us off at the pass. California was two thousand miles away; but I would have taken a train to the end of the earth to get away from Monroe.

A few months after arriving in Oakland, I found out that the deFermery park, which was down the street from my place, had events for us Black folks like dances and activities to help black migrants get adjusted to city life. I would go there sometimes when I wasn't working to listen to the radio. That's where I met George. We were both from Monroe, but I had never seen him back home. We would sit out on the porch of the deFermery mansion and admire the neighborhood. George liked to say the sun shone differently in Oakland than in Monroe. We

were sitting outside having a nice conversation one day when Lady Day's *Strange Fruit* came on the radio for the first time. Everyone kind of paused and stopped chatting to listen.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Her voice reverberated throughout the mansion and throughout our souls. Migrant souls, trying to find our way in this new city; this new urban culture. If any of us had forgotten our purpose because we missed family back home or finding a job wasn't as easy as we thought, we remembered that day. A quietness lingered for a few minutes after the song ended. That song wouldn't have sounded the same on a porch in Monroe.

George liked to save his money and go back to Monroe every year. When we got married, I'd let him take the children back to see his people. The kids always came back home complaining about how Monroe smelled so bad and how they had to use an outhouse toilet. I would laugh at their stories, happy that they could have those experiences. It's important for children to know how their parents grew up and how things have changed since then. But I would never let George take me back with him. That was the only real thing we ever fought over. He wanted to introduce me to his family and show me off to his friends, which he had a right to. But I... I mean, I understood what he wanted. We worked so hard to build a comfortable life together in Oakland and he thought it could benefit others who might be thinking of leaving, but too scared to go. We believed in the Lord's words: *let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* But I just couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to go back.

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THREE

MEAGHAN

I never saw Mrs. Jackson again, but we would see other people my grandma knew from time to time and she would get so excited. *Hey, that's my homegirl*, she would tell me or I'd hear someone call her *Red* or *Sophie* and I knew what that meant — another Southerner had defied the odds. What I liked about my grandparents is that they didn't wait for change. They made it happen. They said *No More!* No more sharecropping; no more Jim Crow; no more walking barefoot on gravel; no more peeing in outhouses; no more stinky slavery residue; no more sneaking two towns over just to leave; no more lynchings; no more hopelessness; no more fear.

War-time overcrowding in West Oakland and redlining presented their own special challenges for black people, but it was nothing compared to what they had been through in the South and they knew that if they could get out of hell, they could get over high water.

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