

**On Fire in
Baltimore
Black Mormon Women and
Conversion in a Raging City**

Laura Rutter Strickling

GREG KOFFORD BOOKS
SALT LAKE CITY, 2018

Copyright © 2018 Laura Rutter Strickling
Cover design copyright © 2018 Greg Kofford Books, Inc.
Cover design by Loyd Ericson

Published in the USA.

All rights reserved. No part of this volume may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher, Greg Kofford Books. The views expressed herein are the responsibility of the author and interviewees and do not necessarily represent the positions or views of Greg Kofford Books.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-58958-716-8

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-58958-722-9

Also available in ebook.

Greg Kofford Books
P.O. Box 1362
Draper, UT 84020
www.gregkofford.com
facebook.com/gkbooks
twitter.com/gkbooks

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

*Children, I beg you to love, for it alone will overcome
hate . . . eventually. Misunderstanding abounds. It
has no special resting place. Rich and poor, majority
and minority, young and old, Black and White—all
feel the sting of being misunderstood.
I am among those who fight misunderstanding.
The weapons I use are stories.*

Queen Mother Mary Carter Smith.
Baltimore's Griot

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Prologue	xi
Introduction: On Fire in a Raging City	xv
1. The Race Dilemma	1
2. Ain't Nobody Going to Drift Me	19
3. Salvation from the Dumpster	39
4. Delilah's Miracle	55
5. You Don't Have to Fake the Funk	69
6. I Could Never See Her Face	83
7. Having It Out With God	103
8. You Don't Serve God Then Drink With the Devil	119
9. Two Souls	129
10. The Healing Hand of Sister Clara Haynes	139
11. Pray for These Three Things	149
Epilogue: God Reclaims With Dandelions	167
Bibliography	171
Index	181

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the Black church sisters who have made this book possible, and ask that they forgive the shortcomings of my work. Knowing them has changed the course of my life. I could not have written this book without the assistance and support of many people. My husband has been my most faithful supporter. He kept me focused through the years and has read more drafts than I can count. I am grateful to my son Benjamin who generously took time away from his family to read drafts and offer insights, and Alia who barricaded herself in the back room to read chapters while I watched her three children, then stayed up late with her husband Jeff to discuss edits. I would also like to thank my brother, Michael Rutter, my mother Josie Rutter, and friends Ruth Greaves and Margaret Hemming who were helpful at the early stages of the writing process. Finally, I would like to thank the editors at Greg Kofford Books, especially Loyd Isao Ericson for catching the vision of this book.

PROLOGUE

Mormons: The Farthest Thing Away from the Black Experience?

In the fall of 2009 I began recording the conversion stories of the Black Latter-day Saint (or Mormon) women from Baltimore who are featured in this book. It was also the semester that I took a graduate class on Africana race and ethnicity—three hours a week that left me painfully aware of how little I knew about the culture and politics of Black people. Professor Bryant, my African American instructor, deepened my anxiety on the first day when she announced that typically only Black students signed up for her courses, but this semester she had four who were White. She also informed the class that now she would have to start from an undergraduate level in order to get the White students caught up with the others because very few of them had a background in Africana Studies.

I am reluctant to admit that, in my case, Professor Bryant's assessment was true. I was a White student with little knowledge of Africana Studies whose interest in race had developed from graduate work in Intercultural Communication and Sociolinguistics. And while I had no reason to doubt the professor's expertise in her field, her pedagogical approach left me wary. I wondered if she really would revise her syllabus based on race. And if so, how would the other students take the dumbing-down of their coursework? The semester did not seem to be getting off to a good start. Already, the university had classified me as a "non-traditional" student because I was fifty-three years old returning to academia after decades of working in the trenches--raising four children and teaching high school Spanish. My fortitude waivered as I looked across the room at the savvy Black students.

Neeva was one of my African American classmates who entered the room with fiery confidence, colored scarves, and a head full of springy hair that augmented her self-assurance. She introduced herself as an entrepreneur whose expertise was Black Politics and Hip Hop, and she came to class with questions and disputes that would spawn lively discussions. More often than not, she and Professor Bryant would start a conversation between themselves, and soon after, other Black students would chime in while we four White students sat clumped together on the left side of the

room and watched. In fact, the more I learned about the layers of racism that existed in America, the more cautious I became of speaking, afraid that I would ignorantly say something that would reveal a Eurocentric view, which I must surely have.

“Can White people truly be Afrocentric?” Professor Bryant asked. “Do you think your race equips you for that?” She looked in our direction. I did not know. I wondered if I truly knew what Afrocentric meant.

So began an intimidating but thought-provoking semester when, for the first time, I read the works of James Baldwin, Marcus Garvey, Molefi Kete Asante, and Maulana Karenga, and when I was introduced to Pan-African film and began to understand Critical Race Theory. But more important, I began to examine my own White identity in relation to a Black perspective. I navigated through an evolution of emotions from feeling guilty for being born White and consequently with privilege, regret for belonging to a race who had enslaved another, inadequately prepared to resolve the racial discrimination I confronted, and acutely cognizant that my whiteness left me unable to understand blackness.

Yet, I felt at home with my Black church sisters and an affinity toward people of color in mixed social settings. I developed a keen interest in studying social contexts where African American English was spoken and decided to pursue this course of study in depth. When I mustered the courage to express these thoughts in class, Professor Bryant, instead of coming back with probing questions, paused the lecture and tilted her head to one side. I wondered if, for a brief moment, our racialized perspectives had found common ground.

After that semester, Neeva and I found ourselves working together as graduate interns investigating how White inner city teachers responded to students who spoke African American English. In addition to fieldwork, we talked about our families, complained about professors, and shared our academic goals. When I explained my interest in publishing the conversion stories of the Black Mormon women in my Baltimore congregation, Neeva asked, “You mean, there are Black Mormons?”

I assured her that there were.

“Then the thing I want to know . . .” she hesitated as if toying with the notion. “The thing I want to know is, why Mormon? How does a Black person get to be a Latter-day Saint? For me, the Mormon Church seems to be the farthest thing away from the Black experience—the Black Diaspora does not take *me* to Utah.”

Neeva's question frames the purpose of this book. The conversion stories of these fifteen African American Mormon women will begin to explain how a Black person "gets to be a Latter-day Saint." With narrations of visions, healings and miracles; life stories of violence, addiction, and Jim Crow racism, I tell how I come to love these church sisters and provide an intimate glimpse into how our Black and White racialized lives meet. As I traverse the crossroads of spirituality, culture, and race, I learn how these Black Mormon women reconcile their membership in a historically White church and begin to understand the depth of their faith that rises from a wellspring of experience so different from my own.

INTRODUCTION

On Fire in a Raging City

Baltimore is burning. Rioters are torching pharmacies, setting police cars ablaze, and throwing bricks at officers hours after thousands mourned the death of Freddie Gray. A weeklong curfew is in effect; the Governor has declared a state of emergency and called upon the National Guard to restore order in a raging city.

(The Post-Standard, April 27, 2015)

After the worst of the rioting in 2015, I called up Eunice to see how she was doing. Neighborhood stores had been destroyed in the rampage, reviving memories of the 1968 Martin Luther King riots, and older residents could not get out to buy food or fill their prescriptions. I wanted to see how Eunice, a seventy-two-year-old African American woman in my congregation, was getting along in the crisis.

“Oh, we’re okay. We still have the Dollar Store—they didn’t loot that.”

“So you can get everything you need?”

“Yes, for now. I prayed for that. I prayed so they wouldn’t loot the Dollar Store—so they wouldn’t loot the Dollar Store *and* to put an end to this unnecessary nonsense.”

After hanging up, I thought about Eunice’s response. Baltimore, a city located on an estuary of the Chesapeake Bay, is home to more than six hundred thousand people. It is also home to multibillion dollar corporations like Under Armor and Legg Mason, as well as multiple international investment firms such as Morgan Stanley. The Baltimore Ravens, who play their football games in the seventy-one-thousand seat M&T Stadium, are valued just short of two billion dollars, and the Orioles baseball team at Camden Yards is valued at about half that.¹ The city’s tourism industry offers dinners and harbor cruises with live music and “unmatched waterfront views,”² and the Marriott attracts a steady stream of vacationers and conference-goers. Yet Eunice, who was born and raised in Baltimore, lives a few blocks from the wealth of the Inner Harbor in a government-

1. Vasilis Lericos, “The Baltimore Ravens Franchise is Worth \$1.93 billion.”

2. “Spirit of Baltimore Dinner Cruises.”

subsidized “mixed income community,” previously known as The Projects. Even with government assistance she is not always able to spare the two-dollar copay to buy medications for her heart condition.

This disparity of life circumstance is not new; Baltimore has a history of discriminatory housing policies that have contributed toward the economic disadvantage of Black people. Apartheid-like practices became law in 1910 when the city enacted legislation that promoted the racial segregation of neighborhoods. It was called an “ordinance for preserving peace,” one that would prevent “conflict and ill feeling between the white and colored races.”³ A multi-tiered real estate market was created where housing developments set up restrictive covenants delineated by racial lines.⁴ In 1917 the ordinance was struck down by the Supreme Court, but not until Baltimore had become the national leader in residential segregation with other states following suit.⁵

Now, in the twenty-first century, if you are poor and Black in “Charm City,”⁶ statistics show that your opportunity for a better life looks bleak. In the predominately Black Westside neighborhood where Freddie Gray had lived, half of the residents are unemployed; one-third of the homes are boarded up and vacant; sixty percent of people have less than a high school diploma; and the violent crime rate is among the highest in the city with sixty-six homicides in 2015.⁷ Neighborhood violence like this has perpetuated Baltimore’s nickname, “Murder City,” breaking the city-wide record in 2017 with 345 homicides,⁸ the highest rate per capita in the history of the city.⁹

That day, after Freddie Gray died in police custody with unexplained injuries to his neck and spine, rioting escalated in downtown Baltimore. More than thirty-six thousand Oriole fans were held at Camden Yards after a Red Sox game while they waited for law enforcement to push back protestors who had blocked a nearby intersection and were smashing win-

3. Baltimore, Maryland, “Ordinance No. 692,” 337.

4. Erin Durham, “Baltimore’s History Mapping Inequality: Historical Context of Baltimore’s Neighborhoods.”

5. Matthew Yglesias, “How Baltimore Invented Neighborhood Segregation.”

6. Baltimore was nicknamed “Charm City” in 1975 in order to promote the city and dispel its poor image. Gilbert Sandler, “How the city’s nickname came to be.”

7. Jamelle Bouie, “The Deep, Troubling Roots of Baltimore’s Decline.”

8. “2017 Baltimore City Homicides: List and Map.”

9. Kevin Rector, “Baltimore Reaches Highest Per Capita Murder Rate on Record in 2017.”

dows. The standoff lasted for several hours with the protestors throwing rocks and glass at police.¹⁰ After peace had been restored, people blamed the underlying cause of the protests on general conditions in Baltimore: gang-related drugs, lack of employment among Blacks, and family instability.¹¹ Others traced the turmoil to Baltimore's segregated history and the despair born of decades of racial inequality, drawing on Martin Luther King's explanation, "a riot is the language of the unheard."¹²

Yet, when the protests were at their height, Eunice had not prayed for racial equality; she had not prayed for social justice. She had even rejected the backlash of Black rage that had resulted in violence and looting, calling it "unnecessary nonsense." Instead, she prayed to spare the Dollar Store. She prayed and, in Eunice's eyes, it had changed the course of events for the people in her neighborhood. I presume that the other sisters from my congregation had also been praying that day, and I wondered how their prayers had impacted their neighborhoods. I have known these faithful women for over twelve years and have learned to trust their praying.

My affection for these Black Mormon women began in 2006, when my husband and I moved to Baltimore and started attending church there. The first thing I noticed about our new congregation was the diversity of its female membership. We were accustomed to multicultural Mormons, since our family had attended meetings in Spain and regions throughout the United States, but this congregation of just about one hundred consisted of Latino, Nepalese, Nigerian, African American, Filipino, Korean, and White members. There were young mothers with newborn babies and ninety-six-year-old great-great-grandmothers. Some women came to the city to work on doctoral degrees, while others had dropped out of high school at age fifteen to take care of their aging mothers or young children. There were brand new converts, as well as members who had been raised in the faith with a heritage that traced back to Brigham Young and the Mormon pioneers.

On Sundays, conversations among the church sisters were often characterized by socioeconomic difference. In the foyer they talked about Food Stamps and Social Services, as well as cruises to Mexico and trips to Disney World. On the one hand, mothers were troubled about securing bail for a son in jail, and on the other, worried about sending a daughter to

10. Associated Press, "Fans at Orioles-Red Sox Asked to Stay in Camden Yards after Violent Protest."

11. "Crime and Despair in Baltimore."

12. Martin Luther King, Jr., "MLK: A Riot is the Language of the Unheard."

Europe. From an academic perspective, I was drawn to this linguistically-rich congregation and wondered in what ways these social and linguistic differences impacted our worship and influenced relationships.

What immediately caught my attention were the prayers offered by the African American women. For Mormons, prayer is one of the most frequent forms of shared worship. Members are called upon by church leaders to offer unrehearsed prayers at the beginning and end of most meetings, so on any given Sunday I could hear up to eight prayers. I noticed that many of the African American women in our congregation did not say prayers with the customary formal approach in which God was addressed with “thee” and “thou.” Instead, they spoke with the informal “you.” They talked to God about personal matters even though they were praying on behalf of the group, “Father, I want to thank you for all you’ve done, for all our sisters and brothers, and thanks for the love that you’ve given to my dad who has cancer.”

But what I really found intriguing were certain phrases that these church sisters said at the beginning of their prayers, such as “Thank you Heavenly Father for waking us up this morning in our right mind.” I did not know then, that they were opening their prayers in the tradition of Black preachers, praising God for another morning where “our sleeping couch is not our cooling board, and our cover is not our winding sheet.”¹³ In other words, the dearly assembled did not find themselves dead this morning, but rather, “clothed in their right mind.” In addition, some of the African American women would approach the pulpit before bowing their head to pray with a version of “first giving honor to God who is the head of my life, and to Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, and to the Elders of the Church and the Bishop who is sitting behind me.” I was not familiar with this kind of worship aesthetic and expression of faith in the Mormon community and wanted to find out more.

I began a study focused on recording the life and conversion of the African American women in my congregation—an endeavor that spanned over ten years and resulted in twenty-five recorded interviews and four hundred pages of transcription. But the interviews became more than data collection; they opened the door to sisterhood and sojourn into the Black community. Sitting side by side in their living room or sipping water at the kitchen table, these women would draw me into their narrative with Black vernacular, laughter, and tears. More than once I would find my-

13. John. R. Rickford and Russell. J. Rickford, *Spoken Soul: The Story of Black English*, 45

self holding their hand as their eyes welled up from painful memories, or smiling at their sarcasm as they described a family member. And my association did not end with the interviews; the women would invite me to family celebrations and birthdays or ask for rides across town to pick up prescriptions. They would call me out of the blue because they “had a feeling,” then tell me another story about their lives. These church sisters also let me know that they were interested in my work. “How are the stories coming?” some would ask as they passed me in the church halls. “We are praying for you,” they would tell me as the unfinished book advanced from months to years.

But our time together was not always easy; sometimes there were tense moments that were difficult to navigate. My White rural upbringing did not lend itself to understanding the rationale behind the decisions these Black urban women made, and because of my ignorance I would find myself in a racialized snare that I could not resolve by intuition.

From an academic point of view, a feminist theoretical approach obligated me to be mindful of these emotions and enabled me to adopt a reflective process aimed at exposing my biases and questioning my responses. It provided me with the theoretical underpinning to acknowledge that, as a researcher, I would naturally affect the research I do, but also, in the process, I would be affected by it. Keeping this in mind, I documented the evolution of my thoughts as I interacted with these women and as I attempted to peel back the layers of my assumptions.

Feminist standpoint theory provided me with a rationale for addressing the longstanding and vexed topic of Whites writing about Blacks, a subject beset with accusations of neo-imperialism and “a certain kind of racism.”¹⁴ The contested issue is whether the line of propriety has been crossed when women research women unlike themselves—especially when researching women who, historically, have had little voice. This raises the question of who can speak on behalf of whom, and if such research would be better aimed at empowering women to speak for themselves. From the onset, my work was not intended to be a forum for giving voice to Black

14. Gabriele Griffin, “The Compromised Researcher: Issues in Feminist Research Methodologies,” 333–347. Feminist Standpoint Theory assumes that men and women’s lives differ systematically and structurally within unequal social locations; therefore, men and women cultivate distinct kinds of knowledge. Studying subordinate social locations not only provides insight into the lives of members of subordinate groups, but also casts light on dominant group practices. See Julia Wood, “Feminist Standpoint Theory.”

Mormon women, but instead, it was a quest to gain insight from the distinct knowledge that only these women could have.

Similarly, I grappled with the question of whether, in the eyes of some research communities, my non-blackness would axiomatically invalidate my research on Black Mormon women or if my heightened reflectivity, due to the shifting relationship that comes with enacting an insider/outsider's role, would give me credibility. As a White person from rural Oregon I was an outsider to these Black urban women in my congregation who had lived in Baltimore for decades, yet as sisters in the gospel, I certainly shared conversion with them. I started by examining this intersection, the juncture at the spiritual crossroads of our Black and White identity.

But as the interviews continued and I began to know these women more intimately, I found that much of their conversion to Mormonism had risen from racially entangled events that produced a kind of despair that I had not experienced: of drug addiction and rape; of nights spent in jail and days looking for work; of single motherhood and grief for lost children; of relentless destitution born of scanty resources and the kind of desperation that comes from abandonment. Yet, their stories were filled with visitations from heavenly beings, dreams about deceased mothers, and protection from violence in the city. They talked about prayers, miraculous healings, and missionary messengers, and I came to feel that these Black sisters possessed a burning trust—an unquenchable spiritual fire—that I was not acquainted with. It was this fire, this spiritual strength, that I sought to understand.

Author's Note

While there is much debate on this topic, I have chosen to capitalize Black and White when referring to people of African and European descent respectively. Historically, the issue of capitalizing names when referring to the race or ethnicity of Black people has been fraught with racial politics and continues to be a rallying point today. My aim is to acknowledge that language matters and to recognize the campaigning efforts initiated by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1899: "I believe that eight million Americans are entitled to a capital letter."¹⁵

Every attempt was made to preserve the integrity and character of these Black Mormon women's speech. You will notice some African American English linguistic features in the transcribed dialogue, such as

15. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, 1n1.

existential *it* which is generally equivalent to *there is* or *there are*, as in, “It was a lot of addictions in the city”; absence of *s* inflections as in, “I had to take my *mother* baby”; reduction of consonant clusters to a single sound, as in, “When I was sixteen, she *decide* for me to get married”; and stressed *been*, pronounced *bin*, which indicates a long time ago, as in, “My mother *been* join the Church way before I did.”

I thought it best to regularize the spelling of most colloquial pronunciations for purposes of clarity and because the nature of written speech is inherently different than spoken. For example, it was not uncommon to hear “mother” pronounced as *muva* or dog to be pronounced like *dug*—a distinctly Baltimorean pronunciation.¹⁶

Finally, the names and distinguishing features of the women featured in this book have been changed in order to protect their privacy.

16. See Inte’a DeShields, “Baldamor, Curry, and Dug’: Language Variation, Culture, and Identity among African American Baltimoreans.”

Salvation From the Dumpster

It is a sultry, Sunday evening in August when Naomi, a Jewish friend of mine who had converted to Mormonism, pulls into the Westside Projects parking lot. When I open the car door, a merciless wave of heat hits my face even though it is seven o'clock and the sun is starting to settle in the West. I feel beads of sweat trickle down my neck and hope that Dee has air conditioning.

The neighborhood is deserted except for a tall Black man about our age wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He walks by and nods his head, acknowledging us. I smile back but feel his gaze linger too long and immediately become alert to my whiteness in a Black neighborhood. Then, not wanting to frame his attention in terms of race, I consider that maybe the man's glance has little to do with skin color; he could be looking at us because we are female, or perhaps because we are newcomers in a place where everyone knows each other. But upon further reflection, I decide that brushing aside a racial explanation entirely is not realistic, and I wonder if the tendency to do this is the result of an internalized perspective of whiteness. By this I mean: as a White person living where whiteness is linked to stature and is innately esteemed, I have acquired a kind of racial confidence and a blind eye that takes whiteness for granted. But at this moment, in the Westside Projects, I have become "raced," and not being accustomed to this kind of social disequilibrium, my inclination is to deny that race is the reason for his scrutiny. While I am carrying on this conversation with myself, Naomi, as usual, is oblivious to what is going on around her, chatting as she checks her purse to make sure she has not locked her keys in the car.

While waiting for Dee to open the door, I look across at the rows of duplicate apartments and notice that Dee is the only tenant who has a true yard. Her property is an oasis among the other dwellings that have dry clumps of dirt, scrubby grass, and stray pieces of trash for lawns. Around her front door she has fashioned a fence made of baby cribs salvaged from the dumpster, tied together with rope and twisted wire. The grass in her yard—which I would later learn she cuts on her hands and knees with a pair of sewing scissors—is green and thriving. Against the baby-crib fence grows roses, irises, and a tall berry-laden bush at the walkway. Dee has ar-

ranged a pile of rocks in the far corner of the yard next to two small tables that hold pots of wandering jew and colorful begonias. Against her house grows one hearty tomato plant, a patch of collards, and several yellow day lilies. This inner garden is enclosed by a border of cucumber vines that she has trained to grow on wire edging.

Dee has not yet answered the door so Naomi knocks again more vigorously. “I hope Dee is wearing her hearing aids,” she tells me. Naomi lives only a few blocks away in Bolton Hill but in an entirely different community. Bolton Hill is now preserved as a National Historic District and was once settled by wealthy German Jews during the nineteenth century. The neighborhood later became home to such non-Jewish residents as F. Scott Fitzgerald and President Woodrow Wilson, but remained segregated from Black people except for servants who lived in alleyways or large homes with White families. Today, many of the ornate row homes have been converted into multi-family apartments.

Naomi had volunteered to come with me because I had just met Dee, and only in passing, whereas she and Dee had worked together as visiting teaching companions for several years.¹ A thin, personable woman in her fifties, Naomi would rather talk than eat. A conversation with her meant that you would need to understand Jewish conversation style—a kind of cooperative overlap that features simultaneous talking and quick turn-taking.² But today I am banking on Naomi listening to Dee’s conversion story. Naomi had described Dee as “a spunky person and somebody who knows every street and back alley in Baltimore,” then added, “and that’s because she was a taxi driver at age seventy.”

At ninety-four, Dee is the oldest member of our congregation, yet she is a convert of only six years. She walks to church, rain or shine, and sits in the middle row so that she can read the speakers’ lips after losing the hearing aid she had been borrowing from a friend. Fascinated by any human who had lived almost a century, I was especially interested in hearing what Dee had to say about Baltimore’s racial history and what had drawn her to join the Church at an age when most people were clinging to bygone memories and daily routines.

1. Visiting teaching is a system of care established church-wide among Mormon women where a companionship of two visits several other women in their congregation. The companionship routes are organized by a female president, thereby creating a network of women who provide spiritual and temporal aid to each other.

2. J. Correspondent, “Interrupters: Linguist Says It’s the Jewish Way.”

At last Dee opens the door smiling and motioning for us to come in. Inside, the cool air is almost painful as it hits my face in stark contrast to the stifling heat outside. "I'm just eating a little salad from my garden," Dee explains as we take her cue and sit next to her around the kitchen table. Dee is a small, sinewy women with muscular legs and shoulders only slightly bent with age. She bustles about the room with arms in motion, stopping at moments to rest her hands on her swayed hips. She has smooth, vibrant, ochre skin and a sculpted face with a nicely-shaped nose that follows the lines of her high cheekbones. Her deep-set eyes take you in with the unspoken discernment that comes with age, yet entirely without suspicion. Her smile is wide, and when she speaks, her eyebrows move up into a questioning arch above her wire-rimmed glasses.

Suddenly, Dee pushes the bowl of cucumbers and tomatoes aside and says, "I'll tell you, after I came home from the hospital that time nobody in the Baptist church visited me so I didn't go back to that church anymore. That's when I prayed to find the right church." Dee had jumped right into her conversion story.

"Wait a minute," I stop her, "I don't have the recorder on yet." I fumble with the batteries. "But anyway, maybe you could start by talking about where you were born and how you grew up?"

Dee's apartment shows all the effects of having lived in one place for years. It is orderly, but jam-packed with household items. The kitchen counter is buried in newly-washed dishes drying on a rack. Plastic containers, cooking utensils, and pots of all sizes are stacked next to the rack, and loaves of bread, boxes of crackers, and cereal are arranged on top of a microwave that is wedged into the corner. The living room, which is an extension of the kitchen, is brimming with boxes of yarn and crocheted slippers, folded granny-squares, and a heap of stuffed animals stacked high on the back of the couch. There is a bookshelf directly across from the couch where, instead of books, Dee has arranged mismatched cups, medicine bottles, and a string of red and green plastic holly that appears to be a Christmas decoration. Even the steam heater serves as a shelf for artificial fruit, magazines, and a circular tin that once held butter cookies. The heavy curtains covering the windows are pulled shut to keep the room cool, but the darkness consumes what little bit of space remains.

"Okay. You got it on now?" Dee is asking. With the recorder ready to go, I soon discover the benefits of sitting next to Dee. When she talks, she touches whoever is close by with a series of gestures. She caresses your arm when she is giving you background information; when the narration picks

42 *On Fire in Baltimore*

up she pats you with her fingers, and at the climax of the story, she'll give you a little push while simultaneously exclaiming, "but I lived through it, yes indeedy—I sure did!" Dee speaks quickly with a flourish, arms always in motion, splashing out fragments of her life—often not in any particular sequence as they bubble up from the wellspring of her mind.

"I was born in 1914 on the Eastern shore in Pokomoke City. I was the oldest of eleven head of children." Dee is stroking my arm with her soft hand. "When I was five years old, I took care of my two little sisters while my mother went out to feed the chickens and hogs. I didn't want to be left alone, so I'd take my sisters and put them in the tub that you wash in, and drag them to my grandmother who lived in the woods. My grandmother used to fuss at my mother for leaving us alone too long."

Dee's mother and father raised their own livestock but also worked in nearby fields owned by White farmers. Outside of Pokomoke City during the early 1900s, most Black agricultural laborers worked fifteen hours a day and received about nine dollars a month.³ With such a meager wage, families had to rely on gardening and hunting, as well as hiring out their children in order to get by.

"We had a coal lamp and one day it exploded," Dee continues, her eyes radiating vitality through the reflection of her glasses. "My mother was gone, and she had locked the door and we couldn't get out of the house, so I took my two sisters and wrapped them in a horse blanket and put them under the table. I told them not to get up. Then I sat on a stool where my mother used to do her hair because I thought the fire was only going to burn one room. But I got burnt up anyway—my hands and face—I was burnt up all over and was blind."

Dee emphasizes the word "blind" as she gives my hand a pat, punctuating the magnitude of her misfortune. "That's awful Sister Dee," I tell her.

"My father thought it was mama's fault I got all burnt up so he left us. He only came back to make more babies," Dee's laugh is childlike in spite of her age. After a few seconds she begins to stroke my arm again. "But I had a beautiful life, and don't you know, my sisters and brothers, they are all dead and gone now, but I'm still here."

"But Sister Dee," I object, afraid that she will forget to tell us the end of the story, "you haven't told us what happened after the fire."

"Well, my grandmother took goose poop and ground it up and mixed it with linseed oil."

3. "The State of Maryland: Not Much Work for Colored People on the Eastern Shore," 1.

“Goose poop?” Naomi responds before I can ask the same question.

“It was mixed with four things but I can’t remember them all,” Dee tells us. “My skin was so bad that she couldn’t use her fingers to put on the ointment because when you touch the meat on my face it would come off. So she would get a goose feather and spread the poop on my skin. She told the doctor, ‘Now you take care of Dee’s eyes because I don’t know what to do about that, and I’ll take care of her face because I don’t want her scarred up.’”

I scrutinize Dee’s face while she speaks and don’t see a single scar. No facial feature is disfigured, no blemish mars her skin. In fact, the smile lines around her mouth only highlight the smoothness of her cheeks. “Your skin looks so smooth!” I remark. “Can’t you remember what your grandmother put in the ointment?”

“It was four things,” Dee pauses. “But I can’t remember the other two things.”

“Well, maybe you’ll remember later on,” I encourage, hoping that she can recall how to make this miraculous concoction. “Can you tell us more about your childhood then?” I ask because not only am I interested in how Dee grew up at the beginning of the twentieth century, but I am imposing chronological sequence to Dee’s narration. Otherwise, her stories would zigzag forward and back over the decades. I wondered if, after having lived so long, the tapestry of her life had become one interwoven design, a cohesive narrative where the materiality of time was no longer essential. Or perhaps the effects of old age had finally started to set in.

Well when I was a little girl, maybe six or seven, where we lived was segregated—here and everywhere else. You didn’t eat with ‘em or go to a lunchroom with ‘em nowhere. You couldn’t go to a bathroom. You wash their toilets and their clothes, this and that, then you had to go out the back door. If you go down to buy a pair of shoes you had to put on the socks or something on your head for a hat. It was pitiful. But I learned to forget about it.

During the 1920s in Pokomoke City where Dee lived, segregation was highly formalized. For example, the Mar-Va theatre on Market Street featured movies for White kids on Friday and movies for Black kids on Saturday. Blacks were required to access the theater by a separate entrance with separate ticketing and seating, as well as “colored only” water fountains and bathrooms. City ordinances also imposed sundown curfew on Blacks, and during mixed race events, a strict code of social conduct ap-

plied. Blacks were expected to acknowledge their subservient status by their posture and manner of speaking.⁴ But today, Dee, in a mode of retroactive defiance, does not even acknowledge the White people in power who had imposed these Jim Crow segregation practices; instead, she refers to the Whites only as *'em*.

So when I was a little girl, and should'a had school, this lady wanted me to scrub her porch. And the whole family would get lice in their heads so I had to put this whatever-it-was on their heads to keep them from getting lousy. I'd go at eight o'clock and didn't get back until four, and she gave me a nickel. But grandmother told me, "I'm not going to let you work there any more because the lady calls you, *Girl*. That woman don't know how to talk to you, and you're too smart a girl for that, to listen to her that way." But I told my grandma, "Words don't hurt me none Grandma, I'm going to make that nickel."

Dee's grandmother had been born into slavery and had grown up at the end of Reconstruction when "separate but equal" laws were coming into full force. Surely she had borne the brunt of these laws, but young Dee, having lived within the relative protection of home life, might not yet have experienced the full magnitude of these discriminatory practices. She did, however, understand the impact of money for a family living in poverty.

So after I grew up—I guess I was about seven or eight years or so—it was a school teacher, Miss Louise, and she lived in town, and she and her husband wanted my mother to let me come and stay with the children. My aunt already cooked and cleaned for them, so I went there to live and came home every other Sunday. One Sunday they took me to Snow Hill, which wasn't too far away, because they were going to have a family get-together up there. And when I got there Miss Louise's mother said, "Why would you bring Dee up here? You know I don't like colored people." But Miss Louise said back, "Mama, Dee's as sweet as she could be. Just put her on the sofa tonight, she'll be fine—just so no thunder and lightning come up 'cause then she'll end up in bed with you."

Dee laughs at how Miss Louise had used Dee's blackness to tease her mother. The intimacy of finding oneself sleeping in the same bed with a Black child must have been unimaginable to this woman who did not like "colored" people. Dee further explains the reason for Miss Louise's joke.

4. Thomas Ross, *Just Stories: How the Law Embodies Racism and Bias*, xi.

You see, at Miss Louise's I used to sleep in the room with the children so if they wake up I'd be there for them. And this one time a big storm come up. I run into Miss Louise bedroom. There wasn't much room but I ease in—kept easin' and easin' and easin' in. And Miss Louise husband said to her, "Louise move over. You push me out of the bed." But Miss Louise said, "Somebody's in here," and he turned the light on. It was me. He said, "Let her stay cause she's scared of the lightening."

Dee laughs, "It was fun then!" and gives my shoulder a little push.

Naomi smiles from across the table, "I love hearing your stories Sister Dee."

"Well, Miss Louise and her husband didn't send me to school like they was supposed to, because I was there with those babies," Dee continues. "I stayed at their house until I was thirteen, but Miss Louise taught me everything, and when I went back to school I could tell the teacher all what the other kids learned. Yeah that was good, yes indeedy." Dee holds my hand for a moment then unconsciously smooths out the wrinkles on the back of my hand, as if she were flattening out a handkerchief.

"After that I went back to help my mother pick strawberries and lima beans in the field, and a whole lot of other stuff."

Dee does not mention a salary for her domestic work, but in the early twentieth century, the average wage for a Black woman in the South was about a dollar per week. A child's wage would have been less.⁵ As a nanny, Dee also would have become intimately acquainted with the workings of a White family, and since her aunt was employed in the same household, she likely guided Dee's behavior to stay within the racial parameters of the day. But Miss Louise and her husband appeared to treat Dee with much of the same closeness as they would one of their own children—even allowing her to stay in bed with them when she was afraid. By age thirteen, Dee had lived with Miss Louise just as long as she had lived with her own mother, but Dee was an employee, and after years of service, she was no longer needed. This farewell must have been a heavyhearted moment for Dee and the children she had mothered at such a young age. The upside was that working seven years as a nanny would provide her with the valuable experience she would need for future employment. The downside was that her life back home was about to take an unfortunate turn.

5. David M. Katzman, "Domestic Servants," 86.

46 *On Fire in Baltimore*

When I went back home my mother married again, and my stepfather tried to get me. He say to me after Mama already gone, “You leave those dishes and get the children to go on to school, you can catch up with them later.” I washed the dishes anyway and hurried up, but he was waiting there for me at the bridge. I had a coat on cause it was the coldest day of the year. But it didn’t have a button so I stuck a safety pin on it. And he came out of the woods—right near the big woods you got to cross a bridge—and he grabbed me by the collar and was pulling me in the woods. Well, something said to me, “Pull the pin out.” So I did, and it loosened my arms. He pulled on the coat, and I flew out of it and ran all that long way to school. And when I got there I was so cold icicles was on my arms and I was crying. They tried to warm up my hands, and I was just screaming murder.

My grandmother lived close, so after school that day I went to her house and I said, “Grandma, did you eat your dinner”? She had arthritis or something. And she said, “I haven’t had a mouthful all day long; the children left out of here to work and didn’t give me breakfast.” And I said, “There’s some of those greens in the garden you like. Can I fix them for you?” You see they had something called winter turnip greens and my grandma said, “Yes, but hurry up or it’s going to be late and your mama’ll kill you when you get home.” And when I got the greens ready for her to eat she said, “Now go home ‘cause the sun is going down and your mama be mad and beat you all up.” But instead, I hid in her closet where they put fruit and clothes.

At nine o’clock my mama came with all the children in the buggy, and she say, “Have you seen Dee?” And grandma said, “She was here and feeds me the best little food, I hadn’t eaten all day, but I sent her home.” Well after my mama left, my grandmother come where I was, and I was peeking through her coat. She said come on out and tell me what happened, why you didn’t go home. And I told her. Well she sent her sons up there, and they beat my step-father to pieces. Then when I found my father and told him, he went and beat him up again and said, “If you *ever* lay hands on Dee again I’ll kill you.”

But you know what? He did it again anyway—he got me. Well, my mother had a shotgun that I saw her shoot ‘cause she used to kill rabbits and squirrels and stuff. I put it to my shoulder, and I shot at him. But he kicked it out of my hand and hit me hard and knocked me out. He coulda come back and kill me. I had a terrible time back then. It was terrible, but I lived through it ‘cause here I am!

Dee gives me another little push signaling the end of that story then pats my arm as if to erase the shove.

“Well, I’ve never heard this story before,” Naomi says. “What did you do after that?”

“After that I ran away from home from my stepfather, and I was out on the highway thumbing a ride like I saw all the people do.”

“You were hitchhiking?” Naomi asks.

“Yes, and a man stopped—he was a mechanic—and he say, ‘What in the world are you out here doing this for?’” Dee imitates the mechanic with a throaty voice.

I say, “I don’t know.” He say, “Where you going?” And I said, “I don’t know, I’m running away.” He said, “Well come with me.” He says, “My mother having a baby, and we are looking for somebody to help.” See back then they stayed down a whole month after having a baby, the mothers did. So I went there and took care of seven or eight sisters and brothers. Cook and wash and iron, and they gave me two dollars a week. Well ‘fore long the mechanic was liking me and the grandfather says, “He can’t be liking her in my house like this. I’m gonna marry ‘em.” But he wasn’t a real preacher, so he didn’t turn in the paper. I lived with the mechanic for five years, and that’s how we ended up coming to Baltimore. They were six generations of mechanics, and his uncle had a place for us where my husband could work as a mechanic so he sent for us. We came by car, and I’ve been in Baltimore ever since.

“Wow, you were so young!” Naomi remarks.

“Yes, that’s how I came to Baltimore.”

Then Dee tells us how, after five years of marriage, she left her husband because he was “acting like a muck” and was jealous all the time. He started slapping her in the face at church and accused her of enticing the deacons, saying, “They were looking at you.” But Dee retorted, “Then why don’t you go slap them? I don’t see no man looking at me.” One day, after Dee came home from work earlier than usual, she found her husband with another woman. “I couldn’t see too good but I saw them through the hole in the door,” Dee told us. “He was naked and so was she. So I went and found a whole pound of lard and melted it in a frying pan. Then I opened the door and throwed it on them. I done scald them, then I ran away to my uncle’s house in East Baltimore to hide. I never went back. It was nice just to get away.”

“I guess they got what they deserved,” Naomi declares while I am contemplating Dee’s creative method of retribution.

“I had three marriages but all of ‘em are dead and gone. I wore them all up because I’m still here.” Dee laughs and gives me a friendly tap, “Yes indeedy.”

“That’s why you’re so happy,” Naomi jokes across from Dee.

But then, out of the blue, Dee becomes indignant. “Somebody got my number and took money out of my bank account, and I don’t know why. I gave myself to everybody all my life, helping people, and I don’t think it’s fair for somebody to go and take somebody else’s money—with my little bit of money.” It takes me a moment to realize that Dee is talking about the present.

“What do you mean, Dee?” Naomi asks.

“I don’t get but six hundred fifty-nine dollars, and the rent is two hundred and something and if I get sick, I’m too old to work anymore.”

“So they withdrew money from your account?” I ask, wondering how the scammer got Dee’s information.

“See, this man, he call me and said, ‘Are you Dee?’ and I said, ‘Yes, speaking. Who are you?’ He said, ‘I’m the man that got your money and if you want it back you better give me your new bank number.’ See, I changed the bank number a month ago. But I said, ‘You think I’m crazy?’ And I started to tell him something that Jesus wouldn’t like to hear, but the man got it—he got what I was saying.”

“Did you get it straighten out?” I ask, smiling at Dee’s fortitude.

“Well, I got the bank to send the money here, but guess what happened? The postman put my check in somebody else’s box. Rent’s supposed to be paid on the first and my insurance too. So Lord have mercy! Maybe they’ll put me outdoors or something.”

“I hope they don’t,” Naomi laughs, making light of the dilemma.

“You can hope all you want, but you’ve got to have faith for real,” Dee tells us, but behind her lighthearted manner I sense her seriousness; that she understands in a very real way, the quality of faith necessary for miracles. “The church people are coming and giving me money and bringing me food. I *am* happy about that.”

“How about family, Sister Dee?” I ask. “Do you have any children or somebody who could help with this mess?” Dee must have someone who could step in and help her navigate the ins and outs of dealing with scammers and incompetent postal workers. But her response is entirely unexpected.

“Well see, I was raped when I was five years old by a cousin that was nineteen.” Dee reveals this incident matter-of-factly, as if sexual abuse

were yet another episode among many in the long list of trials she had endured throughout her life. “And I never had babies,” she tells us. “They said I might get ‘em but I never did—but it’s okay because God sent me a baby and I adopted him. I’ll tell you.” Dee begins to stroke my arm again.

One day my husband went to work and we didn’t have any vegetables, so he gave me money to go to the store. Well, I couldn’t find the money so I thought, I must have put it in the trash. I went out and sorted through the dumpster. And don’t you know, when I was doing that, I heard a baby cry. I had to go get a step ladder to get into the dumpster. And I didn’t know what to do when I got the baby out all wet and messed up. One of the ladies say, “Why don’t you go to the police station and tell ‘em.” So I did. It was right on Pennsylvania Avenue by Dolphin Street there. So I carried him up there and the police said, “You know what? I’m going to send you downtown; say, if you found that baby and it ain’t yours you need to adopt it.” So I did.

“You saved a baby from the dumpster?” I ask, needing confirmation. These were stories that I had only heard on the news and even then, it was unimaginable that an innocent newborn could begin life so viciously. But I also questioned how easily the police had turned over the newborn to Dee. Was there no investigation into this attempted murder? No question as to the circumstances surrounding this act of child abandonment? Did the law just turn its head when dealing with family affairs in Baltimore’s Black community or had Dee left out significant details of the story?

Instead of answering my question, Dee makes a declaration. “Let me tell you, everyone who has a baby is not a mother. Believe me when I say that.”

I nod in agreement as Dee pats my arm, and I feel her nurturing touch validate her words. I look at her adept, shapely fingers, potent and full of life, and her silver bracelet dangling at her wrist. I see that Dee is not just giving us advice; she is telling us that mothering characterizes the essence of who she is. She was not able to give birth—tragically, that gift had been taken from her when she was only five years old—yet it was that very same age when her mothering began, and she had wrapped her sisters in a horse blanket to save them from the fire. Even Dee’s yard, with its castoff baby-cribs that encircle thriving vegetables and healthy flowers, is a memorial to her maternal capacity and ability to nurture.

“I took care of lots of babies in my life,” Dee adds, “a mother to lots of kids, yes indeedy!” Then, while I am still reeling from Dee’s rape and adoption story, she jumps right into another episode of her life. “But I’ve

50 *On Fire in Baltimore*

got to tell you about my Jewish children too!” Her voice is full of energy as she waves her arms in the air and pats my back. “So I took care of children and worked for the Jewish people for years and years.” Naomi nods and smiles because she has heard this story before.

I was taking care of the babies when their mother got sick. The mother got leukemia, and she calls me in and says, “I’m going to the hospital again but I don’t think I’m coming back this time.” She says, “you’ve been with these children, and they love you just like they do me. If anything happens to me will you stay here with them?” I told her, “I have a son remember? And Black children don’t go to school with White people, so can my son stay here and can the children grow up together? Tell your husband that. And if he don’t agree he can find somebody else.” So I stayed and took care of four boys and two girls until they were teenagers. I taught them everything. I paid the bills, I went to the market, I cut their hair my ownself, and I even mowed the grass to save money. The kids, they’d be out playing but I’d make them come into the kitchen with me. I showed them how to set the table—one of them each day—and they would help me cook. And they’d go in the store to shop with me. Remember back then it was segregated, but they’d come right up to the counter with me and say, “Ma can I have this?” I wish you could a seen the clerk’s face. “These your children?” he asked, and I said “Yes.” Then when the kids were teenagers they went to boarding school. I didn’t work there anymore because they didn’t need me.

Suddenly, the phone rings and interrupts Dee’s story. “Oh Lord,” Dee exclaims looking at the recorder, “Can I answer the phone?”

“Sure, go ahead,” I tell her and pause the recording. Dee jumps up and walks into the living room where her phone is plugged into the wall. Her voice takes on a quality of roughness that I have not yet heard. I wonder who could be on the other end of the line and why she appears to be irritated.

“It was Glenard,” Dee informs us after hanging up the phone.

“Glenard! Tell Laura about him, Dee,” Naomi insists, then tells me, “You’ll like this story, Laura!” Dee appears to be happy to start a new account of her life drawing upon her unflagging energy and capacity for talking.

“Okay, see, years back this boy calls me at two o’clock in the morning and said, ‘Are you Dee?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, who’s speaking?’ He said, ‘My name is Glenard,’ and I said, ‘Are you my nephew from New Jersey?’ I thought he might be my nephew.” This time Dee lightly brushes my arm with her fingers at the end of each sentence. And while her touch might

have been annoying to some, I welcomed her connection with me. Her need to touch was so involuntary that I doubted if Dee even knew she was doing it.

But Glenard said, “No, you don’t know me.” So I said, “Well how’d you get my number?” He said, “I closed my eyes and put my finger on the phone book. I wanted to talk to somebody that is not in the family. My father is leaving my mother, and I love the both of them, and I just want to know which one I should go live with.” I said, “Glenard, does your mama own her own home—got a roof over her head?” and he said, “Yeah.” You see, one of Glenard’s uncles is a, you know, dead people, what you call them? A mortician. And he gave her a house, because the father didn’t work so much. The mother was moving from place to place so the uncle gave her a house. So I told him, “Well, you go with your mama.” Then he said, “Can I call you again? What’s your number?” I said, “You called it once, find it again.” He’s been call me ever since. That was thirty-two years ago.

Thirty-two years ago? I was visualizing a child on the other end of the phone, or at the very least, an awkward and obnoxious preteen who had overstayed his welcome. But Dee’s Glenard was a middle-aged man. I begin to be suspicious that Glenard might be some kind of free-loader or another scammer, but Dee enlightens us.

“I found out Glenard had something wrong with him,” Dee says. “See, when he was a little baby his father and grandfather used to work all the time at the Royal Theatre playing music and singing.” The Royal Theatre, first known as Douglas Theatre, opened in 1922 along west Baltimore’s Pennsylvania Avenue. The Royal became the first theatre on the *Chitlin’ Circuit*, a track of night clubs and theatres for Black performers that extended throughout the South, Chicago, and Texas. The biggest stars in Black entertainment such as Duke Ellington, Billie Holliday, Nat King Cole, and The Supremes performed at the theatre. Baltimore City’s first talking motion picture, *Scar of Shame*, with an all Black cast, was also shown there. But unfortunately, during the Civil Rights riots in 1968, the theatre was damaged and from then on began to decline along with the entire Westside community. In 1971 the theatre was razed, and today, only a monument stands in its place.

“After playing the music they would go partying,” Dee continues, “and one time, when Glenard’s father was all drunk up, they had an accident and dropped him down the sewer hole. He never was right since

52 *On Fire in Baltimore*

then. Glenard is a mental case, but I took care of him and taught him to cook because they didn't teach him nothing and that's the truth."

Dee's cornucopia of life stories seem to abound with accounts of running away and saving others, of narrow escapes and rescues. But when I ask Dee to tell her conversion story, I find out that she did not escape the Mormon missionaries even though she tried.

"We're ready to hear your conversion story now, Sister Dee."

"Okay, well, when I had the mastectomy the Baptists didn't come back to help."

"You belonged to the Baptist Church?"

"Yes, and when I go home from the hospital I got nobody—uh huh, and so I didn't go back to that church anymore. So I prayed. I said, 'I'm not going back to church Lord unless you send me somebody!'" Dee's eyes flash behind her wire rim glasses, and she puts her hand on her hip in defiance even though she is sitting.

And he did, but it was years later. Yes, mm hmm. They knocked on the door, and at first I thought, "The Jehovey Witness are here." So I said I was going to put on clothes and go out the back so I wouldn't have to worry with them, but I didn't get dressed soon enough and the knock came on the door. So then I said I wasn't going to open it, but I went immediately anyway and two boy missionaries were there smiling. They showed me their badges and said they were from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I said, "I've never heard of you before, so come in and have a seat. I got two questions to ask you, and if you answer them correctly then you can talk. Well they didn't sit, they stood, and I ask, "Then where do people go when they die?" Because my grandfather preached everybody into heaven, and I couldn't understand how could they all go to heaven if they hadn't did right. Well they told me the answer and said, "What's the next question?" I said, "Do you celebrate Jesus' birthday?" Because the Jehovah's Witness didn't. They said, "Yes, Jesus is the name of their church." Then they said a prayer and read their favorite scripture in the Mormon book. Then they took my name and phone and was going to give it to the girl missionaries to come see me. When the lady missionaries called, I said "I'm sorry, I'm not ready yet. I got to pray on it." But before I hung the phone up I took their phone number. When I hung up something say to me, "How are you going to know what they're like if you don't listen?" So I called them

right back and told them I changed my mind. The day after they were there and I listened.

So the first time I came to church, I came too early, and I was sitting on these marble steps, and the White people was going by looking at me so funny. I felt so badly. But soon after that here comes Sister Kelly. I tell her I'm waiting for the missionaries but she said, "Oh, come on in here." You know how she's kind of bossy—she asked me my name and I told her. Then she says she introduce me to the members, "Now they reach their hand out so you reach out yours too. I'll show you, like this." And I'm so glad I did!

Dee rocks back and forth in her chair, unable to keep still. "And I got news for you—I'm so happy to be baptized! I don't know what to do I'm so happy. The Church is like family, yes indeed! This last time I been sick and the sisters would cook food and bring it! I couldn't use my hands because I had surgery and they *fed me!* Oh my goodness, I sucked it up too. I was enjoying it. It's just so nice to be loved."

The interview had ended that day with Dee showing us a windup monkey toy that someone had given her. "I wonder if he'll still do it," Dee had said as she put the toy by her feet. When she let go, the monkey clapped a pair of symbols together and scooted about on the floor.

"Oh my gosh, it works!" Naomi exclaimed, laughing at the performing vintage toy. A few minutes later after it came to a stop, I asked Dee about the big box of crocheted slippers she had next to the couch.

"I crocheted all these slippers," she replied, then suddenly, "Oh, wait! I didn't tell you this one last story about the slippers."

"Well, just a minute Sister Dee, let me turn the recorder back on," I told her, but she started her story anyway.

"When I was baptized Sister Kelly gave me a present. It was a book and you could put whatever in it. It was so nice because I never got too many presents. So I said, for whoever get baptized I'm going to give them a pair of slippers."

"Like the ones you made here?" I asked, picking up a double-crocheted pink slipper with red trim. "Yes, but I have to tell you, I was making granny squares and bedspreads all the time, but I wanted to make slippers. Now in my dreams I could make slippers, but I didn't know how to put them together in real life, and I worked on it for a whole month. It was like a puzzle and they wouldn't work right." Dee holds my arm as we stand in a circle around the monkey toy.

54 *On Fire in Baltimore*

“Then I said, ‘Well I think I’m going to say a prayer tonight and I’ll ask the Lord.’ I said, ‘Lord, I done made all these things up here, and now I don’t know how to make slippers. If it’s your will, just tell me.’ Then I dreamed these words, ‘Try again.’ That’s all. That’s all that come to me, ‘Try again.’ And guess what? I woke up and tried again and put them on the table and put the squares pointed and the two points together. It come to me and I made them! I made them and done been making them slippers ever since.” Dee claps her hands together, then laughs.

After Naomi and I had hugged Dee and told her goodbye, we left with two gifts: a pair of crocheted slippers in our hands and Dee’s stories etched upon our memory. As we climbed into Naomi’s car and cranked up the air conditioning, I could still feel Dee’s soft hand caressing my arm.

Baltimore saw record snowfall the winter Dee passed away. Right before Christmas, a blizzard shut down the city turning it into a silent, frosty dream world. Then in February, two more storms dropped waist-high snow and brought Baltimore to a halt again. Traffic lights dutifully continued to flash against the dark, gray sky even though no cars were waiting at intersections. There were no rowdy teenage boys walking home from Digital Harbor High in front of my window, no tourists that occupied sidewalks or puzzled over parking signs. The cars that lined the street were transformed into unblemished, white mounds and a blanket of unusual calmness settled over every neighborhood. Word got out that Dee had died and that regrettably, the funeral would have to be postponed for several weeks until the ground could be cleared of snow. For some reason this announcement filled me with warmth and made me smile. Strong and tenacious, full of vigor and playfulness, even in death Dee could not rest. It was then that I thought about something Dee had said in our interview, “All my life I wanted to learn how to do things; I wanted to try everything. I lived a long life and the only thing I haven’t got to do yet is skydive. Yes indeedy!” Then she had laughed.

At the announcement of the delayed funeral, Naomi and some of the other sisters had joked that Dee was probably out playing in the snow. But if I were to place a wager, I would bet that Dee was out trying her hand at skydiving. She had waited on so many people in her life—babies in the nursery and children at church, young Jewish kids and older folk in rest homes—but now she would have one last fling while *we* waited on her and the final ceremony that would celebrate her life.