

IN A CITY UNDER SIEGE

Praise be to the Lord, for he showed his wonderful love to me when I was in a besieged city.” Psalm 31:21

“Typical Detroit crazy,” Tanya muttered, as she hung up the phone on her seventeenth call to the answering machines of homeless shelters and community service organizations, not counting the many other live respondents she had reached, who had all turned her down. Like most natives of the city, she stressed most the first syllable of the city’s name, pronouncing it, “DEE-troit.” Reluctantly she dialed the number of a telephone that would awaken a personal friend at this ungodly hour. As the phone rang, she looked out through the window of her fifth story office to the world below where she could see, through the driving snow, headlights of cars and taxis jamming the circle drive at the entry of Eastpointe Women’s Hospital, bringing in women in various stages of labor.

“Storm brings ‘em on like crazy,” she sighed. “Sister Lucille?” she asked, when she heard the phone being picked up.

“Yes?” drawled a sleepy voice.

“It’s me, Tanya Birkett.”

“Ohhhh, its you, is it?” Lucille asked, slowly waking up. “What on earth could you want at an hour like this?” Her voice barely hid a biting edge of suspicion and irritation.

“You remember that big-time favor you promised me last winter, after the last time I jump-started your car? Well, I’m callin’ to collect.”

“This better be good, Tanya. When I made that offer, answerin’ the phone at 2 AM on Christmas mornin’ was the las’ thing on my mind.”

“I know. And honestly, I tried everythin’ else before I called you. I need a place for a young woman and her newborn baby.”

“Try Brother Lowell tomorrow at 8. He’s on call for *Shiloh Tabernacle* this holiday. I can’t do anything there now. It’s locked up and besides, I heard we’re full. We got some travelers stuck in town by the storm. Didn’t you try no place else?”

“I did. You’re their last chance.”

“Can’t it wait till mornin’?” Lucille asked.

“Normally it could. But all our beds are full, and we’re having to send some away to the County Hospital. The woman in question already had to give up her bed to another woman with high blood pressure.”

“A woman who just gave birth had to give up a bed?” Sister Lucille asked.

“Well, she had her baby yesterday, but we haven’t been able to place her anywhere. She came in labor from the homeless shelter on Gratiot, but they can’t take her back, bein’ as she’s got a baby now, and they’re full up even if they could. Even the county shelters are full up. It happens more often than people know. Only this time there’s a storm.”

“Even the county shelters? I caint’ believe that.”

“Budget cuts. Listen, Eastpointe can’t keep her anymore, as she’s ready to go and she hasn’t got insurance, even if she could stay longer. If you’d be so kind as to come get

her and keep her till *Shiloh Tabernacle* can get her set up, she wouldn't have to sit up all night waitin' for Santa Claus in the snack bar, which is where she's at right now."

"Ain't she got no family?" Lucille asked. "Why's it gotta be me?"

"No family here. She come down from Pontiac a few weeks ago, but she says it ain't safe to go back. You know how it is."

"I hear it all the time. But listen, Tanya. I got a house full a' family from Memphis as it is. Got my grandkids too. What makes you think I even got space for your Madonna an' child? My momma don't sleep too good at her age. A baby's gonna keep her up all night."

"You got a floor, ain't cha?"

A brief pause. "I'm comin.' You better hope I don't need no jump now, or I'll call you out in the snow to come help me."

"After I hang up this phone I'm gonna be dead to the world. Dead asleep. I can't leave till tomorrow afternoon. Gotta fill in for the next social worker who can't make it in from Monroe, what with this weather. If you cain't make it, call me and I'll get you a taxi."

"Why don't you just send her in a taxi now?" Lucille asked.

"Not if I can help it. They're makin' me document and justify every penny I spend in triplicate. Budget cuts."

Sister Lucille was a deaconess at *Shiloh Tabernacle Community Care Center*, a combination church and community service center, K-12 academy, and homeless shelter on Detroit's East Side. For all the sixty-plus hours a week she put in tutoring schoolchildren, visitng the sick, counseling and transporting young women, she could only afford a rusty 1988 Chevrolet Caprice. As it was 20 degrees Fahrenheit and getting colder outside, she was greatly relieved to hear the engine start after the second turn of the key. Making her way through streets covered in the four inches of snow that had fallen since the last plowing, she arrived at Eastpointe around 2:45 AM, parked out front among the taxis, and headed straight to the snack bar by the main entry. She had no trouble locating the "Madonna an' child." They were in the midst of people who were admiring the baby, a group that included a Pakistani doctor, a Russian cleaning lady, and a Mexican nun. It's true what they say, Sister Lucille thought to herself. Everyone in the world has a distant relative in DEE-troit.

"You the one they ain't got no room in the inn for?" Sister Lucille asked the new mother, trying to smoothe her way with humor. It didn't work. The young mother looked tired, suspicious and fearful.

"I'm Sister Lucille Withrow, from *Shiloh Tabernacle*. The social worker called me. You're spending Christmas with us. What's your name? And your baby's?"

"Talisha Edmonds," she said in a dispirited monotone. "And this is Leontyne."

"Like the singer, Leontyne Price?"

"I was sure she was gonna be a boy, so I couldn't think a' no girl's name until they gave her this little Lions' t-shirt. So now she's Leontyne."

"Why are they giving out Goodwill surplus clothing when drug reps are handing out free Pistons' tickets to every nurse and doctor?" Lucille asked, examining the stained and threadbare t-shirt. A far cry from the bright purple one-piece baby gowns they used to give out, bearing the words, "Every Delivery is a Special Delivery at Eastpointe."

“Some of ‘em even get luxury boxes for free at the Silverdome, I hear!”

“Budget cuts is what they tol’ me.”

When have we not had budget cuts? Lucille thought to herself.

Down Kerchival and onto Grand Avenue, Sister Lucille drove with her silent partner and her sleeping baby, past twenty-bedroom homes, built in the early 1900’s for large, wealthy families and all their servants, now serving as cheap, dark and crowded nursing homes and group homes for the mentally and physically disabled. As they approached Jefferson Avenue, they passed boarded up stores, garages that specialized in the constant repair of ancient klunkers like Lucille’s Caprice, bars, liquor stores, soul food restaurants and offices for temporary labor, many of them decorated with Christmas lights. Even in the blowing snow and cold, there was a crowd gathered on the sidewalk and in the street outside a “blind pig,” Detroit’s name for an unlicensed bar. Rap music blared its resonant beat into the night. Latisha grimaced as they passed a wall bearing gang graffiti. She drew Leontyne closer to herself.

“Where you from?” Lucille asked her.

“Pontiac. But most of my family’s moved back to Jackson.”

“Jackson, Michigan?”

“No. Jackson, Mississippi. Said if they was gonna be poor and unemployed, they’d rather starve where they wouldn’t freeze to death too.”

“So why ain’t *you* goin’ back to Pontiac? Or Jackson, with your people?”

“I was stayin’ with my boyfrien’s family, but now they don’t want me back. This is their granddaughter, but they don’ want nothin’ to do with either of us. The say we’s bad luck, on account of my boyfrien’ getting shot and killed.”

The words, “*Take the child... and flee...to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you,*” ran through Lucille’s mind. “I’m sorry to hear that about your boyfriend. Was it gang related?”

“The Crips took him out. They prob’ly want me and my baby, too, fer all I know.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that. They ain’t that smart. By now they’re prob’ly only thinkin’ about their next high. And even if they was after you, everybody sees this ol’ Caprice thinks it’s an unmarked police car.”

Lord, forgive me that little white lie, Lucille thought. Every hoodlum in town knows that unmarked patrol cars don’t have massive rust spots. Nor are they driven by silver-haired grandmothers in flower print dresses and horn-rimmed glasses.

Lucille turned left, onto Jefferson Avenue, passing a sign indicating that they could have continued straight on to Belle Isle, across the causeway. To the southeast could be seen the lights of loading docks and the Renaissance Center along the Detroit River.

“Would you keep my baby?” Leontyne asked. “Jes’ take me to Belle Isle and dump me in the river.”

“They scare you that bad?” Lucille asked, scared herself for this vulnerable young woman and her baby. They drove along in silence, past abandoned, weed-choked lots where once there stood stores, homes and businesses. Then an inspiration hit her.

“You think I’m young enough to keep up with your child prodigy there?”

“What do you mean?”

“You ain’t done no dope, have you?”

“No way.”

“I didn’t think so. You don’t talk like no crackhead. And I seen the storkbite above your baby’s left eye. I seen it before, plenty of times. One child I seen like that went onto become a high rollin’ lawyer. Another become a state senator. Another one’s a vice president a’ somethin’er other at General Motors.” Lucille was again making this up. She had never even met celebrity lawyers, state senators or corporate vice presidents. Uptown Detroit wasn’t among their stomping grounds. Nor did she really believe that the normal bruising and markings of labor and birth meant anything, but she had heard such folk traditions growing up in rural Tennessee. Perhaps this fib might encourage this depressed and fearful young woman.

“Your child could very well be a brain surgeon, or a concert violinist. I can tell that by lookin’ at her long, nimble fingers, too.” Lucille hadn’t really gotten a good look at the baby’s fingers, but it was also worth trying.

Talisha flipped back the receiving blanket and peered through the dimness at Leontyne’s hand. “She does have long fingers!”

“What ‘d I tell you? Jes’ you wait an’ see. She’s gonna leave quite a mark on this world. Don’t you wanna be there to see it?”

“I guess. But what can I do fer her? I ain’t even finished high school yet.”

“We got plenty a girls like you at *Shiloh*, workin’ on their GED’s, an’ gettin’ jobs. We even get you out to where the jobs is all gone, in Birmingham, Novi, even Bloomfield Hills. Why, we even do daycare while you work, or take classes. Your little girl’d have aunties and uncles galore if she attended our academy.”

“How do you manage all that in a place like this?” Talisha asked, as they passed an abandoned warehouse.

“Honey, it’s jes’ like Jesus feedin’ the multitudes. We ain’t got much, any one of us, but when we put our little parts together, two and two starts to make five an’ ten.” All this was very true.

As they continued through a few more lights in silence, Lucille began humming *Shiloh*’s theme song, thinking the words to herself::

“We’ve come this far by faith,

leanin’ on the Lord.

Ohhhhhh, can’t turn around,

we’ve come this far by faith.”

“Where you takin’ us?” Talisha asked.

“My house is right down this street.” A half block off of Jefferson, Lucille parked the rusty old Caprice in front of a two story frame house with shingles for siding and a front porch with storm windows over the screens. The house next door was only a burnt-out shell, through which they could see the the grey, glowing night sky.

Inside her home, Lucille led her guests to the living room, where stood a silver tinsel Christmas tree, next to a lumpy, overstuffed sofa.

“You can put the baby there on the sofa while you help me drag this old mattress out to sleep on, here by the Christmas tree. All our other rooms are taken, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t think I could sleep right now. I’m too keyed up,” Talisha said.

“Suit yourself. I’ll call you when I’ve got the luggage and stuff outa the way.”

She took out piles of shoes, luggage and a bowling ball, until there was a clear path from the closet to the livingroom for the old single mattress.

“Talisha, come give me a hand now. Talisha!”

She went out to look for Talisha and found her fast asleep on the sofa, with her baby snuggled up to her face. She went back into the closet, found a blanket, and brought it out to cover them both. It was 3:20 AM.

At 6:30 AM, Lucille’s two grandchildren, Anthony, 4, and Lorinda, 6, were awakened by the sound of a crying baby. They were sleeping over at Grandma Lucille’s house while their mother worked the night shift at the Wayne County Sheriff’s Department. Hearing the cries again, they looked at each other in amazement. They had expected, as soon as they awoke, to sneak in early and see what presents might have magically appeared under the tree, but the strange sound coming from the livingroom made them hesitant.

“It sounds like a baby. But can’t be! Go see what it is,” Lorinda whispered.

“UNH-unh,” Anthony said, shaking his head. “I ain’t goin’ out there. Might be a big ol’ reindeer. He’ll kick me in the head!”

Lorinda gave him a push off the bed. “Go check it out!”

Ten seconds later, Anthony returned to the room, his eyes wide with wonder and fear.

“What’d you see?” Lorinda demanded to know. “Is it a reindeer?”

“Its Mary, and the baby Jesus!”

The End