

Trueluck Summer



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Wild Lily Arts

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To Mary Jane

Who has known me since I was a "pup"

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Chapter One

Ida Trueluck

Losing a lifetime's collection of belongings is like taking away all your mirrors and no longer knowing what you look like. Three weeks ago, I moved in with my son and his family on Queen Street in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. I now inhabit a lovely room on the second floor overlooking the backyard, with only enough space for a handful of my favorite things. The rest I had to sell or give away. Something that was much harder to do than I imagined.

From my bedroom door, my granddaughter Trudy studies me as though she is an archaeologist, and I am an artifact unearthed from another time. Ancient. Yet not quite mummified. I reach for the shoes I took off the evening before. At least nothing ever gets lost in this small space. Not even my glasses, which I managed to displace at least once a day in my spacious old house.

In the corner of my bedroom, I sit in my favorite armchair, the one with the magnolia print that used to be in our living room—Ted's and mine—next to a fig tree whose growth exceeded my expectations. After forty years together,

Ted and I had refined a sense of comfort, like me and this old chair, at times feeling like one person instead of two.

“Are you thinking about Grandpa again?” Trudy asks.

My granddaughter is curious and observant, and I am convinced that someday she will do great things. Of course all grandmothers think their grandchildren are special. That’s part of the job, isn’t it?

The last time she caught me sniffing, I confessed to thinking about her grandfather. Will I ever stop grieving? It has been over a year since he passed, and I still expect him to walk in the door any minute and ask me what’s for dinner.

“Actually, I was thinking about how your Grandpa Trueluck and I met. Have I ever told you that story?”

With the effortlessness only possessed by someone twelve years of age, Trudy dives onto my four-poster bed and props her head up on one arm, ready to listen. We have already had several heartfelt talks over the last three weeks with her in this same position. If not for Trudy, my moving here would present a much harder transition.

“Tell me,” she says. Trudy wears a summertime outfit: shorts and sleeveless blouse, her sneakered feet not touching the bed.

“It was at the Mayberry Club,” I begin. “It doesn’t exist now, but back then it was a place downtown where you could go and listen to music and dance. It was where I first learned to dance the Charleston.”

I look over, expecting her to be impressed, but my reference appears lost on her.

“Our city had a famous dance named after it,” I say to educate her. “It was a craze back in the twenties.”

To Trudy, forty-years ago must seem like the Middle Ages, but to my relief, her interest doesn’t appear to wane.

“When I saw your grandpa that first time, goosebumps danced up my arms,” I continue.

She sits up and rubs her arms as though inheriting the goosebumps.

“Oh, Trudy, I’d never seen such a handsome man in my entire life,” I continue. “Tall. A sparkling smile. A twinkle in his eye.” A sigh, filled with history, escapes me. “We were married a year later,” I add.

Trudy lays back, her arms folded underneath her head as though imagining our meeting. She was really quite close to her Grandpa Trueluck.

“We never stopped dancing,” I begin again. “Over the years we slowed down a great deal, but we never stopped. Every evening before we went to bed, we danced cheek-to-cheek in our living room. A slow rendition of ‘Tea for Two,’ with your grandpa singing the words softly in my ear.”

Cross-legged now, she says in a half-whisper, “I saw you two dance once. I was spending the night, and you thought I was sleeping.”

“You saw us?” I smile.

She nods.

I stand and close my eyes, swaying to imaginary music. I feel my husband's breath tickling my ear. When I open my eyes and realize that I am not in my home of forty years, but in an upstairs bedroom in my son's house, my eyes mist. Trudy crosses the room and puts her arms around me.

"Everything will be okay, Nana Trueluck," she whispers, sounding older than her years. She always adds the Trueluck to my name as though I am one of a dozen grandmothers she possesses and needs to keep them all straight. But perhaps she simply likes the way it sounds.

"I'm supposed to comfort you, not the other way around." My voice wobbles over the words.

"We'll take turns," she says.

A voice yells upstairs, causing us to part.

Abigail—Trudy's mother, my daughter-in-law—isn't exactly pleased with the new living situation, even though she pretends everything is fine. A behavior practiced by southern women from birth until the grave. This morning at breakfast, Trudy and I were asked to deliver one of Abigail's pies to Calie's Diner where she sells them. A plot, I believe, to get us both out from underfoot so she can watch *As the World Turns* in peace. Yet Trudy and I are not ones to have to be coaxed out of the house.

Trudy leads the way downstairs, and we enter the kitchen, steamy from baking. Charleston in summertime can reach oven temperatures. At least it feels that way. To not have my

own kitchen anymore is strange. And as far as I can tell, Abigail's domain is not to be shared. At least not yet.

A small vase of summer roses sits on the kitchen table. It reminds me of my plan to pick up flowers while on our errand. Flowers on the table in front of my bedroom window might make me feel more at home. I miss my garden's display: my beloved tea roses, hyacinths, moonflowers, and star jasmine. A flowering that extends six months of the year.

"Trudy, please don't slouch," Abigail says.

My granddaughter straightens her spine long enough for her mother to approve and then resumes her usual position. Abigail's posture is as straight as a Charleston lamppost. She wears a dress, though it is a weekday, just in case someone drops by. The only time I have ever seen her wear pedal pushers or the occasional pair of shorts is at the beach, and even then she looked dressed up.

Abigail gives me a sideways glance as though she has heard my thoughts. "Are you going out like that?" A smile is attached to the question as though to camouflage the criticism. A comment I doubt she would have shared if my son, Ted Junior, weren't already at work.

To Abigail, appearances are everything. They used to be important to me, too. But after Ted Senior passed, I got tired of wearing black. I wanted more color. The latest addition to my wardrobe is what I call my gypsy skirts. Skirts of my own creation, made with special order fabrics that are airy and have a flower pattern to remind me I still have some life left in me.

For Abigail's benefit, I give a geriatric twirl to show off the complete outfit: gypsy skirt with large purple and green flowers, a short-sleeved white blouse, and white high-top sneakers to accentuate my skinny legs.

She doesn't look amused and hands Trudy a lemon meringue pie, one of Abigail's specialties, boxed and tied with twine. She makes spectacular pies—apple, peach, and lemon meringue—but if baking and child-rearing hadn't called her, Abigail would have made a good nun. The kind that carries rulers and occasionally raps knuckles.

"Please, get it there in one piece," Abigail says to Trudy, tossing a glance at both of us.

"We will," I say in a sing-song voice, sounding more jovial than I feel, though I doubt I have fooled anyone.

Once Trudy and I leave the house, the smell of salt water overtakes us. A reminder that not only Charleston Harbor, but the Atlantic Ocean is nearby. Trudy and I walk down Queen Street and take a right onto East Bay. Callie's Diner is a few blocks away on Broad Street. Mid-morning, the June day is already sticky. If I hadn't lived in the Lowcountry my entire life, I might find it oppressive, but this June heat is nothing compared to what will come in July and August.

It is the first day of Trudy's summer vacation, and she has a lightness to her step, full of possibility.

"Any big plans this summer?" I ask.

She grins in my direction. "Not yet," she says as though confident something will present itself.

I think of my summers as a girl and wonder what happened to my adventurous spirit. My family lived near a coastal waterway. With Maisie—my best friend throughout grammar school—I made forts, treehouses, and driftwood rafts that sunk as quickly as we released them onto the marsh. Entire days were spent on Sullivan’s Island or Folly Beach building sandcastles while my family’s maid, Sweeney, watched us from under an umbrella—barefoot, yet still wearing her uniform.

My mother’s properness makes Abigail’s seem tame in comparison. I remind myself to give Abigail a chance. After all, she did let me move into her home—although I imagine Ted Junior had to do a great deal of convincing before she agreed.

As Trudy and I walk east toward Broad Street, the sun rises above the buildings. Trudy holds her head high as though open to anything the world has to offer. I wonder if I ever possessed the confidence she has. At my age, it feels like I am closing instead of opening, a flower near the end of its bloom, its sweet aroma threatening to turn bitter in the sun.

At least I haven’t lost all of my color, I think to myself, glancing at my skirt.

Imitating my granddaughter I lift my chin with renewed hope. Perhaps it isn’t too late for this old broad to have an adventure, too.

Chapter Two

Trudy Trueluck

While Nana Trueluck stops to buy flowers from one of the colored women who sits on the corner of Broad and Meeting Streets, I continue on past the post office to Callie's Diner. Until my grandmother started living with us, I didn't spend that much time with her. Mama always came up with reasons why I couldn't go visit, not to mention that Nana and Grandpa Trueluck did a lot of traveling before he died.

A huge crowd gathered at his funeral. Daddy said that Grandpa Trueluck was well loved. He was certainly well loved by me. I still miss him. He smelled of Ivory soap and pipe tobacco and his mustache tickled when he kissed me on the cheek. Without fail, every time I saw him, he slipped a Brach's caramel into my hand when Nana Trueluck wasn't looking.

Nana Trueluck still misses him, too. Since she moved in, she stays in her room a lot, and sometimes I find piles of tissues in the corner of her armchair. I do my best to take her mind off how sad she is.

At the corner of King Street, I wait for the traffic light to change, tapping my foot on the sidewalk. The pie is heavy and

my fingers ache from the twine. Callie's Diner is less than a block away. A dark cloud covers the sun and momentarily softens the heat. For about the hundredth time that day I wish for a summer adventure.

In the next second, a Sunbeam Bread truck barrels down Broad Street from the opposite direction. Something about it seems off. The truck weaves into the other lane, and a car veers out of the way. The driver of the car sits on his horn. A moment later the truck comes straight for me. I freeze, my legs refusing to move as danger prickles up my spine. Brakes squeal, and I hold my breath. An instant before I am smashed flatter than one of Nana Trueluck's pralines that she always makes at Christmas, a brown hand jerks me out of the way and the truck crashes into a streetlamp right where I was standing. The engine sizzles, and a cloud of steam rises from the hood.

"Are you okay?" the boy asks.

In that moment, I realize I have never seen a colored boy up close. He is about my age, though shorter and skinnier, and is much stronger than he appears, given he just pulled me out of the path of a runaway truck.

"You saved my life," I say.

He blinks like he is as surprised as I am.

"My name is Trudy Trueluck." I extend my hand.

He hesitates, like maybe he has never touched a white girl before. But then he shakes my hand.

"Paris Moses," he says. "No relation."

“No relation?” I ask.

“No relation to the guy in the Bible,” he says.

“Oh,” I say.

The lemon meringue pie I was to deliver to Callie’s Diner is a gooey mess on the sidewalk.

“That could have been me,” I say to Paris, “except there would be blood and guts instead of yellow filling.”

He offers a quick grimace followed by a smile. At that moment I know that Paris Moses and I will become friends.

People gather around us, and the driver of the truck asks me if I am sure I am okay. Evidently, he spilled hot coffee onto himself and lost control of the truck. His white shirt is stained with the evidence. Over the mumblings of the crowd, I hear Nana Trueluck call my name as she runs down the street. She divides the crowd with her arms like she is parting the Red Sea.

Nana Trueluck’s hair is solid white, and she wears it pulled up in a bun on the top of her head. Everybody loves her, with the exception of my mother. For one thing, she has a fondness for Doris Day songs and sings sometimes when you least expect it. The same fondness extends to Broadway show tunes. According to Daddy, she wanted to be a nightclub singer someday but never got around to it. On more than one occasion, she has burst into song at the dinner table and made my entire family jump. Last Sunday, she belted out “Everything’s

Coming Up Roses” over pot roast because pot roast was always a favorite of Grandpa Trueluck’s. Once we got over the shock of her singing, all but Mama joined her on the chorus.

However, Nana Trueluck isn’t singing now.

“Are you sure you’re okay, sweetheart? I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you.” Her brow creased, she searches my knees and elbows for cuts and bruises.

I insist I am fine, which I am. For one thing, if this didn’t happen I don’t think I would have ever met Paris. I take Nana’s hand to introduce her to my new friend, the boy who saved my life. But when I turn around, Paris Moses has disappeared.

The next morning when I go into the kitchen, the newspaper is on the table. The headline of *The Charleston Post* reads:

Mayor’s Daughter Saved by Negro Boy

In the newspaper article, Daddy calls Paris a hero and later that night some cowardly white folks throw rocks through the windows at City Hall where his office is. It is 1964, and I am twelve years old.

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