

The Twelve Tribes of Hattie

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*For my mother,
and for Grandmom
and Grandpop*

All of you came to me and said, “Let us send men ahead of us to explore the land for us and bring back a report to us regarding the route by which we should go up and the cities we will come to.”

The plan seemed good to me, and I selected twelve of you, one from each tribe.

—DEUTERONOMY 1:22–23

The house, shut up like a pocket watch,
those tight hearts breathing inside—
she could never invent them.

—RITA DOVE, “Obedience”

Philadelphia and Jubilee

1925

“PHILADELPHIA AND JUBILEE!” August said when Hattie told him what she wanted to name their twins. “You cain’t give them babies no crazy names like that!”

Hattie’s mother, if she were still alive, would have agreed with August. She would have said Hattie had chosen vulgar names; “low and showy,” she would have called them. But she was gone, and Hattie wanted to give her babies names that weren’t already chiseled on a headstone in the family plots in Georgia, so she gave them names of promise and of hope, reaching forward names, not looking back ones.

The twins were born in June, during Hattie and August’s first summer as husband and wife. They had rented a house on Wayne Street—it was small, but it was in

a good neighborhood and was, August said, just an in-the-meanwhile house. “Until we buy a house of our own,” Hattie said. “Till we sign on that dotted line,” August agreed.

At the end of June robins beset the trees and roofs of Wayne Street. The neighborhood rang with birdsong. The twittering lulled the twins to sleep and put Hattie in such high spirits that she giggled all of the time. It rained every morning, but the afternoons were bright and the grass in Hattie and August’s tiny square of lawn was green as the first day of the world. The ladies of the neighborhood did their baking early, and by noon the block smelled of the strawberry cakes they set on their windowsills to cool. The three of them, Hattie and her twins, dozed in the shade on the porch. The next summer Philadelphia and Jubilee would be walking; they’d totter around the porch like sweet stumbling old men.

HATTIE SHEPHERD LOOKED DOWN at her two babies in their Moses baskets. The twins were seven months old. They breathed easier sitting upright, so she had them propped with small pillows. Only just now had they quieted. The night had been bad. Pneumonia could be cured, though not easily. Better that than mumps or influenza or pleurisy. Better pneumonia than cholera or scarlet fever. Hattie sat on the bathroom floor and leaned against the toilet with her legs stretched in front of her. The window was opaque with steam that condensed into droplets and ran down the panes and over the white wooden frames to pool in the dip

in the tile behind the toilet. Hattie had been running the hot water for hours. August was half the night in the basement loading coal into the hot water heater. He had not wanted to leave Hattie and the babies to go to work. Well, but . . . a day's work is a day's pay, and the coal bin was running low. Hattie reassured him: the babies will be alright now the night's passed.

The doctor had come around the day before and advised the steam cure. He'd prescribed a small dosage of ipecac and cautioned against backward country remedies like hot mustard poultices, though vapor rub was acceptable. He diluted the ipecac with a clear, oily liquid, gave Hattie two small droppers, and showed her how to hold the babies' tongues down with her finger so the medicine would flow into their throats. August paid three dollars for the visit and set to making mustard poultices the minute the doctor was out the door. Pneumonia.

Somewhere in the neighborhood, a siren wailed so keenly it could have been in front of the house. Hattie struggled up from her place on the floor to wipe a circle in the fogged bathroom window. Nothing but white row houses across the street, crammed together like teeth, and gray patches of ice on the sidewalk and the saplings nearly dead in the frozen squares of dirt allotted to them. Here and there a light shone in an upstairs window—some of the neighborhood men worked the docks like August, some delivered milk or had postal routes; there were schoolteachers too and a slew of others about whom Hattie knew nothing. All over Philadelphia the people rose in the crackling cold to stoke

the furnaces in their basements. They were united in these hardships.

A grainy dawn misted up from the bottom of the sky. Hattie closed her eyes and remembered the sunrises of her childhood—these visions were forever tugging at her; her memories of Georgia grew more urgent and pressing with each day she lived in Philadelphia. Every morning of her girlhood the work horn would sound in the bluing dawn, over the fields and the houses and the black gum trees. From her bed Hattie watched the field hands dragging down the road in front of her house. Always the laggards passed after the first horn: pregnant women, the sick and lame, those too old for picking, those with babies strapped to their backs. The horn urged them forward like a lash. Solemn the road and solemn their faces; the breaking white fields waiting, the pickers spilling across those fields like locusts.

Hattie's babies blinked at her weakly; she tickled each one under the chin. Soon it would be time to change the mustard poultices. Steam billowed from the hot water in the bathtub. She added another handful of eucalyptus. In Georgia, there was a eucalyptus tree in the wood across from Hattie's house, but the plant had been hard to come by in the Philadelphia winter.

THREE DAYS BEFORE, the babies' coughs had worsened. Hattie threw on her coat and went to the Penn Fruit to ask the grocer where she might find eucalyptus. She was sent to a house some blocks away. Hattie was new to Germantown,

and she quickly got lost in the warren of streets. When she arrived at her destination, bruised from the cold, she paid a woman fifteen cents for a bag of what she could have had for free in Georgia. "Well, you're just a little thing!" the eucalyptus woman said. "How old are you, gal?" Hattie bristled at the question but said that she was seventeen and added, so the woman would not mistake her for another newly arrived southern unfortunate, that she was married and her husband was training as an electrician and that they had just moved into a house on Wayne Street. "Well, that's nice, sugar. Where're your people?" Hattie blinked quickly and swallowed hard, "Georgia, ma'am."

"You don't have anybody up here?"

"My sister, ma'am." She did not say that her mother had died a year earlier while Hattie was pregnant. The shock of her death, and of being an orphan and a stranger in the North, had driven Hattie's younger sister, Pearl, back to Georgia. Her older sister, Marion, had gone too, though she said she'd come back once she'd birthed her child and the winter passed. Hattie did not know if she would. The woman regarded Hattie closely. "I'll come round with you now to look in on your little ones," she said. Hattie declined. She had been a fool, a silly girl too prideful to admit she needed looking in on. She went home by herself clutching the bag of eucalyptus.

The winter air was a fire around her, burning her clean of everything but the will to make her children well. Her fingers froze into claws around the curled top of the brown paper bag. She burst into the house on Wayne Street with

great clarity of mind. She felt she could see into her babies, through their skin and flesh and deep into their rib cages to their weary lungs.

HATTIE MOVED Philadelphia and Jubilee closer to the tub. The additional handful of eucalyptus was too much—the babies squeezed their eyes shut against the menthol mist. Jubilee made a fist and raised her arm as if to rub her running eyes, but she was too weak and her hand dropped back to her side. Hattie kneeled and kissed her little fist. She lifted her daughter's limp arm—light as a bird bone—and wiped her tears with her hand, as Jubilee would have done if she'd had the strength. "There," Hattie said. "There, you did it all by yourself." Jubilee looked up at her mother and smiled. Again, Hattie lifted Jubilee's hand to her bleary eye. The baby thought it a game of peekaboo and laughed a feeble laugh, ragged and soft and phlegmy, but a laugh nonetheless. Hattie laughed too because her girl was so brave and so good-natured—sick as she was and still bright as a poppy. She had a dimple in one cheek. Her brother, Philadelphia, had two. They didn't look a thing alike. Jubilee's hair was black like August's, and Philadelphia was pale as milk with sandy-brown hair like Hattie's.

Philadelphia's breathing was labored. Hattie lifted him out of the basket and sat him on the rim of the tub where the steam was thickest. He was a sack of flour in her arms. His head lolled on his neck and his arms hung at his sides. Hattie shook him gently to revive him. He hadn't eaten since

the evening before—both babies had coughed so violently during the night that they'd vomited the bit of vegetable broth Hattie had managed to feed them. She pushed her son's eyelid open with her finger, his eyeball rolled in the socket. Hattie didn't know if he was passed out or sleeping, and if he were passed out, he might not . . . he might not . . .

She pushed at his eyelid again. He opened it this time—there's my boy!—and his lip curled in the way it did when she fed him mashed peas, or he smelled something he didn't like. Such a fussbudget.

The bright bathroom overwhelmed: white tub, white walls, white tile. Philadelphia coughed, a protracted exhalation of air that shook his body. Hattie took the tin of hot mustard from the radiator and slathered it on his chest. His ribs were twigs beneath her fingers; with the slightest pressure, they would snap and fall into the cavity of his chest. He had been, both had been, so fat when they were well. Philadelphia lifted his head, but he was so exhausted that it dropped; his chin bumped against Hattie's shoulder as it had when he was a newborn and just learning to hold up his head.

Hattie walked circles around the little bathroom, rubbing Philadelphia's back between his shoulder blades. When he wheezed, his foot flexed and kicked her stomach; when he breathed, it relaxed. The floor was slippery. She sang nonsense syllables—ta ta ta, dum dum, ta ta. She couldn't remember the words to anything.

Water dripped from the windows and from the faucets and down the wall into the panel around the light switch.

The whole bathroom dripped like a Georgia wood after a rainstorm. Something buzzed, then fizzled inside the wall, and the overhead light went out. The bathroom was all blue and fog. My God, Hattie thought, now this. She leaned her head against the doorjamb and closed her eyes. She was three days without sleep. A recollection descended on her like a faint: Hattie and her mother and sisters walking through the woods at dawn. Mama first with two large travel bags and the three girls behind, carrying carpetbagger satchels. Through the early morning mist and the underbrush, they made their way to town, skirts snagging on branches. They snuck like thieves through the woods to catch an early morning train out of Georgia. Hattie's father was not two days dead, and at that very moment the white men were taking his name plaque from the door of his blacksmith shop and putting up their own. "Have mercy on us," Mama said when the first horn sounded from the fields.

Philadelphia's foot dug into Hattie's belly button, and she was jolted awake, back into the bathroom with her children, startled and angry with herself for drifting away from them. Both began to cry. They choked and shuddered together. The illness gathered force, first in one child and then the other, and then, as though it had been waiting for that moment to do its worst, it struck like a two-pronged bolt of lightning. Mercy, Lord. Mercy.

Hattie's babies burned brightly: their fevers spiked, their legs wheeled, their cheeks went red as suns. Hattie took the bottle of ipecac from the medicine cabinet and dosed them. They coughed too hard to swallow—the medicine

dribbled from the sides of their mouths. Hattie wiped her children's faces and gave them more ipecac and massaged their heaving chests. Her hands moved expertly from task to task. Her hands were quick and capable even as Hattie wept and pleaded.

How her babies burned! How they wanted to live! Hattie had thought, when given over to such thoughts, that her children's souls were thimbles of fog; wispy and ungraspable. She was just a girl—only seventeen years longer on the earth than her children. Hattie understood them as extensions of herself and loved them because they were hers and because they were defenseless and because they needed her. But she looked at her babies now and saw that the life inside them was muscled and mighty and would not be driven from them. "Fight," Hattie urged. "Like this," she said and blew the air in and out of her own lungs, in solidarity with them, to show them it was possible. "Like this," she said again.

Hattie sat cross-legged on the floor with Jubilee balanced in the crook of one knee and Philadelphia in the other. She patted their backs to bring the phlegm up and out. The babies' feet overlapped in the triangle of space between Hattie's folded legs—their energy was flagging and they leaned against her thighs. If she lived to be one hundred, Hattie would still see, as clearly as she saw her babies slumped before her now, her father's body collapsed in the corner of his smithy, the two white men from town walking away from his shop without enough shame to quicken their pace or hide their guns. Hattie had seen that and she could not unsee it.

In Georgia the preacher had called the North a New Jerusalem. The congregation said he was a traitor to the cause of the southern Negro. He was gone the next day on a train to Chicago. Others too were going, disappearing from their shops or the fields; their seats on the church pew occupied at Sunday service and empty by Wednesday prayer meeting. All of those souls, escaped from the South, were at this very moment glowing with promise in the wretched winters of the cities of the North. Hattie knew her babies would survive. Though they were small and struggling, Philadelphia and Jubilee were already among those luminous souls, already the beginning of a new nation.

THIRTY-TWO HOURS AFTER Hattie and her mother and sisters crept through the Georgia woods to the train station, thirty-two hours on hard seats in the commotion of the Negro car, Hattie was startled from a light sleep by the train conductor's bellow, "Broad Street Station, Philadelphia!" Hattie clambered from the train, her skirt still hemmed with Georgia mud, the dream of Philadelphia round as a marble in her mouth and the fear of it a needle in her chest. Hattie and Mama, Pearl and Marion climbed the steps from the train platform up into the main hall of the station. It was dim despite the midday sun. The domed roof arched. Pigeons cooed in the rafters. Hattie was only fifteen then, slim as a finger. She stood with her mother and sisters at the crowd's edge, the four of them waiting for a break in the flow of people so they too might move toward the double

doors at the far end of the station. Hattie stepped into the multitude. Mama called, "Come back! You'll be lost in all those people. You'll be lost!" Hattie looked back in panic; she thought her mother was right behind her. The crowd was too thick for her to turn back, and she was borne along on the current of people. She gained the double doors and was pushed out onto a long sidewalk that ran the length of the station.

The main thoroughfare was congested with more people than Hattie had ever seen in one place. The sun was high. Automobile exhaust hung in the air alongside the tar smell of freshly laid asphalt and the sickening odor of garbage rotting. Wheels rumbled on the paving stones, engines revved, paperboys called the headlines. Across the street a man in dirty clothes stood on the corner wailing a song, his hands at his sides, palms upturned. Hattie resisted the urge to cover her ears to block the rushing city sounds. She smelled the absence of trees before she saw it. Things were bigger in Philadelphia—that was true—and there was more of everything, too much of everything. But Hattie did not see a promised land in this tumult. It was, she thought, only Atlanta on a larger scale. She could manage it. But even as she declared herself adequate to the city, her knees knocked under her skirt and sweat rolled down her back. A hundred people had passed her in the few moments she'd been standing outside, but none of them were her mother and sisters. Hattie's eyes hurt with the effort of scanning the faces of the passersby.

A cart at the end of the sidewalk caught her eye. Hattie

had never seen a flower vendor's cart. A white man sat on a stool with his shirtsleeves rolled and his hat tipped forward against the sun. Hattie set her satchel on the sidewalk and wiped her sweaty palms on her skirt. A Negro woman approached the cart. She indicated a bunch of flowers. The white man stood—he did not hesitate, his body didn't contort into a posture of menace—and took the flowers from a bucket. Before wrapping them in paper, he shook the water gently from the stems. The Negro woman handed him the money. Had their hands brushed?

As the woman took her change and moved to put it in her purse, she upset three of the flower arrangements. Vases and blossoms tumbled from the cart and crashed on the pavement. Hattie stiffened, waiting for the inevitable explosion. She waited for the other Negroes to step back and away from the object of the violence that was surely coming. She waited for the moment in which she would have to shield her eyes from the woman and whatever horror would ensue. The vendor stooped to pick up the mess. The Negro woman gestured apologetically and reached into her purse again, presumably to pay for what she'd damaged. In a couple of minutes it was all settled, and the woman walked on down the street with her nose in the paper cone of flowers, as if nothing had happened.

Hattie looked more closely at the crowd on the sidewalk. The Negroes did not step into the gutters to let the whites pass and they did not stare doggedly at their own feet. Four Negro girls walked by, teenagers like Hattie, chatting to one another. Just girls in conversation, giggling and easy, the

way only white girls walked and talked in the city streets of Georgia. Hattie leaned forward to watch their progress down the block. At last, her mother and sisters exited the station and came to stand next to her. "Mama," Hattie said. "I'll never go back. Never."

PHILADELPHIA PITCHED FORWARD and struck his forehead on Jubilee's shoulder before Hattie could catch him. He breathed in ragged wet whistles. His hands were open and limp at his sides. Hattie shook him; he flopped like a rag doll. Jubilee too was weakening. She could hold her head up, but she couldn't focus her eyes. Hattie held both babies in her arms and made an awkward lunge for the bottle of ipecac. Philadelphia made a low choking sound and looked up at his mother, bewildered. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't understand either. I'll make it better. I'm so sorry." The ipecac slipped from her grasp and shattered against the tile. Hattie squatted next to the tub, Philadelphia in one arm and Jubilee balanced in her lap. She turned the faucet for the hot water and waited. Jubilee coughed as best she could, as best she could she pulled the air into her body. Hattie put her fingertips to the running water. It was ice cold.

There was no time to load the furnace in the basement and no time to wait for the water to heat. Philadelphia was listless, his leg kicked against Hattie's stomach involuntarily. His head lay heavy on her shoulder. Hattie crossed the bathroom. She stepped on the shards from the broken bottle and cut her foot; she bloodied the white tile and the wood

floor in the hallway. In her bedroom she pulled the quilt from her bed and wrapped it around her children. In an instant she'd descended the stairs and was putting on her shoes in the small foyer. The splinter of glass in her foot pushed in more deeply. She was out the door and down the porch steps. Wisps of condensation rose from her damp housedress and bare arms and faded into the cold, clear air. The sun was fully risen.

Hattie banged on a neighbor's door. "They have pneumonia!" she said to the woman who answered. "Please help me." Hattie didn't know her name. Inside, the neighbor pulled back the quilt to reveal Jubilee and Philadelphia inert against their mother's chest. "Oh sweet Lord," she said. A young boy, the woman's son, came into the living room. "Go for the doctor!" the woman shouted. She took Philadelphia from Hattie and ran up the stairs with him in her arms. Hattie followed, Jubilee limp against her.

"He's still breathing," the woman said. "Long as he's still breathing."

In the bathroom she plugged the tub. Hattie stood in the doorway, bouncing Jubilee, her hope waning as she watched the woman turn the hot water to full blast.

"I already did this!" Hattie cried. "Isn't there anything else?"

The woman gave Philadelphia back to Hattie and rooted around in the medicine cabinet. She came away with a tin of camphor rub that she unscrewed and waved under the babies' noses like smelling salts. Only Jubilee jerked her head away from the odor. Hattie was overwhelmed with

futility—all this time she'd been fighting to save her babies, only to end up in another bathroom just like her own, with a woman as helpless against their illness as she was.

“What can I do?” Hattie looked at the woman through the steam. “Please tell me what to do.”

The neighbor found a glass tube with a bulb at the end; she used it to suction mucus from the babies' noses and mouths. She kneeled in front of Hattie, near tears. “Dear Lord. Please, dear Lord, help us.” The woman suctioned and prayed.

Both babies' eyelids were swollen and red with broken capillaries. Their breathing was shallow. Their chests rose and fell too quickly. Hattie did not know if Philadelphia and Jubilee were scared or if they understood what was happening to them. She didn't know how to comfort them, but she wanted her voice to be the last in their ears, her face the last in their eyes. Hattie kissed her babies' foreheads and cheeks. Their heads fell back against her arms. Between breaths, their eyes opened wide in panic. She heard a wet gurgling deep in their chests. They were drowning. Hattie could not bear their suffering, but she wanted them to go in peace, so she didn't scream. She called them precious, she called them light and promise and cloud. The neighbor woman prayed in a steady murmur. She kept her hand on Hattie's knee. The woman wouldn't let go, even when Hattie tried to shake her off. It wasn't much, but she tried to make it so the girl didn't live this alone.

Jubilee fought the longest. She reached feebly for Philadelphia, but she was too weak to straighten her arm.

Hattie put his hand into hers. She squeezed her babies. She rocked them. She pressed her cheeks to the tops of their heads. Oh, their velvet skin! She felt their deaths like a ripping in her body.

Hattie's children died in the order in which they were born: first Philadelphia, then Jubilee.