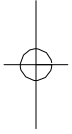


"The impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing."

Richard Wright

1

chapter one



Roz ran with the speed of a gazelle, but he gained on her. She could hear the thumping of her heart and the formation of beaded sweat engulfed her face. Surrounded by trees, Roz glared into a piercing light as her legs gave way.

The man rested his large black hand on her right shoulder. At that moment, Roz woke up screaming and kicking her comforter to the floor. She grabbed her head, thanked God it was a dream—a recurring one that left her clueless.

Roz reached to the left of her queen-size bed to turn on the Tiffany lamp that rested on the nightstand. As she breathed heavily from the disturbing dream, she began pulling her left earlobe—a nervous habit when she was upset.

It had been years since she had that dream. What did it mean? Was it a sign of something from her past? Or was it something in her future? Subconsciously, Roz wondered if it was the result of her backsliding in church. She regarded many things as signs from God, of His approval, disapproval, or signals of what's to come.

She remembered walking to Sunday school at the age of six. Every Sunday, she participated in Bible lessons and readings. Psalms was her favorite book of the Bible. She got great joy from attending



church. At age nine, she decided it was time to get baptized and live for Christ. Her father, being a deacon, had tremendous influence in that decision.

As if it were yesterday, she remembered standing in line dressed in all white, waiting, and tugging at her ear. She had a fear of the water, but put it aside because she was doing this for Christ. Finally, it was her turn as the preacher, larger than life dressed in a black robe, took her hand and led her down the steps to the pool and submerged her in the icy water. Baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

A few verses of a poem that she had to recite in a church play came to mind.

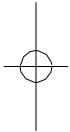
It portrayed God knocking at a door. When the person answered, they asked God, "What do you want?"

God said, "I have work for you to do."

"Go away. I'm too busy. You get someone else or wait until I'm through."

The poem ended with the person praying to God asking for help and God's reply, "I'm too busy. You get someone else or wait until I'm through."

Realizing the error of her ways, the person responds, "Now



when God knocks, I answer. Whenever He calls, I do what He asks me to do.”

Roz thought her dream might be God knocking at her door.

Although she was baptized as a Baptist, over the years she attended different denominations and had joined several church groups.

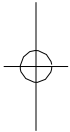
On a bus trip to New York City, Roz visited Bishop McClure’s church. She went to the altar to pray for a sick friend. While praying and crying, Roz suddenly fell to the floor kicking and moving her body from side to side. She started slobbering and speaking in tongues.

Members of the church took her to a room the size of a basketball court. It had plush bright red carpet and red benches along the white walls. It was called the tarry room. There she continued to speak in tongues. Later she was told that she had received the Holy Ghost.

When her younger brother, Earl, heard that Roz went to New York and received the Holy Ghost, his response was, “I hope she don’t ascend to heaven owing me six dollars.”

The last church she joined was Faith Temple. She sang in the choir, attended prayer meetings, and participated in the washing of feet.

One time while Roz was visiting another church with some fellow members, she went to the altar for prayer and the preacher



laid hands on her. He told her, “You want to get so close to God that you could touch him.” She had never shared those thoughts with anyone—how did he know?

She prayed every night before going to bed. Always asking forgiveness and continuing to do wrong. Past relationships led to fornication. She knew full well it was a sin to fornicate. Still, what was the mystery behind this recurring dream?

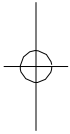
Late one Friday night, Roz’s master bedroom was momentarily illuminated by a flash of lightning, then immediately returned to dark stillness. The thunder had subsided. What remained of the storm was a steady hard rain. In her quiet time, Roz’s thoughts raced towards looking for a perfect man in an imperfect world. Her mind drifted to her special friend, Bill. Perfect he’s not. Several days had passed since they had talked and now she would not see him for at least a week. The last time they were together, he kissed her gently on the forehead and her closed eyelids as he caressed her nude body. Their lovemaking had been intense.

The ringing of the phone startled Roz and broke her concentration. In a sleepy voice she answered, “Hello.”

“Hi baby, this is Bill. Feel like some company tonight?”

“Sure, Bill.”

“I’m on my way over, I’ll use my key. I should be there in thirty minutes.”



“Okay, bye.”

Roz put the phone on the receiver. She decided she had just enough time to take a bath in some jasmine oils. As she was finishing she could hear the faint sound of a car engine that became more and more profound. *Bill's here*, she thought, *punctual as always*. Bill had arrived in thirty-minutes. As Bill walked towards the bedroom, Roz reached for her purple terry cloth robe.

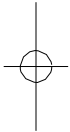
“I wasn't expecting to see you until next week. How did you get out tonight?”, she asked as she tied the belt to the robe.

Bill, with a slight grin that revealed his deep dimples, replied, “The wife and kids went away for the weekend and I'd rather not spend it alone, so I thought I'd come over. I still plan to see you next weekend, but I can't stay the entire weekend.”

“Are you hungry, Bill? I made meat loaf for dinner.”

Bill sat at the foot of Roz's bed and moved the covers to the side. “No, but you can fix some popcorn while I turn on an old movie.”

Roz never imagined she would be involved again, let alone in love with a married man. She never asked Bill to leave his wife and children; the thought never entered her mind. She just felt they were filling a void in their lives, those stolen moments in time. He had another life and she tried to reason with that fact, but her strong



feelings for Bill won out and now she had a married man in her life. Add adultery to her list of sins.

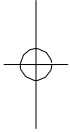
As a child, Roz couldn't understand why family members would hide their alcoholic drinks and cigarettes whenever their preacher cousin, Lester, came to Sunday dinner. Lester was flesh and blood, imperfect like they were. God sees all. Don't they know if His eye is on the sparrow, He watches them?

When she was young, Roz often expressed her thoughts through poetry or diary entries, especially thoughts and things she could not discuss with anyone. Now as an adult, she continued that practice.

Now here she was some thirty years later wondering what her father would think about her behavior.

It wasn't right. But Bill had pursued her in a way no man ever had. In the beginning he treated her like a princess or even a queen. He called her every day for two months. She also got notes and messages in the mail. Every weekend, he sent flowers and said he would not give up until she accepted a date with him.

What was the harm in one date? She had never met a man of Bill's caliber. He was sensitive, yet strong and attentive to her needs. He was consistent. If he said he was going to do something, he did it. He did the little things and made thoughtful gestures. She



wondered what his motives were, but never let her thoughts linger on that subject too long. She just wanted to enjoy the times they spent together.

Roz always looked forward to Wednesdays and Fridays; Bill called her every Wednesday and they got together almost every Friday. Some times he spent the night and left on Saturday afternoon. On several occasions he stayed the entire weekend, but this was not enough for Roz. She wanted him always, but never pushed the issue.

Oddly enough, Bill never mentioned love, never said “I love you.” Now, two years into their relationship, while they cuddled and watched an old cowboy movie, she said, “I love you, Bill.”

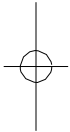
He placed his index finger across her lips and said, “Anything but love.”

She looked at him puzzled. “Why?”

“Not now, baby, not now.”

Bill was deep into the movie. Roz moved his arm from her waist, went into the kitchen, popped some popcorn, and came back to join him.

They had met at the Kool Jazz Festival in Hampton, Virginia in July 1970. Her relationship with James had just ended. She had loved James too much and he didn't know how to love at all.



Why had she tried to convince herself that James belonged in her life? But she had to let him go.

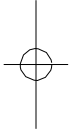
On one of his visits, James said he did not love her, but that he was fond of her. A sharp pain stabbed her chest. Her insides became empty. “Oh, I see. I understand,” she said. But she really wanted to cry and did so after James left her standing in the hallway. That relationship left her longing for a decent love affair. She didn’t want to waste any more years playing the superhero, thinking she could save him. She had let her guard down—that protective shield she wore most of her life, the shield she now had cast aside.

Her girlfriends, Niecey and Darlene, had suggested the trip to Hampton to get her mind off her breakup with James. She agreed to go on the condition that she wouldn’t have to share a room with anyone.

They got into old “Bessie,” Niecey’s royal blue Corolla. During the drive on 1-95 South heading to Hampton, they went from one subject to another.

“You know, this is the second time in my life that I have been hurt, and I don’t believe I can go through this again. I don’t think I will ever let another man know how I really feel,” Roz said.

Darlene pursed her lips and shook her head in disbelief. “Girl, you are the motherly type towards your man.”



“I know I’m a romantic person and like doing things for my man. Nothing is too good for him. I enjoy giving him a milk bath and rubbing him in hot oils. I like soaking his feet and drying them one at a time. I enjoy preparing dinner and serving it by candlelight.”

Darlene’s large round brown eyes narrowed at her. “Yes, and that’s why they take you for granted. You got to wake up, girl.”

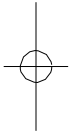
Dating was a hot topic and Darlene asked if Roz had considered using an escort service. “I hear they hook people up,” she said.

Roz shook her head. “Not really. Chile, in order to connect with a compatible mate they want your life history—your age, are you single, do you desire children, are you a smoker or non-smoker. It just doesn’t stop, girl. They want your educational background, your areas of interest, eating habits, if you’re a team or individual sports player. Do you like wine, travel, reading, film, or theatre?”

“You mean there was no question asking whether you wear black panties on weekends,” Darlene asked with sarcasm.

“No, you would think it would end there, but no, they want to know if you are ready for a committed relationship.”

Niecey ran her fingers through her curly black hair, turned to the back and said, “Roz, are you sure you’ve never tried an escort



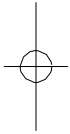
service? You sure know enough about the kind of information they want for someone who's not interested."

Darlene sighed. "Niecey, you best keep your eyes on the road. As soon as we get out of Richmond, I'll drive, then you can turn and talk as much as you want. Anyway, you know how private Roz is. She wouldn't participate in something like that."

Roz sucked her teeth. "Now you know me for real, girlfriend. They send questionnaires to me in the mail. I get them often and I put them in the trash. I hope I never get that desperate that I have to use an escort service to find a potential mate. I mean to each its own, if that's what they want. It's just not me. And Niecey, I know you're kidding." Roz paused and looked out at the convoy of military jeeps that passed by. Headed to Quantico, she wondered aloud if she would one day become a military wife.

Darlene moved both arms and shook her head. "We were, or at least I, was just joking." Darlene then got quiet for a moment and softly said, "Chile, I don't fault you one bit about that. A friend of mine once invited this guy home, someone she met at a disco, and he nearly beat her to death in her own home. Now, if she was that bad a judge of a man's character face to face, can you imagine what an escort service would hook you up with?"

Niecey turned the volume down on the radio and asked, "Are you guys ready for a rest stop and some food?"



Roz patted Niecey on the back. "Sure, I'm ready to relieve myself and eat. Are you ready Darlene? I've had enough already of this gloom and doom. I don't want to talk about dating, relationships, or any of that bull. Just play another eight-track please, if that's not too much to ask."

Darlene chuckled. "Okay, Miss Moody," as she pointed to the sign reading rest area three-fourths of a mile.

Niecey wheeled her Corolla into the rest area parking lot.

After they freshened up and ate burgers and fries, Darlene purchased a fruit cup to nibble on for the remainder of the ride.

Niecey motioned to Roz and Darlene and gave Darlene the keys. "Unlock the doors, I got to go back and get my gum."

She rushed up to the counter and asked the pudgy woman cashier, "Do you have any Double Mint gum?"

"Yes, we do," replied the cashier.

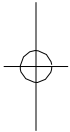
"I'll take two packs."

Partially in the car with her knee holding the door ajar, Niecey unwrapped two sticks. "Girl, you know I need my gum."

Darlene teasingly said, "If you didn't chew two sticks at a time, it would last you longer."

"Chile, please, you know I got to double my pleasure."

They all laughed and proceeded to the festival.



Back on I-95, Roz raised her voice one octave and poked Darlene in the back. “I know I said I didn’t want to talk about relationships, but how did you guys get away this time without your other halves?”

“We just explained to them it was a girl thing, that our sister was in need of some mending,” Darlene replied, batting her big browns.

“Sure blame it all on me.” Roz looked away.

Darlene turned her body and leaned over the seat. “Girl, you know bringing the brothers along this time would be like bringing sand to the beach—there’s enough there already.” They all laughed.

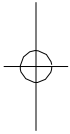
Niecey tapped Darlene on the knee saying, “We’re entering Petersburg, you can take over.”

“Okay, chile I’ll have us at the Holiday Inn in no time.”

Roz laid back with both hands laced behind her head and asked, “Why don’t you guys let me drive?”

“We might let you do some driving when we head home. Besides, we can take our time, school is out and I don’t have to worry about teaching, because you sure drive slow,” Niecey said with a grin.

On the Fourth of July, Roz and her friends went to a house party in Virginia Beach given by a friend’s aunt. It was there that she met Bill and they spoke with their eyes. He was with some of his friends.

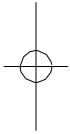


Bill was six-foot-four-inches tall with keen facial features. His skin looked like it had been dipped in honey. He wore a smile that revealed his pearly white teeth. She gathered from the small waist and bulky arms that he must work out.

Yes, he was fine, but it didn't mean anything to her. Besides, she thought, who needs the headache?

A man at the party asked Roz to dance the cha cha. While Roz danced, she kept her eyes focused on Bill's chest and the hair that was spilling from the top of his V-neck T-shirt. He caught her glances and gave her a smile.

The girls were in a hurry to get back to Hampton, not necessarily to the jazz show, but for the big party, which the majority of the festival goers attended. Roz and Bill danced several times to upbeat songs, but when the DJ played "The Treasury of Love" by Clyde McPhatter, who happened to be a close friend to Roz's family, they slow danced and Roz felt his strength and gentleness all in one. She felt as if she belonged there in his arms, safe and secure. His touch was soft and his movement gentle and exquisitely skilled.



They exchanged work numbers. She had noticed the wedding band on his finger, but never gave it another thought. She assumed she would not hear from him.

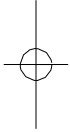
September 12, 1970

THE FIRST DATE

For their first date, Roz couldn't decide which outfit to wear. She pulled several from her walk-in closet, trying first the royal blue suit, but she didn't like the way it looked. She reached for the red pants suit, then the black one. Yes, that worked. She would accent it with pearls.

Roz thought they were going to dinner and a play. But instead, Bill took her to Franklin Square Park at 14th and I Streets in downtown D.C.

Leaning elm trees bordered the park. Four white stone steps led them to the entrance. Directly behind the large granite statue of Ben Brookland was a white marble bench partially enclosed by a weather-beaten wrought iron fence. Green berries hung from the American holly tree waiting their time to be red again. Regardless of the color, two squirrels ran up and down and around it. A bed of pink annuals dotted the walkway to their right and to their left a young boy was tossing a tennis ball to his golden retriever. A young woman was seated on one of the many green wooden benches



reading a book. On another, a man with a pick in his huge afro was having a private conversation with himself and making hand gestures.

A roped-off area was set up like an outdoor cafe. As Roz walked past, Bill said, "I believe this is reserved for us."

"For us?"

"Yes, allow me, my princess." He pulled a chair from the table.

Roz threw both hands up to her face. "I don't believe this. You are too much."

They were served garden tossed salad followed by medium well-done porterhouse steaks, with baked potatoes, broccoli, hot rolls, and tall glasses of ice tea with lemon. Rum raisin ice cream was for dessert.

Roz touched Bill's hand and said, "This is a lot of food. I can't eat it all because I want to have room for dessert."

Bill, revealing his deep dimples, said, "Let me worry about dessert."

A trio of middle-aged men played romantic music. From there, Roz and Bill attended the play.

That first date left Roz breathless. It was like something out of a storybook.

She couldn't believe they had so much in common. She was



such a romantic person and so was he. They liked the same types of music, especially Clyde McPhatter. Bill would take the ordinary things and make them extraordinary. Roz believed he could take a regular bean and hot dog meal and turn it into a wonderful dinner served by candlelight.

But how did Bill get along with his wife and children? That was not a subject she dwelled on too often. Bill was more like her dream man; a dream that ended and became a wake-up call when he had to leave her and return to his wife and family.

She envied them, but in hindsight she would rather be the outside woman knowing the full scope of things instead of the wife left in the dark drawing conclusions only from suspicions.

These thoughts only made her heart heavy. She wanted nothing more than to have a family, as well as please herself, her mother, and her sister, June. Things weren't going the way she planned. Her mother stayed on her case about getting married. She just wished things were different. Roz mused that maybe they would've been if she could have met Bill many years ago.

