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# *The Start of My Big City Life*

*Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades  
... and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley glades.*

John Keats,  
"Ode to a Nightingale"

I DIDN'T know it then, but this would be the last time some of this crowd would ramble about and have fun together. We were fast approaching the time our paths would diverge and we would begin to travel in different directions. Only a day or so later I received a long white envelope from the U.S. Government, Civil Service, Washington, D.C. I was to report to a specific building on January 18. That would be the next Monday. I would be leaving home on Sunday. I could see that Mama was proud of what I was doing, although she'd never told me she wanted me to go out and work at a job far away from home. The choice was mine. I don't know how the rest of the family felt. Sam asked me once why I wanted to go to Washington, and he assured me I was going to perish and come back nothing but skin and bones. Papa

as usual, was against my going anywhere, and he told Mama I just wanted to go there to ramble up and down the streets like I did in Iron Mine, and then he'd bring out his favorite saying: "She's got no more business there than a pig has with a Bible." When I tried to picture one of Papa's fat curly-tailed pigs sitting up reading a Bible, it struck me as funny indeed and I'd giggle. I told Mama to tell him I didn't want to ramble in Washington. I was going to work. The answer to that was, "Oh pshaw, she don't have to go to work. She has a home."

I spent the week packing my footlocker with as many clothes as I could and sorting out family and school pictures and books that I wanted to carry, along with the gifts the gang had given me for my birthday only two short weeks before. It still didn't seem quite real that I was leaving home, and this time it was not for school, but clean out of North Carolina. I had just turned eighteen and was an adult and would be responsible for my own food, rent, clothes, and so on.

Gladys wanted to go with me, but her dad said no, she didn't have to go out and work for a living. Mama said I didn't either, but I wanted to be independent and take care of myself. Well, Sunday came around. It was the third Sunday of the month, which was our preaching Sunday. We went to church as usual. I said good-bye to all the gang who were at church. I almost felt like I did when I first went away to school in Raleigh. I also said good-bye to our pastor, Mr. Tim. I'd miss our little white wooden church, Sunday school, and the preaching on third Sundays.

Mama fixed dinner, and we ate. All my things were packed and ready. We'd be leaving for the bus station shortly afterwards. I was catching the afternoon bus so I'd arrive in D.C. early the next morning. Right after dinner, someone arrived at the house with Frank. He'd been riding Effie, his motorcycle, and when rounding a sharp curve on the way home, he had been thrown off

the bike, landing in a field with Effie on top of him. His chest had been bruised. Thank the Lord it was no worse, but it was so upsetting that I didn't want to leave. After putting Frank to bed and looking at his chest, Mama said it didn't look all that bad and for me to go on as planned. I didn't want to leave my brother Frank there hurting, but she said they would send for the doctor to come see about him. House calls by doctors were made willingly in those days. My trunk was put in the truck and I was soon on my way to the bus station with Papa, Mama, and little Maxine. Eunice was back in Richmond. Sam declined to see me off this time.

Papa bought my ticket and checked my baggage, and we sat in the truck waiting for the bus to roll in. When it did, I felt like I was in a dream and this wasn't me fixing to get on a Greyhound bus and ride hundreds of miles from home to start a new life on my own. No longer were there teachers or a housemother or a whole building full of kids to play with, fuss with, or share with. Silently Papa lifted my bags and small trunk from the truck, and attached tags, without looking at me. I hugged Mama hard and little Maxine, then turned to Papa. He handed me my ticket and only then looked at me. His eyes were sad, and I almost told him to put my things back in the truck, that I wasn't going no place, but he sort of gave me a little push toward the bus driver waiting by the open door. I hastily kissed his cheek, saying "Bye Papa," and stumbled up the bus steps, found a seat, and sat down. The bus started up. I settled in my seat, reading until it started darkening up. Then I just looked out the window. The route was familiar, the same highway I'd been traveling all these years, going to and from school. I realized we'd be passing through Raleigh on Highway 70. I sat alert, keeping my eyes open for the first sight of my old school. It wasn't long. We rounded the curve I'd watched so often from my classroom, and there it was outlined

against the early evening dusk. I saw the boys' dorms and then the administration building. Next I saw the dining hall, and then there it was, my dorm, with all the windows lit up. I could imagine the girls gathered in little groups near a radiator, gossiping and sharing whatever food any of them had managed to smuggle in from the kitchen. It was Sunday, so there'd be extra goodies. I felt so lonely for my old gang and the life I used to have. I watched it through the water in my eyes until the bus rounded another curve and I could see it no longer.

We reached Richmond sometime that night and had to change over to another bus. This one was crowded, and I had to sit in a corner on the last seat in the back. I didn't mind too much. Some people were standing in the aisle or sitting on suitcases. The bus dimmed its lights inside so people could sleep, and it hummed along the highway. I dozed in my corner but woke up when the bus stopped and whoever was sitting next to me got off. Another person immediately took the space and was rude, pushing and shoving. I huddled as far away as I could and tried to go to sleep, but I smelled a terrible odor. Turning my head to see what was nearby, it was my new seatmate, a ratty-looking man with snaggly teeth trying to talk to me, with a horrible smell of garlic, fish, and whatever he'd been eating blowing directly in my face. I turned to the window again. He jabbed me with his elbow, trying to get me to turn around and talk. I had a small case with me on the floor. I picked it up and stood it upright in my lap and hid my face behind it. The smell kept coming, so I knew his mouth must be open. The bus stopped all of a sudden, and when I peeped around my bag I saw the bus driver standing there talking to the man. After that he quieted down and left me alone. But I could still smell him. Sleep wouldn't come anymore, so I thought about home and my dear family.

Usually when I traveled, I made friends somewhere along the way. If anyone looked at me and smiled I was quick to smile back. If they spoke, I'd tell them I was deaf. They'd nod and find paper and pencil to write whatever they wanted to say. Some preferred to talk and make gestures. That was okay too. However, this time I didn't try to make any friends. I had a lot on my mind. Did I really want this? To leave the South that had always been my home, along with the people I knew and loved? I'd be living and working among strangers, hearing strangers at that. I knew how hurtful some of them could be. Would I be able to work? I'd had no college education. I thought of all the pros and cons. Finally my mind tired of it all, and I decided to let it rest and just keep going until I saw how things would turn out. My adventurous spirit returned, and I felt better.

It had begun to get light outside, and my smelly seatmate had gotten off sometime during the night. I started seeing things I recognized along the way, and I knew we were nearing Washington. Preparing to get off, I put on my coat and the new brown felt hat I'd gotten for fall. So here I was arriving in the nation's capital, ready to set out on a new life and a new adventure. It wasn't long in coming. Not only was my cousin nowhere to be seen this time, but it was pouring rain and cold.

After making sure I didn't see anybody even slightly resembling anyone I knew, I sat down to wait and think about what I could do. After no one came through the door looking for me, I decided the only thing I could do was look for them. That meant taking a taxi to the house on N Street. I buttoned up my coat, pulled my hat to what I hoped was a smart angle, and ventured out on New York Avenue, like I'd been doing this for years. Cars and taxis whizzed by, some stopping to pick up or let out passengers. None stopped for me. I held up my fingers like I'd seen

others do. They still whizzed by and stopped for someone else, while I got wetter by the minute. I stood my ground wet and frozen. My smart brown hat brim hanging so low all I could see were tires and the bottoms of car doors. Finally I saw tires stop in front of me and a door open. Thank you, Lord! I leaped directly in the back seat and fell smack dab in a haughty-looking white woman's lap. I was in and not getting back out. "Scuse me, scuse me," I said, raising myself up enough for her to get out. I think she thought she'd tangled with a nut. No matter, I settled back on those cushions waiting for the cab to start up and deliver me to Cousin Mary's door. When it didn't start, I lifted my dripping hat brim to see what was wrong with the driver. He had turned around with his chin propped in his hands looking at me. We stared at each other until it hit me that I hadn't even told the man where I wanted to go. "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry," I said, and I gave him the address. He looked a little longer, then kind of smiled, turned around, and started his car. I guess he had decided I wasn't dangerous. Thus, my big city life began.