

The Last Carolina Girl

by Meagan Church

Prologue

Holden Beach, NC | 1935

The last time Daddy and I stood at the ocean's edge together, there had been a storm most of the day. Even so, Daddy insisted on making it to the shore of Holden Beach before the sun retired for the night. We always went when he was missing Mama.

I can't say I ever minded the pilgrimage. Living a few miles from the ferry, it didn't take much time to get to shore, but time was what we had even though we didn't have much else.

The ocean breeze blowing strong and cool that night didn't seem to bother Daddy much though it rattled my bones and set my hair to dancing. As I looked to the sand and squished my toes into its millions of granules, Daddy called my attention to above the rolling Atlantic waters.

"Wait for it, Leah," he said with his eyes to the cloud-heavy horizon. "There's more coming."

And he was right. Perhaps because he'd always lived close to nature, Harley Payne had a way of knowing these things. Along a sky that had moments ago been monotone, a complete double rainbow bent from the coast and into the ocean. It stretched high and plunged into the water. I wondered if the fish below could see all the colors.

It was a sight the likes that happens once, maybe twice, in a lifetime, each of the seven colors—the start, the finish, and all in between—lighting up on full display. As the rainbow faded, the setting sun lit the remnant clouds with brilliance. Oranges and yellows over the coastline mixed with blues and purples that hung suspended above the ocean. The few fishermen on the shore that night looked more to the heavens than they did to their poles.

Daddy never let me swim at dusk, nor near where the fishermen cast their lines, but I couldn't help but dip my toes in the cool water causing my arms and legs to turn to goose flesh. I liked to stand in one spot, let the water wash up to my ankles and then rush back to sea. I'd see how long I could stay in that one place before sinking too low as the sand washed away with the waves.

During one of the washings away, I felt something under my foot. I screamed and jumped out of my sinking hole and, when I looked down, I saw what Daddy called sand fleas. They looked like sea bugs to me, about the size of the cicadas that buzzed in the trees outside our windows. Their gray bodies matched the sand. With each wave that rushed back to the ocean, they would bury themselves only to have the next crashing surf expose them again. The water tossed them and turned them, dragging them farther than they wanted to go. They scurried to

latch onto the earth, to cling to it and find safety within it. But those relentless waves kept coming, kept pulling them from their homes.

As the water washed out to sea, I couldn't help but wonder if the surfacing fleas could find their friends. With each motion of natural forces, did they know where their mama was? Could they find their daddy? Or maybe the constant beating of the tides left them all too scattered to notice, too alone to have family or friends, even when they were surrounded by each other.

As I was busy wondering, I missed the final colors of the sunset. In mere moments, the oranges and purples faded and a blanket of deep blue settled overhead. Maybe I should've been disappointed to have missed the last moments of majestic lights, but how was I to know I should've lingered in that moment with Daddy? How could I predict the oncoming waves and all their ripples?

When I recall that night, my memory fades with the setting of the sun. I don't recall the ride home and I know it's not because of one of my flashes—those wrinkles of moments I couldn't control or explain, when my body froze and held me captive, still in the world, but temporarily absent.

What I do remember of that night was later on at our home, the little overseer's house on the mainland that Daddy and I shared, the one with only one room, one table for two, one bed shared between us. I recall Daddy's prickly whiskers pressing into my forehead as he whispered, "Goodnight, Mouse," before he turned over in the bed, tumbling just outside my reach as if the wave of sleep pulled him from me.

That was the first night after a long, Carolina summer that we needed Mama's quilt. The beach breeze had been stiff. The storm could've explained the drop in temperature, but the impending change of season, the start of a new school year, the sun that began to set earlier in the evening, even a thirteen-year-old knew what it all meant, that change was coming, a new season entering whether or not we were ready.

But I longed for more than the quilt to wrap around me and offer me assurances I didn't even know I needed. I rolled closer to Daddy, crawling into his warmth, basking in his closeness, searching in him for the only home I had ever known.

Part One

Brunswick County, NC | 1935

Chapter One

Most mornings, Daddy was already gone by the time sleep released me. But when I heard the rain pinging the rusted metal roof when I woke a few weeks after we saw that double rainbow, I knew before my eyes even opened all the way that Daddy would still be sitting at the kitchen table. Soggy mornings meant his lunch pail went unpacked and each sip of coffee slowly savored. Being a lumberjack depended on the weather. The Carolina summer heat and humidity, nor the winter cold snaps, affected his schedule. The clearing to develop Brunswick County and the barrier islands kept moving forward through those conditions. But the rain did make work difficult, and I could count on it to give me a few more minutes with Daddy. The horses

struggled in mud-soaked woods, their hooves sinking, their legs straining to pull the timber from the forest floor and into the clearing.

Course Mr. Barna could always find odds and ends for Daddy to help with on those rainy days. As his employer and with the housing arrangement he'd given my folks in that time before I was born, Daddy obliged his requests and reassignments, pitching in at the farm, sawmill, or country store when he couldn't be working in the woods. Daddy said Mama used to help around the Barna's house, even stitched a quilt and needlepointed Mrs. Barna's good handkerchiefs. I wished I had my mama's skills to make something ordinary into something beautiful. Daddy said I may not have picked up stitching like she did, but I got her spiritedness.

That rainy morning, the steam still curled off the grits when I sat down to the breakfast table. Typically, Daddy left the remainder of breakfast in the pan on the stove for me to dish out before I left for school. The steam twisted toward the ceiling as I sat down to my bowl of warm cereal.

"Mornin', Mouse," Daddy said as he kissed the top of my head, my curls smushed, yet wild from sleep. He placed his finger atop the biggest freckle on my nose and paused for a moment before giving it a little wiggle.

The bowl held more than grits that morning. As I stirred my spoon, I unearthed a few buried, salmon-pink additions.

"Is that shrimp?"

Daddy nodded, a slow smile creeping across his sunburned lips, revealing the gap in his front teeth.

"Did you catch them?" I asked, but Daddy shook his head no. "Bought them? That wasn't in the budget."

"Mr. Barna had a job down at the shore yesterday. He brought a few extras for us."

I looked at Daddy's bowl. He always used the one with a chip.

"Where's your shrimp?"

He kept his eyes on his bowl, his spoon in a constant motion from grits to mouth and back again. He didn't even pause when he said, "Already ate it."

"You did?"

Daddy nodded, his head bobbing the affirmative. His hair did not move at all, a layer of oil kept it firmly in place. He raised his dark brown eyes to meet mine.

"You always tell me not to lie," I said.

"Do I now?"

"Yes. And I think—"

And then I must've paused. Daddy always said I'd become like a statue, pausing all motion, my mouth slightly open in an O, my green eyes staring blankly, yet focused in the distance somewhere. If I had been aware, maybe I would've seen his smile fade, fall from his face like a glass slipping from wet hands and shattering on the floor beneath. I may have been in the room, but I was as distant as a sandbar on the other side of the riptide of parting waves.

And as the moment released me, I gasped for breath, shook my head and recognized the blip of my reality only when I saw Daddy's expression.

"Mouse? You back?"

I shook my head again, my curls bouncing against my shoulders. I always shivered after coming to.

"Yeah."

"You good?"

“Mmm hmmm.” I looked down at my bowl and circled my spoon in search of another shrimp. I wanted to gobble them all up immediately, but I also wanted to savor them, save them for the final bites, fool myself into believing that every bite I had taken had been filled with the delicious morsel.

“Was it a long one?” I asked.

When he didn’t answer, I knew. But what did the length or even the frequency of such episodes even matter? We didn’t know a proper name for them, so we called them flashes. They acted as pauses in time, but they didn’t hurt. Being a child who not many gave attention to, my flashes often went unnoticed, a benefit I didn’t much mind.

“Now go on and finish up your breakfast.” Daddy always moved on from my flashes quickly, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of attention. “Don’t want to be late for school.”

My head dropped, my shoulders slumped, and my tired body longed to be under the quilt again.

“Maybe I need more rest.” I knew better than to directly ask Daddy to stay home. But from his raised eyebrows, I knew he was on to me right away.

“What else you gonna do on a day like today? Woods are too wet for exploring. Sand’s more like mud after all that rain. Besides, you still got learning to do. What’s it I tell yuh?”

Together, we said the words he’d been speaking to me since he walked me to school my first day. “Let ‘em teach me what they can, but don’t go forgetting who I am.”

Daddy put his finger on top of my big freckle and gave it another wiggle. “You’re a smart girl, Leah, but you gotta know more than the trees and the tides to survive.”

Jesse dawdled on the porch that morning, trying to stay out of the rain as long as possible. His mother insisted we walk the mile or so to school together and, being a good Southern boy, he obliged her, even if together meant him marching a few paces ahead once the schoolhouse came into view, while I trailed behind. No use in letting everyone think we were friends. That was reserved for when it was just the two of us running through the woods or chasing after the chickens on the Barna’s farm.

As I emerged from our overseer’s house that sat in the shadow of Jesse’s family’s two-story home with tall pillars and a wraparound front porch, he began to walk down the road. He nodded a hello in my direction, our typical morning communication. Just like in the afternoons, some mornings we’d be full of words and others we’d be fine in each other’s presence without feeling the need to speak. Growing up beside one another since babies, we’d gotten used to each other, knowing how to act when it was only the two of us and realizing our different roles with others around. That’s why most mornings I would let him go on ahead before the others saw us.

But this morning, I wanted to warm the chill that kept trying to get to my bones, while seeking a few moments of freedom and movement before having to sit at a desk for more hours than I wished to count. So I began to run, feeling the wind whip across my cheeks as my heart pounded and my lungs begged for air.

Soon Jesse started running, too. Beside each other, we raced toward the schoolhouse, aiming for the shortest distance to our goal, stomping through the puddles that had been forming all night. His stride was longer, but mine was quicker.

“Don’t let a girl beat you, Jesse!” a chorus of boys called as the trees broke away and revealed the schoolyard.

The girls—of an age when they had put away such foolish notions as foot races—offered no encouragement. Instead their focus was on the puddles before them, carefully stepping to avoid splashing and spraying their stockings.

With the school building in sight, Jesse began to slow. I kept my pace, catching him at the flag pole and lunging ahead of him as we crossed onto the school lawn.

I raised my arms in accomplishment. Daddy always said it wasn't kind to gloat, but it wasn't often that I had opportunity to, so I figured just this once would be okay.

"I wasn't racing," my opponent said, as he sucked in air and tried to slow his breathing. Even with the cool in the wind, he'd worked up a sweat that dampened locks of his brown hair and stuck them to the sides of his forehead.

"I was," I called back. We'd had enough races through the Barna's acreage of yard and forest for me to know that he could've taken me. He won most times, especially since he'd gotten so much taller than me, but he didn't that morning, and I wasn't going to let whatever reason it was stop me from enjoying the moment.

But that feeling of victory soon faded. Miss Heniford didn't like it when I came to school sweaty. She said girls should glisten, not sweat. I thought the rain would hide it that morning, but judging from her pursed lips and furrowed brow, she could still tell the salty perspiration from the precipitation. As she passed out the themes we had written the week before, she smiled and applauded Jesse for so eloquently explaining why he wanted to own the country store, a farm and sawmill, just like his daddy. She even told Jean-Louise that being a mother was the blessing of all blessings. I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

Most of the girls in the class chose to write about motherhood. Each talking about how many babies they wanted and what their names would be. Some even wrote about who their husbands would be and what they would do. But Daddy always said, "The only thing that stays the same is change," so I figured how could I know what I'd be in five, ten, or twenty years? There was only one thing I knew I wanted and so I wrote about it. I even illustrated it, the nubby pencil shading and shadowing all I ever hoped for.

"Remember, students," she said as she approached my desk. "You were graded not just on your grammar, but on the feasibility of what you want to be when you grow up. Who can tell me what 'feasibility' means?"

That Jean-Louise's hand reached to the ceiling, as if her fingertips could scratch the tiles overhead. Leave it to Jean-Louise to be the first with something to say. She and I never had been what you'd call friends, especially after she asked me what kind of a name Leah was. It wasn't so much that she asked, but the way she said it, her hands on her hips, her jaw sticking out, her lips pursed together and eyebrows high. I thought about telling her it was the name my mama whispered as she hemorrhaged on the birthing bed and I cried with uncertainty. At least that's how Tulla tells the story. She was the only one in the room with Mama after I was born. Mrs. Barna had already run out of the house, calling for help. But I knew better than to tell my business to Jean-Louise, so when she asked about my name, I told her it was the kind that was strong, not a mouthful of nonsense like hers was.

"I recall, Miss Heniford," Jean-Louise said, her arm still stretched high. "It means what could really happen. What's possible."

"Thank you, Jean-Louise."

Miss Heniford dropped my essay on my desk. She tapped her finger on the red-letter at the top. "Feasibility, Leah. Feasibility."

Above my title, “When I Grow Up I Will Live on the Beach” was a letter C with a note below, “A bit unrealistic. Remember your capitalization. Your spelling still needs work.”

Leave it to Miss Heniford to think my notions weren’t feasible, but in my defense, the assignment had been to write about what we wanted. And that’s what I did. Just because she saw a house built upon the sand as impractical, especially for a girl like me who lived in a house her father didn’t have the means to own, didn’t mean it wasn’t what I wanted.

Jesse had liked my idea just fine. He wished he’d thought of it for himself. Course, we knew enough to know that parts of our futures held certain predeterminations, Jesse’s more so than my own, especially when his family’s name was painted on a few buildings around town. When I told him what I wrote about, he asked if we could still be neighbors. I said that’d be hard when he’d be taking over for his Daddy and I’d be in a cottage where the ocean met the sound. But, I informed him with a smirk that it’d be okay if he visited sometimes.

I drew the landscape I envisioned, wanting to show Miss Heniford how much consideration I’d given the assignment. But the illustrated waves below the essay had smudged and smeared, smoothing out the lines and blurring the image into a gray mass. Below it, the red note continued, “This isn’t art class.”

Daddy didn’t know about that essay. He didn’t need to. He knew about enough. Miss Heniford sent home notes all the time, even though he never responded, said we didn’t need to concern ourselves with her tendency to nitpick. As long as I kept learning, he was satisfied.

The sun began to peek through and shoot sunbeams onto my desk. That was the way of Carolina weather; the blue skies never stayed absent for long. With the passing clouds, Daddy would be headed to the woods. It would still be wet, his boots caked with mud when he would get home, but there were more trees to cut, more land to clear.

I watched the clouds as they rolled away, the charcoal fading with puffs of white moving in and dotting the blue sky, thinking about how Daddy said the clearing would bring more people, more visitors, more homes to our small town of Supply and the surrounding Brunswick County. Of course town was a loose term. We existed more as a collection of homes within a few miles of one another, a handful of businesses to meet the needs of our community and only a couple of stop signs along our few miles of roads. Farm animals far outnumbered the population of people, and trees surrounded us except in the places on the edges of town that had been cleared for tobacco fields.

Daddy said some day we’d have to share the sand dunes that had so far been our private Sunday resting places. But of course they weren’t ours. They never belonged to us at all, just like the woods behind our house and even the house itself. The property all had Mr. Barna’s name attached, but how could a man ever really stake a claim to something that existed before him and would continue on long afterwards?