

Pink Icing

and other stories

Also by Pamela Mordecai

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Pink Icing

and other stories

Pamela Mordecai



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For Martin

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Chalk it up

Every door inside this house have a window over it. Is not the outside doors, you know. Is every single door inside.

In my Granny house, is a real window, a window with glass. It sit sideways and twist to open and you stick a little iron pin in a hole to make it stay. In our house, is just a space over the door with pieces of wood shaped like the sun—not the whole sun, just half, right at the bottom, with rays sticking out and space between so the air can visit from room to room.

I need the chair, Papa's chair, the heavy one make out of wood that stay still and don't ever rock. Can't lift it up, me one, but it can shove.

This room is for us. Us is girls, the whole four. We sleep two and two in two beds that nearly fill up the room. I sleep with Carol for Papa say it is a better use of the bed space. Carol is first and I come last and Petal and Pauline in the middle. Petal and Pauline and Carol are in school. They can read and write and do sums. I can read and write and do sums too, but I am not in school. Yet.

I hear Mama and Papa talk about it sometimes.

“She is old enough to be in school, Evan. She can read very well. She knows her tables, right up to five times.”

“Nettie, let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Is my pikni that you calling a sleeping dog?”

I don't stay to hear any more that time, but another time I hear Papa say, “Nettie, she is good company for you. That is why I am not hurrying to send her to school.”

That time Mama don't say anything, only sigh.

I don't like when Mama sigh. Carol say that you lose blood when you sigh and Mama thin like a chew-down pencil already. I fret that she going to just drop, plap, one day, if she go on sighing out blood.

Papa go to work every day. He leave early with Carol and Petal and Pauline, everybody brown and spry, crisp like a just-bake Johnny Cake. Papa look good all the time, when he leave in the morning and when he come home to eat lunch and even when he reach back late in the evening, but when school done and they get home, those girls look like boiled dumpling, all gray and wet with sweat in frowsy, crumple-up clothes.

I am a big help to Mama. Clear away the dishes after we eat in the morning and wash them standing on the stool, careful so none don't drop and break. Petal break a dish one time and it sweet me when Mama tell her: “Your little sister Colleen could teach you a thing or two. She wash cups, saucers and plates and never break one.”

Every time Mama tell me something nice, Petal wait till she is gone then stick out her tongue and waggle her bottom at me. But Pauline take my side and warn Petal.

“How much time I am to tell you she is only a child, Petal? If you keep on and keep on, I going to tell Papa.”

That make Miss Petal behave herself.

When I washing up Mama is taking a little rest. Sometimes she take a little cry too. I know when she is crying because sometimes I hear sniffing like she have a cold and sometimes her eye is wet and red when she open the door of her room and say, “Come Colleen. Time to read today’s Bible story.”

Is not one or two time I hear Mama cry. One time, I was round by the maid’s room, looking inside one of the kerosene tins that we put garbage in. It was empty, for the garbage man come and gone already for the day. The only thing in it is a tear-up photograph in the bottom. I see Mama’s head in one tear off piece, and Auntie Alice’s head in another piece, and I think I see a piece of Papa’s head too. I take out the pieces and put them in my pocket so I can put them back together when I go inside.

Just when I am pulling my hand out of my pocket I look up and see Mama coming around the corner of the house. Her eyes is runny and her face all wet.

She sniff when she see me, and wipe her nose on her sleeve, and use all her strength to make a smile.

“What do you have there, my Colleen?”

“Nothing, Mama. Just a penny I have in my pocket.”

Is a big lie, so I tell God sorry same time, but I sure is better Mama don't know I find the picture.

I must hurry and get the stool, for breakfast gone long time and Mama still don't call me. When we finish reading the Bible story, we do sums, then Mama will teach me some history, maybe about the Taino people who first was in this island or the slaves that run away into the hills and turn into maroons.

I know is a long time since breakfast because the dishes finish drain and dry all by themselves. Maybe Mama is sad because of the picture. Maybe she sorry she throw it away and she don't have another one. I take my time and put it together and I see it is her wedding picture for she have on a long dress and a long veil and she is holding flowers, and Papa is in a suit and he have a flower on his shoulder and Auntie Alice is in a long dress too, and she is holding a basket of flowers. Uncle Max is shoulder- ing a flower too. Everybody is smiling a big smile except Mama. Mama's smile is not so sure.

I listen at the door but I don't hear nothing. Mama not sleeping for she snore when she sleeping, even if is only a short-time sleep. But I don't hear no sound at all, no sigh, no little crying sounds, nor no kiss-teeth sounds, nor no nothing. I take time and rap. First I rap a small rap and stop to listen. Quiet as the grave. So I knock hard. Listen again. Still not even a whisper of a breeze.

I think maybe something bad happen to Mama. Maybe it is on account of the photo. Maybe it is Papa

that tear it up and when she think of that, it weigh on her so heavy she can't get up. Miss Clooney is next door and I can call to Miss Clooney but Mama and Papa say Miss Clooney get fat off of listening to other people business and I don't think Papa want her to know about anything in this house. And I don't know how to find Papa. He work downtown in government but I don't know which part. And even if I could find him, I don't want to trouble Papa for Papa is a serious man. I hear him tell Mama so.

“Listen, Nettie. Listen carefully. You know I am a *serious* man, so mind how you upset me.”

I lifting up the stool. I going to put it on top Papa's chair so I can reach high enough to see through the sun window over the door into the bedroom to find out if anything bad happen to Mama.

I step up onto the seat of the chair and hold onto the back to steady myself.

I stand up tall on my toe. Good. Steady. Steady, chair.

Next I take my time to step up on the stool, then make sure I stand firm on it, and I hold onto the rays of the sun and look down through the space to see Mama. I don't see her nowhere. She not in the bed. Not sitting in front the mirror at her dressing table. Not in her chair under the tall lamp that she read by.

Then I see some frizzy hair peeping up over the bottom of the bed. Mama! She must be sitting on the ground. I hold on tight to the rays and pull myself far up

on my toes. It is Mama, yes, and she is sitting slap bam on her bottom, looking at some chalky kind of marks on the floor. Her hand is holding a white stone, a big white stone, like from the quarry at Wareika Hill. But I don't see no chalk, so I guess she is writing with the stone.

Little most I say something to her. But I know that if she lock the door it mean I am not to go in there and also I am not to see what she is doing in there. I stay still and keep quiet and look, though is very hard to stand hereso and I am getting pins and needles in my foot. Right at that time Mama start to move the stone over the floor, and I remember that I have a big box of chalk that will write plenty better.

“Mama! Mama, I have cha...”

Mama head jerk up, and she ask a squeaky question.

“Who is there?”

Her eye search for where the sound of my mouth is, till she find it behind the rays of the sun.

When Mama move so sudden, it frighten me, and I stumble and rock the stool and it slip off the chair and drop and I drop and follow it, and everything crash down onto the floor in one almighty confusion.

For a little time is like I don't know nothing. When I open my eyes, Mama bending over me, crying. I don't understand. Nothing don't break, and Papa won't vex if we make haste and put back the chair and the stool, so why Mama bawling like that?

“Colleen, Colleen. Wake up, baby, wake up.”

I feel a big cocoa on one side of my head. It hurt. I don't want Mama to cry no louder, so I only make a little moan when she touch it.

Same time there is a big banging on the window.

"What happen in there? Everybody all right? Miss Nettie, everything all right?"

Mama make no answer, only feeling my bones all over, still crying loud-loud fit to wake the dead.

"Mama, Mama. Miss Clooney at the window."

Mama still make no reply. I hold on around her neck and pull myself up but one foot fold over at the ankle and hurt bad-bad, so I drop down back on it.

"Oh Mary, Mother of Jesus, child! Have you damaged your foot?"

Mama say this when I boof back down for it hurt so bad a big "Wai-oh!" jump out of my mouth before I can stop it.

I glad Papa is not here for he is a good Jehovah's Witness and he don't like Mama to make any prayers to Mary, Mother of Jesus.

Miss Clooney hammering and hammering, calling and calling, but Mama lip still clamp up tight and now I am crying too, never mind I try not to, for my twist foot that I drop on is burning hot as fire.

I hear two people talking at the window, which is covered with a curtain. I can sort of see two heads through the curls and twists of lace.

"Eleanor, something bad going on in there but my eye dark. Look if you can make out anything."

“Mine no better, Minna. Can’t see a thing, but that racket inside there mean something is badly wrong. I better use my telephone to call my cousin at the station.”

Only one person on the road with a police relative and is she, Miss Clooney. Only one person on the road with a telephone and is she same one again. Mark you, everybody know is her son Lionel pay for the telephone, arrange to send the money from foreign by Western Union every month. Carol say Lionel think Miss Clooney is minding his little daughter who have sick cells and take in bad sometimes and he want to make sure that if she take in, he will hear straight away.

“Lionel don’t even know that Miss Clooney dispatch Lesline way to Manchester hills, say the cool weather is better for her and anyway she don’t have no time to nurse any ailing baby. That little girl could be dead and buried long before Miss Clooney know, let alone poor Lionel.”

By the time Miss Minna and Miss Eleanor moving off, Mama not hardly crying at all. I hoping now they hear the quiet they will know everything is fine again and they won’t bother to call police. I don’t like police, for police take people and put them in jail to rot forever. I know because when Petal vex with Carol, she tell her, “You think you safe because you big. Bet you I walk down to station, tell police you beat me up, make them put you in jail to rot forever.”

My ankle is getting fatter and the pain is getting big and round like the ankle.

Mama is not bawling no more, only tears drying on her face. She take her time and ease me up so I sit with my back against the bed. She take the pillows off the bed and put them behind me, then she go to the kitchen and mix sugar and water and bring it in a cup.

“Take this and drink it, Colleen,” she say. “It will settle your nerves.”

She look down at my big purple balloon ankle.

“That ankle looking very bad. I going just next door to call your Pa to come and take you to the doctor, only leaving you for a little bit,” she say, same time searching in her handbag. “I have to pay Miss Clooney for the phone call to your Pa. You will be all right?”

I nod yes. She put down the handbag on the bed and look at the money in her hand.

“Oh, dear. Not enough.”

Then I hear her in the kitchen fighting with the hard-to-open grocery money tin.

In the exact minute that the tin cover come off there is a big man-voice at the door.

“Open up this door!”

Mama run back to my side.

“Police, here. Open up.”

We hear a next voice now and another set of banging.

I wet my panty—just a little bit though. Mama don’t move. Just standing still like Lot’s wife in the Bible turned to a pillar of salt.

Police only have to lean on the door and it give way, krups.

“Officer Clooney from the Trench Pen Division.”

We hear him before we see a uniform appear at the bedroom door.

“My sister, Miss Eleanor Clooney, call in a complaint about a disturbance on these premises.”

The other policeman behind him look down on me from way up high. He ask Mama, “Is this your child?”

Mama head move up and down to say yes, but her mouth is wrung tight as a sheet after you twist out the washing water.

“Please, sir...” I say.

“Quiet. Let your mother give her response,” he say.

“But is me climb up on the chair...” I say.

“Hold your tongue, girl!” he say, sharp like Papa’s big carving knife.

So never mind I try to tell them what happen, nobody will listen. All they can talk about is cut and bruise on my hand and foot, cocoa on my head, and my swell-up ankle.

“Where is the child’s father?” That is Officer Clooney.

When they find Papa and he come home, he is vexed fit to kill.

“Nettie, how you could see this child come to harm?”

Papa curl his lip in a ugly way.

Mama make no reply.

“You know what this is now going to mean? You are forcing my hand. Again.”

Mama sit in the rocking chair, pushing it back and forward back and forward with her toes while Papa pack a bag full of her clothes.

Maybe she is going to foreign, I think, to the place where Mr Lionel is, where there is money to send by Western Union and everybody have a telephone.

Maybe I am going with her. I watch to see if Papa is going to pack a bag for me.

Mama get up and go over to sit on the sofa.

“Come Colleen. Come and sit with me.”

I go and sit with Mama.

“Remember Jane and Louisa?” Mama ask me.

I nod my head to say yes.

“I want us to sing it together. Will you sing it with me?”

I nod my head to say yes again, and we sing.

*“Jane and Louisa will soon come home,
soon come home, soon come home.
Jane and Louisa will soon come home
into this beautiful garden.”*

“Get yourself together, Nettie. The ambulance is here.”

Ambulance is a big white van with red writing. Two strapping somebody dress up in white come in through our gate. One is a woman and one is a man, but she is broad and strong just like him.

Papa pull Mama up from the sofa. The plastic covering crinkle and it hold on to her as she rise, like it don't want her to go. I am like the plastic for I want to hold on to Mama too. I want to tell Papa, 'No! No! No!'

But I don't say nothing.

It must be because of me. If I was better company for Mama she wouldn't have to go. If I didn't climb up on the chair and fall down, no ambulance would come to take her to jail. There is a big stone in my chest. It won't even let my eye cry.

"Don't worry, Colleen."

Mama say this and she bend down and kiss me. "It will be just like 'Jane and Louisa.' And now you can go to school with Carol and Pauline and Petal. Tell them for me that it will be like 'Jane and Louisa' and I will soon come home."

Is when I am watching Papa walk with Mama down to the gate that I remember the chalk. I run inside, find the box and race back fast-fast to give it to her.

"Is nice soft chalk, mama, and plenty colours. Red and yellow, blue and green, even silver and gold."

Mama pat my head.

"Thank you, my Colleen," she say. "I know you will do very good at school."