

EXCERPTS FROM FOR US, BY US, by Chrystal Bates



Little Church, Part I

(Sung):

*Mt. Zion Baptist Church Library
the little church on the hill
means so much to me
and always will!*

I couldn't wait for Sunday. I loved everything about my little church growing up. I loved that Jesus loved me...even me. That He would hear my humble cry, that He would not pass me by. Jesus knew all about my troubles.

I got to ring the big church bell if I was early enough, and you best believe I made it my business to be early enough. I'd be greeted at the vestibule door by Ms. Lil who had her ushers in white blouses and black skirts and white gloves. When you walked in you felt like you were special. If you were old enough you got a church bulletin that had everything you ever needed to know in it, and a fan just in case someone got to shouting like fire shut up in their bones and needed your assistance in a fan-down session! I love looking at all the regal ladies in their Sunday best. Hats, pocketbooks, pointy high heels and gloves. Their kind of beauty was a true beauty, a godly beauty. Ms. Ruth L, Ms. Hen, Ms. Paulsey, Ms. Eloise...

There were the deacons in their suits and ties sitting on the front pews in positions of honor, and I respected them. My behavior was on point when they were around. And the way they prayed! I made it my mission as a child to learn the elegant rhythm, inflection and phrasing by heart, and I could pray right along with the best of

them, like Deacon Blakey and Deacon Green...."Father God, thank you for waking me up early this mo'ning, touched by your finger of love, clothed in my right mind, blood still running warm in my veins, with my mind...yessir, stayed on Jesus!"

Then in comes the choir, swaying and rocking to the music as they marched in. Ms. Berryman, Ms. Virginia, and Mary Ross and Duckie. And, oh, it was really the best when the Mass and the Senior Choir sang together—Ms. Mary Hall, Mr. Leo, Miss Goggins taking the choir stand in burgundy robes to the sound of Jackie working out on the piano. I can hear Mr. Warren singing '*Blessed Quietness, Holy Quietness, what assurance in my soul, on the stormy sea Jesus speaks to me,*' with an occasional "Well Jesus, weell Jesus," supplied by the mother of the church, Miss Lola Bell. She was like...like, the Wizard of Oz—the oldest and wisest of them all!

Then, the Hour of Power, when Reverend Byars would come out of his office in his black robe and take his place in the pulpit. I felt a sense of Holiness that commanded my attention just by his very presence. Then he would preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. He would begin, "Fact about it, I would have fainted if I had not believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the Land of the Living," and my little heart would burn with me. In his closing, after which our fans would be flapping like birds' wings, he would open the doors to the church inviting, "Whosoever will, let them come!"

And one day I walked up. He would then make this appeal to the church—"If you cannot go to the mission field, at least you can send and relieve the suffering of others."

Those words forever embedded in our hearts and souls and set us aflame with the spirit of giving, and made this little church on the hill give and give and reach down deep in their already fragile pockets and give more. And the object of our giving, our affection, was the Lott Carey Foreign Mission in Liberia, Africa. Oh our church would sing together, '*This may be the last time, this may be the last children, it may be the last time I don't know,*' and we sang it like we meant it!

And Brother Bryant would give the benediction..."Let brotherly love continue" as we would "Take the name of Jesus with us." Sometimes we would go downstairs to fellowship—translation, to eat! And, not meaning to brag, but we boasted the best homemade cooking this side of the Appalachian Mountains! Lord, if I close my eyes I can still taste Miss Johnson's pineapple ice cream freshly churned by one and all, cool and delicious melting in my mouth. A couple of times I was sure I had died and to glory while I was eating it!

I loved everything about my church. We were connected. Like a huge family. A family of love.

KINDERGARTEN DISCOVERIES

Song: '*S' is for Stewart*'

Milk Money

On the first day of kindergarten at snack time we all got a small carton of white milk. Then the teacher passed out small brown envelopes to all the kids for milk money. It cost 25 cents to get a carton of white milk for a week, or five cents a day. And 30 cents for chocolate. We were to take these envelopes home and bring them back the next day with our milk money for the week.

I took mine home and gave it to my mom. The next day there was no money in the envelope. My mom said we didn't have the money. So I returned my envelope to the teacher empty. When snack time came, I didn't get a milk. All the kids in the class got milk but me. The teacher told me I could get a drink of water from the fountain. When the kids asked her, "Why didn't she get a milk?" the teacher said, "Because she is poor and can't afford it." To which the kids all laughed.

Now every now and then a kid who paid for milk would be absent, and the teacher would ask me, "Do you want their milk?" And I told her, "No, I don't like milk." And to this day I don't like milk.

Blackie-Black

I guess kindergarten becomes an "Aha" moment for many folks. I met my son at the bus stop after school that first day, and he was fuming!

"Mommie, guess what? Guess what happened at school—he called me blackie-black, mommie!"

"Well honey, you are black."

"Mommie, what are you talking about! I'm not black."

"Yes, honey, yes you are."

"But mommie, I don't look black."

"Well son, there are a lot of black people that don't look black. In fact, most black people are not really the color 'black' at all. We have all different shades of black and brown."

"My friend Tommy is black and I'm white!"

"No son, you are a fair-skinned black boy, and Tommy is a darker skinned black boy but you both are black." Still looking rather puzzled, he said,

"Mommie, are you black?"

"Yes son, I am."

"Is daddy? Bunna? Grandma?"

"Yes son, we are all a part of a family of color that people call black."

He smacked himself on the forehead and said, "Why didn't somebody tell me!"

"We thought you knew."

"Well, I didn't!"

"Do you understand now?"

"Are you sure, mommie?"

I said, "Yes baby, I'm sure."

"Okay...well then, I guess I'm black."

The next day he comes home from school and I ask him, "Did Billy call you blackie-black at school today?"

"Yes, he called me blackie-black, and I told him *you* might go home and find out you're black like I did. So there!"

Kindergarten lost its novelty with a quickness.

KDO

It was my first day of kindergarten—this was the 50s. I'm meeting new kids. They're different from me and they are just like me at the same time. I ask a little boy with blonde hair if he wanted to play with me and he said "yes". We decided to go to the puzzles and we were having fun together playing. He dropped his puzzle on the floor and it went all over the place. My kindergarten teacher told me to pick it up for him. I said, "But teacher, he dropped it so he should pick up his own puzzle."

She turned to me and said, "Did you hear me? I told *you* to pick up that puzzle."

"But I didn't drop it, he did," I said.

"Pick up that puzzle NOW you little...little chocolate milk! I said pick up that puzzle!"

Now, something about the way she said *chocolate milk* and how she looked at me when she said it, I knew there was no power on earth that was going to make me pick up that puzzle. Ever. So, of course, on my first day of school I was punished. I got paddled.

After that, I would walk to school with the other kids every day, but I wouldn't go into class. I played in the shortcut near the school for two weeks before I was discovered and made to go. The other kids started calling me KDO after that—Kindergarten Drop Out.

Paper Dolls

In kindergarten we had a Christmas grab bag. My teacher, Ms. Gigalis, had a big box that she decorated and filled with slips of blue and pink paper. If you picked the blue you were to buy a boy's gift and if you got pink a girl's. It was my turn and I picked pink. I went home with my pink paper and told my mom we had to buy a really nice gift for the Christmas grab bag.

"Something really nice, mom."

Mom said, "Baby, we can't afford to buy a gift. We don't have the money. But we can make something really nice for you to take."

Make? Now I'm thinking, "I don't wanna take some old mammy-made gift to the school grab bag. All the kids will laugh at me." See, after that empty milk money envelope I knew all the kids knew I was poor. I figured if my mom really loved me she would at least get something new for the school grab bag.

Mama said, "How about we make a paper doll and you can help?"

I'm thinking, as I ball up my fists in my pockets, "I'm not helping at all!" Mom paid me no attention and got a cardboard box, opened it up flat and drew a doll on it, and with little broken bits of crayons she colored it in. She gave the paper doll red lips, brown eyes, freckles, and pink underwear. She made hair from the bottom of a brown bag that she fringed and colored with a pencil. Mom took the rest of the brown bag and drew a whole wardrobe for the doll. She told me to cut the outfits out, being careful to cut neatly on the lines. We colored them in together, and she said I was a good colorer. Then mom made paste from flour and water and took some scraps and embellished each outfit with buttons and bows. She even glued a red bow in the doll's hair. She put the doll and the clothes in a box covered with a brown paper bag, drew a closet door on the top and tied it with a string.

"What do you think now?" she asked me.

"I HATE it! I hate it," I said. "I'm not gonna go to school and I'm not taking that piece of old cardboard to the grab bag!"

Mom said, "You are going, and you will be taking this as your gift."

On that day of the grab bag, nothing could console me. I cried, I pleaded, I faked sick and everything, but she wasn't having it. My mom walked me all the way to kindergarten. We got there early, and she put my gift in

the box, kissed me on my head and left. When time for grab bag came, I went to the back of the class, so angry and embarrassed I wouldn't even look up. Tears were forming in my eyes.

"Everybody's going to laugh at me like before," I thought. Finally, one little girl drew the last gift out of the box. It was mine. She opened it. Laughing, she said, "Look everybody, look!"

Tears were now streaming down my face.

"Look at this paper doll. It's homemade! And it's beautiful!"

All the little girls rushed in to look. One of the girls said, "You got the best gift! I wonder who made it?"

Suddenly my tears of sorrow were now tears of joy, my chest puffed full of pride! I yelled at the top of my lungs, "My mom made it and I helped!"

"You can make stuff like this?"

"Yeah, me and my mom are always making stuff together."

I learned something that day that I would hold onto as part of my identity forever. That I have value because I can create. Value to myself and value to others. Thanks little mommie....

Song: *Kennywood Theme*

Kennywood

I really love my Aunt Do, but she lived in Whitsett, so when I found out that Aunt Do was going to go to Kennywood with us, I almost peed my pants! Tookie, Pam, Diane, all my brothers and sisters, my cousins, my whole town *and my Aunt Do*?! I was in heaven! Oh, and Kennywood Meat. Aunt Do would bring the fried chicken and the Kennywood Meat. Now, for those of you who don't know what Kennywood Meat is, let me explain: it is black folks' version of ham salad. Jumbo, aka baloney, ground up with sweet pickled relish and mayo seasoned to sweet perfection and ONLY available to us colored kids for Kennywood—hence the name 'Kennywood Meat'!

So now, we are on our way, with Aunt Do's Kennywood Meat and fried chicken packed and ready and she asks all the kids, "What do you want to do when we get there?"

"Ride," we shouted.

"Chrystal?"

"The Merry-Go-Round!"

"Putty-Putt? Dana?"

"The Racers!"

"Scott? Woogie?"

"The Ponies!"

Of course, Frankie couldn't ride anything because he had an inner ear problem and just got sick when he rode, so he answered, "I want to go to the Arcade, Aunt Do!"

"Okay, at 5 o'clock everybody meet me at the Arcade."

So we are all at the Kennywood Arcade promptly at five. Now, contrary to popular belief, CPT...colored kids can be on time for the Arcade!

Aunt Do says to us kids, "So who wants some tickets for prizes?"

"We do! We do," we all shouted.

Aunt Do responded, "Go pick out the prize you want and tell me how many tickets we need for you to get it."

Now, Skee Ball was *the* game and Aunt Do was the best there ever was, and ever will be, at it! Nobody, and I mean nobody, was better. Picture it—we were at the OK Corral, and she was our Wyatt Earp coming in with guns-a-blazing! The first ball she threw hit 40, then another 40, then 50, then 100, 100, 50, 100, 100. A huge crowd formed and tickets was a pilin' up like...like...well, I don't know like what, but they were piling up! About a gazillion trillion of them! All I know is everybody was going to get a great big, really good prize from them tickets!

She had been going strong for about an hour, and all us little kids were rooting for her jumping up and down chanting "Aunt Do! Aunt Do!" We were so excited and happy—this was the best day at Kennywood, ever! Aunt Do was laughing at us, said we looked like Mexican jumping beans. And then she threw the next ball and just as she was in full stride she released it. And fell face down, splat in the middle of the skee ball alley! She fell hard, real hard. Too hard. And she did not move. What just happened? All the kids started screaming, "Aunt Do? Aunt Do! Somebody call an ambulance!"

"Move them kids!" The adults pulled us kids back out of the way. Oh my God, Aunt Do...Aunt Do? Is Aunt Do going to be alright? I couldn't believe it, my Aunt Do. Right in front of me, playing skee ball. We were all in shock.

Screaming and crying we watched as the paramedics lifted her, placed her on a stretcher. The best day at Kennywood had quickly turned into the worst. "I hate Kennywood, I hate it!" As they carried her away, with tears running down my face, I heard her feeble voice say, "Where is my purse?"

"I got it Aunt Do, I got it!"

In all that crazy confusion my little six-year-old sister, Putty-Putt, had sense enough to scoop up both Aunt Do's purse and *all them tickets!* She still had her eye on the prize! I was just relieved that my aunt was alive.

We later found out Aunt Do had just fainted—that's when I learned that one of the early symptoms of pregnancy can be fainting. And I got another boy cousin. Aunt Do has nine boys, one girl.

Kennywood was ruined for me that day, even though every one of us kids got just the prize we had picked out at the Arcade. That was my best and worst memory of Kennywood, both in the same day. My Aunt Do—Legendary Queen of Skee Ball!

Diamonds and Rhinestones

My Grandma Lo had a jewelry box in her bedroom. One of my greatest pleasures as a child was to sneak upstairs, open her jewelry box, and try on her *marvelous* diamond jewelry collection. She had earrings, a bracelet, a necklace and even a small tiara. My dream come true! I don't remember her telling me that I could not play with them but I knew these items were precious to her and used only rarely. My grandmother would get all dressed to the nines in all of her diamond finery, put on her red lipstick and Nancy Wilson-looking wig, her high heels and go to the beer garden called the Sebolt Café.

Now in my eight-year-old mind, the beer garden conjured up images of a secret garden with exotic flowers, champagne glasses and beautiful people all dressed up, like my grandma. By the time I got to be 10 or 11, I was old enough to be sort of a human telegraph service. Sometimes my grandma would give me a message to give to one of the patrons inside of the beer garden. It's hard to believe but everyone did NOT have a phone back then. I would knock on the door to Sebolt Café...I had to knock several times real loud so someone would hear over Patty LaBelle and the Bluebells, and wait 'til an adult would come out. While the door was briefly cracked I would try desperately to peek in to see the flowers, but the adults would all purposely block my view, and frustrate my curiosity.

Well, the day finally came when the door accidentally blew open, and I took a good long peek inside. It looked to me...like the Roach Motel! Faded tore up linoleum, peeling paint, taped up bar stools, scratched up counter...full of smoke and smells I didn't even recognize! I later found out it was a combination of sweat, cheap

perfume, hot sauce and liquor. But the women and men inside were dressed like movie stars! I thought, "Why on earth would anybody dress up to come to this dump—to this ratty hole-in-the-wall?"

See, at that time it was one of the only places colored people could have an evening out. I learned a few things as I got older—which do you want first, the good news or the bad news? Okay, the good news! I learned that the adults were standing guard blocking my view into an adult world to protect my innocence....and the bad news is that I also learned my grandma's "diamonds" were just faded rhinestones.

Continuation

I'm all grown up, my world has really expanded over the years. But, I am still the little girl of a paper doll maker. My identity anchored on Overhill, Highland and Grant. I am still rooted and grounded in the little church on the hill. I have two bathrooms now with bath tubs, and my favorite thing in the whole world is to take a long hot bath on a Saturday night!

I still don't like milk, and I believe that I never will. I am still colored and it is still fun. I stay connected with my past and embrace the future as I watch Pookey, Boo and Pumpkin playing in the dip, and dance to hip-hop in the alley.

It's been a long, long time since I had Kennywood Meat but I carry a smile and a tear every time I walk by the Arcade. I celebrate when we drive a whole van full of rainbow kids to the wave pool.

I am Blackie-Black's mom, and I laugh as I teach a new generation how to grit their teeth and not to buckle under the weight of racism and poverty, so that the team can win. I will pick up the brick of my voice and throw it at a school rule that says because we aren't at "50%" we cannot play in their gym.

For us, by us, who can deny us? I don't want to see any more big kids sitting in small chairs and scared of college. I am determined not to fade in silence as Sugarman prowls the playground. See, I am a garbage man's kid, I ain't afraid to take out the garbage. Tramp, tramp, tramp, we go a marching calling action to the door.

I still jump up trying to turn on the light, see....I am a Montour Mine #10 coal miner's daughter, and it is my turn to take the lamp down into the tunnel of a dark mind. I am Library's legacy.