

A NOVEL

Alice Walker

The Temple of My Familiar



BY THE AUTHOR OF *THE COLOR PURPLE*

*The
Temple
of My
Familiar*

A L I C E
W A L K E R

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers

SAN DIEGO

NEW YORK

LONDON



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To Robert,
in whom the Goddess shines

If they have lied about Me,
they have lied about everything.

—*Lissie Lyles*

PART
One





In the old country in South America, Carlotta's grandmother, Zedé, had been a seamstress, but really more of a sewing magician. She was the creator of clothing, especially capes, made of feathers. These capes were worn by dancers and musicians and priests at traditional village festivals and had been worn for countless generations. When she was a young child, Carlotta's mother, also called Zedé, was sent to collect the peacock feathers used in the designs. Little Zedé had stood waiting as the fat, perspiring woman who owned the peacocks held them in ashen, scratched hands and tore out the beautiful feathers one by one. It was then that Zedé began to understand the peacock's mournful cry. It had puzzled her at first why a creature so beautiful (though admittedly with hideous feet) emitted a sound so like a soul in torment. Next she would visit the man who kept the parrots and cockatoos, and the painful plucking of feathers would be repeated. She then paid a visit to the old woman who specialized in "found feathers" and who was poorer than the others but whose face was more peaceful. This old woman thought each feather she found was a gift from the Gods, and her incomparable feathers—set in the spectacular headdresses of the priests—always added just the special flair of grace the ceremony required.

Little Zedé went to school every morning wearing a neat blue-

and-white uniform, her two long braids warm against the small of her back. By high school her hair was cut short, just below her ears, and she tossed it impatiently as her mother complained of the poor quality of the modern feather. No feather, these days, she explained, was permitted to mature. Each was plucked while still relatively green. Therefore the full richness she had once been capable of expressing in her creations was now lost.

Their compound consisted of two small houses, one for sleeping, another for cooking—the cooking one was never entered by Zedé's father or brothers—and there were avocado and mango trees and coconut palms all around. From their front yard they could see the river, where the tiny prahus used by the fishermen slipped by, like floating schools of dried vanilla-bean pods, her mother always said.

Life was so peaceful that Zedé did not realize they were poor. She found this out when her father, a worker on the banana plantation they could also see from their house, became ill. At the same time, by coincidence, the traditional festivals of the village were forbidden. By whom they were forbidden, or "outlawed," as her father said, Zedé was not sure. The priests, especially, were left with nothing to do. The dancers and musicians danced, made music, and got drunk in the cantinas, but the priests wandered about the village stooped and lost, suddenly revealed as the weak-limbed old men they were.

Her father, a small, tired, brownskin man with graying black hair died while she was an earnest scholarship student at the university, far away in the noisy capital. Her mother now made her living selling her incredibly beautiful feather goods to the cold little gringa blonde who had a boutique on the bottom floor of an enormous new hotel that sprung up near their village, seemingly overnight. Sometimes her mother stayed on the street near the hotel and watched the gringas who bought her feathered earrings, pendants, and shawls—and even priestlike headdresses—and wore them as they stamped up and down the narrow dusty street. They never glanced at her; they never, she felt, even saw her. On them her work looked magnificent still, but the wearers looked very odd.

There were riots almost the whole year Zedé was finishing the

university, at which she trained to be a teacher. Occasionally, on her way to class, she had to dodge stones, bricks, bottles, and all manner of raging vehicles. She hardly noticed the people involved. Some were farmers; some, students like herself. Some, police. Like her mother, she had a fabulously one-track mind. Just as Zedé the Elder never deviated from close attention to the details of her craft, no matter that the market had changed and others were turning out leaky pots and shoddy weavings for the ignorant tourist dollar, Zedé trudged along to school ignoring anything that might make her late.

She was not even aware of the threat that came, out of nowhere, she thought, to shut down the school. And yet, incredibly, one day it was shut. Not even a sign was posted. The doors were simply locked. She sat on the steps leading to her classrooms for two days. She learned that some of her classmates had been imprisoned; others, shot.

But she had almost completed the requirements to become a teacher, and when she was asked to teach a class in the hills, a class without walls and with students without uniforms, she accepted. She taught the basics—hygiene, reading, writing, and numerics—for six months before being arrested for being a Communist.

The years she spent in prison she never spoke of to Carlotta, even though that was where Carlotta was born. It was a prison that did not, anyway, look like one. It looked like the confiscated Indian village in the backwoods of the country that it was. The Indians had been “removed,” and all their rich if marginal land was now planted in papaya. It was to plant, care for, and exploit these trees for an export market that the prisoners were brought to the village.

How her mother escaped with her, Carlotta did not know. Perhaps her father had been one of the guards—untutored men, fascinated, if resentful, that a young, pretty woman like Zedé could read and write. Later, when Carlotta’s mother described the tiny, slivery boats that slid down the river like floating schools of dried vanilla-bean pods, she thought perhaps they’d made their escape

in one. Perhaps they'd floated through the Panama Canal, mistaken by the U.S. Coast Guard for a piece of seaweed, and then floated to the coast of North America and into San Francisco Bay.

It was in San Francisco that Carlotta's own memories began. She was a dark, serious child with almond-shaped eyes and glistening black hair. In a few years she spoke English without an accent, a language her mother at first had difficulty understanding, even when Carlotta spoke it to her. Years later she would speak it quite well but with so thick an accent she sounded as if she were still speaking Spanish. Zedé could not, therefore, teach in the public schools of California. And she would have been afraid, in her shyness, to try.

They lived in a shabby, poorly lighted flat over a Thai grocery in an area of the city populated by the debris of society. Some of the people did not live indoors, although it rained so much of the time, but slept in doorways or in abandoned cars. Her mother found work in a sweatshop around the corner. There was no man in her mother's life. There were just the two of them. Her mother's responsibility was to provide food and clothing, and it was Carlotta's job to do the cooking and cleaning and, of course, to go to school.

School was a misery to her, but, like so many bad things that happened, she never told her mother. Zedé, stooped, a twitch of anxiety in her face at thirty-five, was a grim little woman, afraid of noise, other people, even of parades. When the gays paraded in costumes on Halloween, she snatched Carlotta from her perch beside the window and drew the shades. But not before Carlotta had seen one of the enormous feathered headdresses her mother made, somewhat furtively, at home, headdresses of peacock, pheasant, parrot, and cockatoo feathers, almost too resplendent for the gray, foggy city. The headdress was worn by a small, pale man, carrying a crystal scepter, who appeared to be wearing little else. He was drinking a beer.

From this glimpse of the Halloween parade Carlotta marked the beginning of her mother's new career. During the day she sewed jeans and country-and-western-style shirts and ties in the sweatshop where she worked. At home they ate mainly rice and beans. With the money her mother managed to save, they bought feathers from

one of the large import stores. Eventually Carlotta would work at one of these stores, called World Import, first as a sweeper in the storeroom, among the crated goods, so cheap, so colorful and pretty, from countries like her mother's (she did not think of South America as *her* continent), next as an arranger of goods on the floor, and finally as a cashier.

By then she was entering college and could work only during summers and after school. Much later in her life she heard the story of the man who worked in a factory that made farm equipment and each day passed the guards at the gates pushing a wheelbarrow. Each day the suspicious guards checked to make sure the wheelbarrow was empty. It always was. Twenty years later, when the man was rich, he told them what he'd been stealing: wheelbarrows. It was the same with Carlotta; only, she stole feathers, which she always seemed to be holding in her hand as if about to dust something. Peacock feathers mainly. Bundles and bundles of them over the years, because her mother had discovered that the rock stars of the sixties were "into" feathers and that, for one spectacular peacock cape, she could feed and clothe herself and Carlotta for a year.

During her last year in college Carlotta delivered one of these capes to a rock star so famous even she had heard of him—a slight, dark-brown man who wore a headband and looked, she thought, something like herself. It was his Indianness that she saw, not his blackness. She saw it in the way he really looked at her, really saw her. With the calm, detached concentration of a shaman. He was stoned, but even so . . . She had delivered many capes, shawls, headdresses, dresses, beaded and feathered headbands, sandals, and jeans to rock stars and their entourages, and in the excitement of trying on what she brought, they never saw her. Never questioned how the magic of the feathered clothing was done. Never wondered about her mother's pricked fingers and twitchy face and eyes. She did not expect them to. They were demonic to her. She hated the way they looked, so pale and raw and wet; she disliked their drugs, always so carelessly displayed. Feathered pipes and bowls were steady sellers—she was not sure her mother even knew or cared

what was done with them. Carlotta learned to wait silently, unobtrusively, “like an Indian,” until the buyer—her mother’s only word for them—stopped admiring his or her reflection and languidly fumbled for the always-hard-to-locate checkbook. They often tried to get her to lower her prices. Sometimes she spoke to them in her mother’s incomprehensible Spanish and pretended she could not understand what language they spoke. At times, an especially happy buyer, going to a ball or to a parade, gave her a bonus, or noticed she was pretty.

She was not “pretty.” Beautiful, perhaps. Her eyes were worried and watchful—she might still have been tensely afloat in the vanilla-bean-pod boat—her face drawn, her mouth hard to imagine in a smile, until she smiled. Yet she exuded an almost tropical atmosphere that was like a scent. When men looked at her they thought of TV commercials for faraway places in the Pacific, but when they actually saw her, which was rare, they thought of those dry, arid spaces closer to home. She made them think of rain.

Perhaps it was the hair on her head, so black it seemed wet. Or her eyelashes that seemed to sweep and bounce the light. Even the hair that grew beyond the hairline and into her face at temples and forehead formed wispy curls like those found in otherwise straight hair after a shower.

The rock star Arveyda saw all of this. He also saw the cape. He put it on. Resplendent within its iridescent shower of blind peacock eyes, he pranced before her watchful ones. It was he who said what no one else had even thought of.

Taking the cape off, he’d placed it about her shoulders and turned her toward the mirror.

“But of course,” he said, “this is made only for you.”

She looked in the mirror at the two of them. At his rich brownness; his nose like hers, eyes like hers (but playful and shrewd); his kinky, curly hair. His shapely lips. His small hands. His sensuous hips, low slung, cocked, in softly worn fitted jeans. Even his boots were feathered. And she looked at herself—almost his twin. Lighter skin, straighter hair, vanilla-bean-boat eyes—but . . .

“You mean it’s made for my type,” she said, sounding to herself

as if she had an accent, though she did not. It was only because of how she looked.

He laughed. Hugged her.

“Our type.”

For his cape he paid Zedé five thousand dollars, which Carlotta, deliriously happy, took to her. It was the most Zedé had ever been paid. With the money Carlotta knew they would buy a car.

The next cape she delivered to Arveyda, assuming it was for his sister, as he'd said, was for her. Though he sometimes wore his cape onstage—because it looked so great to break out of, and the fans went wild—the only time they could wear their capes in public together was for parades.

Within their magic capes that her mother had made they were indeed birds of a feather.

“The food you eat makes a difference,” he advised her. Left to herself, she ate nothing but sweet cakes—chocolate cream puffs or Twinkies—and the inevitable rice and beans. She knew nothing of salads. She thought she hated fruit.

“You are young now,” he said, “and nature is carrying your good looks along. But one day she will grow tired of your atrocious eating habits and she will stop. Then where will you be?”

Carlotta thought about her mother. How old she looked. How tired her skin was; how lusterless her hair. Her back teeth were breaking off at the gum.

Arveyda lay on his side in a bed piled high with silken pillows. The room reeked of incense and there was a faint whiff of Indian food. The room was full of smoky shadows, only one blind adjusted to let in light from the park.

“You are rich,” she said. “You can eat whatever you like.” Then, contradicting herself, she said, “Diet—I don't think diet has anything to do with looks. It is all in the genes. Some very poor people”—she no longer considered herself poor—“remain very beautiful even into old age.”

“The poor look their best when they are old,” Arveyda muttered, “because they have made it that far. A risk, anyway,” he continued, stroking her face, the wispy hair that plastered itself at the front of