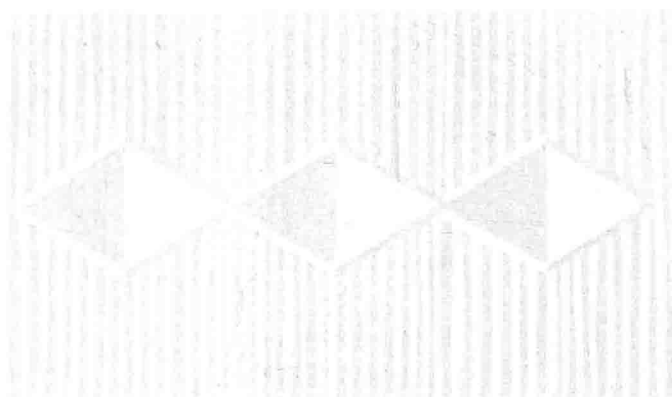


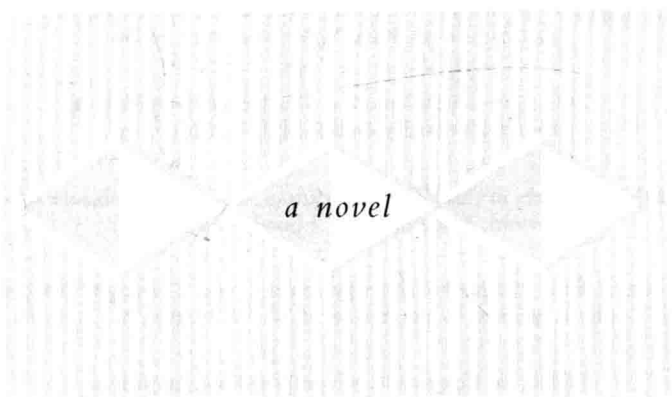
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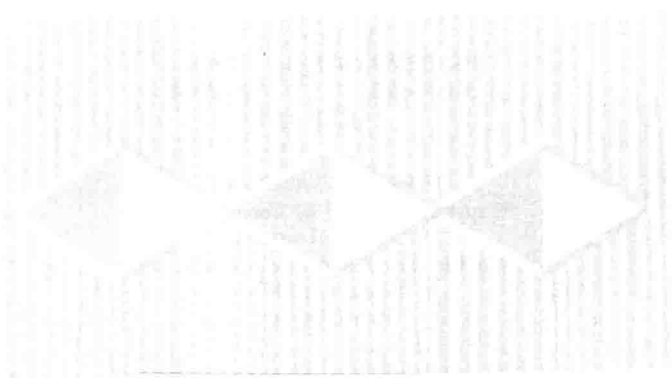


P R I D E



a novel

L O R E N E C A R Y



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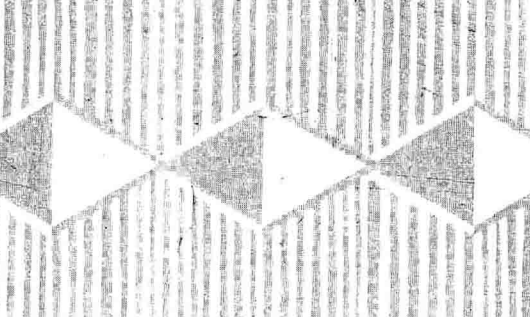
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P R I D E

BY LORENE CARY

Black Ice
The Price of a Child
Pride



Nan A. Talese

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NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

AUCKLAND

To Robert C. Smith

*and in memory of
Emily Hamilton*

“Portrait”

*Strong women
know the taste
of their own hatred
I must always be
building nests
in a windy place
I want the safety of oblique numbers
that do not include me
a beautiful woman
with ugly moments
secret and patient
as the amused and ponderous elephants
catering to Hannibal's ambition
as they swayed on their own way
home.*

—AUDRE LORDE

Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small—we
haven't time, and to see takes time, like to
have a friend takes time.

—GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

At this point in my life I don't think there's anybody I would have done a wedding for except Bryant. Maybe my son. My daughter we won't even discuss.

But once I took it on, though, you'd better believe that this wedding was going to be a very special affair, and classy too—even if the bride was pregnant and barely eighteen years old, and the wedding party put together couldn't have financed a used Chevrolet. I wanted to dignify and elevate their union, and show them what was possible. Hiram and I practically raised Bryant, and I refused to see him and his girlfriend stand up in some JP's office in their sneakers as if they didn't have anybody who was willing and able to do better. That's a terrible way to start out.

Plus, since they were getting married at our country house in Chester County, and since Hiram was looking toward Congress in a couple of years, this was my opportunity to invite a few of our neighbors and supporters out there. What that meant was that I had to keep a very firm hand on the proceedings. I told the kids they could bring their hip-hop music to the reception and all, but for the ceremony, at least, we were going to do this thing right.

Despite everything. Despite the fact that the bridesmaid arrived with her hair stuck out all over her head talking about her

cousin was supposed to do it, but the cousin's boyfriend's house caught on fire, and the kids were staying over with him, so the cousin had to go get them, and now what was she supposed to do, and did we have a beauty shop out here she could go to?

Not hardly.

So I gave Audrey my car so she could drive back to the city to get my daughter Nicki's dryer. Audrey is my old, old girlfriend and Bryant's mother. We took him after she divorced her husband and went back to finish nursing school. When her drinking got bad we kept him. Bryant is like a son to both of us.

Audrey never did like Bryant's girlfriends and couldn't abide this one. She was not totally on board with the wedding, and she did not approach the hair dryer emergency like a team player.

"I got sober so I could watch my one son throw his life away for some big-face, big-titty, big-ass gold digger with a lisp? And then run my ass ragged because the maid of honor shows up to the train station with hair look like she had first-period gym? I don't think so, Roz. She'll have to march down the aisle with them nappy spikes lookin' just like that."

I would have sent my daughter, Nicki, but she was already upstairs trying to help take in the girl's dress where the bodice hung off her chest like it was pouting. I mean everybody had to pitch in on this one.

I wanted to light into Audrey point-blank, like: "Well, what the heck *did* you get sober for?" But at this point, better, I figured, just to stay positive, *period*, with everybody.

"You know what Hiram said, Audrey. With a girl like that, the boy's sort of livin' large." I had to laugh. It just made her madder.

"That tho thweet. Y'all tho funny. . . ."

"She does have *some* ambition," I said. "I've talked to her. I can tell these things."

"What ambition? To marry my son, that's her damn ambition."

Audrey was right, but I wasn't going to give in. "She tells me she wants to open a manicure shop," I said.

"Oh, piss."

"Now, I'ma tell you again, since you seem a little slow on the uptake, Audrey: the dryer is in Nicki's closet, up on the shelf. And take this money."

"What do I need money for?"

"You always need money, Audrey; even if you don't need it, it's good to have. And take the cell phone."

Audrey calls me *bourgie*; she calls me all kind of names, but I don't care. You see who was throwing the wedding, don't you?

In fact, quiet as it's kept, if this had happened any sooner, Audrey would've been out of the picture altogether. It hadn't even been a year since she'd called us at three in the morning to come get her from behind some bucket-o'-blood bar where two men supposed to be giving her a ride took her in the alley and raped her. Hiram went and took her to emergency, where they examined her and brought in a rape counselor, advised her to get therapy and get sober, and released her. Didn't Hiram drive her straight to the city's detox and rehab center—which is right behind Betsy Ross's house, if you can believe that.

Then Hiram being Hiram, he strikes up a friendship with the young black guys who admitted her. He bought them breakfast and listened to their dream of creating a community-based rehab afterwork program. Hiram's put them in touch with Neesie's church and some funders, so it may actually happen. And Audrey's sober; that's the main thing. She's part of our lives again.

I walked Audrey to the car and repeated my instructions about the burglar alarm system to make sure she understood how to work it. She wasn't hardly listening to me.

"Here," I said, reaching into the car for my traveling pad and pencil, "I'll write it down."

"You know that yellow heifer tricked him," Audrey said.

Written directions or not, it was even money she'd set off the alarm when she got there.

"God knows I am trying to get this pulled off with some semblance of dignity and style. Will you help me, Audrey?"

"You know she got herself pregnant just so she wouldn't lose 'im."

What could I say? Bryant is like a throwback—steady and responsible to a fault—and I'd be willing to bet money that Crystal had to maneuver to get him to slip up. I'm sure Audrey was right again.

"My grandmother used to say, 'Who knows what goes on when two people close the door to their bedroom?'"

"They didn't have a bedroom. Probably didn't have a damn door."

Forty-five minutes later she called from the house to say: no dryer. So I ask Nicki, and she tells me that after she and the new Boyfriend-Who-Could-Do-No-Wrong went native with the dreads, she lent her dryer I bought her to some girl at her school who's on scholarship from Camden. Which means I can kiss that hair dryer good-bye.

"You should've asked me."

Asked her? Who bought the doggone dryer? "I know you're not talkin' to me," I said.

She shrugged and kept working on the dress. That boyfriend was a real pain in the neck. A know-it-all. Got her acting like she was a woman grown, and the fact of my presence was stunting her growth.

The maid of honor is sitting there looking me in the face talking about "That's all 'ight. She don't have to bother. With the little veil, ain't nobody gonna see. Plus I got gel."

I used every trick in the book to get Audrey to zoom out to the beauty supply place. I didn't care: guilt, shame, bribery. She called me names. I told her to take that money I gave her and buy a Gold-N-Hot hard hat and extra-strength perm, too. The bridesmaid's roots were pure steel wool—I swear to God—and steady whining.

"I told you just some gel take care of that."

Now, you don't want to be rude, because children these days take such offense, but I had to let her know very politely that there was no gel in the whole wide world could fix what she had crawling down the back of her neck.

"I have a plan for this evening, honey," I said. "And one part of that plan is for you to be as beautiful as we both know you can be. Will you work with me on this?"

My daughter, Nicki, rolled her eyes, but people respond to that sort of appeal. Besides, my other girlfriend Tamara kept popping her head in every half an hour saying, "Cut it. Just let me cut it down to the roots. I'm telling you, with eyeliner and Fulani hoops, you'd be *stunning*. Aesthetically, this could be a real turning point for you."

When we were kids Tam would tease you until you almost wanted to hit her, except she'd hit you back. All this poor girl could do was look at me with those big eyes like: please don't let that five-foot-ten woman with the dreads get near me with no scissors.

I told her to put on a sweatshirt and come trail around and give me a hand putting out the flowers.

The place looked gorgeous, if I do say so myself. It's an old farmhouse, built by a black caretaker on land given to him in the eighteen hundreds by the family he worked for. He built the front section, I understand, from local stone that he dug out of his own fields. In later years, his children and grandchildren added rooms, but then, I guess, the gene pool ran shallow, because they messed over the building and then messed up their finances so bad that we got the property for next to nothing. The one thing I'd expect that living out here would have taught them is the advantage of inheritance. White people out here hold on to their land, and they hold on to their money, which is why they have no debt and why everybody else in America is fighting over what's left.

I told her that this land has been under black ownership for more than a hundred and fifty years. And I explained to her

about the original owner and showed her the gravestone that he carved every day for fifteen years before he died out of a piece of quartz shaped like a cross he found in the creek. Fifteen years, a little at a time. He finished the carving and died a month later. It's a wonderful story. If the family didn't have the sense to keep the place up, well, too bad. I have no qualms about making use of the history they threw away. Whether it made any effect on the bridesmaid, I couldn't say.

Since everybody knew the kids didn't have any money, and the bride's family didn't have a pot to piss in, I tried to keep the presentation humble. Tamara hooked up this "whole village" theme. Tam being Tam, she did it tongue-in-cheek. But, ironic or not, Tamara understands the spirit of a thing like this, or what the spirit ought to be, and then she can translate that into something tangible. Tamara must have made fifty phone calls to get everybody in the bride's and groom's families to donate Bryant's and Crystal's favorite dishes. Then she made up cards with *kinte* cloth around the edges and that person's name, like Aunt Clara's Uncanny Corn Pudding or Uncle Sonny's Hot Sauce, with a big circle with a diagonal line through it like the no-smoking signs, except for where they put the picture of a cigarette were the words CANDY ASS, which is what Sonny always says: "If you're a candy ass, don't eat this stuff."

Now, she did all of this, mind you, even though she personally thought that half the food was "uninspired" (her word) and that only two dishes were "truly extraordinary"—the yellow mustard hot sauce and the black-eyed peas and rice with smoked turkey butts. So she filled in with her own creations, which are fantastic. I tried to get her to make this thing I read about where you bake a ham on a bed of fresh-cut grass, but she launched into a diatribe against Martha Stewart and the taste police and Ralph Lauren ads, so I let well enough alone.

She baked a gorgeous wedding cake with lemon custard in the middle and butter-cream icing and tiny broomsticks and candied pansies and mint leaves cascading down one side, which was about as far into haute cuisine, she said, as she was willing to go.

It was plenty. That thing was exquisite. Tamara brought it down from New York in three cardboard boxes in the back of her little red Karmann Ghia and assembled it at the house. I mean, she outdid herself for this wedding.

I ordered twenty flats of purple and yellow pansies for the inside and outside of the house and, because it was Valentine's Day, red and white roses for the formal arrangements. The house is mostly muted beige and cream and yellow, so the color just popped.

Then there was the wedding party. I wanted little Empire-waistline dresses in red velvet with puffy taffeta sleeves for the bridesmaids. A classic look, young, but with style. But, no. Girlfriend had to have one of those black-and-white weddings. She thought it was *da bomb*, as the kids say. Well, you have to have a very good eye to pull those things off. And money.

And I'm sorry, but it was too late for white.

She wore it, though. Blue-white to hurt your eyes and shiny and tight. I always say: A place for everything and everything in its place—and that cheesy white satin dress was not the place for that big old pregnant belly and butt. God knows baby got back *and* front to begin with, which is why Audrey started calling her T&A.

By the time the deal went down, her three attendants dropped to one. To make a long story short, they were trifling. There's no excuse. The one attendant left was the pitiful girl who had brought us the original bad hair day—although she looked fine once we finished with her, thank the Lord—in a black off-the-shoulder dress. Despite Nicki's work, the pointed tips of the bodice stuck off her chest like some kind of crazy plumes. The shoes were so big, she wobbled. Somebody gave her the idea to wear some off-white stockings that went way beyond bad to comical. Child was so busy trying to do sultry, she ended up making herself look like a crow.

I tried to tell them that an evening wedding is not the same thing as a nightclub act. But the bride was marrying the most promising young black man she'd ever met, so, hey, she knew

everything there was to know about everything. Put the *B* in bad taste, but how could she tell? I gave them like a Currier and Ives backdrop and they come on stage doing Heckle and Jeckle. Hurt your feelings if you think about it like that for too long.

So I didn't. I just sat up in the front in a red peplum jacket and—just to go along with the program—a black full-length straight skirt with a side slash, not to mention a long-line bra for control under the jacket, a long-line girdle for the skirt, and control-top panty hose underneath everything to try to control whatever was left. Dear God. My midsection was so bound up I could feel the gas pockets forming down in my gut before the service even began.

But they were happy. And I refused to be anything but. Bride's gown too white and too tight? The maid's dress too black and too big? Music out of a boom box while the groom's own mother could play piano like an angel? Hey, no problem. Therapist used to say I didn't have any boundaries with my kids, so guess what? I let them plan this whole mess by themselves. Don't come back to me ten years from now saying I made them do this or that, and they got the wrong start in their married life, and it's all my fault. I let them tack it up—some of it—to their hearts' content.

And they loved it. Or, as we used to say, they *loveded* it. All the kids, mine, too—my son, Hiram Junior, standing next to Bryant as his best man, and my daughter and her boyfriend, the so-called Afrocentric intellectual—I swear they acted like we were at the Penn relays instead of a solemn event. They put their hands up in the air and did those doggie hoots like the audience on the old Arsenio Hall show.

"They gonna make this thing into a fuckin' farce," Audrey said through her teeth. "It'th da bomb!"

I just put my head down and said a prayer.

When I looked up Arneatha was standing in front of the fireplace completely unperturbed. Arneatha can fall over her own shadow, she's so clumsy, but let her stand still somewhere and she exudes calm. I've seen her do it in a classroom: the

peacefulness spreads right through the children. Bryant and Junior were so handsome in the tuxes Hiram got them, and Bryant looked so much like Audrey's father, I couldn't help remarking on it.

"Don't even say it."

Arneatha indicated with a finger that the bridesmaid should step back and give the bride room to squeeze in next to Bryant. The ring bearer started to have a fit because he couldn't see, so Junior scooped him up and held him in one arm for the rest of the service. When the wedding party was still and the guests were finally silent, Arneatha let out that beautiful voice. It is a voice that is rich and smooth, not overpowering, but intense. It's a gift and, when she wants to, Arneatha knows how to use it.

"Dearly beloved," she began, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God and the ancestors and in the presence of these witnesses to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony."

At the point in the ceremony where you can read something, the bridesmaid and Junior stepped forward. The ring bearer, who was spoiled rotten, wouldn't get down, so Junior shifted him to his left arm and read holding his papers in the right:

" 'There is no sweeter name than that of my friend, my love, my soul's companion.' "

Then the girl read: "For the Bible says: 'Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard over the land.' "

Tamara leaned forward and whispered into my ear, " 'The voice of the turtle?' "

"And the Bible also says," he continued, " 'A faithful friend is the medicine of life.' "

Then the bridesmaid started to sing "You Are So Beautiful to Me." Her voice was husky and smallish, but right on pitch and from her throat, not all up in her nose like most of the children sing today. Audrey nodded her head. It was just right.

When she finished Arneatha went into her signature wedding