

Alberta

By Allison Fine

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Excerpt from novel *The Life and Times of Becky Kaplan*

Alberta Coleman stood at the stove making sure the fried chicken grease didn't splatter up to her face. With a dishtowel in one hand and a long fork in the other, she kept turning the chicken over and over to brown it evenly on all sides. A large glass bowl on the counter held the perfectly boiled potatoes with a potato masher resting on the side of the bowl, waiting for her to mash them. The sun from outside the kitchen window to the left of her, lowering in the sky, came in through the window and reflected off the glass bowl sending a shiver of rainbow colors onto the beige Formica counter—red, purple, orange, yellow and green. Alberta darted a quick glance at the colors, remarking to herself that it was now past six and Sarah better hurry her little self home quick for dinner. Mrs. Kaplan had left instructions about where she and Mr. Kaplan would be and how they were spending the evening at the club and would be driving to visit friends in Muskegon and wouldn't be back until Sunday. Dinner was nearly ready. A dish of nicely softened butter sat on the stove; there were rolls in the oven, with a pie baking on the top shelf. The black-eyed peas were nearly done, needed a bit more cooking to soften them up. She dropped a *glup* of butter onto the peas and sprinkled salt over the collards that were steaming all green and nice in the steamer. Over her white maid's uniform she wore Mrs. Kaplan's apron with the Yiddish word *balabusta* in red cursive letters across the front. Bennie Coleman was in the Kaplan den watching the last of a summer baseball

game between the Detroit Tigers and the Baltimore Orioles. The bases were loaded and Hank Aguirre, a big lug of a guy at 6'4" was up to bat.

Sarah walked into the kitchen from the back door just as Alberta turned the burner down on the chicken.

Hey honey chile, gimme some sugar.

Sarah kissed Alberta. Her deep, mahogany skin felt soft and sweet to the touch. Sarah noticed how smooth her face was—she had no wrinkles and her black hair was done all in soft curls about her face.

You're wearing mom's apron.

Your mama done gone with Mr. Kaplan to the club, sweet, and they goin' to Muskegon to visit the Grossman's and play golf for the weekend.

Sarah inwardly cheered.

Did they take both cars?

No, they took Mr. Kaplan's Lincoln. You ain't thinkin' of drivin' anywheres are you, cause Mrs. Kaplan left me instructions—no driving the car.

Oh, jeez, Alberta—I just want to meet my friends over at Tom's.

Maybe Bennie give you a ride. Go in the den and give him a kiss.

Sarah loped off to the den. Bennie was leaning forward on the couch, the remote to the television in one hand, a white mesh baseball cap on his head. Bennie was a tall long drink of water, 6'2", lean and agile even at the age of sixty-five, his hair still black, short cropped close to the head and glistening with hair cream. He talked in a long, slow Georgian drawl, making his words and sentences like meditative, musical links. Two words could be a paragraph and more than a sentence could take five minutes.

Well, hi my sweet pea, and how ya doin? He looked over at Sarah. My, don't you look mighty pretty.

Sarah sat next to Bennie on the couch, draping her long, thin white arms about his neck and gave him a juicy, affectionate hug and kiss.

Now, he drew out the 'now" long and deep, Alberta in the kitchen makin your fav'rit meal.

Oh, don't I know it!

We stayin' here foh the weekend, pie.

Yeah, Alberta told me.

She kissed him again and went back to the kitchen.

Alberta turned and smiled at Sarah. She looked more grown up this year. The face had changed—taken on a little more woman and less of the little girl. Her strong, thin body was coming into a nice shape. Her funny old ways were more hidden now—something else was peeking through. Alberta saw a bit of Sylvia Kaplan in her daughter, with something of the wildness of her father too.

You want to go fresh up before dinner?

Yeah—I think I'll go take a bubble bath in mother's bathtub.

You ain't got time for bubble bath, Sarah—dinner most ready now.

Ok, how about a shower?

Make it quick.

Sarah ran off upstairs.

Alberta took the chicken out of the frying grease placing all the pieces on a large platter sitting on the counter and turned off the stove. Everything was ready. She scooped

the peas into another glass bowl, whipped the potatoes until they were frothy and creamy white, mixing in the milk and the butter and some salt, drained the collard greens and put them in another bowl.

Dinner done near ready, Bennie. She turned off the oven and left the pie in there to cool a bit. She pulled the rolls out of the oven and arranged them on another platter.

Aw right—jes lemme watch this one last play.

You gwan call Sarah up now.

Uh-huh. He did not move. The game was almost over and he knew the Tigers would lose anyway. He switched off the television and sat himself down in Frank's chair at the breakfast table. Alberta went back and forth from the kitchen to the breakfast room putting all the food in the center, arranged just so. She brought glasses of ice and a pitcher of lemonade and another pitcher of water.

You gwan call Sarah?

I thought you did.

Aw...

Alberta went to the bottom of the stairs.

Sarah! You come on now for dinner!

Coming!

Sarah came down the stairs in white short-shorts and a tight pink laced top, her dark, burnished hair glowing with a deep blood red hue, brushed off her face into a loose ponytail. Silver and garnet earrings reflected the light and set off her golden skin.

She followed Alberta to the table.

Now you take all you can eat. You know Alberta make your fave-rit.

Thank you Alberta.

Yo welcome, Bennie said.

Mm-mm, Alberta mumbled as she picked some skin off a leg. Hep yo'self.

For some moments nobody talked while they ate and passed the platters around.

Sarah took a huge lump of mashed potatoes and glumped them onto her plate.

You gwan eat all that? Bennie asked.

Oh yes I am.

Tell me about the South, Sarah said suddenly, as she forked the heavenly mashed potatoes into her collard greens and mixed them all up. Mother never makes mashed potatoes like this.

I learn that from my mama and her mamma my grandmammy.

Cooking?

All of it, Bennie said.

Sarah wanted the stories. She had asked the same questions over and over of Bennie and Alberta all through the years since she was three, but every time the stories changed a little, some things got embellished, some things she never heard again, but always new things popped up, and the older she got the more they told about this and that in the South. The stories got larger as she got older. Soon she would be going away and take the stories with her.

How many children in your family?

I had fifteen brothers and sisters.

Oh my god. How could anybody have that many children?

Some of them chillen died.

How?

Two babies was stillborn and one baby died of rheumatic fever and my brother—
he died.

Oh yes, Bennie said.

How many children in your family Bennie?

We had seventeen.

What did you all do?

Alberta laughed.

Oh my chile—we had fun. We had great big meals, cause we all worked the farm,
and had picking and hoeing and all sorts of work, but then we all sits down and eats a big
meal together. And me and my sisters went to dances and danced and had fun. We went
to Church and sang.

You sang.

Alberta sing beautiful, Bennie smiled. Don't she?

Oh yeah—she taught me the gospels, Sarah said.

I taught you *All God's Chillen Got Wings*. She can play all that on the piano,
Alberta said to Bennie with pride.

Oh, yes, Bennie said, our little miss can play.

So, what was it like in the South?

Ah...Bennie eating slow, picking up a chicken bone, drawled out his ideas like a
long pull of taffy on a hot day. Colored peoples is different lives in the South, honey.

How different?

We done worked for other peoples a lot, some white folk, natch-ally, but theys had a big old cotton farm and I done picked cotton since I was knee high.

You picked cotton? Did people still do that when you were little?

Alberta laughed. Oh yes, the South is cotton.

Didn't you go to school?

Yes'm, we alls went to school, but I quit in third grade cause I had to work and help the others coming after.

I made it up to seventh grade, Alberta said, cause I was thinking I would be a nurse. But then I met Bennie and we come here up North.

Do you like it here up North? Sarah asked. Please pass the greens.

Alberta passed the greens.

Oh, folks treat us right nice up here. You know Bennie worked the floor at Motor Wheel till his hearing went bad. He was a presser. Then he was a driver for the McLean's and they gives him the Cadillac. I was cleaning for Mrs. McLean until I came here to clean for your mama and take care of you all.

I know.

Bennie's pristine green Cadillac, 1959, with leather upholstery, in perfect condition. He took complete care of that car from inside out. It looked brand new and the engine purred like a kitten.

She done me right.

Who? Sarah asked.

That old Cadillac. She done me right. Bennie looked over at Sarah.

Alberta laughed.

Oh, I say, Alberta exclaimed.

What happened to your brother? The one that died?

Thas story we got to tell you. Colored folks have been had some bad times. You know that.

Yes, I know that. They have bad times up here too.

Nothun like down there. Mmm-mm.

You want some more chicken, honey? Alberta asked her.

Oh, I am so full.

You best save room for the pie, Bennie told her. Alberta, you done make the pie?

Uh-huh.

Alberta went into the kitchen and came back with the apple pie.

I got the whip cream your mama had in the freezer.

She cut three slices and placed them on the dessert plates she'd brought from the kitchen, poured out some more lemonade in everybody's glasses and looked over at Bennie.

You got it all now?

Yes'm. Sit down and eat yo pie.

Alberta sat. Sarah dug into the pie. The crust was flaky and perfect, the apples oozed all over her plate, the tart and tangy sweetness of the taste mingling in her mouth.

My brother done got hisself in trouble.

He went to jail?

No, honey—he weren't but thirteen.

Oh.

Some white boys up the road—they's Ku Klux Klan, Bennie said.

I know about that.

They's called us the niggers down the way. You know. They way they do down south. They weren't Klan, Bennie. Maybe their daddy's were—but these was young kids, maybe sixteen, seventeen.

Oh they's was oldern' that, Bennie said, finishing off his pie. Some of them's was nigh onto twenty.

You tellin' this story? Alberta spooned some more whipped cream onto her pie.

We worked their patch offed and on, you know. Offed and on and they's bigger boys, much bigger than Willie reckon. But we has our own piece too, a little piece, but biggern' theirs.

You had land.

Oh yes. We growed everything. My pappy growed all the food we ate.

Colored boys got to watch what they says, Bennie said, drawing out the a.

Oh, Willie done nothing, he weren't but thirteen! Bennie, you ain't been there!

Ah.. he said. You tell me Alberta. He hummed a low down laugh to himself.

Willie is your son.

Yes'm but Willie done be her brother too, way back.

Oh. So you named Willie after your brother.

There was silence.

We ought not be telling this story now, Alberta.

Why not? She fit to hear it.

Yo folks won't like it.

I won't tell them, I promise. I don't give a damn what they think anyway.

Don't you swear at our table! Bennie said, in something like an affectation of sternness.

Sarah looked down at her plate.

Sorry.

Oh he don' mean it. Give'im some sugar.

Sarah leaned over the table and kissed Bennie.

I know you don mean no harm—you jes got to be taught.

I understand, Sarah said, a sudden sense of shame stealing over her like a cloud.

Tell me about Willie.

I do. But I gots to clear these plates, Alberta said.

I'll do it. Sarah jumped up and started clearing.

Yo right good girl, Bennie said as Sarah cleared the table, bringing the sponge from the kitchen and wiping things down.

Alberta went into the kitchen and started clearing up.

I gots to put these things into the dishwasher.

I'll do it, Sarah told her.

No, yous sits down with Bennie.

Sarah obeyed while Alberta washed up.

So what happened to Willie? Sarah asked Bennie.

I dunno. Now you gwan have to ask Alberta that. It her story.

Alberta came back, a dishtowel around her waist, hooked around the apron tie and hanging down to her knees.

You want more, honey?

No, I's fine, Alberta. You done tell her the story.

Wille were a boy of thirteen, like I said. A good boy but sometimes goin off, you know.

Going off?

Getting into trouble—this'n'that, what boys do. Stealing a chicken or a bunch of tomatoes, jes stuff kids do. We wus country folk all around; always goin' in and out of each other's patches. Nothing serious. But these white boys has it in for Willie cause he was a bright boy and we wus thinkin' he might right go to college. He was readin' and writin' early—we all taught him.

Was he youngest?

Oh no, they was five after him, but Willie was the smartest. So one days Willie gets into something—I don know what—

He steal something from the wrong patch, Bennie added.

Somethin'. Don' know what. And they'd get after him. He run back and says to us that they's after him.

The white boys?

Yes, some white boys up the road. But we don't pay no mind—it goes on all the time and we wus fixin' to go to a dance and Willie was going with us for the first time.

He had a little girl he liked.

At thirteen?

My mama got married at fourteen. Me and Bennie done got together when we was fifteen.

Things start early in the South, Sarah said.

Oh yes, but then we wus growed up early, Bennie said.

So we all goes to the dance and then we all walk home. It was a moon night out, big moon, golden up in the sky, real big.

Oh, I can picture that moon.

Willie stayed with his girl, I think—they was doing a moon of their own, I reckon! But we's all get home and clean up for mama, get all the things out for the next morning and go to bed. We all's slept in one big room with a great big bed here and a big bed there. It was hot them nights so we sleep without the covers, just in our underwear.

Next morning Willie don't come down to breakfast and nobody know where he is.

Mmm-mm, Bennie said, the low tones of his voice sending an arc of deep vibration into Sarah's stomach.

I goes out to look for Willy, Alberta said and she wiped her eyes.

Oh, Alberta—Sarah started.

No, you gwan Alberta.

Alberta got up for some Kleenex on the sideboard and dabbed her eyes with it.

My eyes is bad. I got the glaucoma you know.

I know.

You member when you threaded that needle for me? You was only three! I'll do it you tells me and you did!

I remember.

Alberta don' want to tell this story.

Oh please finish it, Alberta.

You ain't gwan a like it, Bennie said.

No, but—

Aw right, Alberta said, I's fine. We go on out the road past our house by some boy's patch somewhere's down the road, and I seen a shadow before I seen the thing. A shadow of a body on the ground from up high in a tree. We crep' on up closer and I member clearly my sister Erline let out a scream like to chill you to the grave—when she done seed who it was, and we all did. Her screaming were like some kind of screeching animal from somewhere's else. I member telling her to stop so's we could get a good look and cuts him down. Willie done been hanged in the tree. By these boys. They done hanged him. We knowed they done it but nobody could do a thing about it.

You couldn't get a lawyer or call the police or something?

Bennie laughed, like a horn wailing out of a still night. Alberta was silent.

No, honey, we couldn't do that. We cuts him down and takes him home to our mama. His body all scraped and dirty. We cleaned him up. Our mama screamed and wailed all over the place. My daddy's never says a word but I knowed he was angry because he just didn't talk at all. And then we take Willy up to the Baptist church and have his funeral and bury him. He buried there—at Union Baptist.

Do you see his grave?

Every so's often.

I can't believe people could do things like this! Sarah was enraged.

Peoples do's it, Bennie said. They do's it.

So we comes up North. Colored peoples do better up here.

They still have a long way to go, Sarah said, angry and hurt and filled with an awful sense of doom. We better change it.

We's changin' it. Reverend King is changing it.

Yes, Alberta said, Bless his soul.

Sarah went over and kissed Alberta.

No you don' worry yourself 'bout this baby, this was a long time ago. Many years we talkin' maybe forty, fifty years back.

It don' matter. When you tell it like it was today, Bennie added.

Yes, Sarah said. It is today.

Maybe not. Colored folks is getting mighty proud these days.

They ought to.

Oh, no, Bennie's voiced rocked Sarah's body down to her bowels, No sense in getting too uppity.

We gots to pray, Alberta said softly.

What do we pray?

We pray Jesus help us, baby, give us the love and strength to carry on. You know—that song I been singing when you was little? *You can be saved, O yes, you can be saved--*

Alberta, she done be raised Jewish, Bennie interrupted.

Oh let her sing. I love it.

The only thing keeps me going is I knows God loves me and he loves us all.

Maybe Willie is up in heaven and he knows that, Alberta.

Willie with Jesus, Alberta said. Now what you gwan do tonight?

I'm not sure. Maybe somebody will call and I'll go to this party.

You best go on to a party when you's young, Bennie said.

Yes, I best do, Sarah told him. She looked out the window and saw the dark blue hues of twilight meet the gold tones of the last of the day.

I'm going to put on some makeup, she announced.

You gwan do that and we's watch some TV.

Sarah left Alberta and Ben sitting at the table over the remains of lemonade and apple pie. Alberto turned her face to Bennie and he took her hand in his two large ones. The front-side of his hands were deep, deep mahogany but the palms were like a light, sweet cocoa brown.

Now why you gwan tell her that story?

She most needs to hear it.

Bennie shook his head. I don' know, Alberta. Most ways this kind of thing cause trouble.

This girl has always been trouble—right from the start! Jes let her make trouble the right way.

These white folks train their chillen up to be like them.

Not Sarah. She don't be like nobody.

Alberta looked at Bennie, this man she had loved for nigh on fifty years now, since she was a girl of fifteen. His face had softened up a bit, the strong lines of the jaw and chin were a moving a bit south, but it was still a very handsome man she had. Tall, strong, with such a deep, sweet heart. Those moments in bed, she could remember—how he loved her with his strength and his gentle ways, how he held her deep and tight. They

been together all their lives, working in service and raising up Willie. She done right by Willie, she done right by Bennie too. When he most had to leave the factory she did her part and took those jobs as a maid and a cook. She would most like to have more time in the little garden of theirs in the house he bought her on the west side, but she kept to her bargain and took care of her man. And Bennie, he weren't no kind of man to jes sit round the house and babble—he was up early mornings polishing his car and chauffeuring and driving for the peoples—he drove for Mr. McLean for fifteen years.

And now--he sixty-five—he most ready to relax after all his work. Jesus done right by me, Alberta thought, he give me this beautiful man all my life.

When she thought of Mrs. Kaplan and all the unhappiness and troubles in her marriage—Sylvia and Alberta were most like friends, almost, even though there was that distance, that barrier, but Sarah—she was her baby. She had Sarah from three on and she raised up that girl and taught her the gospel songs and even took her to Church when the folks was away. Beautiful Sarah.

I love her like my own, Alberta spoke aloud.

Yeah, she done turn out a mighty pretty young woman.

She got some ways, though, don't she? Alberta laughed.

Yesss..Bennie drew out the yes for a long time. She got some ways.

That little thing pulled the fire hydrant when she wuz three!

They both laughed.

Ooo-wee! Alberta exclaimed, Miz Kaplan fit to be tied!

Bennie chuckled.

She warn't but a baby.

Alberta smiled and looked out the window at the sun making a platter of gold on the lawn sending fingers of light and shadow, a burnished red color snaking across the grass.

You gimme my old kiss and I go watch de television, Bennie said, catching Alberta's eye. She kissed him lightly on the cheek, brushing her hand across the back of his head.

I gots to finish and clean up the kitchen and do my laundry. Calls me when Sarah getting ready to go out.

I will.

Bennie got up from the table, while Alberta took herself back into the kitchen. Standing at the kitchen window by the stove her thoughts were sliding visual memory, moments falling open like a rain of light and shadow and fastening into the room of her mind with a sigh.

She done been blessed, she reckoned that. Like a sea, like a laugh, like waves, like a silence run underground, and even the grief of Willy could follow itself into the seamless borders of all that memory.