

# From Hardship to Hope

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“Hello. Come in. My name is Zoe Smyth and you will be staying with me just for a day, maybe two.”

“I’m Ruby.” The words come out more ragged than intended as she twists through the doorway, a firm grip on the garbage bag with one hand and the blue blanket with the other; arriving with empty pockets and tempered hope.

“Just put your things here on the chair.”

Ruby Blue sluffs off the blanket and lets it and the bag drop on the old-fashioned chair, wooden arms and legs with animal feet carved on them, and shiny formal-looking striped fabric, like you might see in a fancy hotel lobby.

“Thanks.” Ruby Blue thinks to herself,

*This place smells stale, like ol’ books and Pine-Sol. She’s White like Casper and wrinkly like clothes fresh out of the dryer. Damn, and why is she already tryin’ to get rid of me? But, it’s not about just me anymore. Gotta do this for the baby. Remember, it’s only temporary.*

Zoe gasps, inwardly.

*This girl is looking at me with unreadable eyes that won’t meet mine, yet won’t look away from my face. OH MY GOD. She is pregnant! And tattoos! This isn’t going to happen. She can’t possibly stay here. Her eyes are dull. She doesn’t blink. Her head is lowered like an animal about to charge. There is something wrong with her. Covid? No smile lines around her eyes, but I guess she is only 17 so they might not be there yet. So young. SO pregnant! No, I will call Eleanor right now and tell her to send the Uber back. This cannot happen.*

“Would, would you like something to drink?” Zoe stammers.

“Yes, do you have soda? It settles my stomach.”

*Oh my God, this girl IS sick. Her face is like the drawing of the lion’s face on, what’s the name of that book by D’Egville? Into the Lion’s Den. That’s it, Brits going to South Africa. The arrogant, but frightened stare of those lion eyes. Dangerous eyes. Unblinking eyes. African eyes. She is Black too. Black and pregnant. Black and tattooed. Black and pierced. What have I gotten myself into?*

"I have some green tea. Want to try that?" Zoe offers, moving into formal gracious hostess mode.

"Sure. Uh, where's your bathroom?"

"Right down the hall," Zoe gestures to her left.

As the electric kettle begins to heat the tea water, Eleanor answers the phone. Half whispering, Zoe pleads, "Eleanor, you need to send the Uber back. This isn't going to work. She is pregnant! You didn't tell me that."

"Well, we don't have any options right now. It's just for a night or two. She isn't about to deliver, so you won't have to deal with breaking water and the like."

"No. No. Really. Send the Uber back."

"It is just for a night or two. I'll call as soon as I locate a shelter bed somewhere in the city. I'm looking," Eleanor explains.

Big hesitation, then Zoe sighs, "Well. Okay, okay. I guess."

Overhearing part of the conversation, Ruby Blue rolls her eyes. "My pregnancy won't rub off on ya. It's not contagious. I'm not a thief. I won't steal china plates. I do have manners, thank you very much."

Pretending she didn't hear the china comment, Zoe utters, "There is green tea and black tea, which do you prefer?"

"Don't matter."

*It really don't matter. I ain't drinking this shit anyway.*

"I guess you should stay out of the kitchen while we drink our tea, unmasked. I'll just put yours on this folding table. My Fred and I used this as a way to pass food when he was so sick, to avoid having contact."

Shaken, Ruby Blue blurts out, "Wait a minute. Your husband died in this house?! I ain't stayin' here!" Ruby Blue twists toward her blanket and the black bag, ready to run.

"No, no, Ruby. It was a month ago and he died in the hospital, with a nurse gently holding his head."

"Oh, sorry. I can't get sick, with the baby and all. I do my best, I really do."

Water gurgles in the teapot and Zoe offers, "I made green tea for you; it will be soothing for, uh, you and the baby. It's herbal."

"I've never had green tea before, or any tea actually," Ruby Blue utters, voice low with an accompanying scowl.

The two women sit, distanced, unmasked for the first time, looking at each other, slowly, visually circling like lionesses around a carcass. Wary. Awkward. Intense.

*Oh, God, and a nose piercing. A knife! Are there more tattoos I can't see? She isn't like my students were. One night. Only one night. I won't sleep for a minute.*

Ruby Blue sips the hot tea and frowns, "Got any sugar?"

"Sure." Zoe places an antique sugar bowl painted with tiny pink roses and a small silver spoon on the folding table that separates the women. A hand-embroidered tablecloth decorated with cross-stitched daisies and dandelions, marred by two small amoeba-shaped stains that never came out in washings, covers the worn card table.

*I've never seen a Black hand touch the sugar bowl. What would Granny have said about this image?*

In her teacher voice, Zoe suggests, "Not too much girl; you need to stay healthy for the baby."

"Don't be calling me girl, I'm a woman," Ruby Blue replies sullenly.

*What you, my Mama, or somethin'? No, more like the age of an OG.*

Uncomfortable, Zoe changes the subject. "Want to go for a walk after we finish our tea?"

"I don't do walks in the cold; my ankles swolle' anyways," Ruby Blue replies, half turning away and avoiding eye contact.

"Well, that is a reason to walk; motion is lotion."

*What am I, her keeper, her mother? I sound like my own long-deceased mom. Drat. What is she really thinking, being in this space, my space?*

"What?" Half listening as she looks around the living room that has a definite museum feel to it, Ruby Blue twists her head to the side in a questioning motion.

"Keep those joints moving. This is what my Qigong teacher always instructs as she implores us, her senior students, to work on flowing movement, gentle breathing and, yes, mindfulness. Well, before Covid that was."

"Joints? Qigong?"

*What the hell is this woman talkin' about? Movin' joints?*

Seeing Ruby Blue's perplexed look, Zoe adds, "You know, knees, ankles, toes."

With pure disbelief, Ruby Blue pauses, then mutters, "Ohhhhh, those kinda joints."

"What does your doctor say about your swollen ankles?"

*How do I talk with this angry young woman? She truly is not like my students were. I'd say deferential is the word I'd use to describe my student/professor relationships. Is this question too personal? She is clearly five or six months pregnant. Oh, God.*

"I ain't have no doctor and I'm not figuring to see one in a hurry. That costs money and I sure wouldn't be in this mess if I had any of that."

*Who does this lady think she is? Why is she all in my business? She don't need to worry about me. I got me.*

"No doctor? Have you had any pre-natal checkups?"

*What if she is ill? She looks healthy enough, if sullen and sad, other than those ankles which, yes, are swollen. Depressed? Likely she is depressed; weighted down mentally and physically. A spirit of heaviness. That makes sense. I can connect with that feeling. I'm smiling inside remembering I was just telling myself, after Fred's death, that I wanted to be around people who were in pain and who understood loss. So, we could talk, hold sorrow together, and share our exhausting grief. Maybe that wish has been granted in an odd way.*

"I said, I ain't got a doctor. This ain't none of your business anyway; stay in your lane. You don't even know me like that."

*Who drinks this stuff? There ain't enough sugar on the planet to make tea drinkable.*



Jaylin & Judith, editing