



SPECIAL
MOVIE
EDITION

A MODERN-DAY SLAVE,
AN INTERNATIONAL ART DEALER,
AND THE UNLIKELY WOMAN
WHO BOUND THEM TOGETHER

SAME KIND
OF
DIFFERENT AS ME

RON HALL
AND
DENVER MOORE

WITH LYNN VINCENT

THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY
THAT INSPIRED MILLIONS

Praise for *Same Kind of Different As Me* Special Movie Edition

I deeply admire what Debbie, Ron, and Denver have been able to achieve on behalf of people in need. Their determination to make a difference has inspired people around the world to recognize in themselves an ability to implement invaluable changes through seemingly small kindnesses. I'm honored to share in telling Debbie's story and to be part of this beautiful effort to perpetuate the legacy of her work.

—RENÉE ZELLWEGER

It's a rare opportunity for an actor to be blessed with a role so soulful. To embody Denver's spirit was at once an emotional challenge and an extreme privilege, learning the story of a man who came from so little and gave so much. The givers truly are the gate-openers for the world. I hope that we all can find the best parts of Denver's life and continue that work to benefit humanity.

—DJIMON HOUNSOU

Homelessness is epidemic and anyone who fights the battle to help correct the problem deserves our respect and appreciation. Denver Moore and Ron Hall did more than most to try to shine a light on this plight and, in doing so, revealed that perhaps the most powerful tool in battling homelessness is to simply engage the people around us whose circumstances have left them with less. Working with an excellent cast and crew to help tell the story of Ron's challenging personal journey was a creative joy.

—GREG KINNEAR

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1

Well—a poor Lazarus poor as I
When he died he had a home on high . . .
The rich man died and lived so well
When he died he had a home in hell . . .
You better get a home in that Rock, don't you see?

—NEGRO SPIRITUAL

Denver

Until Miss Debbie, I'd never spoke to no white woman before. Just answered a few questions, maybe—it wadn't really *speakin*. And to me, even that was mighty risky since the last time I was fool enough to open my mouth to a white woman, I wound up half-dead and nearly blind.

I was maybe fifteen, sixteen years old, walkin down the red dirt road that passed by the front of the cotton plantation where I lived in Red River Parish, Louisiana. The plantation was big and flat, like a whole lotta farms put together with a bayou snakin all through it. Cypress trees squatted like spiders in the water, which was the color of pale green apples. There was a lotta different fields on that spread, maybe a hundred, two hundred acres each, lined off with hardwood trees, mostly pecans.

Wadn't too many trees right by the road, though, so when I was walkin that day on my way back from my auntie's house—she was my grandma's sister on my daddy's side—I was right out in the open. Purty soon, I seen this white lady standin by her car, a blue Ford, 'bout a 1950, '51 model,

somehın like that. She was standin there in her hat and her skirt, like maybe she'd been to town. Looked to me like she was tryin to figure out how to fix a flat tire. So I stopped.

"You need some help, ma'am?"

"Yes, thank you," she said, lookin purty grateful to tell you the truth. "I really do."

I asked her did she have a jack, she said she did, and that was all we said.

Well, 'bout the time I got the tire fixed, here come three white boys ridin outta the woods on bay horses. They'd been huntin, I think, and they come trottin up and didn't see me 'cause they was in the road and I was ducked down fixin the tire on the other side of the car. Red dust from the horses' tracks floated up over me. First, I got still, thinkin I'd wait for em to go on by. Then I decided I didn't want em to think I was hidin, so I started to stand up. Right then, one of em asked the white lady did she need any help.

"I reckon not!" a redheaded fella with big teeth said when he spotted me. "She's got a nigger helpin her!"

Another one, dark-haired and kinda weasel-lookin, put one hand on his saddle horn and pushed back his hat with the other. "Boy, what you doin botherin this nice lady?"

He wadn't nothin but a boy hisself, maybe eighteen, nineteen years old. I didn't say nothin, just looked at him.

"What you lookin at, boy?" he said and spat in the dirt.

The other two just laughed. The white lady didn't say nothin, just looked down at her shoes. 'Cept for the horses chufflin, things got quiet. Like the yella spell before a cyclone. Then the boy closest to me slung a grass rope around my neck, like he was ropin a calf. He jerked it tight, cuttin my breath. The noose poked into my neck like burrs, and fear crawled up through my legs into my belly.

I caught a look at all three of them boys, and I remember thinkin none of em was much older'n me. But their eyes was flat and mean.

"We gon' teach you a lesson about botherin white ladies," said the one holdin the rope. That was the last thing them boys said to me.

I don't like to talk much 'bout what happened next, 'cause I ain't lookin

for no pity party. That's just how things was in Louisiana in those days. Mississippi, too, I reckon, since a coupla years later, folks started tellin the story about a young colored fella named Emmett Till who got beat till you couldn't tell who he was no more. He'd whistled at a white woman, and some other good ole boys—seemed like them woods was full of em—didn't like that one iota. They beat that boy till one a' his eyeballs fell out, then tied a cotton-gin fan around his neck and threwed him off a bridge into the Tallahatchie River. Folks says if you was to walk across that bridge today, you could still hear that drowned young man cryin out from the water.

There was lots of Emmett Tills, only most of em didn't make the news. Folks says the bayou in Red River Parish is full to its pea-green brim with the splintery bones of colored folks that white men done fed to the gators for covetin their women, or maybe just lookin cross-eyed. Wadn't like it happened ever day. But the chance of it, the threat of it, hung over the cotton fields like a ghost.

I worked them fields for nearly thirty years, like a slave, even though slavery had supposedly ended when my grandma was just a girl. I had a shack I didn't own, two pairs a' overalls I got on credit, a hog, and a out-house. I worked them fields, plantin and plowin and pickin and givin all the cotton to the Man that owned the land, all without no paycheck. I didn't even know what a paycheck was.

It might be hard for you to imagine, but I worked like that while the seasons rolled by from the time I was a little bitty boy, all the way past the time that president named Kennedy got shot dead in Dallas.

All them years, there was a freight train that used to roll through Red River Parish on some tracks right out there by Highway 1. Ever day, I'd hear it whistle and moan, and I used to imagine it callin out about the places it could take me . . . like New York City or Detroit, where I heard a colored man could get paid, or California, where I heard nearly everbody that breathed was stackin up paper money like flapjacks. One day, I just got tired a' bein poor. So I walked out to Highway 1, waited for that train to slow down some, and jumped on it. I didn't get off till the doors opened up again, which happened to be in Fort Worth, Texas. Now when a black

man who can't read, can't write, can't figger, and don't know how to work nothin but cotton comes to the big city, he don't have too many of what white folks call "career opportunities." That's how come I wound up sleepin on the streets.

I ain't gon' sugarcoat it: The streets'll turn a man nasty. And I had been nasty, homeless, in scrapes with the law, in Angola prison, and homeless again for a lotta years by the time I met Miss Debbie. I want to tell you this about her: She was the skinniest, nosiest, pushiest woman I had ever met, black or white.

She was so pushy, I couldn't keep her from finding out my name was Denver. She investigated till she found it out on her own. For a long time, I tried to stay completely outta her way. But after a while, Miss Debbie got me to talkin 'bout things I don't like to talk about and tellin things I ain't never told nobody—even about them three boys with the rope. Some of them's the things I'm fixin to tell you.

2

Ron

Life produces some inglorious moments that live forever in your mind. One from 1952 remains seared on my brain like the brand on a longhorn steer. In those days, all schoolchildren had to bring urine samples to school, which public health workers would then screen for dread diseases. As a second grader at Riverside Elementary in Fort Worth, Texas, I carefully carried my pee to school in a Dixie cup like all the other good boys and girls. But instead of taking it to the school nurse, I mistakenly took it directly to Miss Poe, the meanest and ugliest teacher I ever had.

My error sent her into a hissy fit so well-developed you'd have thought I'd poured my sample directly into the coffee cup on her desk. To punish me, she frog-marched me and the whole second-grade class out to the playground like a drill sergeant, and clapped us to attention.

"Class, I have an announcement," she rasped, her smoke-infected voice screeching like bad brakes on an 18-wheeler. "Ronnie Hall will not be participating in recess today. Because he was stupid enough to bring his Dixie cup to the classroom instead of the nurse's office, he will spend the next thirty minutes with his nose in a circle."

Miss Poe then produced a fresh stick of chalk and scrawled on the redbrick schoolhouse wall a circle approximately three inches above the spot where my nose would touch if I stood on flat feet. Humiliated, I slunk forward, hiked up on tiptoes, and stuck my nose on the wall. After

five minutes, my eyes crossed and I had to close them, remembering that my mama had warned me never to look cross-eyed or they could get locked up that way. After fifteen minutes, my toes and calves cramped fiercely, and after twenty minutes, my tears washed the bottom half of Miss Poe's circle right off the wall.

With the strain of loathing peculiar to a child shamed, I hated Miss Poe for that. And as I grew older, I wished I could send her a message that I wasn't stupid. I hadn't thought of her in years, though, until a gorgeous day in June 1978 when I cruised down North Main Street in Fort Worth in my Mercedes convertible, and security waved me through the gate onto the private tarmac at Meacham Airfield like a rock star.

It would have been perfect if I could have had Miss Poe, a couple of old girlfriends—Lana and Rita Gail, maybe—and, what the heck, my whole 1963 Haltom High graduating class, lined up parade-style so they could all see how I'd risen above my lower-middle-class upbringing. Looking back, I'm surprised I made it to the airfield that day, since I'd spent the whole ten-mile trip from home admiring myself in the rearview mirror.

I guided the car to the spot where a pilot stood waiting before a private Falcon jet. Dressed in black slacks, a starched white shirt, and spit-shined cowboy boots, he raised his hand in greeting, squinting against the Texas heat already boiling up from the tarmac.

"Good morning, Mr. Hall," he called over the turbines' hum. "Need some help with those paintings?"

Carefully, and one at a time, we moved three Georgia O'Keeffe paintings from the Mercedes to the Falcon. Together, the paintings were valued at just shy of \$1 million. Two years earlier, I had sold the same collection—two of O'Keeffe's iconic flower paintings and one of a skull—to a wildly wealthy south Texas woman for half a million dollars. When she tore a personal check for the full amount from her Hermès leather checkbook, I asked her jokingly if she was sure her check was good.

"I hope so, hon," she said, smiling through her syrupy-sweet Texas drawl. "I own the bank."

Now, that client was divesting herself of both a gold-digging husband

and the O’Keeffes. The new buyer, an elegant, fiftyish woman who owned one of the finest apartments on Madison Avenue and probably wore pearls while bathing, was also divorcing. She was hosting a luncheon for me and a couple of her artsy, socialite friends that afternoon to celebrate her new acquisitions. No doubt an adherent to the philosophy that living well is the best revenge, she had used part of her king’s-ransom divorce settlement to purchase the O’Keeffes at nearly double their former value. She was far too rich to negotiate the \$1 million price tag. That suited me just fine, since it made my commission on the deal an even \$100,000.

My client had sent the Falcon down from New York to retrieve me. Inside, I stretched out in a buttercream leather seat and perused the day’s headlines. The pilot arrowed down the runway, took off to the south, then banked gently north. On the climb-out, I gazed down at Fort Worth, a city about to be transformed by local billionaires. It was much more than a face-lift: Giant holes in the ground announced the imminent construction of great gleaming towers of glass and steel. Galleries, cafés, museums, and upscale hotels would soon rise to join banks and legal offices, turning downtown Fort Worth from a sleepy cow-town into an urban epicenter with a pulse.

So ambitious was the project that it was systematically displacing the city’s homeless population, which was actually a stated goal, a way to make our city a nicer place to live. Looking down from three thousand feet, I was secretly glad they were pushing the bums to the other side of the tracks, as I despised being panhandled every day on my way to work out at the Fort Worth Club.

My wife, Debbie, didn’t know I felt quite that strongly about it. I played my nouveau elitism pretty close to the vest. After all, it had been only nine years since I’d been making \$450 a month selling Campbell’s soup for a living, and only seven since I’d bought and sold my first painting, secretly using—stealing?—Debbie’s fifty shares of Ford Motor Company stock, a gift from her parents when she graduated from Texas Christian University.

Ancient history as far as I was concerned. I had shot like a rocket from canned soup to investment banking to the apex of the art world. The plain truth was, God had blessed me with two good eyes: one for art and the other

for a bargain. But you couldn't have told me that at the time. To my way of thinking, I'd bootstrapped my way from lower-middle-class country boy into the rarified atmosphere that oxygenates the lifestyles of the Forbes 400.

Debbie had threatened to divorce me for using the Ford stock—"The only thing I owned outright, myself!" she fumed—but I nudged her toward a cautious forgiveness with shameless bribes: a gold Piaget watch and a mink jacket from Koslow's.

At first, I dabbled in art sales while keeping my investment-banking day job. But in 1975, I cleared \$10,000 on a Charles Russell painting I sold to a man in Beverly Hills who wore gold-tipped white-python cowboy boots and a diamond-studded belt buckle the size of a dinner plate. After that, I quit banking and ventured out to walk the art-world tightwire without a net.

It paid off. In 1977, I sold my first Renoir, then spent a month in Europe, spreading my name and news of my keen eye among the Old World art elite. It didn't take long for the zeros to begin piling up in the bank accounts of Ron and Debbie Hall. We didn't enjoy the same income level as my clients, whose average net worth notched in somewhere between \$50 and \$200 million. But they invited us into their stratosphere: yachting in the Caribbean, wing shooting in the Yucatán, hobnobbing at island resorts and old-money mansions.

I lapped it up, adopting as standard uniforms a closetful of Armani suits. Debbie was less enamored with the baubles of wealth. In 1981 I called her from the showroom floor of a Scottsdale, Arizona, Rolls-Royce dealer who had taken a shine to an important western painting I owned.

"You're not going to believe what I just traded for!" I said the instant she picked up the phone at our home in Fort Worth. I was sitting in the "what," a \$160,000 fire-engine-red Corniche convertible with white leather interior piped in red to match. I jabbered a description into my satellite phone.

Debbie listened carefully, then delivered her verdict: "Don't you dare bring that thing home. Don't even drive it out of the showroom. I'd be embarrassed to be seen in a car like that, or even have it in our driveway."

Had she really just called a top-of-the-line Rolls *that thing*? "I think it would be fun," I volunteered.

“Ron, honey?”

“Yes?” I said, suddenly hopeful at her sweet tone.

“Does that Rolls have a rearview mirror?”

“Yes.”

“Look in it,” she said. “Do you see a rock star?”

“Uh, no . . .”

“Just remember, you sell pictures for a living. Now get out of the Rolls, get your Haltom City butt on a plane, and come home.”

I did.

The same year Debbie snubbed the Rolls, I opened a new gallery on Main Street in Fort Worth’s blossoming cultural district, an area called Sundance Square, and hired a woman named Patty to manage it. Though we displayed impressionist and modern master paintings—Monet, Picasso, and their peers—worth several hundred thousand dollars, we were careful about posting prices or keeping too much inventory on-site, as a good number of derelicts had not yet been convinced to move to their new accommodations under the freeways to the southeast. Greasy and smelly, several came in each day to cool down, warm up, or case the place. Most of them were black, and I felt sure they all were also alcoholics and addicts, though I had never taken the time to hear their stories—I didn’t really care.

One day, a drug-dazed black man, filthy in thread-worn army fatigues, shambling into the gallery. “How much you want for that picture?” he slurred, jabbing his finger at a \$250,000 Mary Cassatt.

Fearing he might rob me, I tried to humor him while evading the truth. “How much you got in your pocket?”

“Fifty dollahs,” he said.

“Then give it to me, and you can walk out the door with that picture.”

“No, suh! I ain’t givin you fifty dollahs for that picture!”

“Well, this isn’t a museum and I didn’t charge admission, so if you’re not buying, how am I supposed to pay the rent?” I then invited him to leave.

A few days later, he returned with an equally nasty-looking partner and perpetrated a little smash-and-grab, bursting out onto the sidewalk with a sackful of cash and artisan jewelry. Patty hit the real-live panic button we’d

had installed, and I ran down from the upstairs suite, commencing a classic movie-style chase, with the robbers ducking down alleys and leaping trash cans, and me in hot pursuit, yelling, "Stop those men! I've been robbed!"

I sprinted at first, but slowed down a little after it occurred to me to wonder what I would do with the bums if I caught them. (I yelled louder to make up for running slower.) By the time the police collared them a few blocks away, the crooks were empty-handed, having left a ten-block trail of jewelry and \$20 bills.

The incident firmly fixed my image of homeless people as a ragtag army of ants bent on ruining decent people's picnics. I had no idea at that time that God, in His elaborate sense of humor, was laying the groundwork for one of them to change my life.

3

Nobody ever told me how I got my name Denver. For the longest time, nobody ever called me nothin but Li'l Buddy. Supposably, when I was just a little bitty fella, PawPaw, my granddaddy, used to carry me around in the front pocket of his overalls. So that's why they called me Li'l Buddy, I guess.

I never really knowed much about my mama. She was just a young girl, too young to take good care of me. So she did what she had to do and gave me over to PawPaw and Big Mama. That's just the way things was on the plantations and the farms in Red River Parish. Colored families came in all different shapes and sizes. You might have a growed woman livin in a shotgun shack, pickin cotton and raisin' her own brothers and sisters, and that would be a family. Or you might have a uncle and aunt raisin' her sister's kids, and that would be a family. A lotta children just had a mama and no daddy.

Part of that come from bein poor. I know that ain't no popular thing to say in this day and age. But that was the truth. Lotta times the men would be sharecroppin on them plantations and look around and wonder why they was workin the land so hard and ever year the Man that owned the land be takin all the profits.

Since there ain't no sharecroppin now, I'm gon' tell you how it worked: the Man owned the land. Then he give you the cotton seeds, and the fertilizer, and the mule, and some clothes, and everthing else you need to get through the year. 'Cept he don't really *give* it to you: he let you buy it at the store on credit. But it was his store on his plantation that he owned.

You plowed and planted and tended till pickin time. Then at the end of the year, when you bring in the cotton, you go to the Man and settle up.

Supposably, you gon' split that cotton right down the middle, or maybe sixty-forty. But by the time the crop comes in, you owe the Man so much on credit, your share of the crop gets eat up. And even if you don't think you owe that much, or even if the crop was 'specially good that year, the Man weighs the cotton and writes down the figgers, and he the only one that can read the scale or the books.

So you done worked all year and the Man ain't done nothin, but you still owe the Man. And wadn't nothin you could do but work his land for another year to pay off that debt. What it come down to was: The Man didn't just own the land. He owned *you*. Got so there was a sayin that went like this: "An ought's an ought, a figger's a figger, all for the white man, none for the nigger."

When I was just a little fella, folks said there was a man named Roosevelt who lived in a white house and that he was tryin to make things better for colored folks. But there was a whole lotta white folks, 'specially sheriffs, that liked things just the way they was. Lotta times this was mighty discouragin to the colored men, and they would just up and leave, abandonin their women and children. Some was bad men. But some was just ashamed they couldn't do no better. That ain't no excuse, but it's the God's honest truth.

I didn't know hardly nobody that had a mama and daddy both. So me and my big brother, Thurman, lived with Big Mama and PawPaw, and we didn't think nothin of it. We had a sister, too, Hershalee, but she was already grown and lived down the road a ways.

Big Mama was my daddy's mama, 'cept I didn't call him Daddy. I called him BB. He'd come around the house ever now and then. We lived with Big Mama and PawPaw in a three-room shack with cracks in the floor big enough to see the ground through. Wadn't no windows, just wooden shutters. We didn't mind the holes in the floor when it was hot out, but in the wintertime, the cold would stick its ugly head up between the cracks and bite us. We tried to knock it back with some loose boards or the tops of tin cans.

Now, Big Mama and PawPaw made quite a pair. Big Mama was a *big* woman . . . and I don't mean just big-boned. She was big sideways, north to south, all the way around. She used to make up her own dresses outta

flour sacks. In those days, flour sacks was kinda purty. They might come printed up with flowers on em, or birds. It took seven or eight right big ones to make Big Mama a dress.

On the other hand, PawPaw was kinda smallish. Standin next to Big Mama, he looked downright puny. She coulda beat him down, I guess. But she was a quiet woman, and kind. I never heard a' her whuppin nobody, or even raisin' her voice. Wadn't no mistakin, though, she did run the place. PawPaw didn't run nothin but his mouth. But he took care of Big Mama. She didn't have to go out in the fields and work. She was busy raisin' her grandbabies.

She wadn't just my grandma, though. Big Mama was my best friend. I loved her and used to take care of her too. She was kinda sick when I was a little boy, and she had a lotta pain. I used to give her her medicine. I don't know 'xactly what kinda pills they was, but she used to call em Red Devils.

"Li'l Buddy, go on and get Big Mama two a' them Red Devils," she'd say. "I needs to get easy."

I did a lotta special things for Big Mama, like takin out the slop jar or catchin a chicken in the yard and wringin its neck off so she could fry it up for supper. Now, ever year PawPaw raised us a turkey for Thanksgivin. Fed him special to get him nice and fat. The first year she thought I was big enough, Big Mama said, "Li'l Buddy, get on outside and wring that turkey's neck off. I'm fixin to cook him up."

I'm tellin you what, that turned out to be a tough row to hoe. When I took out after that Tom, he lit out like he was runnin from the devil hisself. He zigged and zagged, kickin up dirt and squawkin like I was killin him already. I chased that bird till I thought my legs would give out, and till that day, I didn't know a turkey could fly! He took off just like a aeroplane and set hisself down way up high in a cypress tree.

That bird wadn't no fool, neither. He didn't come back till three or four days after Thanksgivin. Made us have to eat chicken that year.

When that turkey flew the coop, I thought I was gon' get my first whuppin for sure. But Big Mama just laughed till I thought she would bust. I guess that's 'cause she knowed I did the best I could. She trusted me like that.

Matter a' fact, she trusted me more than she trusted my daddy and my uncles—her own sons. Like that money belt she kept tied around her waist—I was the onlyest one she let go up under her dress to get the money out.

“Li'l Buddy, get up under there and get me out two dimes and a quarter,” she'd say. And I'd get that money and give it to whoever she wanted to have it.

Big Mama always had somethin for me. Some peppermint candy or maybe some bottle caps so I could make me a truck. If I wanted a truck, I'd get a block a' wood and nail on four bottle caps, two on the front and two on the back, and I had me a truck I could roll around in the dirt. But them times was few and far between. I never was a playin child. Never asked for no toys at Christmas. Didn't have that in my personality.

I guess that's why I acted like I did when the first tragedy come into my life.



One night when I was about five or six, Big Mama's legs was givin her fits and she had asked me for two a' them Red Devils and went on to bed. Wadn't long after that, me and Thurman went on to bed, too, even though our cousin, Chook, said he was gon' sit up for a while beside the fire. He'd been stayin with us.

Me and Thurman had a room in the back of the house. I didn't have no proper bed, just a mattress set up on wood boards and cement blocks. I kinda liked it, though, 'cause I had a window right over my head. In the summertime, I could leave the shutters open and smell the warm earth and look up at the stars winkin at me.

Seemed like there was more stars in those days than there is now. Wadn't no 'lectric lights blottin out the sky. 'Cept for the moon cuttin a hole in the dark, the nights was just as black as molasses, and the stars glittered like broken glass in the sun.

Now, I had me a little cat that I had found when he was just a little furball of a kitten. I don't even remember what I called him now, but he used to sleep on my chest ever night. His fur tickled my chin, and his purrin was just like a tonic to me; had a rhythm soothed me right to sleep. That night,

though, seemed like I'd been sleepin quite a while when that cat jumped off my chest and scratched me. I woke up with a holler, and the cat hopped up in the window and started meowin real hard and wouldn't quit. So I got up to see what was wrong with the cat, and in the moonlight, I could see smoke in the house.

First I thought I was 'lucinatin and rubbed my eyes. But when I opened em up again, that smoke was still there, turnin round and round. First thing I did was shoo my cat out the window. Then I ran into Big Mama's room, but I didn't see no fire. I knew the house was burnin, though, 'cause that smoke started pilin up real thick. Even though I couldn't see no flames, it felt like there was fire burnin my throat and my eyes. I started coughin real bad and ran to the front door, but PawPaw had already gone to work and locked it. I knowed the back door had a wooden latch on it that I could barely reach.

I ran back to my room and tried to wake up my brother. "Thurman! Thurman! The house on fire! Thurman, wake up!"

I kept shakin and shakin him, but he was hard sleepin. Finally, I jerked the covers off him and rared back a fist and hit him upside the head just as hard as I could. He jumped up then, mad as a wet cat, and tackled me. We rolled on the floor just a-scrappin, and I kept tryin to yell at him that the house was on fire. He caught on after a minute, and me and him jumped out the window into the johnsongrass outside. Even though he was bigger than me, Thurman plopped down on the ground and started cryin.

I tried to think real fast what could I do. Big Mama was still in the house, and so was Chook. I decided to go back in and try to get em out. I jumped up, grabbed the edge of the window, and shimmied up the side a' the house, climbin the boards with my bare toes. When I got inside, I ran out into the front room, stayin down low under the smoke, and there was Chook, sittin by the fireplace with a poker in his hand, just starin with his eyes all glazed up.

"Chook! The house on fire! Help me get Big Mama; we got to get out!" But Chook just kept pokin in the fireplace like he was in a trance.

I looked up and seen sparks shootin down outta the chimney and spinnin off into the smoke like whirligigs. That's when I knowed the chimney was on fire and probl'y the roof. I was coughin and coughin by then, but I had

to try to save my grandma. I scrunched down low and found my way back to her room. I could see her face, sleepin hard like Thurman had been, and I shook her and shook her, but she wouldn't wake up.

"Big Mama! Big Mama!" I screamed right in her ear, but she acted more like she was dead than sleepin. I could hear the fire in the chimney now, roarin low like a train. I pulled and pulled on Big Mama, tryin to drag her out the bed, but she was too heavy.

"Big Mama! Please! Big Mama! Wake up! The house on fire!"

I thought maybe the smoke had done got her, and my heart broke in half right there where I was standin. I could feel tears runnin down my face, part from grief and part from the smoke. It was gettin real hot, and I knowed I had to come on up outta there or I'd be done in too.

I ran out to the front room, hollerin and screamin and coughin at Chook, "You got to get out, Chook! The smoke done got Big Mama! Come on up outta here!"

Chook just turned and looked at me with eyes that looked like he was already dead. "No, I'm gon' stay here with Big Mama." I can't explain why, but he wadn't even coughin or nothin. Then he went back to pokin in the fireplace.

That's when I heard a crackin noise that made me freeze and look up: the roof was fixin to cave in. The smoke started to get so thick I couldn't see Chook no more. I got down on my hands and knees and felt my way till I felt the feet of the potbelly stove, then I knowed I was close to the back door. I crawled a little farther till I could see a little crack of daylight slidin up under the door. I stood up and stretched just as high as I could to where I could just barely reach that wooden latch with the tips of my fingers. Then the door burst open and I rolled out, with the black smoke boilin out after me like a pack a' demons.

I ran around to find Thurman on the side of the house by Big Mama's room, just a-squallin. I was cryin too. We could see tongues of fire lickin down from under the eaves till they grabbed hold of some boards and began to burn down the sides of the house. The heat pushed us back, but I couldn't stop hollerin, "Big Mama! Big Mama!"

The fire swirled up into the dawn like a cyclone, roarin and poppin, sendin out the black smell of things that ain't s'posed to be burnin. The horri-blest thing was when the roof fell in, 'cause that's when Big Mama finally woke up. Between the flames and the smoke, I could see her rollin round and callin out to the Lord.

"Help me, Jesus! Save me!" she hollered, thrashin and coughin in the smoke. Then there was a loud crack and Big Mama screamed. I saw a big piece of wood crash down and pin her on her bed. She couldn't move no more, but she kept hollerin, "Lord Jesus, save me!"

I only heard Chook holler one time then he was quiet. I stood there and screamed and watched my grandmother burn up.