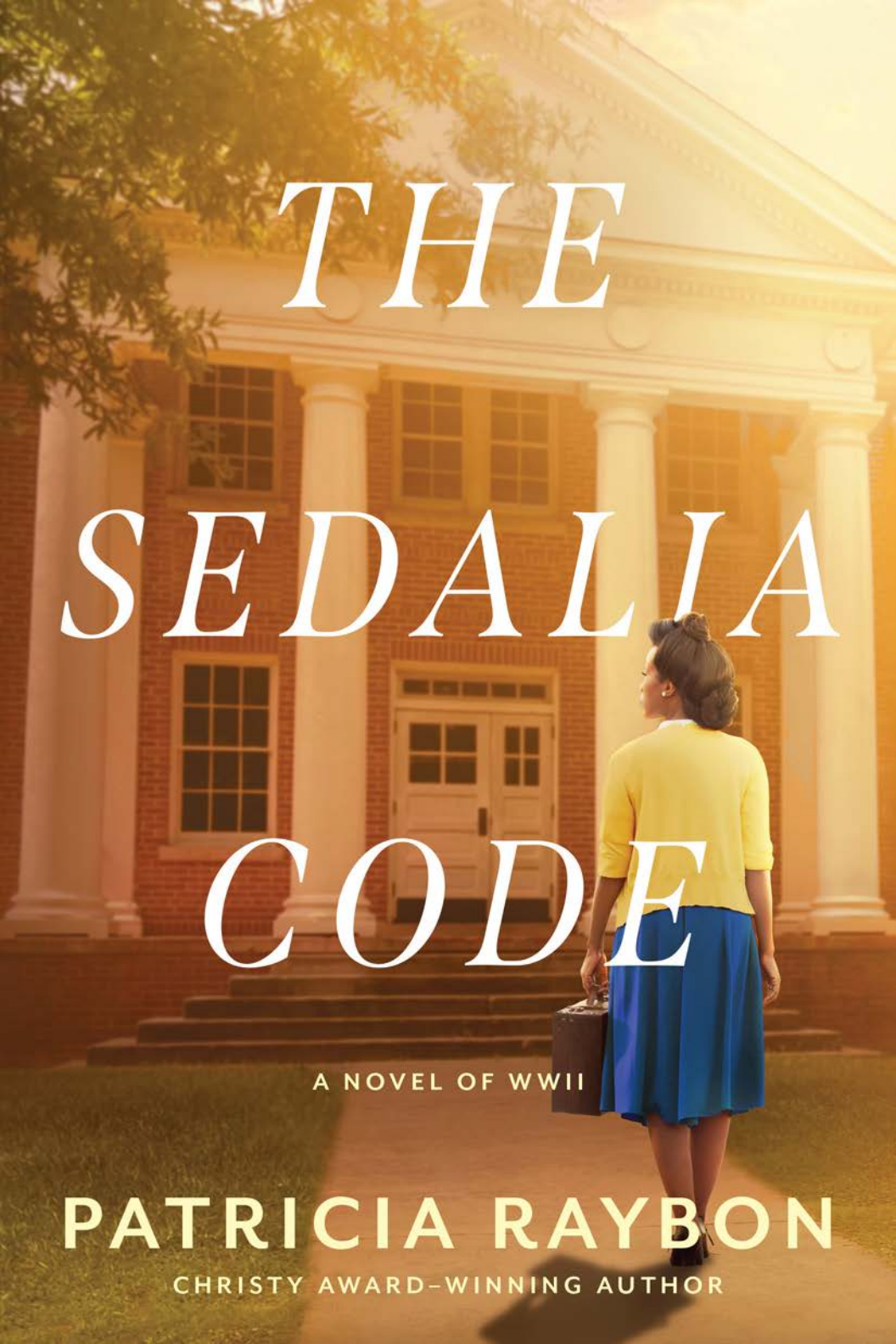




THE SEDALIA CODE

A NOVEL OF WWII

PATRICIA RAYBON

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

Praise for Patricia Raybon

Patricia Raybon's *The Sedalia Code* is a thrilling tale set in the Deep South during World War II, a time and place when Jim Crow laws ruled. Raybon has created a character worthy of the title Heroine—a young African American woman who won't accept the labels and limitations others want to put on her. With secret codes, dangerous plots, and a sweet romance, this is a story that is sure to stay with readers long after they turn the last page.

MICHELLE SHOCKLEE, Christy Award-winning author of *The Women of Oak Ridge*

With grace and wit, Raybon gifts us with a smart and gripping mystery with twists that keep you turning pages late into the night. *The Sedalia Code* is both thoughtful and thrilling.

VANESSA MILLER, *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Filling Station*

[M]ystery novels that incorporate religion in a significant way aren't all that common. Thankfully, the inspiring Patricia Raybon, a veteran nonfiction writer and novelist, has been threading the needle in just the right way with her Annalee Spain series, set in 1920s Denver.

SARAH WEINMAN, *The New York Times*

This story grabs you right at the beginning and takes you on a ride full of plot twists and turns, keeping Annalee Spain—and readers—constantly wading through waist-high trouble that's "determined," "insistent," and "insidious." Yet Raybon makes it clear that all the answers can be found by seeking Jesus, a search that mirrors our own need for ultimate Truth and a deeper relationship with the One who knows and loves us best.

ROBIN W. PEARSON, Christy Award-winning author of *The Stories We Carry*, on *Double the Lies*

In Annalee Spain, Patricia Raybon has given us not only an unflinching perspective of reality for many African Americans in the 1920s but also a self-determined heroine intent on fulfilling the role to which God has called her—regardless of the social landscape. . . . A truly magnificent read.

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT, author of *Last Light over Galveston*, on *Double the Lies*

Patricia Raybon's second adventure for her intrepid sleuth, Annalee Spain, is historical mystery at its finest. . . . *Double the Lies* is double the action, double the intrigue, and double the insight into the human heart. A must-read!

STEPHANIE LANDEM, author of *The Fault Between Us*

Inside masterful storytelling, Patricia Raybon conveys a critical lesson of what transpired when the KKK used its powerful influence to sew racial hatred and segregation throughout Colorado's very fabric. A suspenseful and enlightening read about dangerous and ignorant times.

DONNELL ANN BELL, award-winning author of *Until Dead*, on *Double the Lies*

This story of Professor Annalee Spain seeking to solve her father's cold-case murder is one you won't want to put down.

STEPHEN CURRY on *All That Is Secret*

This fast-paced mystery beautifully evokes life in 1920s Denver. . . . Raybon's lively style keeps the novel moving while shining a light on a sad epoch in American life that still reverberates a century later.

HISTORICAL NOVEL SOCIETY on *All That Is Secret*

A fast-moving story that's rich with romance and spiritual searching and sumptuous descriptions of 1920s fashion, buildings, and culture.

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SOPHFRONIA SCOTT, author of *Wild, Beautiful, and Free*, on *All That Is Secret*

In Professor Annalee Spain, Patricia Raybon has created a real, rounded, and very human character. . . . Not only a good mystery, but a realistic insight into the African American experience in the 1920s.

RHYS BOWEN, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Royal Spyness mysteries, on *All That Is Secret*

Readers will be hooked from the first line of Patricia Raybon's captivating debut novel, *All That Is Secret*. This well-respected nonfiction author proves her worth with fiction as she delivers rich characters and a page-turning mystery set in the beautiful wilds of Colorado.

JULIE CANTRELL, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

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CODE*

PATRICIA RAYBON



Tyndale House Publishers
Carol Stream, Illinois

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Cover design by Sarah Susan Richardson

Interior design by Brandi Davis

Edited by Sarah Mason Rische

Published in association with the literary agency of WordServe Literary Group,
www.wordserveliterary.com.

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 979-8-4005-0219-4

Printed in the United States of America

32	31	30	29	28	27	26
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

PROLOGUE

JANUARY 1929

WAKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Her toes would be half frozen by the time she made Rex Road. But Laurette would march that mile in sleet, rain, snow, or anything else Mother Nature might blow in to keep her from getting to school.

Her younger brother, Jacob, held back, standing in their dirt road with his mouth open, “catching rain.”

Laurette didn’t roll her nine-year-old eyes at him. Her mind was racing too hard, doing her times tables, adding her sums.

“Miss Bailey be waitin’ for me. My math test this morning. Close your mouth and let’s go.”

“I’m cold. My feet’s wet.”

“You think mine dry?”

The road had iced to slop in the January sleet. Mud seeped through the holes in her too-big shoes, sticking like frozen paste between her toes. Jacob’s toes probably froze stuck, too. But Laurette kept them moving.

Far ahead, she could see the three Thomas boys bouncing up and down under a tall pine tree, trying to stay dry while they waited in the freezing rain for the country school bus. The poor smoky thing was turning now onto the road.

“Run, little brother.” Laurette took off, gripping the math book the teacher let her borrow. The big field gloves her grandpa made her wear outdoors helped cover the pages. A good thing because the bus didn’t wait. She and Jacob were too far back.

She squinted, glaring at two more muddy miles of running before they’d make the colored schoolhouse on time. She took off, Jacob stumbling behind.

The school was just a tar paper shack. No running water or lights. Barely bigger than the hovels she and other tenant children lived in with their half-starving families. An outhouse squatted out back.

Her teacher had left a coffee can filled with water by the broken coal stove so any child with gritty shoes or bare feet could rinse. Laurette poured the frigid water over her toes and Jacob’s, clenching at the cold, drying their feet with the rough hem of her flour-sack dress.

On tippy-toes, she eased over to her bench just as Miss Bailey, her teacher, who was calling the roll, reached their names.

“Jacob Lowe.”

Her brother raised his hand high. “Here, Miss Bailey.”

“Laurette Lowe.”

“Here, Miss Bailey.” Her hand shot higher. Her answer was clear and eager and her teacher, who’d watched their arrival, didn’t chastise her for being near late.

“Ready for your mathematics test, Laurette?”

“Yes, Miss Bailey. Thank you, Miss Bailey.”

The teacher nodded at her, then resumed calling the roll.

Laurette felt her eyes close a quick moment in thanks. Miss Bailey was like her own kind of angel, always saying how much she believed

in her students. “You’ll be a mathematician,” she told Laurette. “And Jacob will be a scientist.” For each child, she held out a possible dream.

She looked so pretty when she said it. Bright-eyed and smooth-skinned, she dressed so nice, her hair clean and curled, her fingernails sporting sparkly red polish won in a church raffle—looking nothing like the shack next door where she lived on colored pay and alone, as dictated by the county.

Somehow, she managed to emerge from her wooden door every morning ready to teach the poorest children around, praising their potential, and looking her best.

She wanted Laurette to excel on the math test so she’d place high in her grade at the colored grammar school in the tobacco town of Durham. That’s where Laurette’s mother lived, working in the next county at the Liggett and Myers cigarette factory. Laurette and Jacob were moving there in one week, leaving their grandpa behind, at his urging for a better life.

Her mother hated the plan, calling Jacob too backward and Laurette’s math dreams “a stupid waste of your time.”

But Laurette wouldn’t let such ticky words stop her. She’d already come this far. Already survived life in a tenant shack with a dirt floor and little else. Well, her family’s run-down oak desk. The thing was ugly and perfectly useless.

Still, curled up at the desk Laurette did her figures and fractions, like those on the test Miss Bailey was handing her now. The only nine-year-old in the tiny school, she alone faced the exam.

“Eighteen minutes to complete,” Miss Bailey warned. “Don’t go long.”

Laurette sucked in her breath but didn’t blink. She pulled a sharpened pencil from her dress pocket and licked it. But as she started the first question, she felt a shove against her back.

“You doing your math?” One of the Thomas boys had sidled up to her, looked down at her paper, and started whispering the first question.

She ignored him, already seeing the answer. Three-eighths. Three over eight.

“How you figure that?”

“I tell you later. This my math test.”

“You on question two?”

“Just finished it.”

“You on three now?”

Laurette didn’t hush him or stop working. “Like I say, Jess Thomas. This my math test. Let me finish.”

He said he would, but he turned to his brothers, whispering, “Laurette got her math test and she flying.” Other children sneaked over to huddle around, too.

Laurette glanced at them but didn’t stop. Besides, the next three questions made her smile. They were coding puzzles, and Miss Bailey had taught Laurette and all her students Morse code. “It builds your memory,” Miss Bailey said. “Sharpens your thinking.” Laurette was so good at the dots and dashes, Miss Bailey found a book on other codes and taught her those, too. Her friends called her a “code girl,” teasing, but she liked it.

Now Laurette was racing through her test, loving the feeling, checking off answers, thrilled they were correct, arriving already at the final two questions.

“Last ones, everybody,” Jess Thomas announced. “You can do it.”

“Three minutes.” Miss Bailey turned from the front of the room and gasped. “Children! Let Laurette be.”

Laurette was looking down at her paper. She let out a low whistle. She hadn’t seen such questions before.

Jess Thomas read them in her ear. Laurette didn’t shush him.

“One more minute, Laurette.”

Laurette licked her pencil. She needed a whole number—not a fraction—for her answers.

"A factor?" She studied Jess Thomas's face. He nodded, looking unsure, but trying to help. "You can do it." The other kids cheered her, too. "Keep going."

She could?

"Factor." Jacob shook her arm. "That's it. Factors be in your book."

"You studied it?"

"A little. You left it on Grandpa's desk."

Laurette blinked, willing herself to find the factors her answers needed. She calculated, erased, then tried again, two more times.

"It's nine, Jess Thomas."

He grinned.

She turned to her brother. "Jacob, it's nine. Both answers."

"Write it down, sis. Hurry."

She scrawled 9 under the last questions on her test paper.

"I finished, Miss Bailey." She handed her teacher the paper.

"Just in time. You did it."

As her teacher smiled at her, the barefoot children in the cold school-room let out a happy shout, hugging each other. They shook Laurette by the shoulders, making her giggle. Jacob did a little jig. Jess Thomas joined him.

"You fast, Laurette Lowe."

"I suppose I am."

More than that, she wasn't afraid. Change was coming, some folks said, and maybe another war. But she'd go to Durham, and she'd be somebody. Maybe a code girl, whatever that meant. For now, she pulled her bare feet up under her flour-sack dress and stuck her pencil behind her ear.

How dare any trouble or people try to stop her now?

CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1943
LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

Laurette Lowe stood prim but touchy, blinking hard, watching the bus-station clock, gripping her cardboard suitcase to her chest with her smooth pretty hands. If she knew how to pray, and dared try now, she'd plead like crazy her ragged valise wouldn't fall apart, leaving her few dime-store clothes piled in a dusty heap as she pressed through the cranky crowd.

But these folks wouldn't fret her. Not today.

"Excuse me, please." She scooted past a clutch of white college girls dressed in matching letter sweaters and pleated flippy skirts. "Pardon me, please." Laurette used her best voice, but they paid her no mind. Well, one girl cut her eyes.

No matter. Laurette had survived far worse. She'd lost her teaching job up north a week ago. The school closed. The doors bolted. Their money gone. So, hers, too. Laurette felt let down and lost for one long half day. Then came the fine moment she realized she could pack her belongings and leave. Goodbye to late paychecks, a snippy boss, petty

put-downs of her Southern speech, even younger children ordering her to “talk proper.” So, Laurette tightened her tongue, looked people in the eye, told folks what she thought, felt stunned when they showed they were listening.

Then, with one short telegram, she put in her name at a fancy prep school she admired, and, to her surprise, she got a job.

Now, with a nickel to spare and not much else, she was on her way back home to North Carolina, speaking “proper” English, jostled in a press of passengers waiting in their right Southern line to climb on a bus—white folks in front, colored behind.

Laurette gripped her suitcase by its worn leather belt—her brother Jacob’s wry, smart gift. A Marine, he was younger by a year, but he’d taught her to loop the belt tight around the middle, forming a square knot. “See it? The square?” He pulled the knot hard, then undid it, making her practice.

“It’s fine. I got it.”

“Sure, big sis. But tie it again.”

He’d laughed. She’d joined him, loving their brother-sister kidding. That’s how they’d navigated life, joking about the trying and failing, no matter what came up, laughing as if life between them would always be the same—until it wasn’t.

Her eyes squeezed shut. She didn’t want to think about that now.

“Tickets!” The bus driver marshaled the tetchy crowd. He was lanky and balding, chain-smoking Luckies, standing company-proud in his Carolina Coach gear, but hacking between pulls on the burning Lucky Strike hanging off his bottom lip. He stood beside his waiting bus, its diesel engine chugging. Two luggage doors thrown open on each side let white passengers load their suitcases first, assisted now by the glove-wearing colored porter.

Laurette held her ticket high to catch the bus driver’s eye. But he’d turned his back. He couldn’t care less, it seemed, why she dared look so

eager—her eyes so shiny, her smile so bright, her dark-brown hair, washed and pressed the night before, looking too glossy for his already dusty, long day. Same with her dime-store fingernail polish, something she wore when a splurge said she could. She'd painted the sparkly red onto her nails the night before, determined to look her best for whoever might notice.

Instead, she was traveling alone and unnoticed but hopeful as she changed buses in the town of Lynchburg, Virginia. She meant to make Sedalia, North Carolina, before nightfall, arriving in time for her new teaching job, starting first thing the next day.

The colored porter finally reached her in line. "I'll take your bag now, miss. Bus leaving soon."

"It might fall open—"

"Not for me." He laughed. Then he swung her case onto an overflow rack atop the coach. Her cheap cardboard wasn't pretty, but it held.

She handed him a penny tip, wishing it were more. The porter touched his hat. "Thank you, miss." With a gloved hand, he helped her maneuver up the tricky steps.

On board at last, Laurette looked past the white section up front, did a quick calculation. Three seats for white riders remained, all off-limits to her. Back in the colored section, every seat but one humped over a back wheel was taken, most with Negro soldiers. But colored were getting settled, too, their wide-eyed little children knowing to keep quiet while their mamas and daddies shushed them anyway.

"Hush. White people's in here," Laurette heard one mother whisper to a child, holding her close. The little girl peeked around her shoulder to the front of the bus, gaping at the strangers, finally eyeing Laurette.

Laurette winked, gave her a smile, wishing she could stop asking herself why her own mother hadn't cuddled her like that. But she couldn't fret about that today. Instead, she grinned at the child, who dared give her a tiny half smile.

Eyeing the last empty seat, Laurette headed there now, grateful for a

place to settle. Already, the bus was rumbling its way out of the station. A blast of diesel exhaust filled her nostrils. Laurette waved at her face, nail polish flashing. Then she stopped herself. A young colored Army lieutenant sitting across the aisle cocked his head, watching her, not hiding an arresting smile.

She turned away, hiding her hands, feeling her face grow warm. She couldn't risk his distraction. Not today. Not as a bus rolled to her promised new life—a teaching job at a silk-stockings school, leaving behind her country beginnings, opening a door to the Negro select, her life's hard work paying off. This bus couldn't get her there fast enough.

The coach took a hard turn, swinging its way out of town and onto a curving, dusty highway. Laurette closed her eyes, grateful to be moving. But no peace.

"Close your windows back there!" the bus driver yelled. He'd turned up the cold air.

"Can't reach it," a colored soldier standing in the back shouted. White folks up front jerked to look. Laurette shifted on her hard seat. Sedalia was too close for nonsense. Just three hours and change. But twenty minutes out, the bus was stopping before it hardly started.

The driver pumped the brakes, pulled into a no-name town, and slammed to a wheezy stop. More passengers stomped aboard. Laurette squinted as she counted. Half a dozen new riders, all white.

The driver yelled down the center aisle, "Folks here need seats. Make room back there."

"Ain't no room." The colored soldier again.

Laurette pressed her mouth. She moved to stand, but the young soldier across from her motioned, inviting her to sit back down—in his seat. A white passenger had moved past the Jim Crow sign separating the two sections, claiming Laurette's place. But the soldier was showing he didn't mind trading his comfort to make room for her.

Laurette hesitated but scooted across. "Thank you."

He nodded, gazing at her a long minute.

"Where you traveling?" he finally said. He shifted in the aisle, standing over her, steadying himself. His voice was confident. A Negro voice from up north. She'd heard plenty of them in her past couple of years in New York. He gave her an assured grin, looking suitable with his lieutenant's silver bar, but she held back her smile.

"Headed to my new job." She kept it at that.

He looked down at her, still holding her gaze. His keen brown eyes gleamed, taking her in. She tried to glance away, but the lieutenant was downright striking. Tall, dark, fit, sure of himself. The brim of his garrison cap was set at a jaunty angle, a warning of sorts that he might be a fast, cocky number—thus a young man to avoid. Her brother, Jacob, had warned her.

But maybe he was none of those things. Laurette lifted a brow, sighing, needing to relax, slowing down her rush to Sedalia. She let herself smile—but if she was glowing, and she worried she was, the reason was her new position, not the eye-catching young man leaning over her. This job meant every possible thing to her. A respectable school with proper, smart people.

"A good job?" He looked intrigued, those brown eyes gleaming.

"Better than the last one." He seemed ready to talk, so she gave in. "I was up north, teaching at a day school in New York. But the school ran into trouble and closed. So, I'm heading home to North Carolina. I start tomorrow at La Porte Academy in—"

"La Porte." The young lieutenant looked impressed. "That's the rich folks' school in Sedalia. Little town. Fancy school."

"The Negro finishing school, right—but it's not just for girls. Boys go there, too. All learning etiquette and academics. It's not too far from Greensboro." She rambled on. "I'm a math teacher."

He lifted a brow—a handsome gesture on him. "So, you teach people to count things."

"Things need counting. People, places," she mused. "Problems, solutions."

"Oh, a philosopher too—"

"Just sometimes." She watched his eyes. "Do you know math? Why it matters?"

"A little maybe. But tell me."

"I'm still learning myself." She half smiled, teasing a bit too.

"Then what can you tell me?"

"Oh, here's something. I signed up to take Italian."

The lieutenant's shoulders went stiff a moment. His smile turned odd. Italy had surrendered only days ago. A wartime enemy now an ally. Laurette saw it in the papers, and perhaps now in his eyes.

"You speak Italian?" he asked.

"Not a word. But I can audit the class," she babbled. "So, no credit. I'll just show up one night a week for the lesson. Or maybe I'll take Spanish." She laughed. "Or French. I'm ready to speak another language."

"I am, too." He studied her eyes. "Maybe you can teach me."

"You're ready to learn?"

"I might be." His voice dropped. He looked around the bus, then back at Laurette. "Always smart to learn new things."

She tilted her head, studying him. "That's what folks say."

The bus was sitting at a single cross light in another country town. While they waited, Laurette watched new passengers, all white, climb aboard—the last a slip of a girl carrying a crying baby, pushing toward the back.

The young mother paused beside Laurette and sniffed. "That's my seat."

Laurette let out a silent breath, keeping quiet. But she wondered who'd put the thin gold band on the girl's ring finger, or why she looked so worn and irritated, holding a crying baby wearing a stained hand-me-down pinafore. A hard life doesn't hide.

Laurette stood to give up her seat. She didn't have a choice, not without a fight, and she wasn't aiming for that fight today. As Laurette stood, a Negro couple on the back row—a man and his heavily pregnant wife—pulled the departure rope. Both gestured to the lieutenant, showing he could have their bench.

The lieutenant thanked them, then turned to Laurette. "There's more room back there. Okay if I save you a seat?"

She weighed that a second, but gave in, finally telling him yes. He headed back.

The young husband was struggling with two tattered suitcases while trying to help his wife push through the crowded bus and down the steps.

The lieutenant turned to Laurette. "They need a hand. You mind saving my seat?" He straightened his cap. Then with the bus still stopped, he bounded down the steps to help the husband pull down two more cardboard suitcases from the rack atop the bus.

Laurette watched all this as she made her way to the seat she'd soon share with the young soldier. Looking back, she stopped to wink at the little baby. The child stopped her fussing a moment and giggled, her mother looking too tired to notice. Taking her seat and peering through the window, Laurette watched the soldier gather suitcases for the burdened husband. She liked the look of his kindness. He reminded her of her brother, so perhaps he was a teaser, too. But good-hearted. Ready to help.

She tilted her head. Maybe they could get to know each other. But what a silly thought. That brand-new job was waiting for her—an exciting new life just down the road. This soldier wasn't part of that life. Not one lick of it.

As the lieutenant turned to board the bus again, the driver shut the door, slammed the bus in gear, hit the gas, and swerved away, sooty exhaust bellowing, leaving the soldier behind.

"Wait!" Laurette called out.

The college girls up front jerked back.

Laurette sat still. *Calm yourself, sister.*

But the lieutenant was racing alongside the bus, yelling. "Stop! Hey, driver!"

A sour mood rolled through the bus. Up front, a rank disapproval stirred. Far back, weary anger. "He's a soldier." A colored GI in uniform stood to protest, but an older Negro man sitting nearby pulled him down.

"Better stay in your seat, son."

The soldier huffed, pulling away. White passengers scowled. Colored passengers quieted themselves. Few probably wanted mess. Laurette maybe most.

Outside, the lieutenant, still running, banged on a back fender using both fists, but the driver had turned a deaf ear. The young man was no match for a rumbling, belching, barreling bus. Throwing up his arms in desperation, the lieutenant locked eyes with Laurette. But, to her surprise, he didn't look defeated. He was smiling at her again.

So she smiled back, throwing up her hands, too. He winked, grinning, then saluted her goodbye.

She returned the grin, wondering in the same moment if she'd ever see him again—this soldier she'd just met, whose name she didn't even know. Turning now, she watched him from her back window until the bus took a turn in the road. In a blink, he disappeared, as if she'd never met him or talked to him. He was gone.



Math, as Laurette knew, wasn't just counting. But it sure started there. Young women counting their menses. Merchants counting their goods. Stargazers counting the stars. Children counting shells, stones, and made-up little toys.

Now the world outside sped by to show Laurette farmworkers. She counted them. One dozen, two dozen, three dozen rows of red-faced

men sweating in the sun, picking tobacco leaves in one or another of the North Carolina farms outside the bus window.

Sticky bacca, her late grandpa had called his tobacco, declaring its gum a good thing. *Aphids hate it. Caterpillars*. Who knows what else. By end of day, a man's overalls could stand up on their own from the thick gum. Only poor folks bore this field work. And now, thought Laurette, poor folks and prisoners of war.

That's what the workers' uniforms said. *POW* written in big white letters across the shirts sticking to their sweaty backs. Italians probably. She'd seen in the papers that thousands had been brought to this part of North Carolina, imprisoned in Uncle Sam's Army camps. Farmers here vied for the Italians' labor. Not everybody liked that. These were men who'd once fought Yanks as their enemy. Some might've killed an American son or father. Laurette swallowed. Or an American brother.

She turned from the window. She'd never have a single reason to cross paths with one of these Italian soldiers, even if she learned to speak their tongue. Besides, she already had a never-ending war of her own—with her mother. So, at the coach's next stop—the tobacco town of Durham—she moved to get off the bus to give her a quick telephone call, trying to pretend that was a good idea. It wouldn't be. She knew that.

So, after being kind to people and babies all day, she decided to be kind to herself. After a quick break in the forlorn colored restroom—an insulting place with a broken mirror and Jim Crow signs—she brushed her pageboy and patted on fresh lipstick. In the parking lot, she looked for a farm truck or car offering rides to Sedalia, and found one, paying the ten-cent fare. A lot of traveling she was doing to make it to her job, but she didn't mind.

She had work to do and tall ladders to climb, and nothing or not one soul on God's green earth would stop her.