

CHAPTER ONE

## *Beginnings*

The green silk gown does me well, likewise the white bonnet. My mistress had insisted that I dress plainly. Strands of my undisciplined locks peek from my bonnet. I pinch myself. This cannot be happening to me. To *me*. Phillis Wheatley.

There is a knock on my door. “Miss Wheatley, it’s time to go down.” Amelia, the Irish woman assigned as my maid, stands on the landing. “You look beautiful, ma’am.”

“Thanks, Amelia.”

As I begin my walk down the stairs, I hear a cheer. The smooth leather of my shoes rests comfortably against my ankles. Good, soft Moroccan leather. But not really Moroccan. Nathaniel, my young master, told me that the leather is actually from Hausaland in West Africa. Hausa traders cross the Sahara Desert and sell the leather to the Moroccans. From Morocco the leather is exported to Europe, so Europeans named

AFUA COOPER

it after that country. Nonetheless, it is from Africa, just like me. And it gladdens my heart that I have a bit of Africa with me as I descend the final stair and enter the expectant throng. They cheer.

I have the manuscript in my hand. Thirty-nine poems. *My book*. I glance at the pages and then raise my eyes. Lady Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, smiles serenely at me. I quickly look around the room. There is the Earl of Dartmouth and his Lady; the Countess of Chatham; Lady Cavendish; the very wealthy businessman Brook Watson; John Thornton, the philanthropist who has given his entire wealth to missionary causes; Lord and Lady Lincoln; and Lady Jane Grey and her daughter Emma. The upper crust of British society. Among them are writers and publishers of the leading London newspapers. And I, an African girl of nineteen years, here to read my poetry to them so that they will buy many copies of my book and encourage their friends and family to patronize me.

My mistress, Susanna Wheatley, has sent me to London to oversee the publication of my poems. I could not find a willing publisher in Boston. Doors were closed to me there, but a great one has

opened in London. Lady Huntingdon, a friend of my mistress, agreed to cover some of the costs. My mistress will pay the rest.

I select two pages from the manuscript, but the words swim in front of my eyes. I see flashes of light on the surface of a broad river. A little child pushes aside some bulrushes, and I am swimming in a clear blue pool with my mother. With the sharpness of the morning sun piercing the fog, more scenes unfold: children running behind cattle on a dusty track, women with gourds on their heads going to the well for water, old people sitting under the great baobab tree chewing kola nuts and talking about the latest news. My thoughts flee London to a dusty Senegalese savanna.

I am with little brother, Chierno, and my friends Fanta, Abbi and Mumbi. We hide behind an overgrown baobab tree. I push my head around the trunk and see my elder brother, Amadi, coming along the path with his herd. I signal my playmates to keep still. The cattle pass, their hooves drumming a steady rhythm on the solid dirt. As soon as the last one goes by, we run behind them and let loose small pebbles from our hands. Startled, the cows move faster, plodding into one another, and

AFUA COOPER

laughter erupts from our bellies. Amadi, noticing the commotion, turns and we run in the opposite direction.

“Penda, I will get you for this,” he yells. “And the rest of you, I will tell your mothers.” But we stick out our tongues at him and double over with laughter.

Now I am in my house, engaged in music lessons with my mother. Her name is Asta. She is a griot, a bard, a praise singer and poet, and it is understood that I will follow her path. My mother’s mother and her mother before her were griots. It is my family’s calling. We memorize our people’s history, laws, customs and traditions, and recite these narratives as poetry, admonitions, lectures and songs. Our family carried the traditions of our people even as they moved across great tracts of land in their many migrations. First they were in Macina, in Mali. Then they moved to Fouta Djallon, in Guinea. Numerous clans crossed the mountains and descended onto the plains of the Gambia. Some settled there, but others moved up the wide savannas of Senegal until they arrived at the edge of the desert in Fouta Toro. Several families pushed on, as if seeking the edge of the world. And

they did not stop until they reached Mauretania.

Our clans have such names as Wane, Diallo, Ba, Sow, Sidibe, Barri, Watt, Tall, Maal. My clan name is Wane.

My family clan and several others settled here in the kingdom of Fouta Toro on the banks of the Senegal River. My mother used to sing and recite poetry at royal events, at births, marriages, deaths, initiation ceremonies, at happy events and sad ones, too. She and my father would travel great distances, for her fame as a griot spread. She even journeyed as far as Timbuktu and Djenne to sing at the coronations of kings. Because I was to follow in the footsteps of my mother, my formal training began when I was about three years old. By seven, I had achieved some competence (by my mother's high standards), and my mother felt I was good enough to perform at some celebrations in our town, such as the return of the initiated girls from their seclusion, when the entire town made a large celebration for them. I was among the praise singers who welcomed them back and to their new womanhood.

I see my little self being coached by my mother.

AFUA COOPER

She plays on a small guitar that we call an oud. I sing melodies. “Open your mouth this way,” she gently coaxes, while showing me the gesture. “Lift the sound up from your belly.” And I try. “Good, good.” At this age, I know an entire repertoire of praise poems that includes our ancestors’ journey from the highlands of Guinea.

Now I am with Ma Ndiaye. When I turned six, my mother sent me to her to train in the composition of sung poems. Our people have diverse ways of composing poetry. Mastering at least eight methods means that one is accomplished. Ma Ndiaye is a formidable reciter and praise singer. She is teaching me a rhyming pattern. Every second line is rhymed, and each line must have eight syllables. Ma Ndiaye sighs heavily. I am getting mixed up. Ma Ndiaye says wearily, “See you tomorrow and remember to practice.” I promise myself that I will practice and practice until I grasp the rhyming pattern. I dream of the day when, like my mother, I can sing at royal courts.

Now I see my father in his workshop. He is a weaver. He is named Chierno, like my little brother. Whenever I think of him, I remember him feeding us sweetmeats and yogurt. How he indulged us.

My mother would scold him not to give us snacks before a meal, but he always did. In our country, women spin cotton and dye the thread, but it is the men who weave it. My father's workshop sits to the side of our mud-brick home. He has three apprentices, who set the shuttle and lay out the strips of cotton. My father knows how to weave stories into patterns. Stories of battles, wars, celebrations, journeys and migrations. He is training my little brother to follow in his footsteps.

In our household there are my mother and father; me, Penda; my young brother, Chierno; my older brother, Amadi, the cowherd; and the baby—the apple of our eye and our greatest joy. The baby is a mere nine months old, but my mother says she has the wisdom of a ninety-year-old. Her name is Asta, like my mother.

Our town, Tumbakulli, sits on the banks of the Senegal River. It is protected by a circular wooden wall. At the center is our chief's house and the mosque. We are a settlement of weavers, herders, farmers, griots and fishermen.

“Alif, Ba, Taa. Tha ...” The sound of children's voices, one of them my own, echoes in my head. We are at school, sitting on the floor on straw mats,

AFUA COOPER

in a semicircle. In front of us is our teacher, Baba Dende, and we are practicing our letters. Our school, a long rectangular building built of mud bricks, sits beside the house of our teacher. Boys and girls arrive at school in the evening, when the sun loses some of its power and a coolness descends on the earth. Sometimes it is still hot, though, and Baba Dende gives us our lessons beneath the great baobab in the center of the town. We learn the Arabic alphabet so we can read and recite verses from our holy book, the Qur'an. My brother Chierno is very accomplished. He knows at least a quarter of the holy book by heart, and sometimes he acts as Baba Dende's helper.

In the evening, our voices resound across the village and beyond, as we shout the alphabet in a loud and rhythmic chant. And we think of the beginning of the dry season, when holy men and women wander through the countryside singing religious songs.

Once, when I was about six years old, a group of these holy singers arrived from Macina, in the old kingdom of Mali. There was a woman among them, as tall and straight as a tree. She wore a

billowing dress we call a boubou; the dress was green and her head was wrapped with a cloudy-white turban. She sang in a high-pitched voice that seemed to shoot straight into the sky, descend to earth and vibrate across the desert. She had a funny accent, as do all the Fulani from Mali, but her singing was so beautiful, so melodious that the adults began to cry, and tears also rolled down my face. This woman had a great reputation. It was said that when family members were estranged from each other, they would call on her to heal their troubles with her singing. Her songs were about how to live a righteous life, songs about this world and the next.

Days after the singing woman left our town, I would try to sing like her—pitching my voice to the sky and commanding it to bounce to the earth. But both my mother and Ma Ndiaye laughed out loud and shouted at me to stop. “Not now, Penda, not now. Wait a few more years, when your voice is mature.”

The sky is a clear blue and the sun a golden orb. The heat presses on us from all sides. The baby is fussy. The voice of the muezzin weaves through the

AFUA COOPER

heat. After prayers, my mother gathers the baby and me and we head toward the river, to the section where the women swim and bathe with the small children. The pool is surrounded by bulrushes, some of which hang over the water forming a natural roof, sheltering us from the unforgiving sun. And the water is shallow. I could go to the center and the water would only reach my shoulders. Smaller children hug the bank. We swim and frolic, and snack on the sweets our mothers have brought. After the river bath, we head home. I run to my father in his workshop, and he lifts me up to his shoulders and tosses me in the air like a ball of cotton. I shriek with delight. Even though my father is not a griot, he knows many poems and songs and sings to us. When I am amazed at his knowledge, he says, "All our people are poets."

And it is true. In our country, people do not speak in direct language. For example, if one of us misbehaved in class, Baba Dende would go to the house of the offender. The parents would invite him in and offer tea. After a few sips of tea, they would talk about the weather, the crops, the incoming and outgoing tide of the river, the

initiation ceremonies for the boys and girls. Then, after a long while, Baba Dende would broach the subject that was on his mind.

He would say, "Little hyenas are running wild in the town." And the parents would nod their heads mournfully. The conversation would continue in parables and riddles until one of the parents, usually the father, would say, "Baba, I will take the child in hand."



A slight touch on my shoulder brings me back to the present. The hand belongs to the Countess of Huntingdon. "Phillis, you ought to eat something." In truth, I cannot. I am not nervous. I prepared for this evening all day. But my stomach seems full.

Without another word, the countess takes the manuscript from my hand and summons a servant. He brings a tray heaped with cake slices and buns. I take a bun. Another servant brings drinks. I avoid the wine but select an orange punch.

The Earl of Dartmouth comes to where the countess and I stand.

"What will our young African genius read for us tonight?"

“Don’t be impatient,” the countess rebukes him. “You will soon know well.” And to me she says, “Sit, Phillis. Sit and eat.”

I collapse into a satin-cushioned chair. How soft it is. I eat the bun in small bites. I gulp the punch. I am excited. After what seems like an eternity, the countess calls the room to order and speaks:

“As you know, we are gathered here tonight to hear young Phillis Wheatley, the African genius from Boston. We call Phillis a genius because she is only nineteen years old and already has written many poems and has had them published in newspapers. The printing of Phillis’s book is sponsored by my organization. We expect the book to be ready for sale in September. Phillis and her poetry are wonderful examples of the workings of God. He has lifted a lowly, benighted African girl and has given her the gift of words and rhyme.”

A thundering applause greets the countess’s words. “Now Phillis will read for us.”

A space has been cleared in the middle of the living room beside the fortepiano. A lamp burns brightly. The light will be good for my reading. I walk to the appointed space. I survey the crowd. Most came out of curiosity. To see if a Black girl

could really write and read poetry. To see if a Black girl had literary talent. Others do not believe that I have written the verses.

A hush descends. In my mind, I hear Mrs. Wheatley, my mistress: “Look at them with confidence, hold that confidence in your voice.” I hear my young Master John’s voice: “Stand firm, Phillis, and let your heart say the words.” And the voice of my mother, my mother whom I have not seen in eleven years: “Penda, recite with feelings and passion. Let the words and verses come alive.”

Sweet memories now make my heart ache with longing and sorrow. I decide to begin with “On Recollection,” the poem that invokes Mneme, the Greek goddess of memory, inventor of words and language and mother of the nine Muses. I inhale and then exhale the poem:

*Mneme begin. Inspire, ye sacred nine,  
Your vent'rous Afric in her great design.  
Mneme, immortal pow'r, I trace thy spring:  
Assist my strains, while I thy glories sing:*

As I read, the power of words fills me with confidence and strength. The poem is met with thunderous applause.

AFUA COOPER

I decide that the next poem should be the one I wrote for Lord Dartmouth. Because he is here at Lady Huntingdon's and because he has been so good to me since I arrived—he has given me five pounds and the complete collection of Milton's works—I read "To the Right Honourable William, Earl of Dartmouth."

The Earl of Dartmouth has been appointed secretary of the American colonies. The Americans hope that he will listen to their complaints and do right by them. They are being taxed by the British on almost everything but do not have representation in the British Parliament. Now they are almost up in arms, demanding their freedom from British "slavery."

*Hail, happy day, when, smiling like the morn,  
Fair Freedom rose New-England to adorn:  
The northern clime beneath her genial ray,  
Dartmouth, congratulates thy blissful sway:  
Elate with hope her race no longer mourns...  
No more America, in mournful strain  
Of wrongs, and grievance unredress'd complain,  
No longer shalt thou dread the iron chain,  
Which wanton Tyranny with lawless hand*

*Had made, and with it meant t'enslave the land...  
I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate  
Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat...  
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray  
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?*

The Earl of Dartmouth looks at me, bows from his waist and leads the applause. I bask in the praise and recognition Lady Huntingdon and her friends bestow on me. "Is this me?" "Did I just do what I did?" "Am I the girl that everyone now loves?" And I answer all three questions: "Yes!"



Two days later, Amelia brings me the newspapers. I smile when I see the headlines: "Phillis Wheatley, American African Poet Conquers London." "The Ethiopian Poetess and Her Surprising Genius." They are flattering articles. The *Monthly Review* states that I should be given my freedom, that I am much too talented to be kept in bondage. The writer says that Bostonians pride themselves on the principles of liberty, yet they hold one such as I in slavery. "Oh ye America, give Phillis her freedom!" the *Review* proclaims.

AFUA COOPER

Another newspaper calls me the “mother of Black literature.” It seems I am the first African woman in this part of the world to have a book published. I shake my head in wonderment at this praise. Of course I am flattered, but I quickly remember my mistress telling me not to get too big a head from the acclaim that would be heaped on me.

That evening, my publisher, Archibald Bell, visits the house. He takes off his hat and bows to me. He kisses Lady Huntingdon’s hand. “Ladies, I have good news. Phillis, the manuscript is gone to press!” he says. The countess claps her hands. I simply stare. Since neither of us speaks, Mr. Bell continues. “There are already three hundred subscribers!” This must mean that sufficient buyers have agreed to purchase copies to make printing profitable for him. Finally, Lady Huntingdon says, “Well done, Phillis. God is on our side.”

Though I prepare for sleep, the excitement of the past days courses through my mind and body, and I am unable to relax. I am happy, of course, but the words from the newspapers rush around in my head: “Phillis Wheatley, a slave.” “Genius in bondage.” Though used well, I am a slave, it is true. But it was not always so.