

CHAPTER ONE

A Black Girl at My Front Door

Watching the young woman walk away, I knew that my life had now been marked forever, forever changed. God had challenged me, and it was up to me to figure out what to do about it.

I had opened the door of the parsonage to find a lovely light-skinned girl, very fair, lighter even than myself. This was Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia, around 1937. I remember her standing there weeping, really distraught, but her name is gone with time. She had hoped to see the minister, my husband Rev. William Pearly Oliver. But Bill was away and so she was left with me, crying her heart out and trying to tell me her story.

As a minister's wife in the heart of a poor Black section of Halifax I expected moments like this—that again and again I would face life's pain as part of the job. But that day I knew right away that a cup of tea and a sandwich and maybe a few dollars and my best advice—none of these were going to help this young woman. I also knew that God had put her there, trying to tell her story on

my doorstep. I knew this was my challenge. I just did not know what to do.

When she could finally talk, the young woman told me that she had come from Guysborough, Nova Scotia, to Halifax to begin her nurse's training at Children's Hospital. She was bitterly disappointed and she was exhausted. She said that a taxi driver had dropped her off at the parsonage because she had no other place to go. And he didn't know where else to take a Black person so obviously troubled.

Her parents had put her on the bus to Antigonish, and from Antigonish she took the train to Halifax. She went right to Children's Hospital to register for the nursing program. Other arrangements had been made by mail and over the phone. She was given the forms to enroll. There was space requiring the applicant to identify herself according to race. The young woman wrote "Negro."

Now, this girl was mixed-race. Her father was white and her mother was half-Black and half-white. Since her mother classified herself as Negro, the young woman considered herself a Negro as well. And this woman was so fair that she could have written "Caucasian" in the blank and she never would have been questioned

She told me when she handed in her form, the registrar told her that she had made a mistake by writing down Negro as her racial origin.

The girl said, No, she had not made a mistake, and that she was, indeed, a Negro.

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That's when the registrar told her that the school of nursing did not accept Black women into their program, and that she might as well go home.

The young woman, a country girl, not knowing what to do next, hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take her where she could get help. He took her to see Reverend Oliver. Bill was away, so that poor thing was left with me.

I tried to comfort her. I remember saying something mindless like, "But Dear, didn't you know you couldn't study here?" I thought everybody knew.

I did what I could. I paid the train and bus fares to get her back home to Guysborough. I knew she would still be upset, so I arranged for someone to meet her train at Antigonish station and get her on the next bus home.

But watching those thin shoulders as that young woman walked away, steadying that cardboard suitcase along with the weight of what had just happened to her—a suitcase that likely carried everything else that mattered to her in the world—everything except her dream of becoming a nurse—I imagined I could almost see her broken heart through that young woman's back.

As it happened I too had had the dream of becoming a nurse in Canada. I guess I had lots of dreams. But then I fell in love with William Pearly Oliver and together we planned for a quiet

country life: he would serve as Baptist minister in a small community and I would raise our children and keep the household while helping Bill and the church, doing whatever was needed to make our life together work. But there's a story in how we got to Halifax, not at all part of my dream—it's pretty romantic and I'll tell you about that later.

The point is—until that poor girl showed up in Halifax—once I was married I really never gave a nursing career, or the racism that made it impossible, another thought. Not until that young Black woman crying on my doorstep stirred the latent crusader inside me.