

THE UNIQUE QUALITIES
of a Black Woman



A NOVEL

PETER SHEPPARD

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MBP² Press

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, families, businesses, and the town of Prairie Laurent are products of the author's imagination. Real historical events—the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, the November 16, 1972 shootings at Southern University, Hurricane Katrina, the 2016 Louisiana flood, and the COVID-19 pandemic—appear as the backdrop for invented lives. Denver Smith and Leonard Brown, the two students killed at Southern University in 1972, are real, and they are named here with respect. Any other resemblance to actual persons is coincidental.

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

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*For the grandmothers, mothers, sisters, aunts,
teachers, godmothers, and friends
who put their hands where the hurt was,
and kept them there.*

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The Women of the Quilt

Celestine Bellard (1852–1929)

The Grandmother · traiteuse and midwife · Faith

Rose Bellard Simien (1904–1973)

The Mother · Celestine's granddaughter · Sacrifice

Hattie Simien Mouton (1927–2020)

The Sister · born in the 1927 flood · Loyalty

Bernadette Mouton Fontenot (b. 1950)

The Granddaughter · reporter · Truth

Vivian “Aunt Viv” Simien (b. 1931)

The Aunt · Viv's House of Beauty · Self-respect and joy

Mrs. Lillian Sonnier (b. 1940)

The Teacher · English and debate · Excellence

Lorraine “Nanny Lo” Arceneaux Guillory (b. 1950)

The Godmother · nurse at Charity Hospital · Presence

Simone Richard (b. 1984)

The Girlfriend · pharmacist · Sisterhood

Danielle Jolivet (b. 1985)

The Other Woman · Nia's mother · Grace

Celeste Fontenot Malveaux (b. 1984)

The Wife and Queen · pharmacist · All of them

And the men who stood beside them—Jules Simien, Clarence Mouton, Raymond Fontenot, Earl Guillory, and Desmond Malveaux—and Nia Malveaux (b. 2008), who will one day earn a square.

PROLOGUE

The Cedar Chest



Prairie Laurent, St. Landry Parish, Louisiana — May 2026

*We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation
to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful
works that he hath done.*

— Psalm 78:4 (KJV)

THE QUILT CAME out of the cedar chest for only three things: a birth, a burial, or a wedding.

That was the rule, and nobody in the family could remember a time before it. Not Aunt Viv, who was ninety-five and remembered everything, including things that had not happened to her. Not Celeste's mother, Bernadette, who had been a newspaperwoman for forty years and did not believe in rules she could not find written down. Not even Celeste herself, who had grown up hearing the rule so many times that she thought it was in the Bible, somewhere between Ruth and Esther, until she was nine and looked.

So when Nia came into the back bedroom of the old house and found her stepmother kneeling in front of the open chest with the quilt across her lap, the girl stopped in the doorway.

"Who died?" Nia said.

"Nobody died."

"Then who's getting married?"

"Nobody's getting married."

Nia was eighteen, two weeks from graduation, and very nearly as tall as her father. She had her mother's cheekbones and her father's way of standing with all her weight on one hip as if she were waiting for a band to start. She looked at the quilt, and then at Celeste, and then at the quilt again.

"Then nobody's being born," she said slowly, "unless you've got something to tell me."

Celeste laughed so hard she had to put her hand on the edge of the chest.

"Girl, I am forty-two years old."

"Sarah was ninety."

"Sarah," Celeste said, "can keep that blessing to herself."

Nia came in and sat on the floor beside her, cross-legged, the way she used to sit when she was six and Celeste was the new woman in her father's life, the one she had decided not to like and had liked anyway. She reached out and touched the edge of the quilt with one finger, carefully, as though it might be hot.

It was not a pretty quilt, if you judged it the way people judge quilts at a parish fair. The squares did not match. One was flour sacking, soft as an old dollar bill, printed with faded blue flowers. One was a piece of an apron, stained at the corner with something that had never washed out. One was blue gingham. One was a shade of Columbia blue that only Southern University people could name on sight. One was pink satin, so bright it looked embarrassed to be there. One was black, heavy, academic. One was hospital green. One was a scrap of a T-shirt with half a word on it. One was the soft white flannel of a baby's blanket.

Nine squares, stitched together by different hands across a hundred years, with a tenth space in the center where there was nothing at all but backing and batting and a careful border of gold thread.

"I've seen it before," Nia said. "At Mawmaw Hattie's funeral. But I was twelve. I didn't really look at it."

"Nobody really looks at it at a funeral. You're too busy crying."

"What's the empty square for?"

Celeste did not answer right away. She smoothed the quilt across her knees. Through the window, out past the pecan trees, she could see the long

tables already set up in the yard for Saturday—Aunt Viv’s ninety-fifth birthday and Nia’s graduation, folded into one family reunion because Bernadette said the family could not afford to drive in from Houston and Atlanta and Los Angeles twice in one month, not with gas what it was. Desmond was out there now with two of his band students, stringing lights between the trees and arguing with them about whether the lights were straight. They were not straight. They would never be straight. Desmond would keep fixing them until dark.

“The empty square,” Celeste said finally, “is mine.”

Nia looked at her.

“Every woman in this quilt added her square when she’d earned it,” Celeste said. “Not when she wanted to. Not when it was convenient. When she’d given something that cost her. That was the rule Grandmother Celestine made, back in 1927, in a Red Cross tent in Opelousas, with the whole parish underwater.”

“And you haven’t earned yours?”

“Aunt Viv says I earned it ten years ago. Mama says I earned it during the pandemic. Your daddy says I earned it the day I married him, which tells you everything you need to know about your daddy.”

Nia grinned. “So why haven’t you put it in?”

Celeste thought about that for a long moment. She thought about the flour sack and the apron and the gingham and the blue. She thought about every woman whose hands had touched this cloth, and what each of them had carried, and what each of them had handed down without ever once calling it an inheritance.

“Because I didn’t understand it yet,” she said. “Not all the way. I thought I was supposed to be one of them. Just one more square. But I’m not one of them, baby. I’m all of them. Everything I am, one of these women gave me. And I couldn’t add my square until I could look at every one of theirs and say what it was.”

“Can you say it now?”

Celeste looked down at the quilt.

“I think so,” she said.

Nia pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. Out in the yard, Desmond shouted at a sophomore about a ladder. The afternoon light came in long and gold across the old pine floor.

“Then tell me,” Nia said. “Start at the beginning.”

So Celeste put her hand on the first square—the flour sack, the faded blue flowers—and began.

CHAPTER ONE

The Grandmother



Prairie Laurent, St. Landry Parish — 1910 to 1929

When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.

— Isaiah 43:2 (KJV)

CELESTINE BELLARD WAS born a slave in 1852 and died a free woman in 1929, and in between she put her hands on more people than the priest at Holy Ghost Church and the doctor in Opelousas put together.

That was the way the people of Prairie Laurent said it, and they were not exaggerating. By the spring of 1910, Celestine had been a *traiteuse*—a treater, a healer—for nearly forty years. She had delivered more babies than she could count, though she tried; she kept a tally in pencil on the inside of a kitchen cupboard door, one mark for every child, and by 1910 the door was gray with marks from top to bottom and she had started on the second one. She treated sunstroke and snakebite and fever and warts. She set bones. She sat with the dying. She had a remedy for nearly everything, mostly from the woods and the bayou edge, and for the things she had no remedy for, she had prayers.

She did not take money for the prayers. That was the rule. A *traiteuse* who charged for prayers lost the gift. You could leave something on the porch afterward—a sack of rice, a mess of greens, a rabbit, a jar of fig preserves—and Celestine would take it, because she had a granddaughter to feed. But you did not hand her money, and you did not say *thank you*, either, because saying thank you to a treater was bad luck. You just nodded, and

went home, and got well.

Most people got well.

In the spring of 1910, the granddaughter she had to feed was six years old, and her name was Rose.



Rose had come into the world on a January night in 1904 in the back room of Celestine's house, and her mother had gone out of it the same night.

Celestine did not talk about that night. Not for years. She had delivered hundreds of babies by then, and she had lost mothers before, as every midwife does—but she had never lost her own daughter, and she had never stood in a room and done everything she knew how to do, every single thing, and watched it not be enough.

Marie-Louise was nineteen. She bled, and Celestine could not stop the bleeding. By the time the sun came up, Celestine had a granddaughter in one arm and a daughter beneath a white sheet, and she sat in the cane chair by the window for a whole day without speaking while the women of Prairie Laurent came and went around her, cleaning and cooking and sitting up with the body and taking turns with the baby.

On the second day, Celestine got up.

She washed her face. She put on her apron. She took the baby from the arms of Madame Thibodeaux next door, and looked down into the small brown face, and said, "All right, then."

That was all. *All right, then.* And she raised that child.



By six, Rose was a serious little girl with her grandmother's wide forehead and a habit of watching everything. She went everywhere Celestine went. She sat in the corner of other people's kitchens while her grandmother treated a child for croup or a farmer for a hand split open by a cane knife. She carried the cloth bag of remedies. She learned the names of the plants before she learned her letters—*mamou* for coughs, elderberry for fever, *herbe à malot* for sores, the bitter weed whose name Celestine would only whisper.

"Why do you whisper it?" Rose asked once.

“Because some things,” Celestine said, “you don’t shout.”

What Rose noticed most, though, was her grandmother’s hands.

They were large hands for a woman, broad across the palm, with long fingers knotted at the joints. They had picked cotton as a child on the Desrosiers place before the war ended. They had scrubbed floors in Opelousas. They had pulled babies into the world and closed the eyes of old men leaving it. And when Celestine put them on someone who was hurting—on a forehead, a belly, a back—something happened that Rose could not explain, and never could, even when she was grown.

The hurt got quiet.

Not always gone. But quiet. As though it had heard someone come into the room who was not afraid of it.

“How do you do that?” Rose asked one evening on the porch, after they had walked home from the Batiste place, where Celestine had sat for two hours with a little boy burning up with fever until it broke.

Celestine was shelling peas into a pan in her lap. She did not look up.

“Put your hands where the hurt is,” she said. “And pray like you mean it. That’s all.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.” Celestine snapped a pod and thumbed the peas into the pan. “Most people won’t do the first part. They see somebody hurting and they stand back. They say, *Oh, that’s a shame*, and they pray from across the room. But the hurt don’t hear you from across the room, *chère*. You got to get close. You got to put your hands on it.”

Rose thought about this for a long time.

“What if it’s too much?” she said. “What if you put your hands on it and it’s too much hurt and you can’t fix it?”

Celestine stopped shelling.

She looked out across the yard, past the fig tree and the chicken coop and the cane field going gold in the evening light, toward the little cemetery behind the church where Marie-Louise was buried.

“Then you keep your hands there anyway,” she said quietly. “So it knows it isn’t by itself.”

There was a white doctor in Opelousas named Dr. Fontenot—no relation to any Fontenot who would matter in this story later, though in St. Landry Parish everybody was a Fontenot or knew one—who had opinions about traiteurs. He said so in the newspaper. He said they were superstition and ignorance and a danger to public health.

He also, in the winter of 1912, knocked on Celestine's door at two in the morning.

Rose was eight. She woke up to the knock and lay in the dark listening. She heard the doctor's voice, low and urgent, and her grandmother's, low and calm. She heard the words *my wife* and *the baby* and *turned wrong*. She heard the door close and the sound of the doctor's buggy going away fast down the road, with her grandmother in it.

Celestine came home at noon the next day. She was gray with tiredness and there was blood on her apron, and she said nothing at all until she had washed and eaten and sat down in the cane chair by the window.

"Did the baby live?" Rose asked.

"The baby lived. The mama lived."

"Did you turn it?"

"I turned it." Celestine closed her eyes. "He'd been trying for six hours. He had his instruments and his books. He was a smart man. But his hands were afraid. A baby can feel that."

"Was he angry? That you could do it and he couldn't?"

Celestine opened one eye.

"He cried," she said. "Right there in the kitchen. A grown man, a doctor, crying with his face in his hands. And then he went and got his checkbook, and I told him I didn't take money for that, and he didn't understand, and I told him to go sit with his wife."

A week later, a wagon pulled up to the house and two men unloaded a brand-new iron cookstove, black and gleaming, with nickel trim. There was no note. There didn't need to be. Celestine stood on the porch with her arms folded and looked at it for a long time.

"Well," she said finally. "I didn't take money."

The doctor never wrote about traiteuses in the newspaper again. And for the rest of his life, when a case went wrong in the middle of the night and his books ran out, his buggy came down the road to Prairie Laurent.

Rose grew.

She went to the colored school two miles down the road for as long as there was a colored school, which was five months a year when the cotton allowed it and fewer when it didn't. She learned to read from the Bible and the Sears catalog and the newspapers Celestine brought home from the houses in town where she was sometimes called. She learned to cook from her grandmother and to sew from Madame Thibodeaux. She learned to pray from both of them, in French and in English, on her knees on the pine floor every night before bed.

And she learned the gift.

Not all at once. Celestine did not believe in all at once. But by fourteen, Rose could treat a burn. By sixteen, she had delivered her first baby, with her grandmother's hands over hers. By eighteen, people in Prairie Laurent had started to say *Celestine and Rose* instead of just *Celestine*, the way you say the name of a store when the owner's child has gone into the business.

"Do I have it?" Rose asked once. "The gift? Like you?"

Celestine looked at her.

"Put your hands on my shoulder," she said.

Rose did.

They sat like that for a while on the porch, the old woman and the young one, with the cicadas going in the trees.

"Well?" Rose said finally.

"My shoulder's been aching three weeks," Celestine said. "It doesn't hurt now."

Rose took her hands away and stared at them.

"Don't look at your hands," Celestine said. "It's not your hands. Look at the person. The gift isn't something you have, *chère*. It's something you do. Every day. Whether you feel like it or not. You put your hands where the hurt is. You pray like you mean it. And you don't stand back."

In 1925, Rose married Jules Simien at Holy Ghost Church in Opelousas.

He was a tall, quiet man from a family of farmers near Washington, with a laugh that started somewhere down in his chest and took a long time to reach the surface. He worked at the sawmill and played the accordion on Saturday nights at the dances out in the country, where the old French songs got faster and faster until the floor of the dance hall bounced. He had asked Celestine for permission before he asked Rose, which Celestine considered the first sensible thing she had ever seen a young man do.

"You'll be good to her," Celestine said. It was not a question.

"Yes, ma'am."

"She'll be good to you. But she's got the gift. People are going to knock on your door at all hours. You can't get jealous of that."

"No, ma'am."

Celestine studied him for a long time.

"Play me something," she said.

He went out to his wagon and came back with the accordion. He sat on the porch steps and played an old waltz, slow, one Celestine's own mother used to hum, and Celestine sat in the cane chair and closed her eyes and did not say anything. When he finished, she opened her eyes, and they were wet.

"All right, then," she said.

By the spring of 1927, Rose was eight months pregnant with her first child, and it had been raining for a year.

It had rained all through the fall and all through the winter, not just in St. Landry Parish but all the way up the river, in places Rose had only seen on maps—Arkansas, Tennessee, Illinois, Iowa. The Mississippi was the highest anyone had ever seen it. In April, the newspapers Celestine brought home were full of levees breaking in Mississippi and Arkansas, of whole towns underwater, of people standing on rooftops waiting for boats. In late April, they dynamited the levee below New Orleans to save the city. In May, the water came west.

On the seventeenth of May, the levee along the Atchafalaya broke at Melville, at the northeastern edge of the parish.

Jules heard about it at the sawmill. He came home at a run, mud to his knees, and found Rose and Celestine on the porch.

“We have to go,” he said. “Now. The water’s coming. They’re saying it’ll be here in two days. Maybe one.”

Celestine looked out at the fields. Everything looked the same as it had that morning. The cane was green. The sky was gray. The fig tree was heavy with small hard fruit.

“Where?” she said.

“Opelousas. The Red Cross is setting up a camp. Higher ground.”

Celestine nodded slowly. She stood up out of the cane chair. She was seventy-five years old, and her knees were bad, and she had lived in this house for fifty years.

“Get the wagon,” she said. “And Jules—get the chickens.”



They loaded what they could. The good quilt Madame Thibodeaux had made. The Bible. The tin box with Marie-Louise’s rosary and the papers. Celestine’s cloth bag of remedies, which she packed herself, very carefully, choosing what to bring and what to leave the way a general chooses soldiers. The chickens, in crates, outraged.

They did not take the cookstove. Celestine stood in the kitchen and looked at it for a long time, black and gleaming and nickel-trimmed, the finest thing she had ever owned.

“It’s iron,” Jules said. “It’ll be here when we get back.”

“Maybe,” said Celestine. Then she went to the cupboard and opened the door—the one gray with pencil marks from top to bottom—and stood there, looking at it.

“Mama Celestine,” Rose said gently. “We have to go.”

“Fifty years,” Celestine said. She ran her fingers over the marks. “Every child in this parish whose mama couldn’t pay a doctor. Every one.”

She closed the cupboard door.

“All right, then,” she said, and walked out to the wagon without looking back.

The water came on the nineteenth. They watched it from the road, from the high ground on the way into Opelousas: a brown, slow, endless sheet moving across the fields, swallowing fence posts and cane rows and the low places first, then the high places, then everything. By the twentieth, Prairie Laurent was a lake with rooftops in it.



The Red Cross camp at Opelousas was a city of white tents on the high ground at the edge of town, and by the end of May there were more refugees in it than there were people in Opelousas.

That was what the newspaper said, anyway. Rose could believe it. The tents went on as far as she could see. There were people from all over the parish and from Avoyelles and Pointe Coupee, Black and white, Creole and Cajun, families who had come out on wagons and families who had come out on boats and families who had come out with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. There were lines for food and lines for water and lines for the doctors, who were overwhelmed. The colored section was at the low end, of course, nearest the mud, where the latrines drained.

Celestine looked at it all on the first morning, standing outside their tent in the drizzle with her arms folded.

Then she went back inside, got her cloth bag, and went to work.

She did not wait to be asked. She walked up and down the rows of tents in the colored section and looked inside them, and wherever she saw a feverish child or a cut gone bad or an old man coughing, she knelt down and put her hands on it. She showed women how to boil the water and how to keep the flies off the babies. She made a tea from the elderberry she had brought and gave it away a cup at a time until it was gone, and then she went to the edges of the camp, where the woods began, and found more.

By the end of the first week, people from the white section were coming down to the low end to find her.

“There’s an old colored woman,” Rose heard one of the Red Cross nurses say to another, “down at the far end. The people swear by her. Dr. Fontenot

says to send the hard ones to her when we're full up."

"Is she a nurse?"

"No. Some kind of folk healer. Don't take money."

"Then what does she want?"

The first nurse shrugged. "Near as I can tell," she said, "she just wants people to stop hurting."



Rose's labor started on the night of the twenty-second of May, in the tent, in the rain.

It came fast and then it came slow, the way first babies do, and by midnight it had stopped making progress, and Rose was frightened in a way she had never been frightened in her life. She had helped deliver babies. She knew all the words. But knowing the words is not the same as lying on a cot in a Red Cross tent with the rain drumming on the canvas and the lantern swinging and your body splitting in two.

She knew, too, how her own mother had died.

"Mama Celestine," she whispered. "I'm scared."

Celestine was kneeling beside the cot. In the lantern light, her face was very old and very calm.

"I know, *chère*."

"What if it's like—what if it's like my mama—"

"Hush."

Celestine put her hands on Rose's belly. Those broad hands, knotted at the joints. She closed her eyes and began to pray, low, in French—not the prayers from church, but older ones, the ones she only whispered. Jules stood at the tent flap with his hat in his hands, and Madame Thibodeaux, who had found them in the camp on the third day, held the lantern.

Rose felt the hands on her belly. She felt them press, gently, and move, and press again. She felt something shift inside her.

"There," Celestine murmured. "There you go. Come on, now. Come on."

Rose looked up into her grandmother's face, and saw that Celestine was crying. Not from fear. Celestine's face was not afraid. She was crying the way

you cry when you have been carrying something for twenty-three years and have finally been allowed to put it down.

“I couldn’t save your mama,” Celestine whispered. “I did everything. Everything. And I couldn’t.”

“I know, Mama.”

“I’m not going to lose you. You hear me? Not you.”

At a quarter past four in the morning, on the twenty-third of May, 1927, in a Red Cross tent on the high ground at Opelousas, with the whole parish underwater and the rain still falling, Rose Bellard Simien gave birth to a daughter.

The baby came out angry and loud, and Celestine caught her in both hands, and held her up in the lantern light, and laughed—a sound Rose had not heard from her in years, a girl’s laugh, coming out of a seventy-five-year-old woman on her knees in the mud.

“Look at her,” Celestine said. “Look at her. Mad as a wet cat.”

Rose was crying. Jules was crying. Madame Thibodeaux was crying so hard the lantern shook.

There was nothing to wrap the baby in. Their quilt was soaked through. The Red Cross had run out of blankets two days before. Celestine looked around the tent, and her eyes fell on a flour sack in the corner—an empty one, from the relief supplies, printed with faded blue flowers the way the mills printed them so women could make dresses out of them.

She took the flour sack and wrapped her great-granddaughter in it. It was the softest thing in the tent.

“What’s her name?” she asked.

Rose looked at Jules. They had talked about names for months.

“Harriet,” Rose said. “Hattie. After your mama.”

Celestine went very still.

Her own mother, Harriet, had been sold away from her when she was nine years old. She had never seen her again. She had never known where she was buried, or whether she was buried at all. She had carried that name inside her, unspoken, for sixty-six years.

She looked down at the baby in the flour sack.

“Hattie,” she said, and her voice broke on it, and she held the baby against her chest and rocked, on her knees in the mud, and wept.



They went home to Prairie Laurent in July, when the water finally went down.

The house was standing. It was full of mud to the windowsills, and the fig tree was dead, and the chicken coop was gone, and there was a dead cow in the yard that Jules and three neighbors had to drag out with mules. The cookstove was still there, black and iron and rusted orange, with a crawfish living in the oven.

The cupboard door was gone. The water had taken it.

Celestine stood in the kitchen and looked at the empty hinges for a long time.

“Mama Celestine,” Rose said softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Celestine turned away from the cupboard. “Every one of those children is still out there. The water can have the door. It can’t have them.”

That night, by the light of a coal-oil lamp, sitting in the cane chair Jules had scrubbed clean, Celestine took the flour sack Hattie had been wrapped in and cut a square from the center of it—a perfect square, the faded blue flowers in the middle—and hemmed the edges by hand.

“What’s that for?” Rose asked.

“It’s the beginning of something.”

“A quilt?”

“A quilt.” Celestine bit off her thread. “But not the kind you make all at once. This one’s going to take a long time. Every woman in this family is going to add a square. But not just any time. Not because she wants to.”

“When, then?”

Celestine held the square up to the lamp. The blue flowers glowed.

“When she’s earned it,” she said. “When she’s given something that cost her. When she’s put her hands where the hurt is and kept them there. That’s when.”

“How will she know?”

“She’ll know,” said Celestine. “Every woman knows.”

She folded the square and put it in the tin box with Marie-Louise’s rosary.



Celestine Bellard lived two more years.

She treated people until the last month. She taught Rose everything she had not already taught her. She held Hattie on her lap on the porch every evening and sang to her in French and let her pull on her fingers, those big knotted fingers, until the child fell asleep. Dr. Fontenot came to visit once, an old man himself by then, and sat on the porch with her for an afternoon, and nobody ever knew what they talked about.

She died on Christmas morning, 1929, in the cane chair by the window, with the sun coming in and Hattie asleep in her lap.

Rose found them like that. The baby breathing, warm, peaceful. The old woman gone, with one hand resting on the child’s back.

Right where the hurt would be, someday.

So it would know it wasn’t by itself.



The first square: flour sacking, faded blue flowers. Celestine Bellard, the Grandmother.

What she gave: her hands.

What she handed down

Put your hands where the hurt is. And pray like you mean it.

What she asks of you: When you see someone hurting, do you stand back and say it’s a shame—or do you go to them, and pray?

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