

HOWLING WINDS THROUGH SOUTHERN PINE

by Bernice Anderson Poole

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all who endeavor to follow their dream.

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to act.

Proverbs 3:27, New International version

OTHER BOOKS BY BERNICE ANDERSON POOLE

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The Haunted Woods

Mary McLeod Bethune, Educator

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CHAPTER ONE

It was getting dark fast and Papa hadn't come. He left early this morning going over to comfort Uncle Roy's family. Uncle Roy, Mama's brother, went on to be with the Lord last night, leaving behind Aunt Rita Mae and five children to try and make it on their own, tenant farming. Papa had been having spells of shortness of breath. He said it was indigestion. The doctor said it was his heart.

Mama and I were worried sick. I didn't know what we would do if something happened to him. It was the three of us, struggling ourselves, from day to day trying to make ends meet while tenant farming. Our boss was already threatening to put us out of our rent-free tenant house for a larger family who could work more acres of tobacco and cotton.

I finished my sewing and stood at the window in the front room, my nose pressed against the cold window pane, looking for a glimpse of Papa on the mule and wagon coming down the highway. The cold March wind blowing through the tall pines across the road had picked up and was howling like a wolf. I always seemed to be able to hear voices in a howling wind. As I stood there looking at Mr. Briar's cows grazing in the pasture across the road like ghosts, I listened, and made up a poem.

Listen to the wind

Listen to the wind

Voices of women and children and men

Crying and moaning and doing the wills of

Rich landowners in tenant farming fields.

Hush little girl, don't be afraid,

Touch the sky with the crown of your head

I had been sewing since I was five years old. Mama said it was a gift from God. She said I would cut up any kind of material in the house to make something, if it wasn't nailed down. My sock doll, Annie, had a lot of pretty clothes. I dressed her every morning in a different outfit and lay her on my pillow after making my bed.

I made dresses and skirts by taking the garments apart and laying the pieces on new material, then cutting out the pieces and sewing them up with needle and thread. My biggest dream was to get a sewing machine and learn how to use store bought patterns. I kept an empty space for it under the window in my bedroom. Since Mama said that sewing was a gift from God, I figured that God was using me to get our family out of the no-win situation that we were in.

Mrs. Mabelle Patterson, a white lady, had a sewing shop in the community. She made clothes for the wealthy women of the county. Her business was located up highway 64, as you passed our little tenant farmhouse, traveling toward Raleigh, North Carolina. Each year she put on a dressmaking contest for the white teenage girls from all around. The winner received a whole year of training from Mrs. Patterson herself. At the end of the course the winner was prepared to open her own sewing business. I thought if I, only I, were a white girl.

When Papa got home we were going over to Uncle Roy's house for the sitting-up. That's when the undertaker brings the body home and puts it in the front room and sets up a red light that gives the whole room an eerie glow.

Papa was a kind and gentle man. He would give you the shirt off his back. He worked hard every year, tenant farming, and at the end of the year, when the cotton or tobacco was sold, most of the money went to the landowner. But he was a man with a good sense of humor. He was always singing funny

Songs from his childhood and liked to give people and animals nicknames. My nickname was Scram.

He said it was because when I was little every time he got ready to go somewhere; I started scrambling around, looking for my coat. Our mule was Hee-Haw, and my dog was Stuff.

There was this little poem that he learned from childhood. He taught it to me and I often went around saying it.

*When I die don't bury me deep
Put a jug of molasses at my head and feet
A hoecake of cornbread in my hand
And I'll sop my way to the Promised Land*

I looked and saw Papa coming and yelled and told Mama. He stopped in the front yard and tied the mule to the big oak tree. I held the door open for him, and then followed him to the kitchen where Mama was. Dinner was ready, but he said he had already eaten. He told me and Mama to wrap up good because it was getting nippy outside. We didn't waste any time getting ready and getting on the wagon.

Mama and Papa sat on the wagon seat and I sat behind them on the wagon floor, a quilt around my shoulders. Papa got the mule trotting back up the highway and when we got to Mr. Briar's big white house, called the big house, we turned left onto the path running through the cow pasture which led over to another community, where Uncle Roy and many of my other relatives lived. I thought about the stretch of woods ahead; at night it was scary. Since I was little I had listened to many ghost stories. Papa said it was time that I grow up and stop thinking about that mess. When we entered the woods I covered my head. It was deathly quiet; all I could hear were the wagon wheels grinding through the sandy path.

When we came out of the woods we followed a red dirt road that led past several big farms, all owned by white landowners; all except the farm owned by Mr. Richard Rockingham, a black man. Mrs. Rockingham was my teacher at the three-room school that I attended. Then there was Richard Rockingham Jr., the son. Everybody called him Juke. He was sixteen, cute and smart. I hoped that he would come by Uncle Roy's house tonight. He was a friend to many of the boys in the community. He often talked to the drop-outs, telling them how important it was to stay in school. Juke had never said anything to me, except hello Beranda, but I thought he said it in a very special way.

Sarah and Lucy, Uncle Roy's daughters, were as different as a left shoe and a right one. Sarah liked pretty dresses and was

always begging me to make her something; Lucy didn't care if she ever wore anything except overalls.

When I walked into the kitchen Sarah ran up and hugged me, "Girl we been looking for you. Want something to eat?" I looked at the big hump under the white tablecloth and imagined all the good food underneath it. Sarah and Lucy and I were sitting on the long bench beside the table, talking, when suddenly I heard a familiar voice. "She thinks she's cute now that Aunt Ada lets her wear her hair hanging." It was Dee Ann Winters. She lived around the bend of the woods in back of my house. She was sixteen like Lucy, but acted more like she was eighteen. I thought that it was because she had been raised by her grandmother who had not been well through the years and Dee had practically raised herself.

She didn't mind hurting your feelings. "Hey, Dee," I said and kept talking. She starting messing with my hair and I moved my head away. She liked to show out; if juke came I wanted him to think that I was more mature than that.

I heard a knock at the front door and then heard Juke talking to Junebug. My heart skipped two beats and I smoothed my hair down behind my head, knowing that he would follow June bug to the kitchen.

Juke stopped at the kitchen door and stuck his head in, playfully, then came in, his baseball cap in his hand. He sat down by the boys and they started talking. He and June bug were good friends. He always came by and picked up June bug in his pickup truck to ride with him to town, or to help him with some job on their farm.

Juke didn't stay long. When he left June bug followed him to the door. Dee Ann and some of the other girls stopped showing out. Lucy and Sarah's little brothers, Marshall and Collin suddenly ran through the kitchen and ran around the table, Collin chasing Marshall. Before they ran out I managed to

hug them. I wondered if they understood death. I dreaded the funeral, the sadness and the tears. My heart ached for the family.

Papa came up to me one day and told me to close my eyes and hold out my hands. He had bought me a beautiful sewing book

with illustrations. I hugged him, wondering where he got the money. Mama said he had done some extra work for a man.

It was Monday morning; I had studied my sewing book until the early hours of the morning. Mama had reminded me twice that night that I had school the next morning. When I walked into the kitchen that morning she and Papa were talking about Uncle Roy's children and how hard it would be for them from now on.

On my way to school, my sewing book with me, I went by Dee's house and we met up with Sarah and Lucy and their little brothers at the crossroad.

Our shortcut to school was through a dark wood. Sometimes one of us would pretend that we saw a ghost and everybody would start running and screaming at the top of their voice.

I would finish eighth grade this year. There was no other school for higher learning for blacks in our area. Only a few tenant farming children finished. Our school adjusted its terms according to the planting and harvest of the cotton and tobacco crops.

The White Oak School came into view as we emerged from the woods. It was a white, three-room building. The big iron bell in the belfry was ringing; it could be heard from miles around. We headed for our classroom. It was warm inside the class room from the potbelly stove. Our teacher, Mrs. Canterbury, allowed no horsing around. She kept a leather strap in the top drawer of her desk and didn't mind using it.

She was a stout lady and always wore a sweater around her shoulders. She said since some students had trouble working the problems, she would have someone come to the blackboard and work some of the problems. My heart began to pound, knowing that I was usually the one that she called to the board to demonstrate. Sure enough I was the chosen one.

Next we had history. We read about North Carolina in 1860. We learned about the six kind of social groups. The wealthy and most respected class was called the gentry. Then there were the middle-class. Next were the small farmers. Then there were the laborers; the black and white tenant farmers.

Mrs. Canterbury gave us time to study for a test. It was the perfect time to sneak out my sewing book, which I had tucked inside my history book. I was so absorbed that I didn't hear the footsteps easing up behind me.

“What are you doing, Beranda?” It was Mrs. Canterbury. I froze. She took my sewing book and continued up the aisle, saying something about when she said study, she meant study. She might as well have ripped my heart out. I begged for my book, saying that I was sorry. She said she would keep it until I learned how to do what I was told. When we went across the hall to Mrs. Rockingham’s class, I was in a daze not knowing when I would get my book.

That evening when our gang walked back home through the woods, I was upset. Lucy kicked a pile of leaves on our path. “She’ll give it back soon, Beranda,” she said, patting me on the back. Sarah had stopped to pull up her sock; she caught up with us; “I hate Mrs. Canterbury,” she said. Dee eyeballed me. “Had no business taking it to school in the first place,” she said. We said goodbye to Sarah and Lucy and their brothers at the crossroads.

I didn’t say another word to Dee the rest of the way home, nor did I say goodbye to her when she turned off to go home. By the time I rounded the bend of the woods to my house I felt sorry.