



Good

Dirt

A NOVEL

CHARMAINE
WILKERSON

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *BLACK CAKE*

BY CHARMAINE WILKERSON

Black Cake

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To those whose stories are written in our hearts.

Prologue

ONE MONTH BEFORE

“S HHH,” HER BROTHER SAYS.

She’s giggling. She can’t help it. She tears off pieces of sticky tape and hands them over. Just as her brother finishes with the tape, their mom calls from outside. One day, she will remember them dashing out of the room together, fingers gummy with adhesive, and, despite everything, she will smile.

“Okay, okay,” says their mother. “Let’s take this photo.” She fiddles with her camera. “You can’t show up late on the first day of school.”

But her brother wants them to see what he’s done.

“Mom, I want to take the picture indoors,” he says. “Can we?”

“But it’s so nice out here,” their mom says. Behind her, the pansies and asters are in bloom. The rest is all green against the black-blue of the Sound. This, too, she will remember. The beauty of that first home. How she thought she would never want to leave.

“Let’s just do this,” their father says. She looks up at her dad and reaches for his hand. They follow her brother inside and into the study. When their parents see the old stoneware jar, they laugh. Great big belly laughs. That’s what her brother was going for. He’s put a baseball cap over the top of the jar, and on its front he has taped a handlebar mustache cut out of paper and colored in with a black marker. On the table next to it, he’s stacked a couple of textbooks.

She and her brother haven't forgotten what the jar represents. Who made it. Where it comes from. How very old it is. Their father, and his father before him, have made sure of that. But in their home, they don't treat the jar like it's an antique. They treat it like a member of the family. Her big brother takes up his position next to the jar and leans in close for the snapshot.

"Say cheese!"

Now it's her turn. Then their mother sets the camera on a tripod and they take a group photo.

And thank goodness for the memory.

Because you never know, do you?

Part One

Shattered

2000

LATER, THE RETIRED COUPLE WOULD tell the police they had run over to the Freeman place after hearing the shots. Their exact words would be *shots rang out*. But that was just a phrase that people of their generation had picked up from watching television. On the TV news, people were always saying shots rang out. In the old detective shows, shots were always ringing out. At the box office, Rambo and the Terminator and Serpico and Shaft had all made buckets of money by making shots ring out. But this was real life, in a town with one of the lowest crime rates in the nation. Few people around here had a vocabulary suited to a situation like this one.

The space between houses being what it was in these parts, it was unlikely that anyone else living along Windward Road would have heard the shots, which did not, in fact, ring out so much as make a dull *crack-crack* sound. It was unlikely they would have heard the splitting open of the antique jar when it tumbled from the table in the study. Nor could they have heard the thud of the victim's flank against the floor when he fell. What the neighbors heard for certain was the screech of the van's tires as the panicked robbers tore out of the driveway and took the first road north away from the shore, in the direction of the country club.

The neighbors had been collecting seeds from their coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. It was that time of year. They had been working side by side, knees in the dirt, murmuring to each other as they did. Taking in the clicks and chirps of their backyard. The whisper of the sea breeze through

the tulip tree. The scent of fallen apples warming in the sun. But now they were hurrying past the line of trees that separated their garden from the Freemans', their shoes flattening dirt clods and snapping fallen twigs as they went. They were surprised to see the children's bicycles were still there.

Later, they would recall that this was the moment when panic set in.

Weren't the kids supposed to be gone? The Freeman children were almost always gone during the week, now that school had started up. They would head back out on their bikes after classes, if they came home at all. Piano lessons for her, tennis or debate club for him. The neighbors banged on the side door, now. They called out. They ran around to the front and found the entrance to the main hallway wide open. And that's when they heard it. A sound that would stay with them for years. The voice of a child, bleating like a lamb that had lost its way. A child they had watched grow from infancy. A girl who had played with their own granddaughter for most of her ten years.

It was a sound that could shatter a person's heart.

At Least, This

2018

WELL, OF COURSE THEY HAD hoped for a day like today. If life had taught them anything, it was that a person's path still could be lit by moments of joy, even after unspeakable loss. And here they were. Soh and Ed Freeman smiled at each other then looked up at the window, where they could just make out the crown of flowers on their daughter's head. Peaches and pinks. They glimpsed the dark tone of her arms against her cream-colored dress. No bridal veil, Ebby had insisted. Just the flowers and her granny's gown, the bodice above the flounced skirt adjusted to fit. What a lovely young woman their child had become.

There was a glint of light from their daughter's engagement ring as she moved away from the window. Sapphires flanking a two-carat diamond, handed down to her by her other grandma, Soh's mother. There was no personal keepsake from the groom's mother. Not that it was necessary, but it was the kind of gesture that those who knew the Peppers might have expected.

True, Henry's parents had hosted an impeccable dinner for the couple at their club three days before, but Soh and Ed couldn't help but notice that Henry's mother had not embraced their daughter that night. Hadn't kissed her on the cheek. Hadn't even taken her hand. Henry, though, had stayed close to Ebby all evening. His arm around her waist. His nose brushing her cheek. Love might not conquer all, they realized, especially in a marriage

between a black woman and a white man. Even nowadays. But mostly, love still carried more weight than pretty much anything. And they were hopeful.

Ed thought back to his own wedding day and reached out to touch his wife's fingers. Their ceremony and reception had been chock-full of guests from the black fraternities, social clubs, and summer resort circles to which they, like their parents, belonged. With all that he and Soh had inherited and were passing down to their daughter, Ed wanted to believe they had equipped their child with everything she would need to find her way in this life.

Soh tried to slow time. Savor the moment. She breathed deeply, took in the scents of the freshly mowed grass, the potted flowers along the stone path, the good dirt. The salt air coming off the Sound, a hint of chill signaling the beginning of fall. If only she could stop worrying. She looked around her garden. There were plenty of guests from the groom's side. She recognized two Fortune 500 businessmen, and that artist whose somewhat mystifying work was currently doing the rounds at the bigger museums. But there was no sign of Henry and his parents.

The Peppers were running late, today of all days.

When Ebby returned to the window, she was holding something against her torso. They saw the silvery, rectangular shape and understood. It was a framed photograph of their son, taken one morning before school. With the jar, and that impish smile of his. Typical Baz. He would have been thirty-three years old, now, had he lived. He would have been down here in the garden with them, waiting for his sister. They had lost so much as a family. But today, they were looking forward, not only back.

Within a minute, everything would change. Ebby would lean against the glass pane and they would catch the strained expression on her face. She would call her mother's cellphone, which would vibrate in the satin purse under Soh's arm. Soh would hurry upstairs to speak with her daughter. Whispers would start to circulate among the guests in the garden. And finally, Ed would walk into his home office, shut the door, and telephone the groom's father, trying to keep his cool. *Tell me this isn't happening*, he would say.

But before any of this came to pass, they were simply the mother and father of the bride, standing on the walkway leading up to the gazebo, their backs to the sea, their eyes focused on their girl, both thinking exactly the same thing: *At least, this. At least, this.*

Small Favors

EVEN AFTER THE CEREMONY HAD been called off, Ebby was aware of small favors being bestowed upon her by the universe. Chief among them was the fact that there were no wedding gifts waiting for her at home. Ebby and Henry had asked for donations to a local charity in lieu of personal items. They had been born into families that had provided them with healthy trust funds and gifted them their first homes. They both had jobs but could pay their bills without them. There were plenty of other people who needed the extra support. The decision had been a no-brainer. On that point, at least, Ebby and Henry had been perfectly in sync as a couple.

When Ebby, too much in shock to register the full weight of what was happening on her wedding day, had insisted on walking downstairs herself to announce the cancellation of the ceremony, she immediately offered to pay back any guests who had wired funds to the nonprofit. But everyone shook their heads *no*.

“A donation is a donation,” someone piped up. Funny, Ebby thought, the person who had made the comment was someone she barely knew from the groom’s side. At any rate, there were murmurs of agreement all around, hugs from those who knew her well, and the blessed presence of her parents, who, having been unable to convince Ebby to stay inside the house, remained on either side of her.

She would be grateful, always, for the black hole in her memory after that. She would never remember how she ended up getting out of that garden, out of her dress, and into bed at her parents’ house that afternoon. Nor would she recall eating anything the next day, or the day after that, or getting into her car. She would remember only walking into her own place a

few days later, thankful for a hallway and dining table completely free of any signs of silvery wedding-gift paper. She would remember flopping on the sofa and sitting there until the sun went down, still too stunned to weep, wondering what kinds of chemicals went into paper to make it shine like silver anyway, and whether any of that stuff might be toxic.