

## *Matches from Heaven*

“Heavenly Father, bless these precious moments that bring people together in peace, harmony, and the sanctity of life itself. We know that love is more powerful than hate, yet we pray for inviolability at a time when transgressions often prevail against the venerated. *His* shall surely be the Kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”

“Amen,” all said together.

“Ooooh wheee, I never knew a white boy could pray like ‘dat,” said a woman directly across the table from Arlen. She wore

a blue dress with a white shawl over her shoulders.

“You gotta’ love everybody,” said the lady sitting next to her. “That’s what the *Lord* says.”

“Some people don’t want you to love ‘em,” replied the first lady.

“What we gonna’ do with them folks?”  
The two women clapped their hands and laughed hysterically.

“Tell the man,” cried the lady in blue.  
“Tell the good man ‘bout them matches from heaven.”

Arlen moved forward waiting for a response.

“Come on now,” Katherine insisted.

“We were raised on this island,” Lucille said. “We know what happened ‘cause we was here. Others talk about it. Others read about it. But, we lived it!”

“Yes ma’am,” Arlen replied.

“You tell him everything Lucille,” Katherine shouted with joy. “You tell him about the big one in ‘40.”

“You know about the hurricane of 1940?”

“That was a big one it was,” Lucille paused for a moment. “Only way we pulled through something like that is ‘cause *God* watches over us.”

“Yes sir, you have to know that. I was no more than twelve or thirteen then,” recalled Katherine.

“What about you, Lucille?”

“I was sixteen goin’ on thirty-two,” she laughed. “Why, I remember walking all over this island. Mama says, ‘Come on Lucille.’ I remember walking on Sunday morning with our shoes in our hands. We went to the pump and washed off our feet, and then put on our shoes for church.”

“What’s it like to be a member of this church?” Arlen wanted to know.

“Goin’ to this church is like goin’ to the ole’ dug well and drawin’ up a cold cup of water,” Katherine said. “When you drink it down on a hot August day ... well, then you get yourself a good feeling. That’s what its like.”

The little white church with the stained glass windows had surely become a special place for meeting with community elders. Arlen was directing his fourth meeting there after working through a community liaison at the local university. He knew from his research that twelve hundred Gullahs and a few whites lived on Hilton Head Island in 1940. The Loomis and Thorne families acquired two-thirds of the island as a game preserve in the aftermath of the 1929 stock market crash. The Hudson and Toomer families later moved from Savannah to establish oyster factories on Hilton Head. Gullahs settled the remainder of the island following the 'Big Shoot.'

"I have a map of the island before the bridges," Arlen said, fumbling around in his leather case. "Now," he said, unfolding the map, "tell me about the hurricane of '40."

"That year, well they weren't any electricity on Hilton Head Island," Lucille began.

"We used matches," Katherine said. "You had to have matches to light that old kerosene lantern."

"My, did it get dark in that awful storm. If you didn't have no matches, you were in trouble sure 'nough."

"Tell the whole story," Katherine insisted. "Lucille's family was awful sick when the big one hit."

“Papa and my sisters were terrible sick,” Lucille recalled. “Mama and me and the *Good Lord* were watchin’ over them. Our matches had gotten wet, and we couldn’t see nothin.’ So mama said to me, ‘Come on child. We’ll go get some matches from the general store.’ It was dark. It was raining and it was terrible, but we went walking ‘cause we had to care for our family.”

“Where was that particular store?” Arlen asked, scanning the map for a location.

“It was the only store at what’s now Coligny Square. We fought the wind the whole way to that little store. We walked so hard that my feet and legs ached like never before, but we couldn’t get there. The wind fought us the whole way.”

“That rain ... . oh, how it rained,” Katherine shivered. “We lived up by Honey Horn where that rain came down sideways. Never saw rain come straight down sideways through the air like that.”

“Did you make it to Coligny?” Arlen asked Lucille.

“We finally got to that little store and mama paid for the few matches bought with the last of our grocery money,” Lucille replied. “The man at the store tried to keep us there. ‘You’d better wait right here,’ he said, ‘this storm will only get worse.’”

“Did you heed his advice?”

“No sir! Mama whispered under her breath, ‘*Good Lord* will watch over us child,’

and we went straight back into that awful storm.”

“And, then the water started rising,” Katherine said.

Lucille paused for a moment to catch her breath. Katherine retrieved a cold soda from the church refrigerator. Lucille sipped slowly from the bottle with immense satisfaction.

“Just like in the days of old Noah,” Lucille continued. “Up come the water so fast and powerful. Mama and me was walkin’ against a river waist high, a current so strong we was goin’ straight under unless shelter could be found. Mama said, ‘We gotta get into that old building ‘till this heavy rain passes.’ So, we crawled into an old abandoned shack.”

“Tell the man what you did in the darkness of that old shack,” Katherine said excitedly.

“Oh sir, we prayed!”

“Oooh wheee,” Katherine shouted.

“Mama held me in her arms and we prayed together, ‘Ow-uh farruh, hu aht in heh-wm. Hallow-ed be dy name, dy kingdom come, dy will be done on ut as it done in heh-wn. Jih-w us dis day ow-uh daylih bread, an fejih-w dohz trespass ajens us. Lead us not into temptation, but dihlih-wuh us fum all ting like e-wull. Dyne dih kingdom, pahwuh, an dy glorih. Amen!’”

“Was prayer your salvation?” Arlen asked.

“I tell you we prayed and prayed as we waited for that storm to pass. Mama said, ‘Come on child. Pray with me again. Cause *God* lob all de people een de wol sommuch dat e gii we e onliest *Son*. *God* sen we um so dat ebrybody wa bleebe pon um ain gwine dead. Dey gwine lib faebamo.’”

“We know our *God* comes first,” Katherine said with her hands folded in prayer.

“Oh yes,” Lucille declared, “we can’t breathe without our *God*.”

“Finish the story, Lucille.” Katherine unfolded her hands and placed them in Lucille’s.

“It was past midnight when the storm died down, and we walked through that old

muddy water back home. Papa shouted again and again and again, 'We thought you was dead child.'"

"Now, tell him about them matches," Katherine squealed with delight.

"Oh, them matches," sighed Lucille. "Mama pulled the wooden matches from her wet bosom. Low and behold, the first one lit our kerosene lamp. After being in that terrible storm, my sisters thought they was magic matches. But, mama and me knew they weren't no magic about it. Sir, those were matches from heaven! *Almighty God* protected them matches for our wood burning stove and kerosene lamps."

“Lucille, your accounts remind me of my own childhood in West Virginia,” Arlen told her.

“Did you go to church as a child?” Lucille asked.

“I remember walking to church singing ‘*This Little Light of Mine.*’”

“Do you put your light under a basket, or hold it upward for all to see?”

“I’m afraid it’s been hidden far too long,” Arlen replied honestly.

“The *Good Lord* provides for our light you know,” Lucille said proudly, “so, we can weather the storms of life.”

“It appears that faith in *Almighty God* gets the Gullah by on a daily basis,” Arlen reflected.

Lucille leaned forward and spoke softly. "Our ancestors left the only thing they owned - wisdom. You see, theirs was a passage of faith, a belief that *Almighty God* would never abandon them. Faith is the source of *your* light too!"

Arlen was stunned by the aesthetics of her revelation.

Lucille placed a lone wooden object in the palm of his left hand. Arlen thought of a phrase used to describe the hands of time, as her fingers felt rough and callused with age. She gently closed his hand around what appeared to be a lone wooden match.

"You keep this until you need it," Lucille whispered, "'till you're ready for your leap of faith."

“Hilton Head has really changed since 1940,” Arlen said, engaging the women one last time.

“My, how things are different now,” Katherine sighed.

“*Almighty God* watches over us all,” Lucille reminded them. “And, that never changes.”

“It sure makes me wonder,” Arlen said.

“About what?”

“Can faith completely transcend the darkness?”

“Mista’ Arlen,” Lucille said. “If we learn to be still and obedient, all things are possible in *Divine Time*.”