



Ripples of Hope

Mary Flowers

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Chapter One

It was 1917 when Henry left us. He broke Mama's heart and planted fear in the rest of ours. All Pa would say was, "life's hard enough without a son in the war when your skin is darker than the souls of everyone else." Then Mama would scold him as she held Henry, their cheeks both stained from tears.

The grief was tangible. It seemed I could trace my fingers along its wakes from each person, even Pa. Henry had tried to comfort us by mentioning he was helping the troubled world. But his words were unable to hide the underlying truth that we would potentially never see his face again.

Mama sighed. "Just stay home, Henry.... Please."

He gave her a hug and kissed her hair. "Mama, I'm going to make life better for everyone, for every American. I am going to prove that we are no different than the average white man. I'm fighting for our rights, for equality, for respect. ...I'm fighting for you, Mama, and Pa and Thomas. I'm fighting for all of you to have better lives. You won't have to walk the streets in fear. Thomas won't get bullied. Pa will be respected at work. The color of our skin won't keep us from being treated like human beings. I'm fighting to bring true democracy to America, Mama."

"I am so proud of you. You have a heart of gold, and I couldn't be more proud," she whispered before glancing at the clock. "...Please be safe. I love you so much."

"I'll see you soon," he stated. "I'll write to you every week. I love you, Mama." He kissed her cheek and went to Pa.

"Listen, son," Pa murmured, pulling Henry into his side. "Don't lose yourself. You're gonna face judgement and have the hardest times of your life. The whites have never been understanding, you hear me? They've always thought they're better than us. But you're strong and brave. Don't let them change you or discourage you. I love you, Henry."

Henry once again had tears streaming down his face. However, this time Pa's eyes were leaking as well.

"I love you too, Pa."

As Henry came to me, I already felt my eyes stinging and my throat knotting. I tried to speak, but no sound came out of my gaping mouth. Instead I just ran to him and wrapped my arms around him. He stroked my back as he listened to my muffled cries.

"Thomas," he said at last, "you are going to accomplish great things. You're going to go to high school, and you're going to graduate. ...You are the smartest kid I have ever met. Follow your mind and your heart too. Don't let anyone get you down." He knelt down to look me in the eyes and smiled a broken smile. "Take care of Mama. You'll do that for me, right?"

I nodded as I wiped my eyes.

Lowering his voice, he continued, "And Pa will need some help too. I know he seems like he's stone-cold, and he acts like he knows everyone inside and out. But he's sensitive on the inside. He's been through a lot, Thomas, and it's scarred him. He's not a bad guy, just a broken one. He's bitter about how he's been treated in the past, but deep down he wants to forgive them; I'm sure of it. They are not all bad people. Remember that, okay? Do not discriminate against them like they do to us. I have always tried to help Pa understand that, so now you'll need to. Can you do that?"

Once again I nodded. "You're going to come back."

Henry nodded as a large smile graced his face. "I am. And I'll be back soon, okay? I'll see you graduate high school." He wiped my cheeks and pulled me back into his embrace. "I love you, Thomas."

"I love you."

Henry stepped back and gathered his bags.

"Do you have everything?" Mama worried as she rushed around the room. "Do you need any food? Do you know where you're going? Do you-"

"Mama," he laughed. "You and Pa have done more than enough for me. Thank you for everything." He took one last look at his family – his mother, his father, and me – his fourteen-year-old brother. "I'll see you all soon." And with one last hug from the entire family, Henry was headed to Brooklyn, New York, to enlist in the United States Army and fight in the World War.

Chapter Two

The bell broke the silence in the classroom. I rose from my old wooden desk and gathered my books into my satchel. All of the students gathered with their friends in clusters as they prepared to go along with the rest of their days. I, however, evacuated the building as soon as possible. As I stepped outside the decomposing schoolhouse, I felt the December air nipping at my bare skin.

Pa's job wasn't everything it had seemed to be. We had migrated from Winston-Salem, North Carolina to Albany, New York in hopes of finding better opportunities and conditions. The northern industrial economy was said to be improving due to the war and the demand it created. And while Pa did find a new job with a higher salary and improved working conditions, our family still faced serious discrimination, substandard living conditions, and many hostilities.

"Hey, darkie!"

My pace quickened as I heard the threatening shout behind. Unfortunately, I was still met by my pursuer.

"I'm talking to you, dark skin. Don't you know it's rude not to look at someone who's talking to you? Or do your people not teach you that?"

I shrugged, hoping that for once my tactics would work.

"That means look at me," the boy said as he smacked my chin up, forcing my gaze to meet the eyes of him, Mikey Wilsh.

Mikey haunted my existence ever since my family moved here. For numerous years he had found a way to access my vulnerability. Every year he seemingly found a new flaw to pair with the color of my skin, which is partially why I had sheltered myself from my peers. The more of my life I kept private, the less Mikey would have against me.

"Where's your coat, huh?" he asked whilst pushing my arms out. "It's pretty cold out here."

I stayed silent as I glanced at my feet.

"Oh, what's that?" he mocked. "You can't afford it? Maybe you should go back to the south where it's warmer."

I tried to keep walking, but Mikey stepped in front of me.

"What are you learning in Negro school?" he scoffed and snatched my bag. "Well this is nothing. I learned this three years ago." He threw the book on the ground. "Oops. Here, let me get it." He picked the book up by a handful of pages, which tore out with a deafening sound.

Mikey looked at me, expecting to see a frightened look on my face, but instead he was met with a view of the top of my head. I simply looked at the ground, hoping he would retire his harassing attempts.

"Well, you aren't too worried, are you?" Mikey broke into hysterical laughter. "You are dumber than I thought! These paper stacks here hold stuff you learn."

You need this in order to be, eh, maybe half as smart as white people.”

I remained silent. I could feel Mikey’s gaze burning into me; its intensity increased as his frustration did.

“You people are hopeless,” he growled. “You’re all a waste of air.” Mikey tossed my bag into the street before strutting off. “Fetch.”

I released the breath I had been holding and retrieved my bag and its contents. I scurried around the street to find the scattered pages from the book, appalled by his lack of respect or mere decency. The ignorance he presented almost made me pity him. He would spend the rest of his life getting joy only from the misery of others. And once the war was over, and equality was finally granted, he would live with the bitter memories of the days where he felt superior.

I shrugged away the event and continued home. The mail was scheduled to arrive, and I needed to hear from Henry. He was my source of hope. I had always looked up to him as a child because he was the prime example of hope. If anyone were to change the nation’s outlook on Negros, it would be him.

I found Pa and Mama sitting at the dinner table as I entered the house. In her hands, Mama held the recognizable wax-sealed envelope, one of Henry’s letters. I sat down next to her and stared in anticipation as her trembling fingers ripped open the barrier.

“Please read it for us, Thomas,” she requested anxiously as she passed it to me.

“Dear Mama, Pa, and Thomas,” I began, “things are still the same. We still aren’t sure what we have to look forward to. We’re still facing many racial injustices. We are still nicknamed ‘darkies’ and still looked down on. Many of my comrades are discouraged, like I said last week. They believe that we should be mixed with the whites. I couldn’t agree more. I saw the conditions they get. They’re so much better than ours, and it’s not fair. But I know that after we prove ourselves, things will get better. And....”

I paused.

“What is it?” Mama whimpered.

My hands began to shake tremendously. “And we have...gotten the opportunity to prove ourselves. My division, the 93rd Division, is being ‘loaned’ to France.”

“He’s gonna fight in France?” Pa mumbled. I could hear fear lacing his words.

I continued hesitantly and with a trembling voice, “We don’t know what we’ll be doing there. We don’t know if we’re fighting, guarding bases, or just unloading ships. And I don’t know what conditions we’ll have, but they can’t be much worse than the ones here. We should arrive January 1, 1918. How are things back home? Are they better? I really hope so. If not, they will be soon. I promise. How is school, Thomas? I bet you’re the smartest kid in your class. I bet you already know everything. I’ll send you some French books. You can learn the language. I’ll pick it up while I’m there, and then we can talk to each other.”

I felt my chest burning. How I missed him.

“Pa,” I continued, “how is work going? Are things better than they were in the South? I hope you’re being safe in the factory and getting the treatment you deserve. You’ll have to show me how everything is made when I get back. It’ll be nice to know more about the weapons I’ll be using.”

Pa held the hint of a smile upon his lips. A closer look revealed tears welling in his eyes.

“Mama- ”

At the mention of her name, Mama had already begun bawling. Pa set his hand on hers and tenderly squeezed her fingers.

After a moment of gathering herself, Mama murmured, “Go on.”

“How are you doing?” I read. “I miss your constant reminding. I think I’ve done a pretty good job at keeping myself together. Sometimes I’ll forget some things. And the other day I lost one of my socks. I found it, though, so it’s okay. I miss you. I miss you all. And I can’t wait to come home and eat a good meal. I need to get everything together. We’re getting on the boat soon. I’m excited to see France. I’m sure I’ll have all sorts of stories to tell you all. Try not to worry about me too much, alright? I’ll write you next week. I love you, Mama. I love you, Pa. I love you, Thomas. I can’t wait to see you again.”

We sat silently for a moment. All thinking of our beloved Henry.

“We should write to him,” I mentioned at last. “Perhaps he’ll receive it when he arrives.”

Mama nodded as Pa went to retrieve paper and a pen. We then wrote to our beloved Henry about all we had on our minds.

Chapter Three

“Dear Mama, Pa, and Thomas. Nothing new has happened this week. We are still unloading cargo from ships and other physical labor acts. I honestly feel a little useless. For three months all I’ve done is carry boxes. It feels like those years of training have gone to waste. I should be more positive, though. The conditions here are much better! And the French are very respectful, and they believe in equality. They have many colored people in their army. I feel respected here. I can’t wait for the day when America is as accepting as this. The white American military authorities that came along are still disrespectful. They still harass us even though the French discourage it. We’ve even had a few fights break out between colored and white American soldiers. Americans fighting each other.... Isn’t that strange? I don’t understand why it has to be like this, but soon it will be over. America will no longer be segregated by skin tones.

“Have you listened to jazz music? There are many jazz musicians in our unit. It’s amazing! It always brightens our moods whenever we begin feeling down. It lets us express ourselves in a way I’ve never felt before. The French like it too. And I believe the white Americans do as well, but they are less open about it. Thomas, I finally found a good language book! I sent it to you. It might not get to you the same time as this, but it should be there soon. I’ve been asking the French men to teach me some, but you’ll probably know more than me by the

time I get back. You'll have to teach me then. Pa, I think I might have bigger arms than you now. All the heavy lifting I've done here might have pulled me ahead. Then again, you're the one making most of this, so I'm sure you're close. Ma, every day I find a new place that I know you'd love. It's so pretty here in France – all of it. I need to get back to work now, I'll write next week. I love and miss you all so very much," I read the April of 1918.

Letters of that caliber were extremely comforting to our family. Knowing Henry wasn't sacrificing his life in battle provided us with a sense of closure. And it was that perspective that resulted in the suffocating worry that accompanied Henry's letter that was written May 8, 1918.

"Dear Mama, Pa, and Thomas. Today is the day. They're stationing us on the Western Front with the French 16th Division. We'll be in the Argonne Forest. I don't know if I was supposed to say that, but I'm sure it's okay. I'm writing this on the way there, so I'm sorry if you're unable to read what I've written. I'll be in the trenches when we get there. I'm a little excited to finally be in the action and be able to actually fight for what's right. I'll be sure to tell you about it when I get home. I bet I'll have a lot of stories. I've heard about the trenches and how awful they are, but I don't want to worry you with that."

A glance at Mama revealed tears streaming down her face in fear. Pa embraced her in an effort to comfort her. Unsure of what to do, my eyes wandered back to the letter.

"Mama, listen," I muttered. "Mama, I know you're worried, but please don't be. I'll be safe. We've had

amazing training, and I have amazing comrades. I'll be home soon. I promise. I love you, and I can't stand the thought of you worrying. Please try not to. Pa, I'll be alright. I'm going to be able to help you provide for the family soon. Thomas, we're going to speak French soon, alright? Have you been practicing? Je t'aime.' That means I love you. 'I'm proud of you, and I can't wait to see what you've accomplished. I must go now. Thank you all for everything. I'm so blessed to have you as my family. I love you all so, so much.'"

Chapter Four

I reached in my pocket. Touching the edges of the letter helped calm me, which was well needed considering my brother was touching the edges of death. I had difficulties focusing in school during the time; however, I wasn't too concerned considering how advanced I seemed to be. Our school system didn't advance quickly anyway. It clearly lacked structure, and I couldn't help but wonder if the white system was operated in the same poorly constructed manner.

After the hours of the day slowly dragged on, it was time for our release. I had found that if I remained at the schoolhouse for a longer period, I could potentially avoid an encounter with Mikey. And while I found it unfortunate to be stranded alone among a sea of my social peers, I knew it was far better than a match against the brute. So, I waited. And after about half an hour of waiting, I finally left the premises with a distracted mind.

It was because of the battle over seas that I was unable to spot my own battle arising. Mikey stepped into my path and gripped my arm.

"I got scared you wouldn't show up," he smirked.

I brushed the letter with my fingers as Mikey took my bag and emptied its contents on the road.

"It's always the same stuff in here." He noticed me rummaging in my pocket. "What do you got in there, though?"

I froze. Mikey couldn't know about Henry. If he did, he would have a new aspect of my life to target. The new source of harm he could access could completely demolish my hope, the hope of my entire family.

"Show me it," he demanded.

I shook my head.

"Show me it, negro!"

Mikey yanked my hand out of my pocket, but I held the letter in a tightly bound fist. He quickly reached for my fist but I drew it back and punched him. Mikey paused as he gathered his thoughts. I felt anger coursing through my veins; it was accompanied with fear.

Mikey straightened with a smug grin. "Bad choice, black boy."

He tackled me to the ground and pinned my wrists with his knees. His fists pounded into my face as I squirmed in an attempt to escape. I jabbed my knees into his back and kicked at his head, but none of my actions could stop the assault.

I tasted my blood and tears mixing as Mikey's hands then attacked my own. I tried desperately to prevent him from seeing what my fist contained, but alas my efforts were in vain.

"More paper?" he scoffed. After a moment of reading, he looked at my bawling face. "A black soldier? How dumb. You know what this is? Worthless like him."

Mikey shredded the letter, and with that I felt my hope and heart shred as well. Perhaps that was the last letter we would receive from Henry. Perhaps those were the last words he would ever say to us.

"Why are you crying? It's not like anyone wants him around anyways. A black soldier! That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard! You're all good for nothing. Why would we trust you with a gun? Why would we trust you to fight for us?" He threw the shreds into the wind. "Learn your place, blackie."

The next day, I couldn't think. We had saved every letter we received from Henry, but that last one – potentially the last one – was destroyed by an ignorant racist. How could I have lived with myself? If I would have left the letter home, it would have remained in our possession. Mama tried to reassure me that it was alright while Pa ranted about how "the whites will never change." I knew Henry would have wanted me to correct him, to remain positive. But at that moment, positivity was nonexistent. I couldn't escape the seemingly inevitable truth that that was the society we lived in.

As I continued to lie in my bed, I could hear Mama and Pa talking.

"What if he's...dead?" Mama whimpered.

"Then we continue to love him," Pa responded. "If Henry's dead, then we're gonna keep loving him and remember why he did this – no matter how foolish it was. He's our son, and I'm proud of him. And I know you're proud of him."

"Should I get Thomas? School starts soon," Mama asked at last.

“No,” Pa said. “He’s smart. He can skip a day. He’s gonna need time to get over this.”

And Pa was correct. I remained home for two days. And on the third, I received the typical treatment from Mikey to and from school, but I had just kept walking. If he tripped me, I would stand and continue. If he shouted insults, I would ignore him. I felt nothing.

That was until mail day arrived, and we received no letter from Henry. Then, all I felt was complete grief along with Mama and Pa. The air was heavy and pressured my chest – perhaps breaking my heart even more. The amount of pain I felt was inconceivable. I stayed home for a week after that. And the pain was amplified when, once again, our mailbox was empty.

Chapter Five

I began believing Pa was right as the days trudged on. Perhaps it was the pain in my heart that led me to sharing the perspective or the constant torment from Mikey. He used Henry's death as a weapon against me. He did not know he was correct, but he knew the lingering possibility in itself would destroy me. It wasn't merely Mikey's ignorant comments that eroded my faith, though; many other white citizens would mutter mindless comments about how the African American soldiers were not equal to the white American soldiers. They claimed they were rapists and criminals. Therefore, my beliefs changed: America would never display true democracy as it claimed. And then I met him.

I was walking the path to school early when I encountered a white-skinned boy around my own age. Scarred by my experience with Mikey, I lowered my head and quickened my pace.

"Excuse me!" the boy called.

I continued walking but heard the pounding of rushed footsteps following me.

"You dropped this."

I glanced at the boy to see one of my text books in his extended hand. I gingerly took the book, afraid a wrong move would offend the boy and cause him to rage.

"...Pardon my asking," he continued nervously as he itched the back of his head, "but are you Thomas Johnson?"

I sent him a confused look before mumbling an affirmative.

"Your brother is in the war, correct? Henry Johnson?"

I lowered my gaze at the mention of his name and bit my lip in an attempt to repress any tears.

"Oh," the boy trailed off with apparent sympathy – a foreign experience to me. "I am very sorry. It must be very difficult having a family member in that position." He sent me a kind smile. "It is a very noble act of him to sacrifice himself for our country. Your family must be very proud."

"Are you mocking us?" I spat.

He quickly shook his head. "No, absolutely not! I would never intentionally disrespect someone. I apologize if I presented myself that way."

I was baffled. "Why are you being kind to me? I'm a negro!"

He chuckled. "And you are a human like me. I see no difference other than the colors of our skin. Through and through, we are the same."

In response to my puzzled look, he continued, "I know most people lack respect for African Americans, and I am very sorry for that. But not all of us believe we are superior."

There was an awkward moment of silence.

"I'm Josh Clarry," he said at last, extending a hand.

I shook it hesitantly. "You somehow know my name already."

"I am a friend of Mikey," he replied. The horrified look on my face led him to add, "No, I am different than him. I apologize for his misbehavior. He is from a family that believes strongly in racial inequality. He's a decent kid...though I suppose you wouldn't know."

I felt extremely uncomfortable. The thought of a kind, respectful white American hadn't entered my mind for a while. It seemed suspicious. Though, I believed I only felt that way due to the neglect I had come accustomed to.

"I have tried to influence Mikey away from his racist behavior, but he is rather stubborn," Josh continued. "Ignorance is an easy trait to pass from generation to generation."

Another brief moment of silence presented itself. However, it had been I who terminated it that time. "I need to get to school."

"Right! I hope to encounter you again," he replied. "It was wonderful to finally meet you. I am terribly sorry for what your family must endure. Give my condolences?"

I nodded, off put by his strange manner of speaking. He almost seemed too intelligent for our age.

"Farewell, Thomas."

"Goodbye," I murmured, continuing to the school.

When I returned from school, the house expressed the same gloomy mood. My family ate in silence, only a symphony of clanking silverware kept me from madness.

At last, I mentioned, "I met someone today." My parents cast me glances that practically begged me to continue. "His name is Josh Clarry. He heard about Henry going to war, and wanted me to share his sorrow with you two. He said he admired what Henry was doing."

Mama's face displayed a depressed yet proud smile. I identified that she was trying to suppress her sadness.

"He's white," I added after a moment, causing Pa to cease eating. "He's one of Mikey's friends, actually...."

He gave me a suspicious eye. "A respectful whittie?" he scoffed. "He's scheming. He's gonna do something to hurt you somehow."

"I'm not sure, Pa," I responded. "It was unusual, but he seemed truly concerned. I think maybe he's different-"

"They're all the same, Thomas!" Pa barked. "I know you think they can be good, but if you went through what I did, you'd know they're never gonna change."

"Pa, I know it sounds naïve, but like Henry always said: there is good in everyone. Josh told me not every one of them is racist. He was respectful to me, Pa," I stated.

"He's a friend of your bully. He's probably gonna find out about all your secrets and tell Mikey."

"What does it matter if he does?" I asked. "Mikey will find information about me in some way. And maybe they aren't all bad, Pa...."

"Why would you risk it?" he snarled.

That question evoked serious thoughts. I was honestly unsure why I was so insistent upon believing Josh meant well. Finally, I answered, "When he left, Henry told me not to discriminate against them like they do to us. He said they aren't all bad, Pa. And if Henry is gone, then the best way we can honor his sacrifice is by living by his beliefs and ideals!"

I hadn't realized I had tears streaming down my face until Mama began vigorously wiping them. She embraced me warmly as I wept into her shoulder.

"We will give Josh a chance," Mama cooed gently. "Won't we, Pa?"

With a sigh, he answered, "I guess. For Henry and you, Thomas. I guess I can try."

Chapter Six

After frequent encounters with Josh throughout the month, I began accepting he was a genuine person. It was clear he truly practiced equality and had a mutual respect for me and those like me. We became quick friends – at least I had assumed we were friends considering I had never actually had one before.

Josh had explained his home to me; I was dumbfounded by the elegance it seemed to hold. Upon subtle request to visit it someday, Josh had hinted towards the neighborhood not being as accepting as his family. He then had asked about my home. I had been embarrassed when I described my indigent home. It seemed near worthless compared to his. However, Josh remained enthusiastic about seeing it.

As my house entered our view, I grew nervous. The neighborhood's eyes bore into Josh with judgment as well as mortification. It was daunting having a white man in a Negro neighborhood. So when we approached my house, I once again felt the lingering intimidation of being economically inferior. Josh complimented the "homeliness" of the house, though it was clear it was not what he was accustomed to.

"Mama! Pa!" I called as I opened the door. "I brought home a friend."

At that, they quickly came into the room. Pa seemed shocked once his eyes landed on the light boy.

Mama, however, smiled warmly and began offering him beverages and food, which he kindly declined. When I mentioned providing Josh with a tour of the house, Mama immediately grew red and scurried off to clean up.

During the entire scene, Pa sat and stared at Josh, the small hint of a scowl upon his brow. I could tell he was making his best effort to suppress his animosity.

"Hello, sir," Josh greeted with an anxious yet charming smile. "You have a lovely home."

"Thanks," Pa grunted.

Both were visibly uncomfortable.

"Did you get the mail yet?" I finally asked, breaking the tension in the room.

Once Pa shook his head, I had Josh accompany me to retrieve it.

"I'm sorry about my pa's behavior," I mumbled.

Josh shrugged, slightly discouraged. "It is an understandable response. I assume he has had difficulties with prejudice in his everyday life, correct?"

I nodded.

"I would be hesitant as well."

"You'll just need to find a topic you can talk about," I explained as I opened the mail.

There was a small pile of envelopes. A couple fell out as I tried to grab them.

"And what would that be?" Josh asked as he picked up the stray letters and offered them to me.

"I--"

At the sight of the familiar wax-sealed envelope, my heart bound into my throat and prohibited my speech. The pile of letters in my hand slipped through my fingers, but I simply grabbed the envelope Josh held and rushed inside calling to my parents.

Pa saw the envelope and his jaw dropped. Mama then entered the kitchen with a string of worried phrases, which ceased once her eyes landed on my hands. Her eyes began welling up as she whispered, "Henry?"

"Open it," Pa requested, his voice sounding fragile.

My fingers shook as I tore the paper with tears welling in my eyes. The contents of the letter were unknown. It could have either been a letter from Henry or a letter stating he was deceased.

"I have the mail you dropped, Thomas," Josh announced as he entered the house. "I think I...." He trailed off as he witnessed my emotional family. "What is happening?"

I took a moment to gather myself before mumbling, "Henry is in the trenches in France. We haven't received a letter since he was stationed about a month ago. He could be dead...."

"That is his letter? May I stay and hear?" he asked Mama and Pa. "I do not need to, but I truly admire Henry for all he is doing and what he has sacrificed."

Pa cast me a cautious, questioning glance. "I guess. Read it, son."

"There are multiple papers. This one was on May 13, 1918. 'Dear Mama, Pa, and Thomas,'" I began, "'I'm really nervous to fight. I've had lots of training, but I don't know how good I'll be in actual battle. Truthfully I don't know what is going on. Fully at least. Mama, don't worry. I'm being careful and taking care of myself. My comrades are too. There are some amazing men here, especially the French. I might consider moving here after we win the war. I'll bring you all, too. They have good education here, Thomas. And it'll be even better since they don't mistreat Negros. I'm assuming they have good working conditions and opportunities because of that too. We could work together, Pa! With all sorts of people with different skin tones. What a life, huh? America will be like that soon."

"I don't know when you'll get this. Letters are going to be harder to send and receive since we're on the battlefield now. I'll still write to you every week, though. I made a promise when I left, and I'm going to keep it. I don't have as much time to write as I used to, so my letters are going to be shorter. I miss you all more than you could imagine. I can't wait to come home. It smells so bad here. I need to go now. I love you all. I'll see you soon."

The room was silent in anticipation as I fumbled with the papers. I began reading immediately once I had the second letter positioned.

"This one he wrote on May 16. 'Dear Mama, Pa, and Thomas. I can't imagine how worried you must be. They told me they haven't had a chance to send my other letters. I'm not dead. I'm quite alive and alright. We got

attacked by a German party a few days ago. It was late in the night on May 14. Or...May 15 I guess. I was on sentry duty with one of my good friends, Roberts. Needham Roberts from New Jersey. He's a good man, he never gives up, I swear. Even when he's hanging on a thread of life he doesn't give up. At about 1 A.M. we were sniped by a German soldier. I think he was in a bush about fifty yards away. I knew he couldn't be alone. What soldier what go out alone, right Pa? I knew he wasn't, so I opened a box of thirty grenades and lined them up. A bit later I hear this snipping sound. I don't think I'll ever forget that sound. It was quiet, but boy it was the loudest sound I heard that night. Turns out the Germans were cutting through the wire at my post. I didn't know how many were there, so I threw a grenade, and he opened fire. Guns were firing, grenades were flying. It was madness. There is nothing like it, believe me. Not even you could imagine what it's like, Thomas. Roberts got taken down by a German grenade and he couldn't stand, and then two Germans tried taking him as a prisoner. I beat them off, though. They didn't know what I could do. I didn't really either.

"After a while, I ran out of grenades and had to start shooting them with my rifle. When we came here, they gave us all French rifles, so that's what I was using. But I jammed mine by trying to put an American clip in. I know, Mama, I need to pay attention more. But it was all I had. I thought maybe the American and French ammo would work the same, but I guess not. Did you know that, Pa? Maybe I can bring my rifle home for you to see. It's a lot like the American ones I think. Anyway, my rifle wouldn't fire, so I had to bang them with the butt of it. I banged them for a good long while. It took a lot out of me, but I kept it up. The butt busted after a bit, and then I had to use my bolo knife. I slashed in a million

directions! I made every slash count, believe me. The Germans knocked me around a bit, but I always got back on my feet. And then by the time backup finally got there to help me, they were all gone. Everyone was surprised and worried. They kept asking me questions. I can't remember what they said because after they arrived, I fainted.

"When I woke up, I was in a French hospital, and they told me I had twenty-one wounds. I had some on my left arm, my back, my feet, and my face. They put a steel plate in my left foot. It doesn't feel too great, believe me. And it sure doesn't look too great either. It's hard to walk on it too. But, I'm alive and I'm glad about it. Everyone's telling me there were over thirty Germans I took on myself. That's something, right Pa? I killed four and wounded probably twenty. They all are calling me a war hero, but there wasn't anything so fine about it. I just fought for my life. Even a rabbit would've done that. I just kept thinking of you all, and all the promises I made to you. My comrades are telling me that the Germans are calling us 'blood-thirsty black men' so now the Frenchmen are calling us the 'Harlem Hellfighters.' It's got a nice ring. Sounds like something you'd come up with, Thomas. They gave me and Roberts an award called the Croix de Guerre. I also got a golden palm on my ribbon that says 'extraordinary valor.' I got it for being so brave. Pa, it's the fanciest thing you've ever seen! Mama, I want to hang it on the wall. I'm the first American to get it!

"I know you're proud, Mama. And you too, Pa. I'm sure you've already got lots of awards, Thomas. I'm stuck in this hospital. It's boring. I don't know when I'll get back on the field. I don't know if they will even let me fight more because of this foot. If I can't, I hope I'll get to

come home. I'm more than ready. I miss you all. And I'm sure you've been worried sick. I'm very sorry. I'll be home soon, though. We're able to hold our own pretty good, as we learned that night. I'm going to get some rest now. I love you, Mama. I love you, Pa. I love you, Thomas."

I finally raised my gaze and found the entire room enthralled. Relief was emitted from every individual, including Josh. Every eye dripped, but not of sadness. Henry had proven himself. He had single-handedly made an enormous contribution to the war and survived. Everyone said it was his skill and training that kept him alive, but I believed it was his strong, passionate heart.

Chapter Seven

Knowing Henry was alive instantly changed my perspective on everything. All aspects of my life were suddenly filled with optimism and thoughts of Henry coming home. Throughout school I was cheerful, and the walk home was great. I was hardly even bothered when my path was intercepted by Mikey.

"Blackie," he spat, "how's the Negro army bait? Dead probably."

"No," I replied. "He's actually doing well."

Mikey laughed. "Right. Like a black could do something good."

I shrugged and stepped around him. He followed, still attempting to get a reaction.

"I heard when they start running out of food and stuff, they just kill off the Negros and eat them."

"Is that so?" I disregarded his claim.

"And they use them for target practice, too."

"I'm sure."

I could feel Mikey's rage burning into my skin. Just then, I also felt his hands forcefully push me to the ground. "You think you're so good, don't ya?"

I looked down to see my knee bleeding.

"Answer me!" he shouted as he kicked my side.

"No."

He gripped my arm like the snake he was and hissed, "Then why you acting like this, blackie?"

I opened my mouth to answer when he smacked my cheek.

"Mikey!" a voice called from the distance.

Josh hurried into my view and a sense of relief washed over me. He pried Mikey off and stood between us.

"Why?" Josh asked simply.

"Look at him," Mikey growled. "He's a dark-skin, Josh. Why are you standing up for dirt?"

"Why are you treating a human being like dirt?" he retorted.

"The blackies are nothing better than dirt. They don't do anything for America!"

Josh scoffed. "They do just as much. Industrial occupations have been more successful than ever since they started migrating north."

"But the stuff they do is bad compared to what whites do."

"Give me one example," Josh requested. The calm tone to his voice was more intimidating than any hollered threat I had ever heard.

Mikey stuttered, thought for a moment, and then became more vexed than before. I could have sworn smoke was streaming from his ears.

"Listen closely," Josh said, placing a hand on Mikey's shoulder. "The only difference between whites and blacks is skin tone. They are just as capable, just as smart, just as strong. They deserve to be treated the same."

Mikey rolled his eyes. "Whatev-"

"There is one man I have recently heard of," Josh interrupted, "who went to war. He was guarding his post one night when a German party attacked at 1 A.M."

It had felt as if the barrier my personal life was hidden behind was being breached. I was shocked that Josh had decided to share information about the most important secret I had kept from Mikey.

"The comrade that was helping him patrol was incapacitated by a grenade, and he was about to be taken prisoner when the other man fought them off. The comrade was unable to merely stand. There were more than thirty Germans attacking, and the only thing preventing them from reaching the post was that lone soldier. His grenades were depleted and he began shooting the enemies with his rifle. But his rifle became jammed, and he was forced to bash them with the butt of his gun, which eventually broke. And when it did, the soldier fought them off with his knife. That soldier had single-handedly killed four German soldiers, wounded twenty, and frighten the rest away. He received twenty-one wounds, including a severely injured foot. He's a war hero in France now."

Mikey listened in awe. "He was white, right?"

"His name is Henry Johnson," Josh said. "Thomas's brother."

Mikey gazed at me, his mouth gaping. "Your brother?"

I nodded meekly, petrified of the new realm of knowledge he had acquired.

"Your brother?" he repeated. "That's insane.... I-I...."

"So," continued Josh, "when you say 'blackies' are inferior to 'whities,' what evidence do you have to support it?"

Mikey still held a baffled expression. "I...that's just what my dad always said. And my ma just gossiped about them all the time. I just figured, ya know, that was true...." He looked at me apologetically. "I didn't know your brother was that amazing."

"Thomas is just as impressive," Josh stated. "He is the most intelligent person I have ever met, especially considering the substandard education provided to African Americans."

Mikey shook his head in disbelief. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I guess I never realized how...the same we are, ya know?"

I shrugged, unsure how to respond in this situation. "It's alright. Ignorance is an easy trait to pass from generation to generation."

I could tell he was lost, but he simply lowered his head and mumbled, "I'm gonna go home...."

Josh helped me off the ground. "Are you alright? I apologize for exploiting Henry's story without your

permission, but truly it's an impressive accomplishment; I knew it would gain Mikey's respect."

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's fine. How did you get him to listen, though? If I would have told him the story, he would've simply ignored me."

Josh shrugged. "I am well-respected because of my family's status."

The thought was extremely foreign to me, but I respected it nonetheless. I didn't press farther because I could hear the disinterest in Josh's voice. "Thank you," I replied at last.

He sent me a warm smile. "It was my pleasure. Mikey won't disrespect you anymore. And if he does, inform me, and I will resolve the conflict immediately."

We bid each other farewell and went our separate ways. I couldn't suppress the overwhelming smile that spread across my face. A democratic lifestyle seemed to be swiftly approaching.

Chapter Eight

It had been a few weeks since we had received a letter from Henry saying he was coming home. For the past nine months their infantry had traveled across Europe to assist in the war; however, Henry didn't do much due to the injuries he had acquired in the Argonne Forest. His spirits remained high nonetheless, but in his most recent letter announcing his return, he seemed particularly ecstatic to be coming home.

The story of Henry's impressive performance had been shared in America soon after we had heard of it. It graced many newspapers and magazines. Unfortunately, it didn't have as large of an effect on the American population as it did on Mikey. They remained racist and I even heard a few alienating accusations from a few citizens. I knew a complete democratic nation would take time to achieve, but seeing Mikey's change had restored my faith in the white American community.

Mikey, furthermore, had grown to be a fine acquaintance of mine. He and I didn't develop a relationship like Josh and I, but I would see him on my path to and from school and greet him. He often seemed ashamed of his previous actions whenever he encountered me, and he always apologized subtly. I was apprehensive to forgive him, but with encouragement from Josh as well as Henry in his letters, I managed to pardon Mikey. I had even invited him to attend the

parade welcoming home our African American troops with my family and Josh.

Josh was nearly as thrilled as my family to welcome Henry home. It had become routine for him to be present whenever we read Henry's letters; he had even written to Henry a few times. He truly admired Henry and the entire infantry. "It is such a noble act," he had said, "for them to fight for a country that treats them so poorly."

As we stood in the crowd on February 17 in 1919, we could feel the patriotism radiating from all around us. I figured about a quarter of a million citizens had gathered, those with dark skin in particular. We all had dawned white badges reading "Welcome, Fighting 15th."

"The time is 11:26 A.M.," Josh announced, anticipation enhancing each word. Mama seemed more worried than excited. "What if he missed the boat? What if he got lost or can't walk in the parade? Wh-"

"Mama," I laughed, "he will be fine. Enjoy yourself. Your son is coming home!"

Suddenly, music erupted in the street. Every head turned to gaze upon the direction the soldiers would appear from. I glanced around at the familiar faces that had accompanied me to the event: Mama, Pa, Josh, and Mikey. All were joyous, and all stretched to see above the heads of the crowd. I soon saw twenty soldiers marching down the street. They all held themselves straight, their pride practically visible.

"I never seen that formation before," Pa shouted over the blaring music and cheering.

"I believe it is a French formation," Josh replied, entranced by the soldiers.

"Look!" cried Mama. "There's Henry!" Tears streamed down her face as she pointed at her son.

Once my eyes landed on him, they began welling up. He stood in an open automobile with a bouquet of red and white lilies. His features were more prominent and mature than when he left, and his frame was far more built.

The adoring crowd began chanting once he was in sight. I supposed his story had touched more hearts than I had realized. "O-oh, you wick-ed Hen-nery Johnson! You wick-ed ma-an!"

The crowd could no longer be contained as families rushed towards their soldiers. Mama grabbed Pa and I's hands as she rushed us into the madness, Josh and Mikey following close in suit. Once Henry caught sight of us, tears burst from his eyes and he instructed the driver to stop. He then exited the vehicle and hobbled to us as quickly as he could. Mama, Pa, and I embraced him warmly as we all wept. We seemed to hold on to him for hours, cherishing the reunion of our family.

Once we pulled away at last our crying had mildly resolved, I introduced Henry to our guests. When he saw them, Henry's face lit up with the largest smile I had ever seen. That was what he was fighting for – the unity of whites and blacks. Josh basically held the same expression, and Mikey was wonderstruck.

We all conversed briefly before Henry was forced to bid us farewell and return to the automobile.

"I have to go to a banquet," Henry called from the vehicle. "Then we'll go back to Camp Upton. I'll be discharged there, and I will come home as soon as I can. I love you, Mama! I love you, Pa! I love you, Thomas! Nice to meet you, Josh and Mikey!"

We all returned his farewells and watched as the car drove off. We all began weeping once again, overwhelmed by the joy of having our beloved Henry back and the sacrifices all the soldiers had made.

Chapter Nine

It was May 24, 1919 when Henry was finally back home in Albany with us. The joy of finally being home with his family was obviously present, but he seemed rather troubled. I initially wondered if it was simply because the home-lifestyle was so foreign to him. But he grew more blue as the day passed.

"Henry," I mumbled to him at last, "what's wrong?"

He sent me a smile. "Nothing at all! I'm happy to be home. It's just not what I'm used to."

I shook my head. "Henry, I can tell you have something on your mind."

He glanced at Mama cooking in the kitchen and lowered his voice. "When they discharged me, they didn't say anything about my wounds.... And soldiers who are wounded bad enough are supposed to get payment for not being able to function as good." He began to tear up. "I've been hoping it's not because my skin, but what else could it be? White soldiers all got what they deserved. But we're still being discriminated against." He shook his head as a tear fell. "I thought they'd respect us, Thomas. We gave our lives for this country, but we're still treated different."

"Your efforts aren't in vain, Henry," I reassured him. "Look at Josh and Mikey. Mikey was my bully, and once he stopped living with his parents' opinions, he

began respecting us. It'll just take some time for the rest of the nation to follow, but it will."

He sighed. "I can't find a job because of this foot, and I don't get any benefits for serving. I feel like everything we've done...everyone just ignores it."

"But thousands of your pictures have been sold. And you've given lectures in town about your experiences. Plenty of white folks have witnessed them. Henry, America is changing. Slowly, but it is changing."

In 1921, I graduated from high school. Henry had attended it, as he had promised when he left. It was a tremendous accomplishment considering I was the first in my family to receive a proper education. I interpreted this as representation of the world changing around us and our nation becoming more accepting, more democratic. With some assistance from Josh's family, I was able to get a well-paying job as a banker. It was highly unusual, and it caused a large loss of business for the bank, but the Clarry family insisted I remain with the bank.

"The country is bound to change soon. And when it does, you will be well-respected and well-paid. Do not under-exaggerate your intelligence and potential," they had told me. I was successful and happy. My life was remarkably well.

Henry, on the other hand, had difficulty financially. After years of searching with no success for a new job, he was forced to return to the occupation he had before he was drafted – a railway porter. The Clarry's had been able to find him many physical labor jobs, but his injuries made it impossible to perform to the same ability as

before. He became severely depressed. Feeling alone and forgotten, he became an alcoholic.

Mama's heart was broken, and Pa was shocked by how he had changed. I had tried to keep the spirits in the house high by assuming Henry's optimist-position. I believed it helped Mama and Pa cope; Henry, however, was far too discouraged. He became absent a majority of the time around 1924, and five years later he passed away penniless in New York City.

We had been alerted of his passing through letter from the governor. All of our hearts were shattered. Mama had been bedridden for a week, and Pa and I both took a large leave of absence from our jobs. I had informed Josh and Mikey, for they had grown rather close with Henry since he arrived. They mourned with the rest of us.

As we stood at his grave in Arlington National Cemetery – Mama, Pa, Josh, Mikey, and me – I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with sorrow for our dear Henry. For years he left his home, gave all he possibly could, to prove we were equal to those with white skin. It was the ideal of a democratic, fair America when he returned that kept his faith strong and inspired him to continue fighting. So, when Henry came home to a country still plagued with discrimination, his hope had diminished and his strong heart had shattered. It was not our Henry Johnson who had been present with us for those past few years; he was someone different, changed by the ignorance of the ungrateful souls around him. And just as his incredible feats were disregarded by the white population, his personal outlook on democracy was forgotten, and he no longer believed that America would accept Negros.

But as I stood side by side with two white men who mourned over the fallen soul of an African American, I could see what Henry had been blind to. I could see the potential in the white community and the potential of the United States. And as those white men comforted Pa and hugged Mama with deep sorrow, I knew affirmatively that that was the future. Henry and the other African American soldiers who had lent their services in the World War had not fought and died in vain. They were the revolutionary start to a new, democratic nation.

About The Author



Mary Flowers - born May 19, 2000 - has always lived in the mountainous west of the United States. She has a wonderful and supportive family that she is very grateful for. They have provided inspiration for the characters and their relationships in this story.

Currently, Mary is still in school and plans to attend college where she will major in English and biology. She plans on entering the medical field for emergency medicine while continuing writing as her heart pleases. Writing holds a particular sense of ecstasy for Mary, as she feels it provides her with a temporary escape from reality into whatever realm she desires. She also enjoys community service - from local to international - and hopes to be able to leave a large, positive impact on society.

As a child, Mary was very passionate about musical theater and saw it as an outlet to utilize and express emotions; she has transitioned to using this in her writing. She is also actively involved in competitive cheer,

which has taught her discipline, endurance, and the value of relying and trusting in others.

The inspiration for this book initially came from a school project. During her junior year of high school, she learned of the Harlem Hellfighters of WWI and was particularly inspired by an individual by the name of Henry Johnson. A scholarship offered by Story Shares to write a short story was brought to Mary's attention, which she was thrilled to apply for. After a bit of thought, Mary found herself repeatedly drawn to the idea of writing a historical fiction about Henry to express her admiration of his accomplishments and her frustrations with society at the time.

The communities Mary is familiar with have little diversity, so she hopes to learn more about different struggles throughout the nation and the world, and she dreams excessively of relieving them. With this motivation, she felt driven to write with an underlying stride towards true equality for all people.



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Notes: