

ANOTHER VOW

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Another Vow

by LaJoyce Martin

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CHAPTER One

Vultures

“Philadelphia!”

I heard the sound of my name, muted by distance, but I didn't answer. It was my brother's voice, and he knew I didn't like being called Philadelphia. (That was my birth name, but because I hated it, I shortened it to Phyllis.) I had no plans of responding.

I lay in a stand of rank Johnson grass, half hidden, with my hoe handle idle beside me. I had found a good place to rest, and resting I was. The sky was yellow-white, every bit of the blue washed out by the glare of the sun, and nowhere was there a cloud for shade. It was hotter than hot. The air was so dry that I had to gulp at it to get enough.

From the tunnel of vision circumscribed by my slat bonnet, I squinted my eyes and peered into the heavens. Above me, black dots made lazy circles so high that I could hardly tell they were vultures.

“Old vultures,” I said, “I know you're circling up there

waiting. But you won't get me! No siree. Maw and Paw and Willis can hang around here until they rot if they wish, but I want a better life. And I'll have it—just you wait!"

The old farm where we lived had worn out and starved out two families who had tried to work it. We were the third, and as I saw it, the same fate stalked us.

Actually, Maw and Willis—and our old mule—ran the farm with a little help from me when they could catch me long enough to make me do it. Paw couldn't be depended upon; his time was spent with his brown jug. That was all he ever did. It seemed he was cursed with failure, and his many sorrows required daily drowning.

He said it was his bad luck with children that made him a drinking man. Maw had given birth to her first still-born infant before her sixteenth birthday, and many others followed, spurning the breath of life. Then in her late thirties, Willis had miraculously survived. I was born the succeeding year.

In five generations of Hawkinses, I was the first ever to learn to read and write. When I was eight years old, a drummer came by selling educational books. I don't know where Maw got the money, but she bought me a big book with pictures that gave instructions in reading, writing, and arithmetic. I taught myself, alone and unaided. I suspected that my pronunciation was often at variance with the actual sound of the words, but who was to know the difference? On rare occasions when anyone had a printed document to decipher, I was called upon to interpret the mysterious scrawls thereon.

Paw never learned about the book Maw purchased for me. I kept it hidden. He thought I was possessed of a

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supernatural talent or revelation quite past his comprehension. Now in his declining years, he had pinned his hopes on me.

He had shooed away all the young men, hoping I would marry an ancient widower with enough money to cover his own seeds, debts, and whiskey. Yet I stubbornly refused—even when menaced by his wicked razor strop—to form a connection with any such character. My lack of compliance added to Paw’s outraged disgust. At nineteen, I was single yet without a prospect in sight, an old maid by Maw’s hill standards. To me, however, the present didn’t account for much since I had higher plans for the future.

Suddenly, while I stared at the speckless sky, vague dreams danced about in the light-flooded depths of space. I was in each of them, far from dusty fields, feed-sack dresses and a life of poverty, striding lightly among people whose eyes glowed with ambition. They smiled, talked, laughed with me. I was in a city. . . .

“Philadelphia!”

Willis’s cry, closer now, jerked me back to reality. I could feel the reverberations of the mule’s hooves shaking the earth where I lay. If I didn’t sit up and show myself, he might run right over me.

“Oh, there you are.”

I nodded, pushing back my bonnet to mop the sweat from my face. *Do nice folks sweat?* I wondered. I reckoned they must, but likely they took a bath twice a week and changed all their clothes, putting on powder and perfume.

“I’m resting,” I said.

“Paw’ll be riled if you don’t get the hoeing done, Philadelphia.”