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—*New York Times Book Review*



THE BETWEEN

A NOVEL

TANANARIVE DUE

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The Between

A Novel

Tananarive Due

 **HarperPerennial**
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Dedication

*To my mother,
my guardian angel,
Patricia Stephens Due*

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PROLOGUE

1963

Hilton was seven when his grandmother died, and it was a bad time. But it was worse when she died again.

Hilton called her Nana, but her real name was Eunice Kelly. She raised Hilton by herself in rural Florida, in Belle Glade, which was forty miles from Palm Beach's rich white folks who lived like characters in a storybook. They shared a two-room house with a rusty tin roof on a road named for Frederick Douglass. The road wasn't paved, and the stones hurt Hilton's tender feet whenever he walked barefoot. Douglass Road was bounded by tomato fields behind an old barbed wire fence Nana told him never to touch because he might get something she called tetanus, and they couldn't afford a doctor. Hilton knew they were poor, but he never felt deprived because he had everything he wanted. Even as young as he was, Hilton understood the difference.

Nana had been a migrant worker for years, so she had muscles like a man on her shoulders and forearms. Nana always saved her money, and she played the organ for pay at the church the monied blacks attended across town, so she hadn't harvested sugarcane or picked string beans alongside the Puerto Ricans and Jamaicans in a long time.

Hilton worshipped her. She was his whole world. He didn't know anything about his parents except that they were gone, and he didn't miss them. He didn't think it was fair to his friends that they had mamas and daddies instead of a Nana.

Nana always said she didn't intend for Hilton to end up in the fields, that there were bigger things in store for him, so she sent him to school instead. She'd taught him to read before he ever walked through the doorway of the colored school a half mile away. And it was when he came home from school on a hot May afternoon that his life was changed forever.

He found Nana sprawled across her clean-swept kitchen floor, eyes closed, a white scarf wrapped around her head. She wasn't moving, and not a

sound came from her. Hilton didn't panic just yet because Nana was old and sometimes fainted from heat when she tried to act younger, so he knelt beside her and shook her, calling her name. That worked by itself sometimes. Otherwise, he'd need to find her salts. But when he touched her forearm, he drew his hand away with a cry. Even with the humidity in the little house and the steam from pots boiling over on top of the stove, their lids bouncing like angry demons, Nana's flesh felt as cold as just-drawn well water. As cold as December. He'd never touched a person who felt that way, and even as a child he knew only dead people turned cold like that.

Hilton stumbled to his feet and ran crying outside to find a grown-up who could help. He was only half seeing because of his tears, banging on door after door on Douglass Road, yelling through the screens, and finding no one home. After each door, his sobs rose higher and his throat closed up a little more tightly until he could barely breathe. It was as though everyone were simply gone now, and no one was left but him. He felt like he'd tried a hundred houses, and all he'd found was barking dogs. The barking and running made him feel dizzy. He could hardly catch his breath anymore, like he would die himself.

In truth, there were only six houses on Douglass Road. The last belonged to Zeke Higgs, a Korean War veteran angry with middle age, angry with white folks, and whom no child with sense would bother on any other day because he kept a switch by his door. Zeke appeared like a shadow behind his screen when Hilton came pounding and crying, "Nana's dead. Come help Nana." Zeke scooped Hilton under his arm and ran to the house.

When he got home, Hilton's childhood flew from him. Nana was no longer lying lifeless on the kitchen floor. She was standing over the kitchen stove, stirring pots, and the first thing she said was: "I wondered where you'd run off to, boy." She looked at Zeke's face and nodded at him, then she fixed her eyes on Hilton. "I'm 'fraid Nana's made a mess of supper, Hilton. Just a mess."

"You all right, Mrs. Kelly?" Zeke asked, studying her face. Hilton did the same. She was perspiring, and her cheeks were redder than usual underneath her thin cocoa-colored skin.

"Just fine. May have had a fainting spell is all. I hope Hilton didn't send you into a fright."

Zeke mumbled something about how it wasn't a bother, although he was annoyed. Hilton barely noticed Zeke slip back out of the house because his