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A Slave's Daughter

By Edie Clark

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A cold wind blows across the island. Many houses that front the harbor are boarded up for the winter. Traffic along the main road is light, almost nonexistent. An old dented gray Valiant with a front license plate that says "I Love Martha's Vineyard" pulls into the parking lot of Our Market. The driver arches her neck to see above the steering wheel, brings the car to a stop, and gets out. "Hello, dahlin' chil'," she says to me. Her eyes sparkle like small black suns.

This is Dorothy West, the daughter of a slave, the last surviving member of the Harlem Renaissance, a novelist who has lived on Martha's Vineyard since 1943 and who had vacationed there with her family since her first birthday in 1908. To the close-knit community of this island, she is simply Dottie, the Oak Bluffs correspondent to the local newspaper, the *Vineyard Gazette*. She is wearing a red hat pulled down over her ears and a red plaid dress. She hurries into the market for a loaf of bread. At 83 she is bent, but still, in her bright red running shoes, her walk is almost a dance. Though child-sized, she is vibrant and alive, a firecracker of a woman.

Here beside the market was where her parents' first cottage stood, a big Victorian, summer home to an extended family that included many cousins and aunts. Her father, a wealthy black businessman, rarely visited. He found the island "too boring" and remained in Boston, tending his fruit and vegetable business. But the summer was like one long carnival for Dottie. Oak Bluffs was full of exciting people, many of them writers and artists and musicians. She could sit on the porch and watch the boats in the harbor. When she was four, the house burned down. They did not rebuild, but instead moved away from the water, eventually to a smaller cottage on a quiet sand road.

When she comes out of the market, small brown bag in hand, that is where we go, to the cottage on Myrtle Avenue. We cross the brief front lawn, ducking under and around the panoply of bird feeders, and go inside. It is dollhouse-small, a haven of a home. The kitchen has the big iron stove, still shining, that once cooked meals for her mother and her cousins. In the living room Dottie's chair faces the

front door where the welcome face of a visitor might appear. Under the chair is her old dictionary, a foot high, and in front of it is her small writing table. She writes a regular column, and she is working on a novel, *The Wedding*. She sits now in this chair, at this table, and does what she enjoys almost as much as, perhaps more than, writing. She begins to talk.

"My father was born a slave, and he was freed at the age of seven, and my grandfather was born a slave. I never thought to ask them how was slavery. I think it's because I know what a slave was," she says.

After his emancipation Dottie's father, Isaac Christopher West, ran errands and saved his money. At age ten he opened a restaurant with his mother in Richmond, Virginia. A few years later he hopped a train to Springfield, Massachusetts, where he opened a fruit stand. In his early twenties he already had a successful produce business in Haymarket Square. He was known as Boston's "black banana king"; it was said he could ripen bananas better than anyone. He bought a four-story brick house on Brookline Avenue and a summer home on Martha's Vineyard. He provided his wife and only child, Dorothy, with comforts to match any of the neighboring whites. Their only hardship, it seemed, was their color.

Most of Dottie's stories are about colored people. She has taught herself to use the word *black* in reference to her race, but when she is relaxed, talking away, she slips back into using *colored*. "I get so sick of the word *black*," she says. Her voice is highpitched, *fast*, the powers of speech apparently not quick enough for her mind. "When I was a young girl, we decided we were going to call ourselves Afro-Americans. Of course, I was never a part of the silly decision, I was only one of 'us.' In my family, we come in every color. My mother used to say, 'Come on, little colored children; let's go out and drive the white folks crazy.'"

Her mother, she says, was light-skinned — her body was cream-colored, and she had pink cheeks that Dottie dreams about to this day. Her father was a very dark man with blue eyes. Her mother's sister Helen had olive skin. Dottie's skin is the color of gingersnaps, but by her account she was the darkest child in her family. "What my mother meant when she said that, I think, was she liked to confuse people. There was a little boy in my family who was as blonde as he could be, and my mother used to like to dress us up alike and take us out, the darkest and the lightest, just to see what people would say."

She tells a chilling story about her grandmother, who was the cook on a plantation in South Carolina, in the same way that she tells all her stories — detailed, circuitous, compelling. And always with a point. Her grandmother had 11 children by her master. Many of these children were fair, so the blacks did not particularly care about them and neither did the whites. One of the girls, Ann, was told to fan the family; the dog was circling the table and everyone was giving him something, and all of a sudden the dog yelped. The master said to her, "You stepped on that dog's tail on purpose." She argued with him until finally he took her out to the barn.

"My grandmother was sitting on the back porch, sewing. And the master came out with the little girl and took her into the barn to beat her, to whip her until she said yes she did, but she wouldn't say it,

and so finally he came out and he said to my grandmother, 'You'd better go see about your daughter,' and of course he had beaten her to death. All right. My grandmother went out to her. She picked her up. Ann was 15 years old, so she must have been heavy, but no black slave said to my grandmother, 'I will help you carry your child,' and no white person came forward to help either. I'm a writer and I guess my thing has always been, well, we'll go it alone."

And so she has. In a very distinctive manner Dorothy West has lived her life apart from her race, yet intimately caught up in it.

She has been all over the world. But until recently she had never been to the South. A few years ago the University of Georgia invited her to speak. She politely declined. In truth, she was afraid. When she was growing up, her mother had always warned her: "Dorothy, the way you talk back, you'd be strung up on the first tree." "She literally made us promise never to go to the South," Dottie says.

But the Georgia professor was persistent. "She was stubborn like my mother," Dottie says. She called four times, and each time the answer was no. But at last Dottie went. The trip was, predictably, uneventful. A college campus in the 1980s is not the South of her mother's bitter memory.

Her cottage has been the scene for some of Dottie's more memorable short stories, just as the childhood house on Brookline Avenue became the home she portrayed in her 1948 novel, *The Living Is Easy*. Reissued in 1981, the book brought the literary world to her doorstep. Suddenly the world remembered Dorothy West, discovering that Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman — the literary circle that flourished with her in Harlem during the 1920s — were all gone. Except Dottie. To her it was surprising, even amusing. She laughs, a gentle melodic laugh, as she tells this.

"You see, I'm Dorothy. I don't know what's going on. Radcliffe was the one who said, 'She is the last surviving member of the Harlem Renaissance,' and then everybody wanted to come and see the last one. I live quietly here, and then I go to the big city and here come the cameras! Some young person once asked me, 'What was it like to be part of the Harlem Renaissance?' We didn't know it was the 'Harlem Renaissance'! It was called that *afterward*. We were all just struggling, trying to eat, and some of us were dying of TB. But the important thing was we were all young."

It was Oak Bluffs that led her to New York. Oak Bluffs is thought to be the first black resort in America. It attracted artists who told their friends and more came. One of the most beloved was Harry Burleigh, a composer of Negro spirituals. On the island he was better known as the "children's friend," and that is how Dottie remembers him. He told her about New York City, and when she was 17, she packed up and went there. Her mother, whose own mother had sent her north on a train when she was 14, never to see her again, did not object.

"I had won this little prize [for her story "The Typewriter"] and I said that I wanted to go to New York, and she could have refused me, but she didn't feel she had a right. She identified, you see."

She had grown up used to having whatever she wanted. In New York she lived on frankfurters and pineapple juice. She wrote stories for the *New York Daily News* and for the *Saturday Evening Quill*. When she was 20, she heard about a new play, *Porgy and Bess*, and went to audition. She was from Boston — she said *demahnd* and *commahnd*, *cahn't* and *shahn't* — and she didn't sound like the Southerners they were trying to portray. She didn't win a speaking part, but traveled as an extra with the cast to London where the play closed after only three weeks because, ironically, no one in the English audience could understand those Southern accents.

Soon after, she was invited (along with several other black actors, Langston Hughes among them) to Russia to act in a film the Russians were producing about the unfortunate lives of black Americans. At the Russian border the neighbors came from miles around to see the black actors. "They were lovely and friendly and sang and danced for us," she wrote. In Leningrad they were met with a brass band and several thousand applauding Russians. "I have quite got used to having my hand kissed," she wrote in a letter.

And this woman, for whom the difference between black and white has posed a lifelong conundrum, was transfixed by their white nights. On a ship crossing the Baltic Sea she stood on deck and watched the dimming sky that held no darkness grow bright again. On an overnight train, crossing into Russia, she stood by the window all night long, "watching the tall trees whiz by."

"You want to go out, cat? Cat!" Dottie follows the dog-sized orange cat across the linoleum floor. The warm little house on the blustery island is far from those white nights. She opens the door and lets Cat out into the cold, cloudy morning. "Listen, I've had animals for 40 years, and I never ordered one, you know what I mean? They come to me." She returns to her chair, sitting almost on the edge of the seat, alert. "Now, what was it I was saying?" she asks.

In 1933 Dottie's father died, and she returned from Russia. At one time he hoped to leave her a million dollars. But business had run out on him, and there was no such grand legacy for Dottie. No matter. She had her work. In 1935 she founded a magazine called *Challenge*, publishing writers known as the "new Negroes" — Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson. And she wrote, using the name Mary Christopher. *Challenge* survived four years. Dottie was wooed by the Communists, but her answer was no. Her father, after all, had been a slave who worked his way up through the capitalist system into wealth. Her resistance to the Communists was firm, and because of their pressure she ceased publication.

She wrote, then, for the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal agency. The good times in New York continued. There was drinking, way too much drinking. The death of her friend Wallace Thurman from complications triggered by alcohol sobered her, sobered them all.

Once again it was time to go it alone. She came home to Oak Bluffs in 1943 to write, she says, "Because as a child, I thought it was

always summer here, and no one ever called me nigger."

She worked on *The Living Is Easy*, and it was published by Houghton Mifflin. It was one of only a very few novels published by a black woman in the 1940s. Largely autobiographical, the book gives a vivid picture of Boston's black middle class in the early part of this century. It is a work full of the irony of this black urban existence, where a man could make enough money to hire a maid and yet still be looked down upon and called nigger. And it looks forthrightly at the trap upwardly mobile blacks set for themselves by pursuing false values.

In Oak Bluffs she watched what she calls the "black revolution" on TV, and she had and still has mixed feelings about its leaders. "It took me a long time to like Martin Luther King. He had that Southern Baptist preacher style. To me it seemed insincere. And Malcolm X — I thought he was crazy. Just crazy. And I cannot stand Jesse Jackson; I absolutely cannot stand him."

The business about what to call her race came up again, and Afro-American was replaced by black. "My mother used to call this 'color foolishness.' Because you are the color that God made you. A friend of mine had just come from New York, and the young people had suddenly decided to call themselves black. She asked me to lunch up island, so I went and we were sitting there and she said, 'Dorothy, as a colored person, what do you want to be called?' And I said, 'I want to be called to dinner.'"

"Would you like some tea, dahlin' chil'?"

Another cold day. Dottie is in the kitchen, fixing a meal for Cat. On a dinner plate she arranges a portion of Ocean Buffet from one can, a portion of Chicken Chunks from another can, so that when she is done, it looks like a full meal for a hungry man.

Dottie never married and had no children, though she says perhaps her one and only ambition was to have six children. At one time she wrote a letter to Langston Hughes, asking him to marry her so that she could have a child. If she has any, these are her regrets. "What is the point of having regrets? The only thing I ever wanted was children, and I couldn't have children."

She puts Cat's banquet on the floor, and we move back into the living room, settling into the chairs that had held us so well the day before.

Once back on the island, she needed to pay the bills. She went to the venerable *Vineyard Gazette*, then edited by Henry Beetle Hough. In the early sixties she worked in the office, filing and so forth, and while she was there she would tell her stories and people said, "Oh, Dottie, you ought to write that story." Her first appearance in the *Gazette*, however, came under a pseudonym. She calls this her "dark secret."

"I knew a beautiful woman who had a column in the paper all about the birds. We had a little writers' club, and when she went away, she asked me if I would write the column for her. I write pretty well,

but not about birds. It never occurred to me to give myself a byline. I knew this woman's background — she was an expert. I wrote about what I saw at my feeder. So I called myself 'The Highlands Waterboy.' It amuses me, because the waterboy, as you know, was the one who carried the water. He was a slave. I did it for fun. " One reader wrote the *Gazette*, "I hope you keep that boy; that boy writes beautifully." Dottie loves this, her own joke on the world.

Even at the *Gazette* there was friction, tension between herself and another writer. Dottie was fired. She told almost no one. "Because I am black, I did not want any of the black people to know that I'd got fired. I didn't want to hurt them."

She came back, though, as a columnist, writing about the people of Oak Bluffs. In her stories she never said who was black. "They didn't tell me not to, I just knew better." She wanted to, though. To her there were some rich stories to be told about the black residents of Oak Bluffs, many of them professional and some of them, like Adam Clayton Powell and Edward Brooke, known far beyond the island. "Mr. Hough, he was a Yankee, an older man. I would not have asked him. He would have said, 'Oh, Dorothy, are you sure the colored people' — the word was not *black* then — 'would want this?' He would have been timid about it, and then he would not have been sure that the white people would want it."

She turned instead to her ally at the paper, Colbert Smith, a young editor from the South. "I said, 'Colbert, there are many black professional people on the island, and I know that Mr. Hough sees them and assumes that they are Edgartown servants. I don't want to ask him, but I would like to do a column about these people.'"

Colbert said yes, so she wrote the column the first week about a doctor who was the first black college president, and the next week she wrote about another successful black resident. "On the third week I was sitting at my desk, and Mr. Hough came by. You know what they say about black people being invisible. Well, he passed right by me and went over to Colbert, and he said, 'There were all of those wonderful people here, and I never knew they were there!'"

The column, called "The Cottager's Corner," continued into the late sixties. "When integration began, I thought I should not do it anymore, and I think I was right. I mean, do we want to be exclusive or do we want to be integrated? I still write about blacks, but not exclusively."

Her column, from then until this day, is headed simply, "Oak Bluffs," and sometimes it contains only news of the goings-on of the townspeople. When a young lady of ten came from West Palm Beach, Florida, to visit her grandparents for the summer, Dottie wrote, "There is no other place she loves so much, because of its permanency ... the woods and sea are unchanged, and the Flying Horses, her chief delight, still seem to have whirled down from heaven. This year the Dixons have air-conditioning and Donna is very disapproving. She has air-conditioning in Florida and closed windows. Here she wants the windows open in the old way, and the curtains gently moving."

Many people ask her to write obituaries for their loved ones. She writes them beautifully. Once she wrote the obituary for a neighbor,

and when she went to the funeral, she found that the minister, instead of delivering a eulogy, read what she had written for the *Gazette*.

Sometimes, in the winter especially, when the population dwindles, there is nothing much to write about, so she writes out of her own experiences, out of her memory. All the same, she takes it down to the offices in Edgartown. "I always say, 'It may not be any good,' and he always says, 'Dorothy, you always say that.' But I mean it. How do I know if it's any good? With a painter, you know. You can see if it's good. But these are just words. How do I know that they are the right words?"

What has happened to her in the past few years has been unexpected. For years she never left the island. Never. And then the invitations started. She is quite used to it now, the appearances, that is. But she will never get used to getting there, for leaving the island and returning to it is never a quick and simple procedure. She doesn't like the boat. She usually flies. Sometimes these experiences become material for her column.

A couple of years ago, in March, after a weekend appearance in Boston, she woke up in her hotel room and raised the shade to see what kind of day it was. It was snowing lightly, but by the time she got to Logan Airport, the snowstorm had intensified. She got her boarding pass and took a seat. "But the waiting began to extend itself," she wrote. "The snow was now falling steadily, and the view outside the window was beginning to be eerie, as if seen through a descending fog." She was the only passenger. It was a terrifying flight through the blind sky of a blizzard. To make it worse, there was mechanical difficulty. They flew full circle back to Boston. "I was certain I was going to die," she says.

At last, with a clearing sky, she was airborne again. "I touched Vineyard soil. I have lived various places, but the island is my yearning place. All my life, wherever I have been, abroad, New York, Boston, anywhere, whenever I yearned for home, I yearned for the island. Long before I lived here year-round, in my childhood, in the years of my exuberant youth, I knew the island was the home of my heart."

It is time to go. The ferry leaves soon. As Dottie knows all too well, you cannot just leave this island impulsively. You have to wait until they are ready to take you. Dottie gets up and walks outside with me. Our breath spills out in clouds. Birds of every color flutter in and out of her feeders. Cat sits on the porch rail. "Will you come back to the island?" she asks. "Please do come back. It's you young people who keep me *alive*." She goes inside, into her yearning place, and turns, and from behind the storm door she watches me leave and waves.

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