The Hopes and Dreams Series
African-Americans

Nobody Knows
A story based on history

Second Edition

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PRO LINGUA ASSOCIATES
The Hopes and Dreams Series
by Tana Reiff

The Magic Paper (Mexican-Americans)
For Gold and Blood (Chinese-Americans)
Nobody Knows (African-Americans)
Little Italy (Italian-Americans)
More to come.
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1 The Sweet Shop
The American South, 1902

Mama came in from the fields.
The day was hot.
Six-year-old Mattie was shelling peas.
She looked up at her mother.
Mama looked tired.

“Finish up, child!” said Mama.
“We are going into town.
I’ll get the horse and wagon ready.
Hurry up!”

Mattie finished the basket of peas as fast as she could.
She loved going into town with Mama.
It was fun
to be off the farm
now and then.

Mama lifted Mattie
onto the wagon.
Mama talked
the whole way to town.
“If you’re a good girl,
I’ll buy you
a sweet,”
she told little Mattie.

Of course,
Mattie was a good girl.
After shopping,
Mama took her
to the sweet shop.

The shop
had two doors.
The first door
had fresh paint.
“White Only,”
said the sign.
The second door
was old and worn.
“Colored Only,” said the sign on the second door. Mattie and Mama went in the second door.

Inside, Mr. Prinn was serving some white people. Mattie and Mama waited on the other side of the sweet shop.

Another white woman came in the shop. Mr. Prinn served her. Mattie and Mama still waited on the black side of the shop.

At last, Mr. Prinn came over to Mattie and Mama.
“We’ll each have a soft drink,” said Mama. “And a sweet roll for the little one.”

Mr. Prinn took their money. He never smiled or said a word.

“I don’t think that man likes us,” said Mattie.

“Don’t mind him,” said Mama. “Our money is as good as white people’s. Be glad, child. I remember when I was your age. I was a slave. A family of white people owned our family. Owned us!”
Yes, they did!
They forced us
to stay on their land.
My parents worked
all day, every day,
until night came.
We couldn’t go into town
whenever we wanted.
You’re lucky, child.
You’re free
to come and go
as you please.”

“Yes, Mama,”
said Mattie.
She took a bite
of her sweet roll
and smiled.
Over the years Mattie grew
tall and strong.
The family stayed
on the farm
that they rented.
But Mama and Daddy
could never get ahead.
They paid their rent
in cotton
instead of money.
But some years
there wasn’t enough cotton,
so they fell behind
on the rent.

All the children
worked on the farm.
The land
was not their own.
It never would be.
But the whole family
worked every inch of ground
like it was theirs.
When Mattie was 18 she met Mr. Nate Charles. He was a big man and a good farmer. He worked hard, just like Mama and Daddy. His family rented a farm about ten miles south.

“Marry me,” he begged Mattie. “I’ll give you the best life that I can. I can’t give you a gold ring. But we can have a fine little wedding. Be my wife, Mattie.”

Mattie said yes. They held a nice wedding in the country church. Everybody came and brought food.
“Not like your grandparents,” said Mama. “They were married, all right. But they never had any real papers. Slaves couldn’t have any real papers. You’re lucky, child. You and Nate by law are man and wife.”

Mattie and Nate began their life on the farm. They paid their rent with a share of the crops. But, like Mattie’s family, they had a hard time. The cotton crop was in big trouble. Tiny black bugs called weevils ate most of the cotton before it was picked.
One day,
Nate was in town.
As he walked
down the street,
a man stopped him.

“I’m from up north,
said the man.
“I’m looking
for strong men.
Do you want
to make money?
Then come with me.
I’ll even give you
a train ticket.
You can work
in a meatpacking plant.
You can live
a good life
in Chicago.
You’ll never
live a good life here!”
Glossary
Definitions and examples of certain words and terms used in the story

Chapter 1 — The Sweet Shop  page 1

**shelling peas** — The process of removing the shell (cover) from peas.
_Six-year-old Mattie was shelling peas._

**lifted (to lift)** — To pick up someone or something.
_Mama lifted Mattie onto the wagon._

**fresh** — Very recent or new.
_The first door had fresh paint._

**colored** — At the time and place of the story, a term used for dark-skinned people, mainly African-Americans.
_“Colored only” said the sign on the second door._

**soft drink** — A non-alcoholic drink, often with a fruit base and lots of sugar.
_“We’ll each have a soft drink,” …_

**sweet roll** — A sugary pastry.
_“And a sweet roll for the little one.”_

**slave** — A person who is owned by another person. They have few rights.
_… when I was your age, I was a slave._
owned (to own) — To have something (or someone) that is personal property.
A family of white people owned our family.

Chapter 2 — Mr. Nate Charles  page 6

cotton — A major crop in the southern United States. Cotton is used to make cloth.
They paid their rent in cotton instead of money.

instead of — In place of; as a substitute or alternative for.
They paid their rent in cotton instead of money.

fell behind (to fall behind) — To be unable to make a payment; to owe money.
... there wasn’t enough cotton, so they fell behind on the rent.

begged (to beg) — To make a very strong request.
“Marry me,” he begged Mattie.

papers — Official legal documents.
But they never had any real papers.

meatpacking plant A place where animals are cut up into pieces and prepared for distribution and sale.
You can work in a meatpacking plant.