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∞ The Invitation ∞

Greta hated summer vacation with all her heart. She knew this wasn't normal. She knew every other kid she'd ever met loved summer vacation. They couldn't wait until that bell rang and they were free for ten whole weeks. *Well, they don't have to spend the summer at Poor Camp,* thought Greta. That is really what she hated: Poor Camp. The concrete, the hoop without a net, the snacks made with government cheese and stale crackers. It would be her sixth year and she just couldn't bear it. *No, she thought, that isn't the right word. I am dreading it. I am filled with morbid consternation. I am morose.* As Greta started to think of even more words to perfectly match her feelings, she was reminded of what it was that made Poor Camp so deplorable. Sure the concrete was bad, the kids were exceedingly big—and mean—but she could have survived it if she had been able to go unnoticed.

You wouldn't think to look at her that anyone would notice Greta. She was small for her age and very thin. She was black, but so were most of the kids at her school. And all the girls wore the same dreary, blue uniform. No, Greta wouldn't stand out one bit, if she didn't know quite

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so many words. Expansive. That is what Principal Jones called it.

“You have an expansive vocabulary, Greta. You should be very proud. It is good for a girl your age to excel at something all her own.”

Greta could not care less about excelling. In fact, if she had her choice, she would prefer not to excel. Then she wouldn't be noticed. She didn't like people looking at her, thinking about her, making assumptions, thinking they knew her, knew her family, knew everything about her. It was presumptuous. What Greta did care about, had always cared about for as long as she could remember, was rightness. The perfect fit. The “click” she felt in her gut when she found just the right word to express a situation or person or feeling. She loved it. It was like solving a puzzle and it made her so happy that she couldn't help smiling at the beauty of it. Of course, that didn't help at all.

“What're you smilin' at?” one of the biggest girls from Poor Camp had asked her last year. “You think you're so smart, 'cuz you know all those fancy words, huh?”

“No,” Greta had said softly.

“Yes, you do. You think you're smarter than me. You probably think you're smarter than every kid here, don't you?” the girl had demanded as she started to shove her.

Greta had looked around, hoping to find a counselor. She saw a sea of children but no adult in sight. *They were probably smoking cigarettes in the break room*, she had thought.

Greta shuddered with the memory. She looked at the clock. Eleven minutes left. Eleven minutes of school, of structure, of reliability, of all the things Greta treasured. But she wouldn't have them for long. In just a few minutes, now only eight, she would be immersed in the frenzied chaos of hot concrete, terrifying children and horrible food. Greta was miserable.

A rustling of feet brought her mind back from her daydream. The bell had rung and kids all around her were

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racing to get out of the classroom. They were laughing and talking and pushing. They seemed so thrilled. Greta didn't know what their summer plans were, but she was almost certain that none of her happy, carefree classmates would be joining her at Poor Camp.

Greta grabbed her book bag and slowly walked through the door and out into the hallway. As she made her way to the bus, all she heard were pieces of excited conversations. Plans for family vacations: horseback riding, swimming, hiking, sailing and camping. Each adventure sounded even better than the one before and just made her more melancholy. If these kids were riding horses, she'd be riding one of the four bikes at Poor Camp without a flat tire. They'd be swimming in lakes and she'd be swimming in her own sweat!

By the time Greta got off the bus, she could not have been in a worse mood. She walked the two and a half blocks down Carver Avenue until she reached The Ocean Vista Apartments. *That's a joke*, Greta thought to herself. *I've lived here my whole life and I haven't seen one single drop of an ocean.* She climbed the stairs to the third floor and opened the door of number 317, the apartment she shared with her mother.

"Greta!" her mother yelled happily. "I have wonderful news! Come in, sit down, let me get that for you." Mrs. Washington took Greta's bag and hung it by the door. "What's with the long face, sugar? I thought kids your age were delighted when summer vacation came. Or has that gone out of style?"

Greta didn't say anything. She hated arguing with her mother. They had gotten into some big fights about Poor Camp but it hadn't changed her mother's mind. Actually, that wasn't fair. It wasn't...accurate, that would be a better word. In fact, her mother sympathized with her. She knew Greta hated the place, and Greta knew how much it bothered her mother that she dreaded going there. Still, it was either that or stay home and there was

no way Mrs. Washington would ever allow that, even if Greta was eleven-years-old. She had begged not to go.

“I’m sorry, honey. I know how much you hate this. If I could make it better I would, but we just don’t have the money.”

“Please just let me stay here. Please. I’ll do anything. I’ll do all the cleaning. I’ll wash clothes. I’ll get a job, anything!”

“Baby, we’ve talked about this. You get your say but when I make a decision, that’s it. There is no more discussion.”

“But Mama—” Greta had started.

“Greta Lynn Washington! What did I say?” Her mother rarely used that tone and Greta dropped the subject.

“Yes ma’am,” she had said sorrowfully.

That night, her mother had made Greta’s favorite, spaghetti with meatballs, for dinner. After that Greta tried to stop moping around as much. She knew how hard it was for her mother. She was going to school and working and being a parent too. Plus, it wasn’t as if she was deciding this to be mean. For her, it must be like Greta begging for the moon. She could relate to her daughter’s wanting something but it just wasn’t possible. Since then things had been better. They had struck an unspoken compromise. Greta tried not to show her mother how disappointed she was and her mother didn’t put on a façade and pretend it was going to be a great summer.

At least not until now.

Mrs. Washington was grinning from ear to ear. Poor Camp was bad enough. Greta shouldn’t have to be happy about it too.

“Now, let me see....” said her mother. “What is the one thing that you want most in the whole, wide world?”

“What?” Greta asked. This was...unexpected.

“I’m not talking like ‘a promotion for my mom’ or ‘world peace’ or anything like that. I’m talking just about

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you, the thing *you* want more than anything.” She waited expectantly.

Greta was afraid to speak. What if she told the truth and her mother said, “Greta, I’ve told you for the last time, you are going whether you like it or not. Now guess something else!”?

“Come on,” Mrs. Washington said eagerly. “Say it!”

“Not...to...” Greta began slowly, “...go to...”

“Poor Camp!” her mother nearly screamed it. “Exactly—although you know how I feel about calling it that. Still—yes, yes, yes!” Her mother grabbed her and gave such a squeeze, Greta wondered if she was in her right mind.

“Mama,” Greta began hesitantly. “What exactly is going on?”

“Only this,” her mother replied as she casually tossed a thick envelope onto Greta’s lap.

She picked it up. It was on lavender stationery and addressed to “Miss Greta L. Washington.” Greta noticed the seal wasn’t broken. “It’s not even opened. How do you know—?”

“I guess I just do,” she said coyly. “Now open it, open it!” Mrs. Washington was acting like a little kid on Christmas morning.

Greta stuck her finger below the flap and used it to break the edge free. She pulled out a wad of paper surrounded by a lavender note card. She looked at her mother.

“Oh, honey, I am so happy. I thought maybe this year, but when it didn’t come I figured.... Oh, never mind—see what’s inside.”

Greta opened the card. The first thing she noticed was a blue airplane on a folded envelope. She picked it up and peered inside. It was a plane ticket. “I don’t understand,” Greta said.

“Read the note,” her mom said softly, taking the ticket and placing it on the coffee table.

Greta looked down to read the note and was distracted by a bright, crisp bill. She picked it up. It was twenty dollars. “What is this?”

“Wow,” her mother said. “When I got mine, it was only five. I guess that’s inflation for you.”

Greta wasn’t sure exactly what that was supposed to mean but she surmised her mother wasn’t planning to volunteer any more information.

She read the note.

Greta,

I do hope you will be able to join us on The Island for the holiday. Enclosed are your ticket and money to help with traveling expenses. Dinora will meet your plane in Boston and take you from there. I am very much looking forward to meeting you.

*Give my love to your mother,
Tia*