

Excerpt from the Prologue to "Fried Chicken Castañeda"

They hurried through the gate in the white picket fence, up the walk and the stairs, across the porch, and through the front door. Prudence called out, "Mother! We're home," as they hung their coats on the hall tree and Wally placed his hat on the shelf above. Prudence headed up the stairs to her bedroom, while Wally started back toward the kitchen. He was met by Mrs. Bates, wiping her hands on a towel. Not as tall as her daughter, she was a comfortable woman whose greying hair was pinned up in the "cottage loaf" pompadour of the previous generation and whose house dress was covered in a "Mother Hubbard" apron.

"Oh, Wally, it's good to see you. Is Pru getting changed?"

"Hi, Ma," he said, bending to kiss her cheek. "Yes, she is."

Mrs. Bates shook her head and laughed. "Well, don't just stand there. Come on back to the dining room. Would you like something hot to drink? I have coffee ready, or tea."

"Coffee would be great, but first, what can I do to help?" They carried the serving dishes of food from the kitchen to the dining table, which was set for three, then Mrs. Bates returned for the coffee pot and to leave her apron in the kitchen.

Her mother was pouring coffee into Wally's cup when Prudence entered. Her dark, bobbed hair was brushed until it shone and she had changed into a set of silk lounging pajamas, with wide flowing legs and a kimono jacket, and comfortable embroidered house slippers. She set the program brochure on the table between her plate and her mother's.

Mrs. Bates poured a cup of coffee for herself and Prudence. "Wally, don't wait on ceremony!" she laughed. "I know you must be hungry. Serve yourself some pot roast. Pru, please start the carrots. Here you go, Wally, have some potatoes." The dishes made their way around the table, then there was silence for several minutes, broken only by the clink of silverware on china and muffled sounds of chewing.

"Tell me about the program, dear. Are you going to go on one of those – detours? Is that what they're called? – for your vacation this year? It's a bit far away ..." She picked up the brochure and leafed through it.

"Oh, Mother! It was marvelous!! The illustrations in the brochure only hint at the wonders of the landscape. Such vast expanses! The horizon – there doesn't seem to be a horizon. Just empty desert and range after range of buttes and mesas and in the far distance, mountain peaks that look as if they are floating. And the colors! She showed us colored slides of the scenes in the brochure. So striking in the sunlight – such dark, rusty red and burnt orange bands with streaks of verdigris and gold. And at sunset, they are all purple and gray and black. And the Grand Canyon! Mother, words cannot describe ..."

Wally laughed. Prudence shot him a stern glance across the table. "Our Pru is thinking of

abandoning us to become an Indian Detours guide, Ma.” He ignored the dirty looks she was giving him.

Her mother looked startled, then laughed uncertainly. “Oh, Wally, you’re such a prankster.” She looked at her daughter. “He is making a joke, isn’t he?”

Prudence glared at Wally from under her eyebrows. “Yes, Mother, he’s joking. I’m not abandoning anyone.” She turned to face her mother. “It would only be for a year ... or two.”

Her mother’s face crumpled. “But, I had hoped, now that you’ve finished with college” She looked in Wally’s direction. He grinned wryly and looked at his now-empty plate.

“We’ve been over all that, Mother,” Prudence muttered through gritted teeth. “I’m not ready to settle down just yet.”

“You’re not getting any younger, dear. And what about your job at the library? Working for that nice Miss Freeman and Miss Eastman.”

Prudence took a deep breath and waited until her surge of irritation had tempered. She wondered if her mother even realized that the two women she held up to her as role models had never married and Miss Freeman, at least, had traveled extensively. “They would be the first ones to tell me to follow my dream, Mother. Miss Freeman would say that travel broadens the mind, and that I would be a better librarian at the end of it. Miss Eastman is always encouraging us to expand our horizons. I have a suspicion that is why Miss Eastman asked me to attend the program. There are times that I feel that they both think I’m terribly provincial, never having left home.”

She leaned forward, and continued earnestly, “And this would be a chance to see all those Indian tribes I only read about in my anthropology books and in their natural setting. You remember how much they fascinated me when I was in college and how much I wanted to go out West to do field work with them when I was a student. Don’t you see, Mother, how important this is?” She did not add that the only reason she had not gone was because her mother had thought that she would be gone too far for too long.

Her mother sighed. “I thought you were all through with that, now that you’ve got such a nice job at the library and such a nice future ahead of you. I really don’t understand ...”

Wally grinned. “I think it’s because she likes the clothes. You know how our Pru likes clothes.”

Prudence rolled her eyes, while mentally thanking Wally for changing the subject, and answered her mother’s confused and questioning look. “She was wearing the Courier uniform, and, yes, I liked it. It’s – well, rather exotic – a velvet blouse of the type that the Indian women in that area wear, heavy silver and turquoise jewelry, a pleated walking skirt, a soft hat, and walking shoes, of course. Stylish and practical. But if the clothes were all I wanted, I could easily order a set made for me here. I want more than that.”

Her mother sighed, but before she could speak, Wally interrupted. “She said they only hire girls who grew up there. How are you going to get around that?” He leaned back in his chair, looking smug.

“Well, MISTER Carver,” she snapped. “She said they “prefer” – which means they make exceptions. So, all I have to do is convince them that I am one of the exceptions. I AM a librarian. I CAN read. And between now and June, I’ll be able to read just about everything written on the American Southwest – that I haven’t read already. And what the Library doesn’t have, I can get on interlibrary loan.” She paused, then her eyes lit up. “In fact, I’m going to spend the next six months organizing a series of lectures for the library on the subject of the American Southwest. I’ll know more about the Southwest than even the Harvey Detours instructors by the time I’m through.”

Wally opened his mouth to respond, but stopped when Mrs. Bates shook her head. “She knows her own mind, Wally. You know as well as I do that no one can change her mind for her once she’s set on something.”

His lips twisted into a wry smile again, as he nodded. “Yeah, Ma, yeah, we both know.” He sat up straight. “Maybe I can put a good word in for you. We do have the contract for some of the Harveycars and they buy trucks from us. Someone in purchasing might be able to pull a string or two.”

“Walter Carver,” Prudence stared at him across the table. “I don’t know whether to kiss you or smack you. Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

He shrugged. “I was hoping to talk you out of it. Besides, I don’t know how much good it will do, but I’ll ask around. It’s not as if we’re working with Fred Harvey himself, or I should say, Ford Harvey. He took over when the old man died about 30 years ago. Or even with the head of the Detours, Major Clarkson. Our contact is someone in their transportation department.” Prudence grinned at him. “Don’t go getting your hopes too high, missy,” he warned.

Mrs. Bates slid back from the table. “Now, who wants pie?” She smiled at Wally. “It’s peach, your favorite. Made with canned peaches, I’m afraid.”

“And I won’t be able to tell the difference, if you made it,” Wally proclaimed.

After dinner, Prudence and Wally insisted that Mrs. Bates leave them to clear up. As she washed the dishes and Wally dried, they continued their discussion from dinner.

Wally began, “Look, Pru ... I know I’ve asked this before and ...”

She turned to him as she handed him a clean plate, “Wally, you know what my answer will be.”

“I know, but like I told you – you’re the only girl for me. You’ve been the only girl since we were six years old.”

“And I’m very fond of you, Wally. I always have been. I’m just not ready to settle down to a white picket fence, a couple of kids, and pot roast every Sunday.” She sighed and looked pensive. “Dad told me just before he died that the only regrets he had were for the things he didn’t do. He and Mother married so young, and then he worked so hard to provide for us. If it hadn’t been for us, he probably would have joined up in 1917, just to see Europe. He planned for them to travel when he retired and was saving toward that. He’d bought the house and started Mother’s annuity when they got married, and he got steady promotions and things were going well for us financially, but he got sick and the travel money went into a trust fund for my education. I don’t want to have the same regrets, Wally. I’ve still got some money left in the trust fund. The house is paid for and Mother’s annuity is plenty for her to live on and I will always be able to support myself as a librarian, so I’m going to use it in a way that I know he would have wanted me to.”

She stopped and stared out of the kitchen window, then continued in a different tone of voice, “Come with me, Wally!” She turned toward him, her eyes sparkling, “Come with me! Just for a few months! We could have an adventure together.”

“Now, Pru ... that’s not very practical. I’d have to give up my position at the motor company and I’m due a promotion before the end of this year. Besides, what would people say?”

“Oh, who cares what people would say?” She rolled her eyes. “Besides, we’d be in the company of other Detourists and Couriers. It’s not as if we would be going off into the wilds together, just the two of us. As for your job, you’re young, and you’re good at what you do. A few months wouldn’t be the end of your career ... and think how much fun we could have!” She smiled enticingly at him, inviting him to change her opinion of him.

He shook his head and changed the subject, trying to console her by offering her a bribe, as if she were a child who had been denied a treat. “Friday night, how about we go to that new speakeasy in Short Vincent that I’ve heard good things about?”

She smiled regretfully and looked back down at the sink. “All right. It’s been ages since we’ve been dancing.” How many chances was she going to give him to show that he was – that he could be – the kind of man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with? Or even that he understood her and what she wanted?

They talked about the speakeasy as they finished the dishes, then Prudence walked him to the door. Wally slipped on his coat and took his hat in his hand. “Look, Pru,” he said, in a low voice, “I know you want to do this and I know you’ve made up your mind, but, if you won’t think about us, think about your mother. You’re all she has. Leaving her all alone to go gallivanting after Indians ...”

Prudence glared at him. “I won’t be “gallivanting after Indians,” as you put it,” she hissed. “I don’t even know any Indians. I’ll be expanding my horizons. And when have I not thought of Mother? I wanted to go to one of the Seven Sisters, but instead, I went to Western Reserve, because it was close to home. I earned a master’s in library science because Western Reserve offered one and I could get a job here in Cleveland and I got one. I’m twenty-five years old,

Wally, and I've never been farther from Cleveland than Chicago, and then only for a couple of nights. I wanted to be an anthropologist and study primitive tribes, like Margaret Mead, not just read about them. It's too late for me to do that, but I could do this."

She paused for breath. She refrained from adding that she had maintained a close friendship with Wally in part because her mother doted on him and he cared about her mother almost as much as she did.

"Ah," Wally nodded. "So that's what's got you all het up. That woman's book that came out last year."

She gritted her teeth. "It certainly brought it all home to me how little I've done that I really wanted to do. And now I have this opportunity – possibly my last opportunity – and all you can say is "think about your mother." When do I get to think about myself?"

He looked down at the hat he held in his hand. "I never realized you resented your mother so much, Pru."

"I don't "resent" my mother!" Prudence hissed through clenched teeth. "I love my mother and I'm grateful for everything she's done for me. I just don't see why that has to mean that I can't have a life of my own!"

"Now, Pru," Wally put out a hand to her arm. "We only want what's best for you, you know that."

"And this IS what's best for me!"

"Are you sure?"

"The only way to know that is to do it, Wally. At least I have to try. And it's not as if this is a permanent change. It's only for a year or two."

"Even if it means leaving your mother all alone for that year or two?"

"Mother is not "all alone." She has her ladies' club and her church group and the neighbors." She paused in exasperation. "And she has you. You know you're like a son to her."

He looked at the ceiling. "Like a son to her, Prudence, not a son." He shook his head in exasperation. "I could be a son to her, if you'd just say the word. Agree to marry me and you can go off on your adventure, leaving your fiancé to look after your mother. That's the proper way to do it. And I won't even ask you to set the date until after you get back."

She moved closer and put her arms around his neck. "I might consider it," she said and pulled him closer, pressing up against him, lifting her face toward his.

He brushed a chaste kiss on her lips, then pulled his head back and pushed her gently away. “Now, Pru,” he chided, “We both know you’re not that kind of girl. So, what’s it to be?”

“No, Wally, it’s no. Not even for Mother.” And never for someone who couldn’t see her as a woman, not a girl and a rather staid and colorless girl, at that.

He shrugged. “You’ll change your mind one of these days, Pru. Well, I guess you know that I’ll look after her, regardless, and I’ll still be here waiting when you get back.” He settled his hat on his head and opened the door. “Night, pumpkin. Don’t take any wooden nickels.” He grinned as he left.

She stared through the glass at his back as he walked down the sidewalk. “Not that kind of girl? You don’t know me at all ...” she muttered to herself. “That was your last chance, Wally Carver. Now I’m going to go out and find someone who is ‘that kind of boy.’ Or better, that kind of man.” And if she didn’t, well, Wally would still be there waiting for her when she got back. She hoped she’d be able to do better, but if not, she knew that she could do a lot worse.