

Past Imperfect

by Cheryl DeLoatch

The line stretched around the corner. So far, I'd been able to maintain meaningful conversation with each loyal fan.

I turned to the woman standing before me "Who do I make this out to?"

"Oh, make it out to Allison. I really like your books. Can't wait for the next one."

"Thanks, Allison. How about, *'To one of my most loyal fans. Without you, there'd be no me.'* That work for you?"

"Oh yes!" Allison gushed—there's really no other word for it-- accepting the book carefully as though I'd given her diamonds.

Though I really was grateful to them all, I still resented having to give up yet another Saturday morning. I needed to be at home writing. It had been such a struggle lately, each word seeming to drip onto the page, letter by letter, the cursor blinking excruciatingly slow. It chided, "You've pulled it off in the past but I don't know about this time." The challenge was more than I could handle and I'd push away every time.

"Do you remember me?"

Pulled from my thoughts, I was confronted by a woman standing at the head of the line. As she thrust her book at me, I realized she looked familiar, but I couldn't place her. Was it hot in here? Suddenly, my skin felt clammy, humidity covering my arms and hands. I reached up to touch my face and felt moisture there.

"You don't remember me do you?"

I stared at her. She was an older woman but her impressive height was intimidating especially since I was sitting before her. Her mostly gray hair still showed streaks of light brown and red. Reminded me of wheat tinged with North Carolina red clay. And red freckles were flung carelessly across her nose and cheeks. "North Carolina red clay?" It hit me then.

"Mrs. Howser?"

"Yes child. Seems like only yesterday I was separating you from the other first graders!" She laughed, "And here you are, still sitting at a table by yourself. Don't look so spooked! I'm not going to send you to the corner!"

The dams burst and sweat began to pour from my skin. Droplets gathered at my hairline and slowly wandered down my temples. My blouse stuck to me as condensation settled at the base of my spine. My anxiety took slow languid laps in the pit of my stomach, in no hurry to leave. I flashed back to the time I'd spent with Mrs. Howser.

I remembered her very clearly now. 1977, rural North Carolina. I had been attending a new school at the time. It was new from the ground up. The trees were mere bushlings

surrounded by very little grass. But there were miles and miles of North Carolina red clay. It covered everything, always seeming to get in your mouth and eyes when the wind blew.

“Charlene, go to the corner now!” She’d screamed continuously back then. “Troublesome child! I don’t understand why I’ve been stuck with you. You’d think they’d put you all in the same class and not bother all of us!”

Recesses were so lonely. I would spend time on the swings enjoying the feeling of flying above all the others. The only time my classmates talked to me was when they wanted to know why my hair wasn’t straight like theirs. **As I answered, they would touch my hair their eyes puzzled, often depositing sand and debris they’d hidden in their palms. Then they’d run away giggling, leaving me wondering what they thought was so funny.** Some days, the boys would push me into the red clay, while the teachers looked on blindly. I would lie there ashamed, trying to pull my dress down as they laughed at me.

Boundary lines had been redrawn at that time and the new school’s boundaries happened to include a housing project located right outside the city limits. The children of the project would be afforded the opportunity to attend a new elementary school, the pride of the county. But other residents within the boundary lines were not as happy about the large number of Black children who would be attending school alongside their children. I’d been to meetings with my parents as those residents demonstrated, voicing their discontent in loud volume, their faces red with anger.irate looks were flung at me and I realized it didn’t matter that my family did not live in the housing project. Their gazes were full of hatred because I looked like those kids. I was black. And they didn’t care where I lived. They didn’t want me there.

Mixed in with the parents were teachers and school staff. **“Not in our classrooms!” signs read. They sat at the head of the room with their arms crossed, looking out at the crowd in disgust. In the end, it hadn’t mattered. I’d ended up in Mrs. Howser’s class, to her displeasure. Actually, I’d spent more time looking at the walls of her classroom. It seemed I could not do anything right in those days. If I spoke up, I’d be reprimanded. If I didn’t speak up, I’d be punished. Mrs. Howser would send me to the corner feeling smaller every time, followed by the open laughter of my classmates.**

“She’s just so dumb,” I remembered one of them saying. “My daddy told me they don’t learn like we do. He told me we’re better than them cause we’re smarter than them.”

Standing there, **Mrs. Howser’s book opened and awaiting my inscription, I remembered the shame I’d felt. My eyes began to burn as tears threatened to rain down in torrents. My heart pounded in my chest, my pulse raced. After all these years, this woman still caused me anxiety.**

“I told Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Green it was you. Remember them too?”

Remembering my second and third grade teachers, I managed to eek out “Yes.” It hurt to swallow. My throat was so dry.

Mrs. Howser continued, “Mrs. McCall and Mrs. Green refused to believe you could be the same child they struggled with. You did read a lot, but we all still had our doubts. We’re certainly glad you were able to make something of yourself.” Turning around, she spoke to the man behind her, “She was a handful, this one was. I was her first grade teacher and she had us all worried. She was a little terror, always getting into trouble,” she laughed. “And so slow in class! I would explain things to her and she never got it. Guess I did something right after all, huh?” she gloated turning back to me.

The man smiled uncomfortably, and looked at me with pity. He nodded as though encouraging me and the present came flooding back. There was still a line around the corner and I’d been here two hours already. These people were here for me to sign their books, books I’d written, and talk to me. They admired the author and woman I’d become. My works in the community were well known, and I had a significant following. These people were here to see me!

Turning to Mrs. Howser, I said, “How about this?” *‘To Mrs. Howser: Without you, I never would have aspired to such greatness. Your words and actions shall always fuel my ambitions. Despite you, I am me.’*

I watched my hand inscribe the words, enjoying how good it felt to write.