

## Book Excerpt II - And The Living Is...

*“Why don’t you have a lot of wrinkles?” a curious nine-year-old Journey once ventured.*

*With a serious but loving look in her almond eyes, Grandmom told Journey how everyone had soul wells. Instead of troubles and worries finding a place on the face, black folks’ worries found their way into the secret places of our souls. She was careful to let him know that soul wells weren’t the best places to keep their troubles.*

*“But you see, baby, our story has been one of a very long while of keeping our thoughts and feelings inside, hidden—so that’s where they went.*

*“Understand what I’m trying to say, Journey. Even our wrinkle worries were afraid to be seen. Yes indeed, learned to even hide our wrinkles. We knew we didn’t have to, we just so used to everything going inside and out of sight*

*that wrinkles went there, too.*

*“Don’t be fooled, it’s not all a good thing, baby. Worry and troubles don’t just sit still in the soul. Can’t just be still and don’t bother nothing, gotta wear everything down that’s around it. That’s why we always be dying inside. Can be so strong on the inside, but all the time be dying faster than everybody else.*

*“People don’t understand that that’s why we lose our men folk way before the women. He keeps getting cut down, might be seeming to like it, but he can’t sing and dance it all away. He keeps, just keeps losing his man dignity. That hurt pretty soon finds its way deep into his soul well and it soon gets so crowded and twisted that it tears a strong body down.*

*“Ever see those African lions on those TV shows? They be looking so proud and powerful in Africa. Just be standing like kings over their lion family. You can’t ever see that same proud lion in the zoo cause his soul’s been snatched. May as well call him something else, ain’t no more a lion. Oh, us women feels it, too, but our wells are a bit more flexible and soft like a woman, we hurts but can stand it a whiles longer.”*

*Jurney could still see the curled pictures and drawings on the kitchen wall that had been done by children who had long-since reached adulthood. At times, Grandmom couldn’t recall exactly who was the current president, but she could tell you who drew each picture and what grade they were in when they did it; even if the once small artist had now started to gray. Her half-sized windows were framed by now yellowed curtains, speckled with the fading ghosts of once radiant roosters and flowers.*

*Although always clean, Grandmom would never replace her curtains. I guess what her children and grands’ would never really appreciate is the fact that for many of her early years, there were no real curtains and whitewash paint was the only wall covering for her and many like her.*

*Her now modernized family could never understand the joy that she felt years ago when her husband used the money from his third job to not spend time with the fellas, but to present his wife with brand new curtains. Even the tags were still on them (tags, now that in itself was a wondrous occasion most now can’t understand!). Her*

*neighbors were lovingly jealous and swore that the crisp new curtains simply glowed from the color-bursts of flowers and roosters.*

*“My children, what can you buy me that’s finer than what my man brought to me on that rainy Friday night of April 1957?”*

*Amidst the perfected-from-memory preparation of the sweet potato and kneading of the piecrust, Grandmom Swiftwood had often listened to her grandson’s dreams of how he wanted to be somebody when he got older. She would tell him to keep thinking that way because all children are special; all children are able to dream.*

*“Don’t ever lose your dream, baby,” said Grandmom. “Don’t you never lose your dreams. You keep your dreams like a fire; you keep them hot, you hear? Don’t you let nobody put out your fire. A man without dreams might as well look for the funeral man. Cus ain’t no life in him. Don’t you even let the fire burn down cus then it’s just a-smoldering. You see, baby, a man gets crazy cus he lettin his fire go down and soon it just be smokin—it be all dark, all stank and sometimes evil. That’s when folks do bad things in this world, cus of smolderin dreams.”*

*Adorned in a frayed apron that was scented with the scattered fragrance of dusted flour and nutmeg, she would tell him that dreams are only seeds and therefore must be planted and nurtured to yield a bountiful harvest.*

*“Baby, you ain’t dirt,” she would smile. “But for today I want you to think of your mind as soil, a place where your dream-seed is to be nourished and cared for. Now the problem with most children, adults too, is that they place their seeds in the far corner of their garden. They forget to water and cultivate it, just letting weeds grow just anywhere. Pretty soon a body can’t even find the plant or just plain ol forgot what was planted. There goes another dream. Take care of your dream, boy. Keep watch over it and don’t let nobody take a stroll through your soil and just step all over your dream.”*

*“Did you have dreams, Grandmom ?”*

*“Oh, I sure did, baby, I sure did. But you see, nobody ever told me about dreams the way I’m speaking to you now, and by the time I’d lived and learned a lil bit, I was a ways down the road.*

*“But I will tell you this. I planted dreams for my babies. I knows that a person gotta have their own dreams, but I figured that I could redo my soil and make a ways so my children see their dreams. That’s why your granddaddy worked himself to an early grave.*

*“Yes indeed. My Frank Journey Swiftwood knew that the dreams he once held as a young man wouldn’t meet him in this life, but he got a true joy in knowing that he was making it so his family was on a much wider highway toward seeing theirs. You a lot like him, Journey, yes sir, a lot like him. You think a lot. You try to understand the whole situation about things where most people can barely figure out what’s in front of them. Yea, that was my Frank, my sweet hard roll Frank.”*

*“Sweet hard roll? Shouldn’t it be either a sweet roll or a hard roll?” asked a naïve Journey.*

*Grandmom laughed, even blushed a bit. “You see, baby, sometimes a man and a woman got private names for each other, just play names.”*

*“Did you have a play name, Grandmom?”*

*“Oh yes, baby,” she laughed. “Sometimes your grandfather would put his arms around my waist, oh it was a small waist back then, and call me his ‘morning butter’.”*

*“Morning butter?”*

*“Mmm, mmm. For sure. Cus my Frank would say that nothing goes with a sweet hard roll like some nice morning...never you mind. You be getting a name by and by, I reckon. Yes indeed, yes indeed,” my morning butter Grandmom whispered to herself as she bent down to open the oven that immediately released aromatic heaven in the form of the golden buttered rolls. “How your grandfather loved my rolls. How I loved that man.”*

Journey often remembered leaving his grandmother’s kitchen with her lost in a private smile, gazing at the thinned curtains. Journey swore that, at times, the curtains, even with the windows closed shut, would billow and almost reach toward her face. She would just hold still, very still...and smile.