Short story: “History Lesson-1954” from Out of the Blue: Aleta’s Stories

Angela Bowen

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From "Out of the Blue: Aleta's Stories"

By Angela Bowen

History Lesson-1953

Aleta entered the classroom early and chose the first seat in the second row so she wouldn't miss a thing. In all her years in school, she never had a black teacher!

When Miss Handy entered the room, she turned deftly and held one crutch under her arm as she closed the door behind her, then made her way to her desk. She sat down and reached out to prop her crutches in the corner. Looking calmly out at her new class, she said in a soft, melodious voice, "Hello, girls."

"Hello, Miss Handy," came the reply. Aleta dropped her eyes in embarrassment because she hadn't expected the whole class, high school juniors, to respond in such a singsong manner. When she looked up, Miss Handy was smiling directly at her, out of a heart-shaped face with the most beautiful dark brown eyes Aleta had ever seen. She smiled back, her heart beating hard.

Suddenly she realized that, although she'd seen Miss Handy around the school for the entire previous year, she never heard her speak, and certainly had never before looked her directly in the face. She was a smooth, cinnamon color, with very black shiny straight hair, which she wore twisted into a figure eight bun, low on her neck. Tiny little threads of white were faintly visible, mixed in with the black, and delicate pink lipstick that emphasized her dainty mouth.

For weeks Aleta gazed, lost in Miss Handy's beauty before she finally began paying attention to what the teacher was saying in class. It took several more weeks before Aleta could reluctantly bring herself to admit that Miss Handy was, at best, a mediocre teacher. As hard as Aleta listened, she could discern absolutely nothing between the lines. Miss Handy taught the history book, just like any ordinary white teacher. In fact, Aleta had heard much more that was stimulating and informative from Miss Green, a white teacher in her last school.

Miss Handy took a strong liking to Aleta. Since this was the last class of the day, she asked Aleta to help carry her pocketbook, schedule book and a few other things out to the taxi that she rode home in every day. Then Miss Handy began giving her a lift as far as the corner of the main avenue to cut down on the distance Aleta would need to walk to dancing school.

One day Miss Handy asked if Aleta would come to her house and help her do some cleaning on a day they had off from school because it was President's day.

Miss Handy lives in the first-floor apartment of a house she owns, filled with lots of "good sturdy furniture," she often said. Her house was about 6 blocks from the school where she and Aleta had met. The dancing school was six blocks in the opposite direction.

It was awkward at first, being in a teacher's home with her, but they began making it work, as they slowly found a rhythm of working together.

Aleta cleaned out cabinets as she climbed on stools to change the shelf paper and wash the greasy wall above the stove with spic and span, Miss Hardy telling her when to get down and change the water.

After the success of their first day together, Miss Handy asked if Aleta could come two days a week and half a day on Saturday, but Saturday was out of the question for Aleta. She had to do her housework at home in the morning so that she could be at dancing school by one o'clock.
That's where she stayed till evening, taking classes and helping to teach the little ones. She'd never give that up, not even for a hundred dollars a day. It was a sacrifice to give up any time at all, even on weekdays because she needed to take as many classes as she could, having started dancing at 14, which was almost too late, unless you were willing to work like a demon. Aleta worked like a demon, but still she needed to make more money. Her dance equipment was very expensive—she went through a pair of toe shoes every four weeks, and that was no joke for poor folks, as mama said. Anyway, Miss handy seemed to really need her. So they made a compromise. On Tuesdays and Fridays Aleta would ride home from school with her, work two hours, and then run to her dancing school six blocks away from Miss Handy's house and her dancing school.

One day Miss Handy said she wanted to get a good head start on her spring cleaning because she had neglected to get it done the previous year, and now that she had Aleta, they would be able to do a good job, a very good job, I'm sure, right Aleta? "Yes, of course, a very good job. Miss Handy, I'm very sure," Aleta said; with a broad smile AND SO THEY BEGAN.

Sometimes they would move the sofas in the living room and clean dust balls out from behind. Aleta would slide under beds and pull things out, opening containers of sweaters and blankets that had been folded away for 30 or 40 years, changing the mothballs, refolding the items, and putting them carefully away again!

She had a grand piano, two couches and three armchairs, three bedrooms with underbed containers stuffed with blankets that needed to be aired out and refolded, two kitchen tables, four sets of dishes, numerous cups and saucers, miscellaneous plates, drawers full of silverware that needed polishing, and an endless, crowded supply of things to be cared for, and put away again.

Our father (who died before I could remember what he looked like) insisted on getting us a grand piano, even though it was a second hand one. I never told Miss Handy that we also had a grand piano just like hers. Somehow—I thought that she would not like it. Maybe she would ask me to play it, and if she couldn't do it, she would be embarrassed and would hate me!!!

Sometimes Aleta wanted to accept a sweater or scarf that Miss Handy offered, but she had her own rules about such things, worked out over a period of time. Mama or no one else knew on what basis Aleta would say yes to one item and no to another. But she herself knew, even if she wouldn't explain it to anyone else.

Some of the white women Mama worked for in Newton and Brookline had girls who had outgrown (or maybe just grown tired of) some clothes that were perfectly good and still in style. Accepting clothes from them was okay because Aleta didn't ever expect to see them anyway, so what difference did it make?

Taking something that her friend Em had tired of was okay too. Aleta and Em had long ago dealt with the reality that Em was financially better off than Aleta. Still, although Aleta envied Em's large, quiet neat house and the huge bedroom Em had all to herself, Em envied Aleta's family, her chaotic and bustling home life and her freedom. Em was generous from the heart and loved to see Aleta in something she'd given her, so they were both comfortable with it. But somehow it didn't feel right to take something from Miss Handy. Aleta would be embarrassed to wear it to school, and Miss Handy would be waiting to see it on her and wondering why she never wore it. After offering a few times and receiving the same response, Miss Handy gave up.

She always offered Aleta cookies and tea. The first few times Aleta had refused, thinking it was too much trouble to put Miss Handy through just for her. Then she noticed that her teacher "took tea" herself anyway, as she called it, and seemed to really want Aleta to join her, so she accepted. They'd sit at one of two kitchen tables, the one that was free of piled up papers, folders,
letters and newspapers. While they "took tea," they'd "have a chat" as well. Miss Handy seemed quite interested in Aleta's family and came to know a lot about them over a period of months.

Aleta asked questions about Miss Handy's family too. Her father had been a dentist. Both parents had lived in the house with her until they died, her mother nine years previously, and the father just two years ago. She asked Aleta what she wanted to be and cautioned her to get an education, so she'd have something to fall back on if dancing didn't work out. Aleta loved her for not saying that an intelligent girl like her shouldn't waste herself on dancing.

"It must be lovely to be able to sail through the air like that," Miss Handy said, smiling into Aleta's eyes. "Can you tell me how it feels?" Aleta felt awkward trying to put it into words, but she did her best to describe the feeling.

"It's like being outside of my body. Just feeling free. The higher and wider you jump, the longer you can float, and if you can time it so that you're up there right at the peak of the music, it's like heaven."

"Do you believe in heaven, Aleta?"
"I guess I don't, not really."
"Have you thought about it?"
"Yes. Have you?"

Miss Handy looked down for a few seconds, then, lifting her head, said quietly, "There's got to be one. There just has to be."

"My mother believes in one, but my brother Wesley says you better get it here because this is all there is."
"And you?"
"Well, I just recently read Bertrand Russell's Why I Am Not a Christian, and I think I agree with him."

"Bertrand Russell?"
"The British philosopher, Miss Handy, you know him?"
"Well. My dear, who introduces you to such material? Your brother?"
"No. Actually, I was just looking around in the library, and the title caught my eye."
"What does your mother say to that?"
"I don't think I ever mentioned it to her. Why do you ask?"
"Well, if she believes in heaven, she must be a Christian. Would she mind your reading that?"

"Oh no, Mama says the more you read, the more you learn, and if you learn enough, then you can find out what you think."
"Do all of you read indiscriminately like that?"

Aleta laughed. "I think I'm pretty discriminating about my reading, actually. We all are. For instance, Lilly reads tons of True Confessions, Ralphie reads nothing but comic books, and Wesley reads all kinds of newspapers and magazines and things like that. We just all read whatever we like."

"And what does your mother think about the True Confessions Lilly reads?"
"Nothing much, but we all tease her about them."
"Is she embarrassed?"
"Only at certain times, like when Wesley says, 'Oh, look, Lilly's getting to the good parts now, her toes are starting to twitch.'"

They both laughed out loud. "And you, do you read them too?" asked Miss Handy.
"I used to, but there's just so much more interesting stuff to read, I don't bother too much with them anymore."

"What else do you read?"

"I must have read every Wonder Woman comic book there is. I still love them. Let's see ... I read about Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, women pioneers in black dance. And ... oh, yeah, I recently read The Natural Superiority of Women by Ashley Montague."

Miss Handy shook her head. "I've never heard of that either," she said.

"Miss Handy, what do you read?" asked Aleta.

"Oh, I don't have much time for reading," she said, looking away.

"Well, what's the last book you did have time to read?"

"I read my Bible every night, as I have every night of my life." Aleta watched her silently.

"And I'm currently about halfway through Jane Eyre. But of course, I've read that before ... and then there's The Brothers Karamazov."

"What's that?"

"A Russian novel, by Dostoevsky."

"Don't you read any American books? Like the kind that tell you what people think about things?"

"Novels tell you what people think about things. They just do it more indirectly."

"Then what novels would tell me what people think about things that are American? What novels do you read about black Americans?"

"Aleta, I've been meaning to tell you that there's a certain class of person who doesn't think calling ourselves black will help us much in life."

"Oh, well that's the word we always use in our house. My mother and my brother say all colored people should call themselves black."

"And there are many colored people who strongly disagree," said Miss Handy in a tone that let Aleta know exactly where she stood. They never did get back to their discussion about reading. In fact, several of their conversations ended up the same way.

One Friday evening, Aleta told Miss Handy she wasn't going to dancing school because she was going to a hall to hear speeches from several people, including Paul Robeson.

"Will he be singing?" asked Miss Handy.

"I don't know about that, but Wesley said he's definitely going to be talking about how the government took his passport away so he can't travel out of the country. And the whole rally is about politics, so he'll be talking about how we as black people have to act to get our freedom."

"Hmmph! He'd do well to raise that beautiful voice of his in song and stop talking so much about all this other business," Miss Handy said.

"You don't like Paul Robeson?"

"Of course, I like him," she exploded. "It's just that if he persists in all this talk against the government, it will only bring more trouble onto the heads of all decent, God-fearing Negroes. We have enough to go through as it is."

"Well, isn't that what he's trying to do? Get us all to pull together to stop us having to go through so much as it is?"

"Aleta, you don't understand. It's just too complicated to solve with all these rallies and meetings. You have to work hard, you have to show what you're worth, and earn respect, and then demonstrating won't be necessary. Nobody's going to give you respect without education."

"Wesley says Paul Robeson has a law degree, and he was some kind of special scholar."
"A Rhodes scholar, yes, that's true. He's received a top-notch education, and he ought to be encouraging others to do the same. Because, you see, the vast majority of us aren't educated yet. That's why young people like you are so important to our future. You must work hard to uplift the race, not tear it down."

Funny, Aleta thought, she was always hearing that expression used in such different ways. She remembered once when she was about eight, when Wesley and Alan had used the same words to Ralphie, who must have been about ten. Her older brothers, who were still living with the family then, were members of a group called The Young Progressives, and they held very secretive meetings at our house, in their bedroom. They had enlisted Aleta and her brother Ralphie and some of their friends to help pass out leaflets about the Scottsboro Boys' trial.

One Saturday Ralphie said he couldn't pass out the leaflets that day because he had to work at the bowling alley. Wesley and Alan said not to worry about the bowling alley, that this distribution was the most important work he could be doing because this was something that was going to uplift the race, not tear it down by doing white people's menial labor for them. Besides, they said, being a pin boy was dangerous work, and young boys were constantly having their brains knocked out with bowling balls and flying pins. Ralphie said he was very quick and hadn't been beaned since the first week he was on the job. He needed some money, he said, and went on out to the bowling alley. The brothers were furious with him. Aleta was glad that Ralphie was working because he gave her money sometimes. She and her friend Connie kept on passing out the leaflets. Saturdays were good for doing it in the area around Dudley Station because a lot of people did their shopping in that group of stores along there. Connie's older sister, who was Alan and Wesley's age, came along and told Connie to go on home. She said that if Connie kept hanging around with Aleta, she could end up in jail for being a Communist. Connie asked Aleta if she was a Communist and Aleta said no. She said she didn't even know what one was, so how could she be one? Connie stayed with Aleta and they kept right on passing out the papers. That was half a lifetime ago for Aleta, and she wondered how she would know whether what she did would uplift the race. Would being the best black ballerina uplift the race? What about if she was only 5th best, or 10th? Did people make the decision about what to do with their life based on whether it would uplift the race? Did Paul Robeson? Did Miss Handy? Could she ask her? Would she ever dare?

One day in early spring, Miss Handy and Aleta had just finished putting away winter clothes and taking out summer dresses. They sat down with a cup of tea and Miss Handy told Aleta that she could be in the cotillion if she wanted to.

"The cotillion, what's that?" Miss Handy explained that it was a "coming out" into society for the better class of Negro girls. Then Aleta recalled some talk about it at home. The big brothers had been chuckling about black folks who acted as if the bloodlines to their white ancestors made them better than others with obvious lines direct to Africa; they'd laughed aloud at the notion of a "black society set" built on such ridiculous connections.

So, when Miss Handy asked her now about doing this social coming out party, she couldn't imagine that even if she wanted to, she'd receive any encouragement at home for being part of such a thing as a cotillion. Yet Aleta figured that explaining all this to Miss Handy would be pointless. So, she said in as plain a voice as she could, "No, thank you." Miss Handy told her she had as much right to be in it as anyone else. Aleta nodded to be polite but didn't answer.

A few days later, Miss Handy brought it up again. "You're just as smart and just as pretty as all the other girls who will be entering. I'd be willing to buy your gown. I know your mother doesn't have extra money for this sort of thing." Aleta shifted on the chair but didn't answer. "This is as important an investment for your future as going to college will be."
"You really think so?" Aleta asked.
"I know it, yes.
"Why?"
"First of all, Aleta, you must realize that Jocelyn, Thelma and all those other bright girls who sit back there in that corner are no better than you." (Did she mean bright-minded, or bright-colored Aleta wondered?)

"They've just had more advantages in life, but not one of them is a bit smarter." Aleta wondered if Miss Handy could possibly think she was envying those girls' brainpower, but she thought she'd keep that remark to herself and wait to hear what else her teacher had to say. She had already decided that Miss Handy didn't have anything to share with her as far as history was concerned, or literature either. But since Miss Handy had such an interest in the cotillion, she might explain something about her philosophy on society, give her an idea of what value all this might be. Mama said Aleta should always be sure to listen to ways of thinking that were different from her own and her family's. She needed other things to chew on. No, to ruminate on, she thought. Or was it to ruminate about? Anyway, that was the place to use her newest word.

Miss Handy continued, "Don't you ever think low of yourself just because you don't have the right clothes or live in the lovely homes like they do. You study hard and meet the right people and learn how to dress and carry yourself and you can have all the advantages they have."
"Miss Handy, I don't think low of myself," she couldn't resist saying.
"Well, just don't let them look down on you because their fathers are doctors and teachers."
"I didn't know anything about their fathers till just now. I don't care about their fathers. Or them either, really."
"Aleta, you have to notice who the important people are in the world if you're going to get anywhere."

"Who's important? Jocelyn and Thelma and them?" Aleta laughed. "They can't even hold a sensible conversation, why would I care what they think? I'm fine with all of them, we get along all right, I just don't pay much attention to them, except . . . well, I wouldn't mind having their clothes. They really do wear some pretty nice clothes. But they're just boring, you know? So why would I want to go to a dance and be with them all evening?"

"It's not them, especially, Aleta, it's being introduced to a higher form of society, traveling in the right circles so you can meet the kind of young men you would want to make your life with."

Aleta laughed. "A higher form of society? Well, thank you, Miss Handy, I know you're trying to help me, but I'll take my chances about finding the right circles to travel in."

"You don't understand, Aleta. I know I'm probably not presenting it in a way to help you realize it, but this is a golden opportunity you shouldn't dismiss so quickly. They don't let just anybody come out in the cotillion, but I know I can do it for you if you'll just take my word on this."

"Honestly Miss Handy, I'd rather be around other kinds of people, who are doing exciting and interesting things."

"But Aleta, dear, dear child, there's so much trouble you can get into for the rest of your life if you're not careful to associate with the right people. You need to get started in the right direction now."

"I'll find them, the right people for me, out there somewhere. I just have to finish school and get away from here to start my life, that's all."

"Listen to me, Aleta "
"Please stop, Miss Handy, I appreciate your concern, but I'm just not interested," Aleta interrupted. The teacher looked at her with a sorrow the girl couldn't fathom. How could it possibly make such a difference to her? Why won't she just leave me alone? Then Aleta thought to ask, "Have you ever gone yourself, Miss Handy? To a cotillion, I mean?"

Her eyes flashed. For the first time Aleta saw a bitter twist to the dainty pink lips. "Well, yes," she said mockingly. "My father took me, all dressed up in my beautiful blue gown that came down to the floor." She looked down at her wasted legs. Her voice grew soft, "And one by one the children of my father's friends came by our table and sat dutifully for a few minutes before they waltzed off." She raised eyes full of pain to Aleta. "I wish I could have been like you, not wanting any of it. How did you get like this, anyway?"

"I don't know; my family, I guess," Aleta said without thinking. Then, suddenly seeking more clarity, she added, "Like what? How'd I get like what?"

"Arrogant," she spat out, her face twisted in anger. "Just so sure of yourself and arrogant! Who do you think you are to be so superior? You have nothing, and you think ... you think..." She sputtered to a stop.

They stared at one other for a few seconds before looking away as if by mutual assent. Aleta felt as if she had done something to be ashamed of, maybe by asking too many questions. Miss Handy looked as if she herself knew she had.

After a few minutes of silence, Aleta gathered her things and left, closing the door softly behind her. Neither of them said goodnight.

Aleta went back twice more, but it finally seemed best to make an excuse about extra rehearsals keeping her from coming. Miss Handy made no objection. In fact, she seemed relieved. Aleta had to give Miss Handy credit, though. Whatever she was feeling toward Aleta now, she gave her an A- in American History. Aleta had never had an A- in her life. But she knew that Miss Handy needed to do that for herself. If it made her feel better, so be it. Aleta was free.

END

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