

The Hopes and Dreams Series  
African-Americans

# Nobody Knows

A story based on history



Second Edition

Tana Reiff

Illustrations by Tyler Stiene

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### **The Hopes and Dreams Series**

by Tana Reiff

The Magic Paper (Mexican-Americans)  
For Gold and Blood (Chinese-Americans)  
Nobody Knows (African-Americans)  
Little Italy (Italian-Americans)  
More to come.

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# 1 The Sweet Shop

The American South, 1902

Mama came in  
from the fields.  
The day was hot.  
Six-year-old Mattie  
was shelling peas.  
She looked up  
at her mother.  
Mama looked tired.

“Finish up, child!”  
said Mama.  
“We are going  
into town.  
I’ll get  
the horse and wagon ready.  
Hurry up!”

Mattie finished  
the basket of peas  
as fast as she could.  
She loved  
going into town  
with Mama.

It was fun  
to be off the farm  
now and then.

Mama lifted Mattie  
onto the wagon.  
Mama talked  
the whole way to town.  
“If you’re a good girl,  
I’ll buy you  
a sweet,”  
she told little Mattie.

Of course,  
Mattie was a good girl.  
After shopping,  
Mama took her  
to the sweet shop.

The shop  
had two doors.  
The first door  
had fresh paint.  
“White Only,”  
said the sign.  
The second door  
was old and worn.

“Colored Only,”  
said the sign  
on the second door.  
Mattie and Mama  
went in the second door.

Inside, Mr. Prinn  
was serving  
some white people.  
Mattie and Mama  
waited on the other side  
of the sweet shop.

Another white woman  
came in the shop.  
Mr. Prinn  
served her.  
Mattie and Mama  
still waited  
on the black side  
of the shop.

At last,  
Mr. Prinn  
came over  
to Mattie and Mama.

“We’ll each have  
a soft drink,”  
said Mama.  
“And a sweet roll  
for the little one.”

Mr. Prinn  
took their money.  
He never smiled  
or said a word.

“I don’t think  
that man likes us,”  
said Mattie.

“Don’t mind him,”  
said Mama.  
“Our money  
is as good  
as white people’s.  
Be glad, child.  
I remember  
when I was your age.  
I was a slave.  
A family of white people  
owned our family.  
*Owned us!*”



Yes, they did!  
They forced us  
to stay on their land.  
My parents worked  
all day, every day,  
until night came.  
We couldn't go into town  
whenever we wanted.  
You're lucky, child.  
You're free  
to come and go  
as you please."

"Yes, Mama,"  
said Mattie.  
She took a bite  
of her sweet roll  
and smiled.



## 2 Mr. Nate Charles

Over the years  
Mattie grew  
tall and strong.  
The family stayed  
on the farm  
that they rented.  
But Mama and Daddy  
could never get ahead.  
They paid their rent  
in cotton  
instead of money.  
But some years  
there wasn't enough cotton,  
so they fell behind  
on the rent.

All the children  
worked on the farm.  
The land  
was not their own.  
It never would be.  
But the whole family  
worked every inch of ground  
like it was theirs.

When Mattie was 18  
she met Mr. Nate Charles.  
He was a big man  
and a good farmer.  
He worked hard,  
just like Mama and Daddy.  
His family  
rented a farm  
about ten miles south.

“Marry me,”  
he begged Mattie.  
“I’ll give you  
the best life  
that I can.  
I can’t give you  
a gold ring.  
But we can have  
a fine little wedding.  
Be my wife, Mattie.”

Mattie said yes.  
They held  
a nice wedding  
in the country church.  
Everybody came  
and brought food.

“Not like your grandparents,”  
said Mama.  
“They were married,  
all right.  
But they never had  
any real papers.  
Slaves couldn’t have  
any real papers.  
You’re lucky, child.  
You and Nate  
by law  
are man and wife.”

Mattie and Nate  
began their life  
on the farm.  
They paid their rent  
with a share of the crops.  
But, like Mattie’s family,  
they had a hard time.  
The cotton crop  
was in big trouble.  
Tiny black bugs  
called weevils  
ate most of the cotton  
before it was picked.

One day,  
Nate was in town.  
As he walked  
down the street,  
a man stopped him.

“I’m from up north,  
said the man.  
“I’m looking  
for strong men.  
Do you want  
to make money?  
Then come with me.  
I’ll even give you  
a train ticket.  
You can work  
in a meatpacking plant.  
You can live  
a good life  
in Chicago.  
You’ll never  
live a good life here!”

## Glossary

Definitions and examples of certain words and terms used in the story

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### Chapter 1 — The Sweet Shop page 1

**shelling peas** — The process of removing the shell (cover) from peas.

*Six-year-old Mattie was shelling peas.*

**lifted (to lift)** — To pick up someone or something.

*Mama lifted Mattie onto the wagon.*

**fresh** — Very recent or new.

*The first door had fresh paint.*

**colored** — At the time and place of the story, a term used for dark-skinned people, mainly African-Americans.

*“Colored only” said the sign on the second door.*

**soft drink** — A non-alcoholic drink, often with a fruit base and lots of sugar.

*“We’ll each have a soft drink,” ...*

**sweet roll** — A sugary pastry.

*“And a sweet roll for the little one.”*

**slave** — A person who is owned by another person. They have few rights.

*... when I was your age, I was a slave.*

**owned (to own)** — To have something (or someone) that is personal property.  
*A family of white people owned our family.*

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**Chapter 2 — Mr. Nate Charles** page 6

**cotton** — A major crop in the southern United States. Cotton is used to make cloth.  
*They paid their rent in cotton instead of money.*

**instead of** — In place of; as a substitute or alternative for.  
*They paid their rent in cotton instead of money.*

**fell behind (to fall behind)** — To be unable to make a payment; to owe money.  
*... there wasn't enough cotton, so they fell behind on the rent.*

**begged (to beg)** — To make a very strong request.  
*"Marry me," he begged Mattie.*

**papers** — Official legal documents.  
*But they never had any real papers.*

**meatpacking plant** A place where animals are cut up into pieces and prepared for distribution and sale.  
*You can work in a meatpacking plant.*