

JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME- FOR A COUNTRY

By Ella Čapek





I'm walking through the quiet streets of Owen Sound to get biscuits with my little sister, Susan. I love our quaint little town even though shops' windows are covered by news articles about black protestors, advertisements for brands only the white rich folks can afford, and other nonsense. "Marissa! Come on, I want to go to the shop to get a dolly!" says my little sister. Oh right, my mother is again spoiling my siblings with things we can't afford even with her working day and night. She tells me to get Susan a new ragdoll, but I pretend not to hear my desperate little sister and stay planted on the footpath, my eyes glued to the shop windows. One small photograph in the lower corner of the display catches my eye: a woman in a nurse uniform in front of a huge hospital. What if that could be me, Marissa Scott?

As soon as I get back to our quiet little house, I dig through the endless files in our rusty black filing cabinet, searching for my school file. I dig out my final report card of grade 12 and the multiple copies my high school gave me at the end of graduation. I don't know why I suddenly feel an urge to go to university. My mother does not have the money, but I already have a plan. I will apply for several scholarships, as well as write a letter to the schools containing my last report card, then I will put them in an envelope, go to the post office and get a stamp. I have a plan.





After getting back from cleaning Nancy Macdonald's mansion, Susan and Charles, my little siblings, run at me from the family room. My mother and father follow more slowly, my mother holding an envelope. "What is all this?" I say, confused. "Marissa. You got the replies of the universities you applied for! We wanted to wait for you to open them." I walk up to her, Susan and Charles detaching themselves from me, smiles on their little round faces. I sit down in the family room on our old couch, my family sitting around me as I open the first envelope with a knife. I'm reading the letter, my parents still beside me; Susan and Charles get bored and run off. The first letter tells me I did not get in. Same with the second. Same with the third. The three schools I applied for declined my application letter. The excited faces of my parents slowly dwindle with every letter until they are left with disappointment. My father lifts his spirit and tells me: "At least you tried. I'm proud of you," and he starts tickling me mercilessly. Despite my disappointment, I giggle like I'm a little girl again. He always knows how to make me feel better, even in the worst times. But that doesn't mean those hard times never happened.

A month goes by and I'm still not even considering applying for another school. I think to myself, "Why did I decide to apply for nursing school in the first place?" I think of Bernice Redmon and all she went through. She must have been devastated to have been denied by all those universities, just like me. But what did she do? She didn't sulk like I am. Instead, she moved to the United States and went to university there. Now I'm not saying I'm moving to the U.S., but that I should pick myself up and do something about my situation, not wait around for a never-to-come miracle.

I think about Bernice a lot. So, I apply for another school. I do the same thing as before. Hand-written letter. 12th grade report card. Envelope. Stamp from the post office. Mail. Wait.

Honestly, I don't think I got in. I don't think a nursing school would ever let a black woman in. But I am proven wrong by Bernice Redmon and all the other black nurses in the U.S. I know the letter is coming today. I am rushing home from Ms. Macdonald's. I need to get an answer.





I get home from work, and find a letter sticking out of the mail box. No one is at home. I fumble with my keys and open the door. For some reason, even though I believe I did not make it, I have an odd feeling about this letter, and I open it. As I read through, I see the words. "Congratulations to Marissa Scott on receiving a scholarship at St. Joseph's Hospital, Guelph." I don't have the words for the growing fear, excitement and joy inside of me. I think of all the opportunities I'll have; helping the unwell, helping my family, serving Owen Sound, inspiring black woman across the country; all those opportunities.

It has been a month, and fall has rolled around. I watch the auburn leaves fall from the trees as I wave to my family and head off for the train station to my new school. My new life.





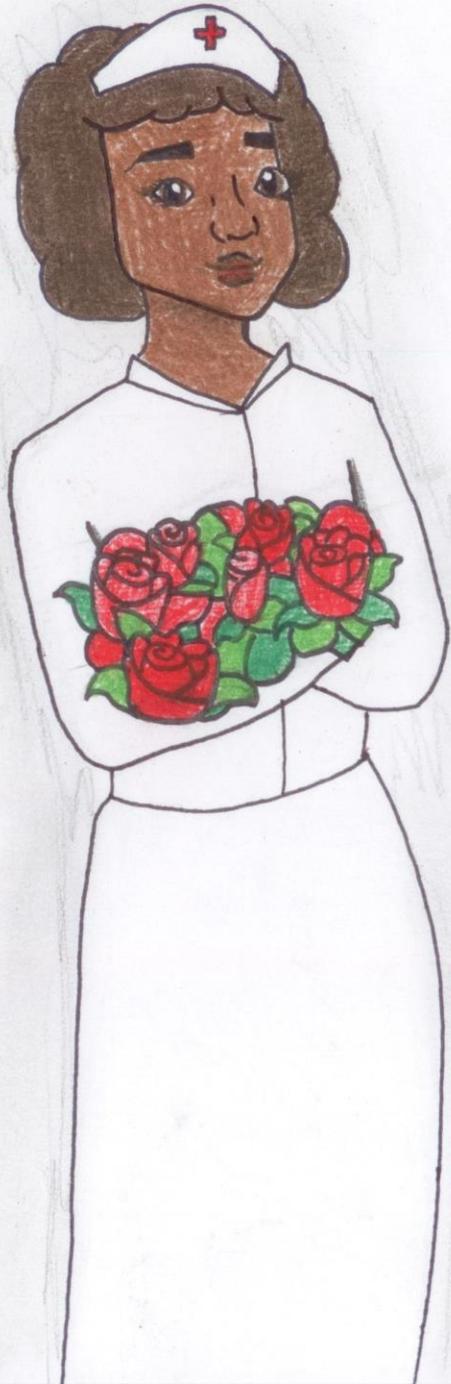
As excited as I am, I am walking toward my first class. I'm scared, but my mother's words ring in my ears: "People will judge you, but you need to keep your head up and ignore the stares," and that is my guide for the next couple years. I walk into my class, and there is one white woman in the class. The teacher. She hears me walk in, but keeps her head buried in her papers. "Come in, come in. Sit down." Then she lifts her head, and I say: "Thank you, ma'am. At any seat?" her expression is pure surprise, and she tries to cover it. She fails. "Why don't you take a seat at the back?" "Yes ma'am." is all I say. My mother and father once told me not to give anyone a reason to be irritated with me, so I don't retaliate at that racist woman. And there I sit. In the back of the class on my first day.

I experience many similar situations throughout my years here. Despite the judgement I get, I have made myself a home here. It is a couple minutes until I give a speech at my graduation about the struggle I experienced when applying for nursing school. I have cue cards, but I'm still as nervous as can be. Other graduates are giving speeches too, but I know mine is going to be a lot deeper than theirs. No one's eyes will be dry during my speech.





Looking back at my graduation in 1950, I remember just how it played out. I stood at the podium, in front of dozens, maybe hundreds, of people. I was right. There was no dry eye there as I spoke about my struggle of being a black woman, trying to get into a university and how I finally got accepted by St. Joseph's Hospital, Guelph. And my parents cheering until they could not speak. That was me, Marissa Scott-the first black Canadian nurse.



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