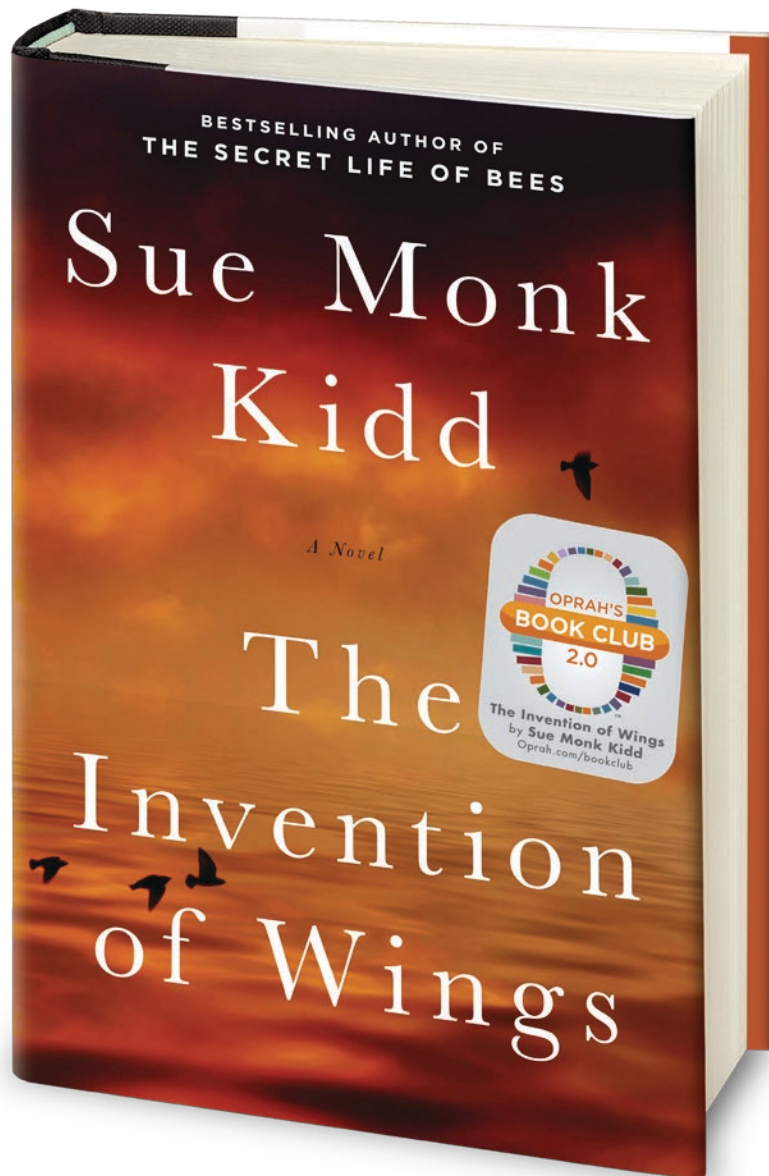


Excerpt from

The Invention of Wings

by

Sue Monk Kidd



Hetty Handful Grimké

There was a time in Africa the people could fly. Mauma told me this one night when I was ten years old. She said, “Handful, your granny-mauma saw it for herself. She say they flew over trees and clouds. She say they flew like blackbirds. When we came here, we left that magic behind.”

My mauma was shrewd. She didn’t get any reading and writing like me. Everything she knew came from living on the scarce side of mercy. She looked at my face, how it flowed with sorrow and doubt, and she said, “You don’t believe me? Where you think these shoulder blades of yours come from, girl?”

Those skinny bones stuck out from my back like nubs. She patted them and said, “This all what left of your wings. They nothing but these flat bones now, but one day you gon get ’em back.”

I was shrewd like mauma. Even at ten I knew this story about people flying was pure malarkey. We weren’t some special people who lost our magic. We were slave people, and we weren’t going anywhere. It was later I saw what she meant. We could fly all right, but it wasn’t any magic to it.



The day life turned into nothing this world could fix, I was in the work yard boiling slave bedding, stoking fire under the wash pot, my eyes burning from specks of lye soap catching on the wind. The morning was a cold one—the sun looked like a little white button stitched tight to the sky. For summers we wore homespun cotton dresses over our drawers, but when the Charleston winter showed up like some lazy girl in November or January, we got into our sacks—these thickset coats made of heavy yarns. Just an old sack with sleeves. Mine was a cast-off and trailed to my ankles. I couldn’t say how many unwashed bodies had worn it before me, but they had all kindly left their scents on it.

Already that morning missus had taken her cane stick to me once cross my backside for falling asleep during her devotions. Every day, all us slaves, everyone but Rosetta, who was old and demented, jammed in the dining room before breakfast to fight off sleep while missus taught us short Bible verses like “Jesus wept” and prayed out loud about God’s favorite subject, obedience. If you nodded off, you got whacked right in the middle of God said this and God said that.

I was full of sass to Aunt-Sister about the whole miserable business. I’d say, “Let this cup pass from me,” spouting one of missus’ verses. I’d say, “Jesus wept cause he’s trapped in there with missus, like us.”

Aunt-Sister was the cook—she’d been with missus since missus was a girl—and next to Tomfry, the butler, she ran the whole show. She was the only one who could tell missus what to do without getting smacked by the cane. Mauma said watch your tongue, but I never did. Aunt-Sister popped me backward three times a day.

I was a handful. That’s not how I got my name, though. Handful was my basket name. The master and missus, they did all the proper naming, but a mauma would look on her baby laid in its basket and a name would come to her, something about what her baby looked like, what day of the week it was, what the weather was doing, or just how the world seemed on that day. My mauma’s basket name was Summer, but her proper name was Charlotte. She had a brother whose basket name was Hardtime. People think I make that up, but it’s true as it can be.

If you got a basket name, you at least had something from your mauma. Master Grimké named me Hetty, but mauma looked on me the day I came into the world, how I was born too soon, and she called me Handful.

That day while I helped out Aunt-Sister in the yard, mauma was in the house, working on a gold sateen dress for missus with a bustle on the back, what’s called a Watteau gown. She was the best seamstress in Charleston and worked her fingers stiff with the needle. You never saw such finery as my mauma could whip up, and she didn’t use a stamping pattern. She hated a book pattern. She picked out the silks and velvets her own self at the market and made everything the Grimkés had—window curtains, quilted petticoats, looped panniers, buckskin pants, and these done-up jockey outfits for Race Week.

I can tell you this much—white people lived for Race Week. They had one picnic, promenade, and fancy going-on after another. Mrs. King’s party was always on Tuesday. The Jockey Club dinner on

Wednesday. The big fuss came Saturday with the St. Cecilia ball when they strutted out in their best dresses. Aunt-Sister said Charleston had a case of the grandeurs. Up till I was eight or so, I thought the grandeurs was a shitting sickness.

Missus was a short, thick-waist woman with what looked like little balls of dough under her eyes. She refused to hire out mauma to the other ladies. They begged her, and mauma begged her too, cause she would've kept a portion of those wages for herself—but missus said, I can't have you make anything for them better than you make for us. In the evenings, mauma tore strips for her quilts, while I held the tallow candle with one hand and stacked the strips in piles with the other, always by color, neat as a pin. She liked her colors bright, putting shades together nobody would think—purple and orange, pink and red. The shape she loved was a triangle. Always black. Mauma put black triangles on about every quilt she sewed.

We had a wooden patch box for keeping our scraps, a pouch for our needles and threads, and a true brass thimble. Mauma said the thimble would be mine one day. When she wasn't using it, I wore it on my fingertip like a jewel. We filled our quilts up with raw cotton and wool thrums. The best filling was feathers, still is, and mauma and I never passed one on the ground without picking it up. Some days, mauma would come in with a pocketful of goose feathers she'd plucked from mattress holes in the house. When we got desperate to fill a quilt, we'd strip the long moss from the oak in the work yard and sew it between the lining and the quilt top, chiggers and all.

That was the thing mauma and I loved, our time with the quilts.

No matter what Aunt-Sister had me doing in the yard, I always watched the upstairs window where mauma did her stitching. We had a signal. When I turned the pail upside down by the kitchen house, that meant everything was clear. Mauma would open the window and throw down a taffy she stole from missus' room. Sometimes here came a bundle of cloth scraps—real nice calicos, gingham, muslin, some import linen. One time, that true brass thimble. Her favorite thing to take was scarlet-red thread. She would wind it up in her pocket and walk right out the house with it.

The yard was over busy that day, so I didn't have hope for a taffy falling from the clear blue. Mariah, the laundry slave, had burned her hand on charcoal from the iron and was laid up. Aunt-Sister was on a tear about the backed-up wash. Tomfry had the men fixing to butcher a hog that was running and screeching at the top of its lungs. Everyone was out there, from old Snow the carriage driver all the way down to the stable mucker, Prince. Tomfry wanted to get the killing over quick cause missus hated yard noise.

Noise was on her list of slave sins, which we knew by heart. Number one: stealing. Number two: disobedience. Number three: laziness. Number four: noise. A slave was supposed to be like the Holy Ghost—don't see it, don't hear it, but it's always hovering round on ready.

Missus called out to Tomfry, said keep it down, a lady shouldn't know where her bacon comes from. When we heard that, I told Aunt-Sister, missus didn't know what end her bacon went in and what end it came out. Aunt-Sister slapped me into yesterday.

I took the long pole we called a battling stick and fished up the bedcovers from the wash pot and flopped them dripping on the rail where Aunt-Sister dried her cooking herbs. The rail in the stable was forbidden cause the horses had eyes too precious for lye. Slave eyes were another thing. Working the stick, I beat those sheets and blankets to an inch of their lives. We called it fetching the dirt.

After I got the wash finished, I was left idle and pleased to enjoy sin number three. I followed a path I'd worn in the dirt from looping it ten, twelve times a day. I started at the back of the main house, walked past the kitchen house and the laundry out to the spreading tree. Some of the branches on it were bigger round than my body, and every one of them curled like ribbons in a box. Bad spirits travel in straight lines, and our tree didn't have one un-crooked place. Us slaves mustered under it when the heat bore down. Mauma always told me, don't pull the gray moss off cause that keeps out the sun and everybody's prying eyes.

I walked back past the stable and carriage house. The path took me cross the whole map of the world I knew. I hadn't yet seen the spinning globe in the house that showed the rest of it. I poked along, wishing for the day to get used up so me and mauma could go to our room. It sat over the carriage house and didn't have a window. The smell of manure from the stable and the cow house rose up there so ripe it seemed like our bed was stuffed with it instead of straw. The rest of the slaves had their rooms over the kitchen house.

The wind whipped up and I listened for ship sails snapping in the harbor cross the road, a place I'd smelled on the breeze, but never seen. The sails would go off like whips cracking and all us would listen to see was it some slave getting flogged in a neighbor-yard or was it ships making ready to leave. You found out when the screams started up or not.

The sun had gone, leaving a puckered place in the clouds, like the button had fallen off. I picked up the battling stick by the wash pot, and for no good reason, jabbed it into a squash in the vegetable garden. I pitched the butternut over the wall where it splatted in a loud mess.

Then the air turned still. Missus' voice came from the back door, said, "Aunt-Sister, bring Hetty in here to me right now."

I went to the house, thinking she was in an uproar over her squash. I told my backside to brace up.

Sarah Grimké

My eleventh birthday began with Mother promoting me from the nursery. For a year I'd longed to escape the porcelain dolls, tops, and tiny tea sets strewn across the floor, the small beds lined up in a row, the whole glut and bedlam of the place, but now that the day had come, I balked at the threshold of my new room. It was paneled with darkness and emanated the smell of my brother—all things smoky and leather. The oak canopy and red velvet valance of the bedstead was so towering it seemed closer to the ceiling than the floor. I couldn't move for dread of living alone in such an enormous, overweening space.

Drawing a breath, I flung myself across the door sill. That was the artless way I navigated the hurdles of girlhood. Everyone thought I was a plucky girl, but in truth, I wasn't as fearless as everyone assumed. I had the temperament of a tortoise. Whatever dread, fright, or bump appeared in my path, I wanted nothing more than to drop in my tracks and hide.

If you must err, do so on the side of audacity. That was the little slogan I'd devised for myself. For some time now, it had helped me to hurl myself over door sills.

That morning was full of cold, bright wind pouring off the Atlantic and clouds blowing like windsocks. For a moment, I stood just inside the room listening to the saber-fronds on the palmettos clatter around the house. The eaves of the piazza hissed. The porch swing groaned on its chains. Downstairs in the warming kitchen, Mother had the slaves pulling out Chinese tureens and Wedgwood cups, preparing for my birthday party. Her maid Cindie had spent hours wetting and fastening Mother's wig with paper and curlers and the sour smell of it baking had nosed all the way up the stairs.

I watched as Binah, the nursery mauma, tucked my clothes into the heavy old wardrobe, recalling how she used a fire poke to rock Charles' cradle, her cowrie shell bracelets rattling along her arms while she terrified us with tales of the Booga Hag—an old woman who rode about on a broom and sucked the breath from bad children. I would miss Binah. And sweet Anna, who slept with her thumb in her mouth. Ben and Henry, who jumped like banshees until their mattresses erupted with geysers of goose feathers, and little Eliza, who had a habit of slipping into my bed to hide from the Booga's nightly reign of terror.

Of course, I should've graduated from the nursery long ago, but I'd been forced to wait for John to go away to college. Our three-storied house was one of the grandest in Charleston, but it lacked enough bedrooms, considering how . . . well, fruitful Mother was. There were ten of us: John, Thomas, Mary, Frederick, and myself, followed by the nursery dwellers—Anna, Eliza, Ben, Henry, and baby Charles. I was the middle one, the one Mother called *different* and Father called *remarkable*, the one with the carrot hair and the freckles, whole constellations of them. My brothers had once traced Orion, the Dipper, and Ursa Major on my cheeks and forehead with charcoal, connecting the bright red specks, and I hadn't minded—I'd been their whole sky for hours.

Everyone said I was Father's favorite. I don't know whether he preferred me or pitied me, but he was certainly *my* favorite. He was a judge on South Carolina's highest court and at the top of the planter class, the group Charleston claimed as its elite. He'd fought with General Washington and been taken prisoner by the British. He was too modest to speak of these things—for that, he had Mother.

Her name was Mary, and there ends any resemblance to the mother of our Lord. She was descended from the first families of Charleston, that little company of Lords that King Charles had sent over to establish the city. She worked this into conversations so tirelessly we no longer made the time or effort to roll our eyes. Besides governing the house, a host of children, and fourteen slaves, she kept up a round of social and religious duties that would've worn out the queens and saints of Europe. When I was being forgiving, I said that my mother was simply exhausted. I suspected, though, she was simply mean.

When Binah finished arranging my hair combs and ribbons on the lavish Hepplewhite atop my new dressing table, she turned to me, and I must have looked forsaken standing there because she clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and said, "Poor Miss Sarah."

I did so despise the attachment of *Poor* to my name. Binah had been muttering *Poor Miss Sarah* like an incantation since I was four.



It's my earliest memory: arranging my brother's marbles into words. It is summer, and I am beneath the oak that stands in the back corner of the work yard. Thomas, ten, whom I love above all the others, has taught me nine words: SARAH, GIRL, BOY, GO, STOP, JUMP, RUN, UP, DOWN. He has written them on a parchment and given me a pouch of forty-eight glass marbles with which to spell them out, enough to shape two words at a time. I arrange the marbles in the dirt, copying Thomas' inked words. *Sarah Go. Boy Run. Girl Jump.* I work as fast as I can. Binah will come soon looking for me.

It's Mother, however, who descends the back steps into the yard. Binah and the other house slaves are clumped behind her, moving with cautious, synchronized steps as if they're a single creature, a centipede crossing an unprotected space. I sense the shadow that hovers over them in the air, some devouring dread, and I crawl back into the green-black gloom of the tree.

The slaves stare at Mother's back, which is straight and without give. She turns and admonishes them. "You are lagging. Quickly now, let us be done with this."

As she speaks, an older slave, Rosetta, is dragged from the cow house, dragged by a man, a yard slave. She fights, clawing at his face. Mother watches, impassive. He ties Rosetta's hands to the corner column of the kitchen house porch. She looks over her shoulder and begs. *Missus, please. Missus. Missus. Please.* She begs even as the man lashes her with his whip.

Her dress is cotton, a pale yellow color. I stare transfixed as the back of it sprouts blood, blooms of red that open like petals. I cannot reconcile the savagery of the blows with the mellifluous way she keens or the beauty of the roses coiling along the trellis of her spine. Someone counts the lashes—is it Mother? *Six, seven.*

The scourging continues, but Rosetta stops wailing and sinks against the porch rail. *Nine, ten.* My eyes look away. They follow a black ant traveling the far reaches beneath the tree—the mountainous roots and forested mosses, the endless perils—and in my head I say the words I fashioned earlier. *Boy Run. Girl Jump. Sarah Go.*

Thirteen. Fourteen . . . I bolt from the shadows, past the man who now coils his whip, job well done, past Rosetta hanging by her hands in a heap. As I bound up the back steps into the house, Mother calls to me, and Binah reaches to scoop me up, but I escape them, thrashing along the main passage, out the front door, where I break blindly for the wharves.

I don't remember the rest with clarity, only that I find myself wandering across the gangplank of a sailing vessel, sobbing, stumbling over a turban of rope. A kind man with a beard and a dark cap asks what I want. I plead with him, *Sarah Go.*

Binah chases me, though I'm unaware of her until she pulls me into her arms and coos, "Poor Miss Sarah, poor Miss Sarah." Like a decree, a proclamation, a prophecy.

When I arrive home, I am a muss of snot, tears, yard dirt, and harbor filth. Mother holds me against her, rears back and gives me an incensed shake, then clasps me again. "You must promise never to run away again. *Promise me.*"

I want to. I try to. The words are on my tongue—the rounded lumps of them, shining like the marbles beneath the tree.

“Sarah!” she demands.

Nothing comes. Not a sound.

I remained mute for a week. My words seemed sucked into the cleft between my collar bones. I rescued them by degrees, by praying, bullying and wooing. I came to speak again, but with an odd and mercurial form of stammer. I’d never been a fluid speaker, even my first spoken words had possessed a certain belligerent quality, but now there were ugly, halting gaps between my sentences, endless seconds when the words cowered against my lips and people averted their eyes. Eventually, these horrid pauses began to come and go according to their own mysterious whims. They might plague me for weeks and then remain away months, only to return again as abruptly as they left.



The day I moved from the nursery to commence a life of maturity in John’s staid old room, I wasn’t thinking of the cruelty that had taken place in the work yard when I was four or of the thin filaments that had kept me tethered to my voice ever since. Those concerns were the farthest thing from my mind. My speech impediment had been absent for some time now—four months and six days. I’d almost imagined myself cured.

So when Mother swept into the room all of a sudden—me, in a paroxysm of adjustment to my surroundings, and Binah, tucking my possessions here and there—and asked if my new quarters were to my liking, I was stunned by my inability to answer her. The door slammed in my throat, and the silence hung there. Mother looked at me and sighed.

When she left, I willed my eyes to remain dry and turned away from Binah. I couldn’t bear to hear one more *Poor Miss Sarah*.