

ROBERTA & REN

By Robert Angela Dee



ILLUSTRATED BY MISTY MALVEAUX

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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ROBERTA AND REN

By Roberta Angela Dee

DEDICATION

The author dedicates this novella to all male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuals, regardless of whether or not they have elected to have surgery.

Roberta Angela Dee

CHAPTER ONE *The Baby*

She was christened Brenda Taylor at birth. She was small, barely more than 5 pounds, and frail, even for an infant. Yet, she cried like a boy child weighing more than 7 pounds. Some mistook her for a boy, but the tiny folds between her curled legs revealed the genitalia of a female.

Her mother, Sandra, was also small, barely five feet tall, and just over 100 pounds. She had an unfocused look, the kind of look that you see in the eyes of people who devote their lives to dreams and their pursuit. They run after feathers in the wind but never catch a single one. Perhaps the sight of the feather that motivates them. Perhaps, for some people, the chase alone is enough.

Sandra was young during a difficult time in Mississippi. 1962. was the year that the publication of *Silent Spring* launched the environmental movement. It was the year that James Meredith became the first African-American student to attend the University of Mississippi, after 3,000 troops put down riots. President John F. Kennedy announced that military advisers in Vietnam would fire if fired upon and Gregory Peck won an Academy Award for his role in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

There was tension in the world, and especially in Mississippi, much of it between blacks and whites. It was a bad time for a 20-year-old woman to be having a baby.

You have to be a woman to understand that feeling inside that makes you want to create life, to feel life growing inside you. Men think it's a passing phase girls go through after they grow beyond playing with dolls. They think it's a "female thing" that's neither logical, nor tangible. To a man's way of thinking, if you just ignore it, it'll go away.

Sandra *tried* to ignore it, but she couldn't. For her, it was as logical and tangible as needing to eat or use the bathroom. And it was as real as daylight.

"Nice girls don't have babies, 'less they married," her mother said.

Just the year before Sandra was impregnated by a man her age who was full of promise but empty of ambition. Maybe her mother sensed it. Maybe it was female in-

tuition — another of those “female things” that men believe to be neither logical, nor tangible. Just another something that, if ignored long enough, might go away.

Sandra's mother wasn't a very well-educated woman. She didn't know the words to explain how much a woman's life is altered when she's had a child with no husband to provide for her. A woman is looked upon differently from the man who fathers the child. The man remains untainted. Only the woman is tainted, as if she commits the sin alone, as if, somehow, she impregnates herself and no one else should bear the responsibility. But how does a daughter understand what her mother is unable to explain?

The feminist movement was still in its early stage. An unwed mother was still frowned upon, socially. She wasn't the “nice girl” a woman was supposed to be. Her sin left her spiritually tainted, as though her soul could somehow be dirtied by her act. A tainted soul was just a tainted soul. No one needed to explain how it was tainted, nor explain how a tainted soul was logical or tangible. It was decreed by God, and that was that.

Still, when Brenda's mother fell in love, all that mattered was being in love. For the young, love has no penalties, no consequences. Love is timeless, endless. Love is the only perfection in a flawed world. It's ignited by its own flame, and it burns without fuel.

Sandra had been pregnant nearly two months before she was certain of it. There were no home pregnancy kits back then. A woman just had to know. And Sandra knew no sooner than it became clear that her body was beginning to change.

“Mama, I'm pregnant,” she barely whispered at the kitchen table.

Her mother looked at her for a long time, as though she were appraising her daughter's words. Her face grew hard.

Finally, she asked with a stern voice, an almost angry voice, “Who's the daddy?”

“Michael,” Sandra whispered.

“Michael Pope?”

“Yea, Mama,” Sandra answered, “Michael Pope.”

“You sure know how to pick `em. That boy couldn't recognize thunder once, given three tries and a ton of clues.”

“He ain't stupid, Mama,” Sandra spoke up, defensively.

“He can't read,” her mother began. “He can't write. He ain't mechanically inclined. What do you call a man like that? He ain't nothing *but* dumb, dumber than a sack of rocks.”

Sandra crossed her legs, crossed her arms, and stared away from her mother. Her mother knew that Michael wasn't the issue. The issue was Sandra having a baby. The issue was caring for a baby. The issue was having people think she was somehow less than a lady because she had had a baby out of wedlock, as though having a husband could somehow make the baby more holy or make her more holy.

“We'll talk about this later,” her mother announced. “Phil's home.”

Phil was Sandra's father and a general laborer at the Sconyer's Mill. If trash needed to be hauled, Phil hauled trash. If there was a need for housekeeping, Phil became the company's janitor. If a truck needed to be loaded, Phil loaded trucks. As long as he kept busy, he had a job.

He was not very much liked. No one admired him. He was a braggart. He had nothing, but he could always tell you about someone who had more than the person he was speaking to.

To make matters worse, he was loud, because he thought that a man *had* to be loud to be “manly”. He believed that a man who wasn't loud had to be either funny or rich. They were the only kinds of men that didn't holler. His loudness assured him of his masculinity.

“Hi, Papa,” Sandra said, greeting him as he walked through the door into the kitchen.

“Hey, baby,” her mother said. “How'd things go today?”

“I tell you,” he shouted as though they were both 50 yards away, “that mill wouldn't *be* a mill, if it weren't for me. I do just about everything there that needs doing.”

“They should pay you more than they're paying you,” Esther replied.

“Now, Esther, you know as well as I do that they're only gonna pay a black man so much in this town,” he said. “I'm lucky to even have a job at the mill.”

“What's so great about the mill, Papa?” Sandra asked. “It's dirty. It smells funny and they work the people like they's slaves.”

“What's good about it is it pays folk like us better than the kind of money we'd make doing anything else,” Phil replied. “They got girls down there your age, even younger. You oughta be thinking ‘bout getting a job there. You'd make more than you make cleaning houses.”

“Set the table, Sandra,” Esther ordered. “We're fixin' to eat supper.”

Sandra was ending her first trimester. Esther knocked on Sandra's bedroom door. Sandra acknowledged her knock and Esther entered the room solemnly. Then, she sat on the edge of the bed.

Sandra, nervously, sat up. They looked at each other the way that women look at each when something unspoken too long needs to be said.

“Girl, we need to talk,” Esther began, “‘bout what you gonna do ‘bout this baby. It's been three months.”

“I know that, Mama,” Sandra answered with a tone of desperation in her tiny voice. “But what *can* I do?”

“Well, have you thought about getting rid of it?” Esther asked. She struggled with her emotions and tried to distance herself from everything she felt inside. She did, after all, understand the joy of being pregnant. She wasn't heartless.

“Get rid of it?” Sandra asked, as though she needed some clarification. “I can't do *that*, Mama. I could never kill my baby. It's a part of me. It's not like it's some animal. It's *me*, Mama. It's human.”

"I know it's human, baby," Esther answered. "I know it ain't no animal. But why is it so important for you to have this baby? How you gonna take care of it? You ain't even got a real job yet."

"I don't know yet," Sandra answered. "But I know I'll do *something*. I don't have the money to get rid of it. And I wouldn't even know where to go if I did."

"Then, maybe you oughta think about getting rid of it some other way," her mother suggested, still trying to distance herself from what she was really feeling inside. "Maybe you oughta stop being so frickin' selfish, and think about the baby and the kind of future the baby can have, instead of just thinking about yourself."

Esther's accusations might not have been fair, but they forced Sandra to think about how much more complex her life would be with a baby. She wondered how she'd finish the school year. The principal would never allow her to attend classes as an unmarried pregnant woman. Then, there was the question of supporting the child, and paying for visits to the clinic, not just for herself but for the baby as well.

How would she answer the inevitable questions to follow: Who's the father and what is he doing to help? Will the two of you be getting married soon? Where are you staying?

There were a few minutes of silence while these and several other questions raced through the young woman's mind. It had finally dawned on her that being a woman meant a lot more than looking pretty, giggling, and thinking of a handsome young man, a knight in shiny armor who would sweep her off her feet and escort her to a magical kingdom where servants would attend to her every need. There were no magical kingdoms in Mississippi, and Michael Pope was clearly *not* a knight in shining armor.

Esther repeated her question, a bit more harshly, "Why is it so damn important that you have this baby anyway?"

"I just want somebody I can love, Mama," Sandra answered desperately, as though she was pleading for her own life as well. "I just want somebody I can love, and somebody who will love me."

Her words reached deep into Esther and grasped her heart with a hold that squeezed out memories she wished she had forgotten. She resisted, but almost immediately embraced her daughter. Both cried now. The two women shared the same fears.

Finally, while still sobbing, Esther pleaded with her. "Pray on this, child. Ask the Lord for direction and for forgiveness. I'll have to tell your Daddy soon enough. And I don't know how he'll react. It's in God's hands now. I've said all I can say, and I've done all I can do."

"We're Catholics, Mama," Sandra blurted out, attempting to defend her position. "Catholics don't kill babies. It ain't right, Mama. It ain't right to end a life that God's already started."

"Well, that's a fine idea for the Pope," her mother answered. "The Pope ain't having no baby no time soon. And the Pope don't have no idea what it's like for a black

woman in Mississippi to be an unwed mother with no job, and no place to stay. If he did, he might think different'.

CHAPTER TWO *This is My Body, This is My Blood*

Sandra was entering her fourth month of pregnancy. The baby was about 6 inches long, and weighed nearly half a pound. She could feel it move inside her body. A doctor could hear its heart. Eyebrows and lashes had already formed, and its skin was covered with fine hair. Her nausea and drowsiness had subsided. In fact, she was feeling better than she had felt for a long time.

It was no longer safe for her to have an abortion. Even if she had the money or could find someone to perform the illegal procedure, it wasn't safe.

The family attended mass at Holy Trinity, during her sixth week. She watched attentively as the priest raised the Eucharist and recited the words, "... this is my body." An altar boy rang a bell to alert the faithful so they could mentally prepare to receive the body of Christ. Then, the priest recited the words, "...this is my blood." Again, an altar boy rang a bell to alert the faithful so they could mentally prepare to receive the blood of Christ.

Sandra received communion along with most of the other parishioners. Receiving the Eucharist gave her a sense of well-being; it gave her the sense that somehow God, along with her baby, was within her. She was all too conscious, however, of the many obstacles that lay ahead.

Esther waited until the end of Sandra's fifth month to tell Phil of her pregnancy. Sandra was showing, even though she had concealed it well. In another month, however, it would not be so easy. Even Phil might notice.

She told him at dinner one evening. Phil said nothing. He paused for a while, then continued eating his supper as though not a word had been spoken. After dinner, he retired to his favorite chair in the living room.

Sandra approached him, quietly.

"Why ain't you said nothing, Daddy?" she asked. "Don't you even want to know whose baby it is?"

"It's *your* baby," he answered coldly. "Don't need to know no more than that. It's *your* baby."

Phil voice was deep. It had moved to a lower register. It was now half voice and half thunder.

Esther looked on from the entrance that connected the living room with the kitchen. Her arms were folded. Her eyes fixed on the man.

"It's mine and it's Michael's," she said as though it might make a difference.

"You think Michael can support you and a baby?" he asked. "Michael can't even support his damn self. Michael's an idiot and you're only half as bright for having his baby."

"I could help with the money," she replied.

"You and Michael together could barely support one child," he snapped, "much less two grown people and a baby."

“We could stay here,” she began, “until...”

“Until nothing,” he interrupted. “We're stretched to the limit as it is. This is *my* house and when I come here after working all day, I don't need nobody else's baby keeping me up half the night.”

“It would be your grandchild,” Esther interjected.

“Grandchild!” he shouted. “It ain't nobody's grandchild. It's just a child with no daddy and a mother who can't support it. That's no grandchild.” Then, angrily, he added, “I don't even want to say what it is.”

Sandra burst into tears, and shouted, “You don't have to say what it is, Papa. I know what you're thinking, but it's just a baby. You can't put a label on it just 'cause people think things have to be done a certain way.”

“That ‘certain way’ is how your mother and I done it, and it's the way *you* oughta done it. It's hard enough with you here. But if you have that baby, you'll have to go.”

Sandra turned away and raced towards her bedroom.

Esther waited for Phil to look at her. He wouldn't. She knew it meant he was fixed in his position.

“I could get a job, you know,” she began. “Something, just part time or so. Just enough to help out with the baby.”

“I don't want you to work, and you shouldn't *need* to work,” he answered coldly. “I've been takin' care of things here like the man should. Ain't no reason why my wife's got to work.”

“Not even long enough for her to get on her feet?” she asked gently.

“Not even *that* long,” he replied.

“That girl loves her Daddy,” she commented. “It's a shame her own Daddy's got to be the first one to break her heart.”

Esther walked into the living room, then sat on the sofa opposite Phil. Phil remained quiet a while longer, then said, “She's broken my heart too. This ain't what I wanted for my little girl. It ain't what I wanted for this family.”

Then in what seemed like pure frustration, he added, “Why it got to be *my* girl? I done nothing but tried to raise her decent. And now I'm disgraced.”

“Is *that* what you're worried about?” Esther asked, a bit angered. “Is that what you're worried about — what folks'll think? Ain't nobody's business what they think. All that matter's is your daughter and her child, flesh and blood. Flesh and blood matters a whole lot more than people's ideas.”

“As far as I'm concerned, the child's *got* no blood. Not mine anyways,” he answered, almost as if he was ashamed to make the comment. “Mike's the father. Not me. I had nothing to do with it. And I ain't gonna *have* nothing to do with it.”

“But Sandra's blood. Ain't she?” Esther asked. “You ain't gonna have nothing to do with her, neither?”

“Not when she has that baby,” he replied, “and not so long as she keeps it. She can stay until she has the baby. Not a day longer.”

Esther knew there was no sense in talking any more. His mind was set. Right or wrong, his mind was set.

It was the one thing she disliked about Phil, and the thing she hated most about people like Phil. Once their minds were set, nothing could change their opinion. All the logic in the world wouldn't budge them.

Phil based his thinking on fleeting principles set in place by men who had no idea of the consequences those principles would have on the lives of people. And too often, the people most adversely affected by those principles were women.

The remaining months were quiet. Phil barely spoke to Sandra, and Sandra barely spoke to Phil. The bond between father and daughter had been severed. Esther did all she could to keep some warmth in the house. She made things for the baby, invited some ladies over for a baby shower, and baked their favorite meals.

There were a few smiles every now and then, but nothing that lasted, nothing that would take root and grow. Sometimes she even blamed the baby, but she couldn't, not for very long. The baby had nothing to do with it. It was Phil who was to blame. Phil and his unshakable belief that everything had to be a certain way and that any variation was somehow inherently wrong or evil. Nothing else could exist in Phil's tiny little world. Everything was black or white, male or female, high or low. Nothing existed in the middle.

Mother and daughter, however, grew closer. Esther, perhaps because she felt helpless to change the situation, wanted to somehow show her support. And Sandra *needed* the support from her mother that never emerged from the baby's father. Together, they could remain strong enough to make each day work a day at a time. Apart, they were once again little more than frail creatures in a world ruled by men and the rules of men.

Sandra was in her ninth month. The baby was due any day now. More than ever, Sandra worried if the baby would be born healthy.

Esther was helping Sandra clean her room. Sandra, fatigued, sat on the bed and asked, “Why is Papa doing this to me? Why is he putting me in this situation? He's breaking my heart, Mama. He's breaking my heart.”

Esther sat next to her. She needed all her feminine and spiritual strength to explain it to Sandra. After taking a deep breath, she said, “He feels like you're breaking his heart, too, Sweetie. You got to understand that you've always been his little girl. In his mind, you're *still* his little girl. And the idea that his little girl done had sex with a man he don't like nor respect—well, that's breaking *his* heart.”

“But it's not like we planned it to happen this way, Mama,” Sandra tried to explain.

“I know, Sweetie,” Sandra answered. “Men folk sees things differently than we women do. Men look for things to fit into places where they just don't fit. They think they can force things into place. They think with their muscles, not with their hearts as we do.”