

h e a v e n



BY THREE-TIME CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD WINNER

ANGELA
JOHNSON

heaven

In Heaven there are 1,637 steps from my house to the Western Union. You have to walk by a playground and four stores—two clothing, one food, and one hardware coffee shop. After you pass those stores, you cross one street and hop over a deadly looking grate. (I once heard about a man who got struck by lightning while standing on one.) Ten steps past the grate is Ma's Superette.

(If you can't find it at Ma's . . . she even sells live bait on the side.)

Ma's Superette is open 23 1/2 hours a day. Ma closes it from 4:10 A.M. to 4:40 A.M. every morning. She uses the half hour to pray. At least that's what she says she uses it for. When I said differently one day Pops said I was skeptical and not spiritual at all.

That made me mad 'cause hadn't I put all my allowance in the Salvation Army kettle last winter? Sometimes Pops just doesn't get it. He even said a while ago that because I was just fourteen I didn't understand about life, but I wasn't about to

heaven

hear that. Sometimes he gets so mad at me, he just shakes his head and mumbles that I'm just like Uncle Jack. Then he tosses the thought away I guess and smiles at me, every time.

Anyway, Ma's was the place you could get nachos and nail polish, Levi's when you needed them, and flip-flops for the summer. I'd already gone through two pair and it's only the middle of June.

Heaven might sound pretty boring to most people, but before I really understood about all my years at the Western Union, it was fine for a girl like me.

I don't get sent to Ma's for bread and milk like most kids, but to wire money. I've been doing it ever since I've been allowed to leave the yard by myself. It's something I thought most kids did. It's something I found out a little further down the road that made me different from every other kid in Heaven.

postcards from uncle

We live in Heaven 'cause about twelve years ago Momma found a postcard on a park bench post-marked HEAVEN, OH. On the front of the postcard were clouds and a group of people floating around and waving. It said, HI FROM HEAVEN.

Momma said she'd been looking for Heaven her whole life—so we moved: Momma, Pops, Butchy, and me.

Pops was looking for another job, too. He said it was getting pretty dry out west. Too many people had decided California was the place they had to be. So it was time to go.

But this is how Momma tells it.

“Wasn't much to it. Small town, lots of trees and kids running everywhere. There was the cutest little school sitting over by the river—and when the Impala died right in front of this little house with a picket fence and Marley started screaming to go to the bathroom, we were in Heaven to stay.”

Pops says, “What? I don't know. That was ten

MARLEY HAS LIVED IN HEAVEN SINCE SHE was two years old, when her mother found a postcard postmarked HEAVEN, OH, on a park bench and decided that was where she wanted to raise her family.

And for twelve years, Marley's hometown has lived up to its name. She lives in a house by the river, has loving parents, a funny younger brother, good friends, and receives frequent letters from her mysterious uncle, Jack. Then one day a letter arrives from Alabama, and Marley's life is turned upside down. Marley doesn't even know who she is anymore—but where can she go for answers, when she's been deceived by the very people she should be able to trust the most?

A CORETTA SCOTT KING AWARD WINNER


◆“Johnson uses the present tense to give her ruminative, sparsely told story a sense of immediacy.”

—*Kirkus*, pointered review



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