

THE ROAD TO ASBURY

The Story of Sister Isis

Part I

Rosalee McNair was born in Warbaso, Florida on January 2, 1943, the youngest of four children (two older sisters and a brother). Her mother died during childbirth when she was two years old. Rosalee sat by her mother's rocking chair for days crying inconsolably, until one day, the rocking chair began to rock by itself, and she stopped crying. Rosalee now feels that she must have sensed her mother's spirit at that moment. She remembers her early years being filled with many unexplained premonitions, dreams, and images, which became a normal part of her everyday life.

She and her siblings eventually moved into the care of their grandparents, Rosalee and Clinton Harris, in Jacksonville, Florida. Her grandmother had sixteen children. One strong memory Isis keeps was the story that was told about her Uncle, Doc Harris, whenever the family got together. Doc and his wife, who were living with her grandmother, were walking home with their groceries. Something fell out of a bag and rolled over and hit a white man's foot. When Doc's wife went to pick it up, the white man slapped her, and Doc slapped him back. Doc and his wife then ran off and later that night a group of men came to the house and made threats until they got Doc to come out and then they hung him.

Her grandparents had a large piece of land and a vast garden with everything in it. She was really raised up on a farm in the city. They had chickens, cane, cabbage, sweet potatoes - you name it. She did not know what going to a store was all about, until her grandmother died. The only items they got from a store were a bag of flour and a bag of meal. Rosalee was to learn cooking from her grandmother and farming from her grandfather.

Her sister's husband had a job building and repairing railroads in Ft. Pierce, Fl. Isis lived with them and went to school there. Rosalee had her first child at the age of sixteen. And when her boyfriend's mother found out she was pregnant, she forbid him to see her again. When

Rosalee was just beginning to show, she met a man who sweet-talked her into how he would take care of her and her child. She married him out of fear she would lose her baby to adoption. His name was John Wesley White, and she had four children with him. Her husband was called "Mr. White" because he worked for Backus Boat Company, one of the biggest boat companies there. Many times Rosalee helped him clean the boats and other times found jobs scrubbing floors on her knees. She was a nobody. He would beat her often, and since he was friends with all the police, her complaints were in vain. Every year they had a baby, but her husband would not sign for birth control pills. People were marching in Orlando protesting this archaic law, which Rosalee participated in without the knowledge of her husband. When her husband caught wind of it, that was when the fights began. Ultimately, they were successful in overturning that law.

Rosalee had a house, a car, furniture, but no love. Rosalee thought she loved him, but he made her hate him. He would lie, mess up, and come home and beat her. He had the bad habit of calling her and saying "I am going to beat your ass." So one day when he did that Rosalee bought a gun, she was going to kill him. Hartance pleaded for his life. She was just a little girl. She said mommy if you kill him you are going to jail and I won't see you no more. She followed her baby's wisdom and made up her mind to leave him. And one day she did just that. And that was where the journey started. That was the beginning of the road to Asbury. She left with four children, twenty-five dollars, and no idea where she was going. She went to the bus stop and got on the bus with her four kids [Hartance, Joanne, John, and Daniel]

One thing Rosalee had learned from a passing friend of hers was how to dance with fire. When she first started to dance with fire, no one had ever seen such a dance before. The girl who taught her was coming through Fort Pierce for one night only. She was with a band and a group of people who were doing different performances. So when she taught Rosalee how to do it, that was going to be her ticket out of town. Rosalee got herself a two-piece swimsuit and practiced her new skill.

So when the bus driver asked Rosalee where she was going with her four kids, she said I don't know, but if I get off the bus, I am going to die. She asked him to take them as far as he could with the twenty-five dollars. She was crying, was scared, and was mad.

Rosalee got off the bus, when it stopped, with not one red penny on her. She sat at the bus stop crying. A cab driver came up to her and asked, "Where are you going?" and Rosalee responded, "Nowhere." The third time he came over to ask her, it finally dawned on him that she did not have a place to go with her four kids. He offered to take her to a hotel where his girlfriend worked, and she would get a room for them there. He pushed her to discover what she did to support herself, and Rosalee told him she dances with fire. Although he didn't know what that might look like, he offered to bring her to a Club who would allow her to dance for the night for tips, rather than hiring her.

They went to the hotel and asked his girlfriend to watch the kids. He took Rosalee to the club, and she went in and got dressed with as little on as possible and wrapped a shawl around her and demonstrated her performance. They needed a replacement for one of the shows. The Club owner said I cannot pay you, but you can have the tips. When the show went on, the crowd roared - they were stomping and screaming. They had never seen anything like it. They began throwing money, and by the end of the performance, she had over \$500 in tips.

Club owners were in competition to have Rosalee perform the dance of fire. She was doing early and late shows to accommodate everyone. People were coming to performances at both clubs. She was the hit of Orlando.

During their first week there, Rosalee went to the Laundromat a couple of blocks from the hotel and had a serendipitous meeting with Myrtle Lee Boney. Myrtle remembered her from the time they were together as kids in Endero, outside of Ft. Pierce, many years previously. Upon hearing her story and where they were staying, she insisted

that they come to stay with her at her home. Myrtle lived there with her grandson, Booker T, who was a young gay man very much tied into the clubs in Orlando as a performer. He went out of his way to introduce Rosalee to the different clubs. "Hey, child, you are going to be "Miss Thing" come out and do your fire dance with me." "This is my sister, she is the best, and she needs a job."

After a couple of years, Myrtle let her know that she could not stay in her home forever and that she needed to find her own place. Rosalee at this point had steady work at the clubs and was able to do this. Soon after she met Willie Richardson and had a son with him.

Submitted by Bill Stevens