

SWEET, SWEET MEMORY

Jacqueline Woodson

Illustrations by
Floyd Cooper

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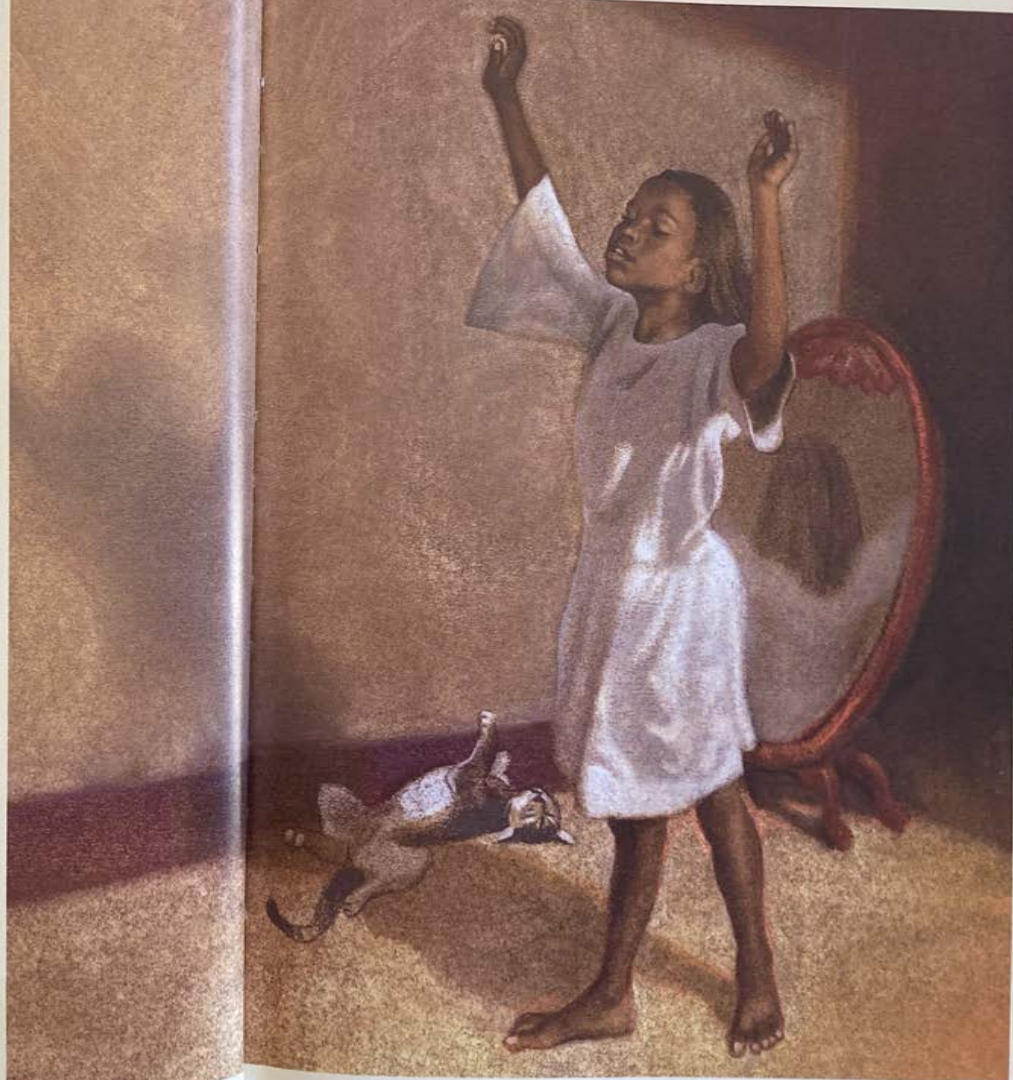
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JUMP AT THE SUN
HYPERION BOOKS FOR CHILDREN
NEW YORK

Grandma has made me
a white dress with angel sleeves.
I pull it over my head,
button the back,
and lift my arms.

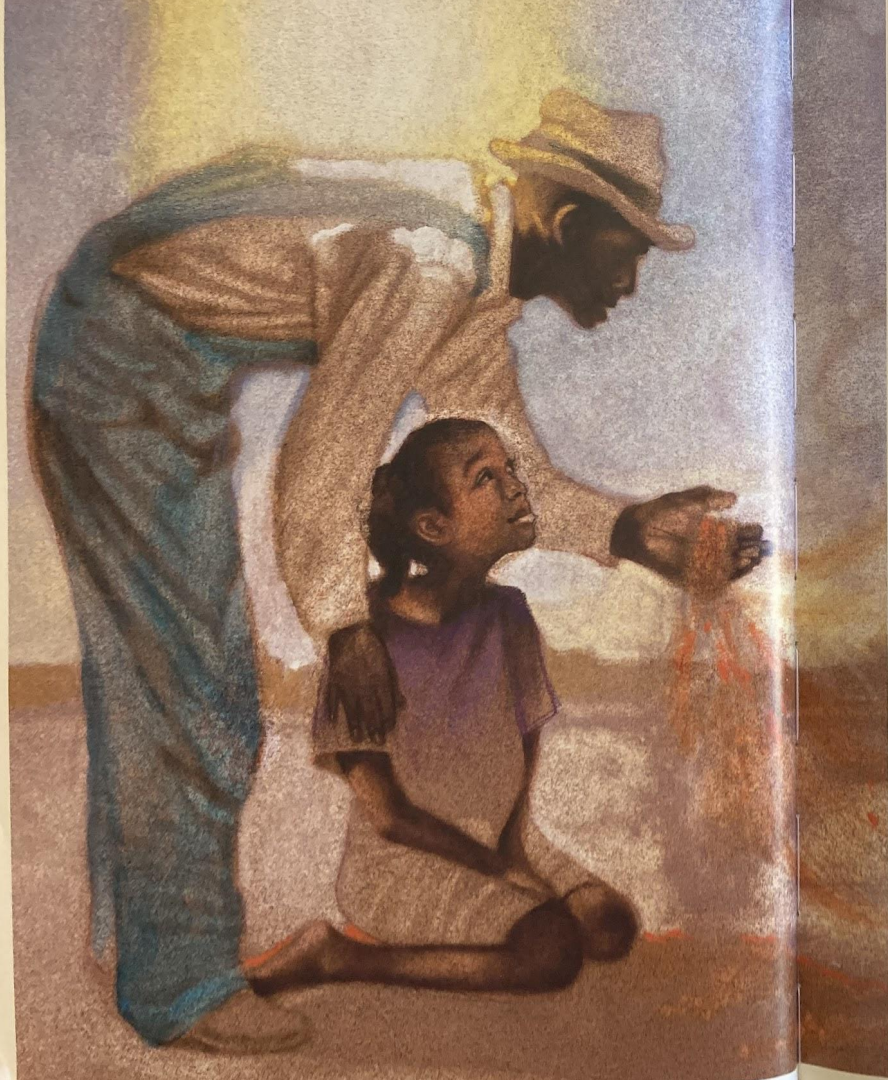




Out on the porch,
I comb my own hair
for the first time because
Grandma is busy and Grandpa is gone.

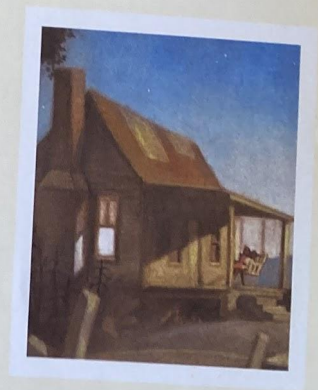
The lettuce is thin and fine.
The stalks of corn are taller
than I am now.

Soon there will be collards,
tomatoes, cabbage, and squash.



*The earth changes, Grandpa said,
as he planted this garden.
Like us it lives, it grows.*

*Like us, Grandpa said,
holding the rich brown earth in his hand,
a part of it never dies.
Everything and everyone goes on and on.*



The house is
hushed and golden.
Soon there will be people here.
And heads bowed in prayer,
and arms around me,
silent and sad. Soft warm hands
against my forehead.
More tears to brush away.

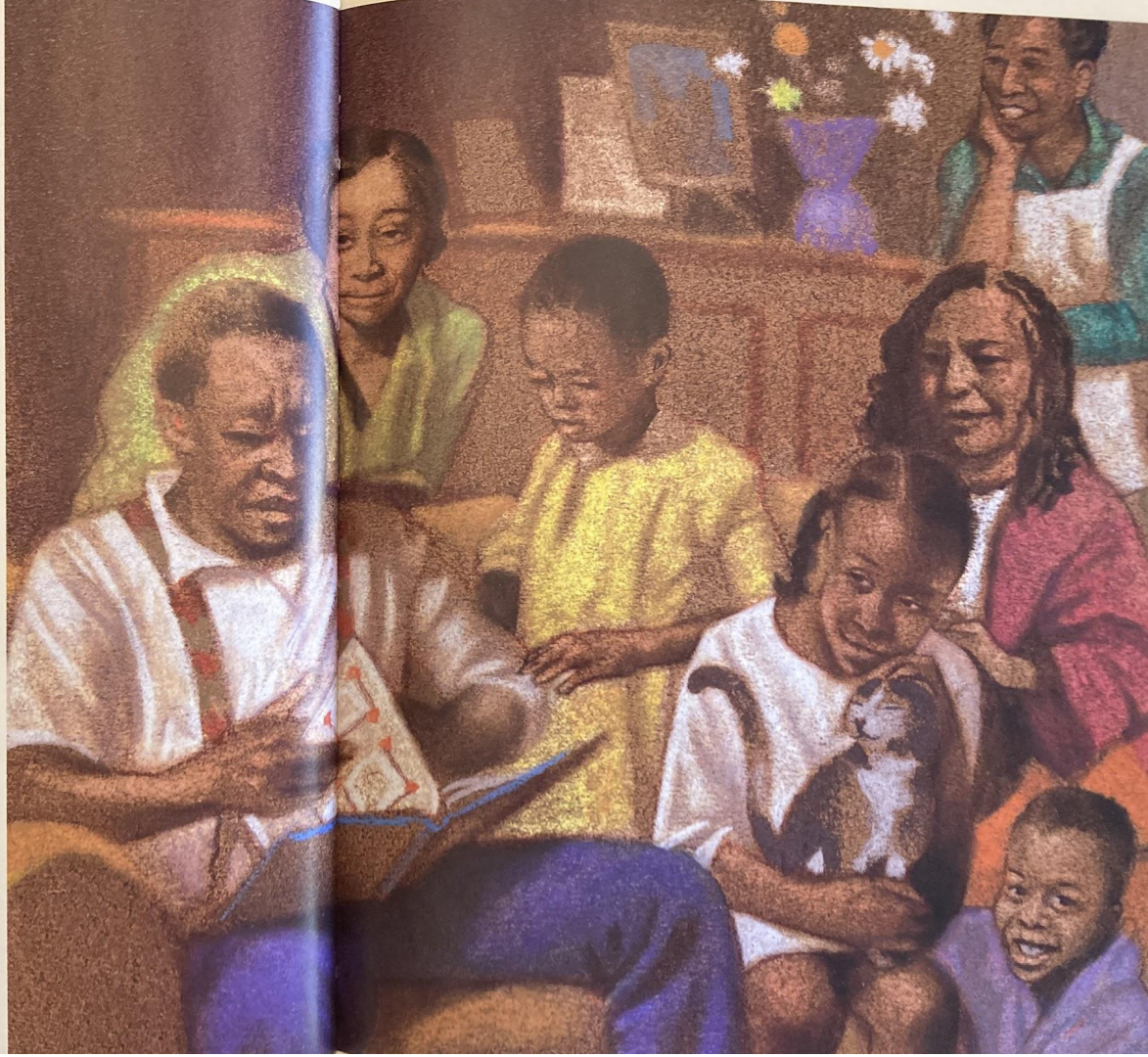




Relatives come
from everywhere,
bringing food and hugs
and memories of Grandpa.

Gray brushes soft
against my leg, like always.
I pick her up and rub her
until she purrs.
Her purring goes on and on.

My family
has a hundred stories
to tell about Grandpa.
The long-ago stories
from before I was born.
The last-month stories.
The last-week stories.
But I don't tell my story.
The one that is stuck there
in the back of my throat.





“Say something about your grandpa, Sarah,” Grandma says. But I shake my head, lean into her, and cry, not caring that everyone is watching me—cousins and uncles and aunts.

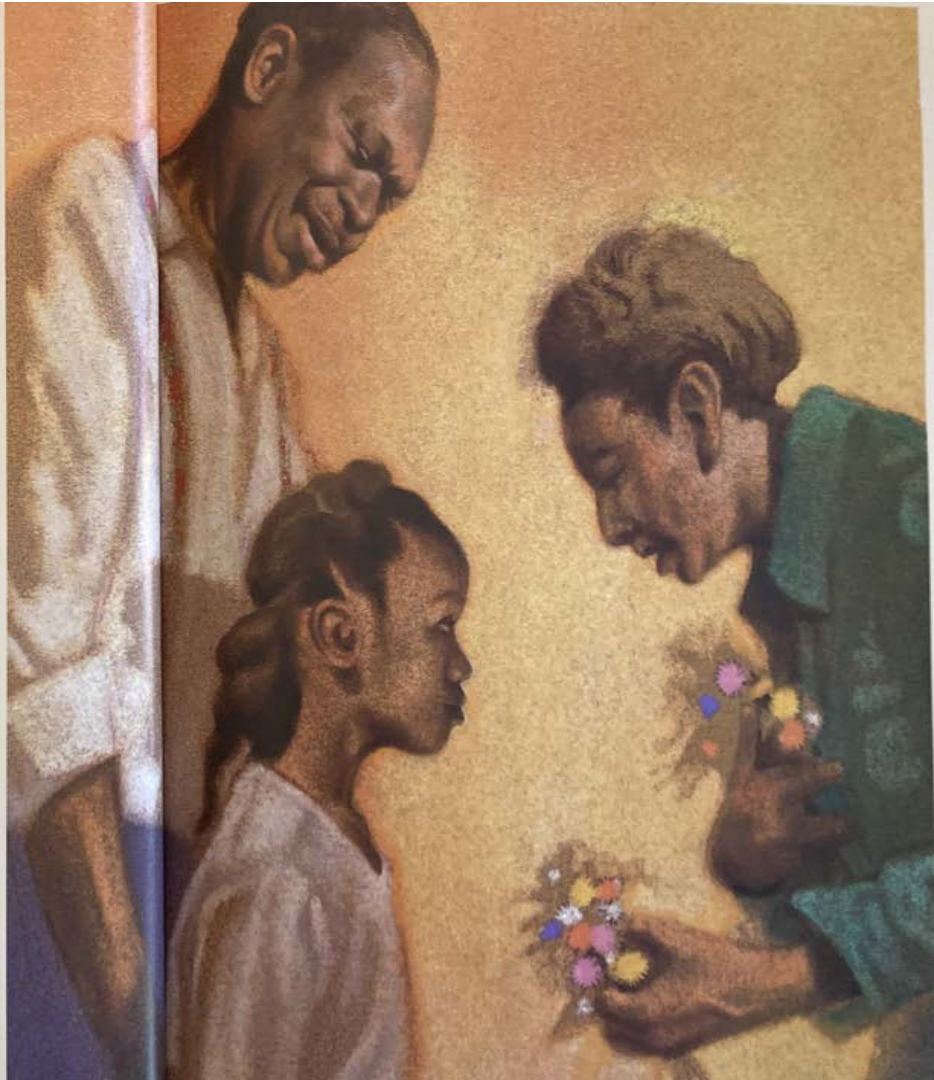
“It’ll pass,” Uncle Mitchell says, hunkering down beside me. “A little bit at a time. Everything and everyone goes on and on.” “That’s my story,” I whisper.

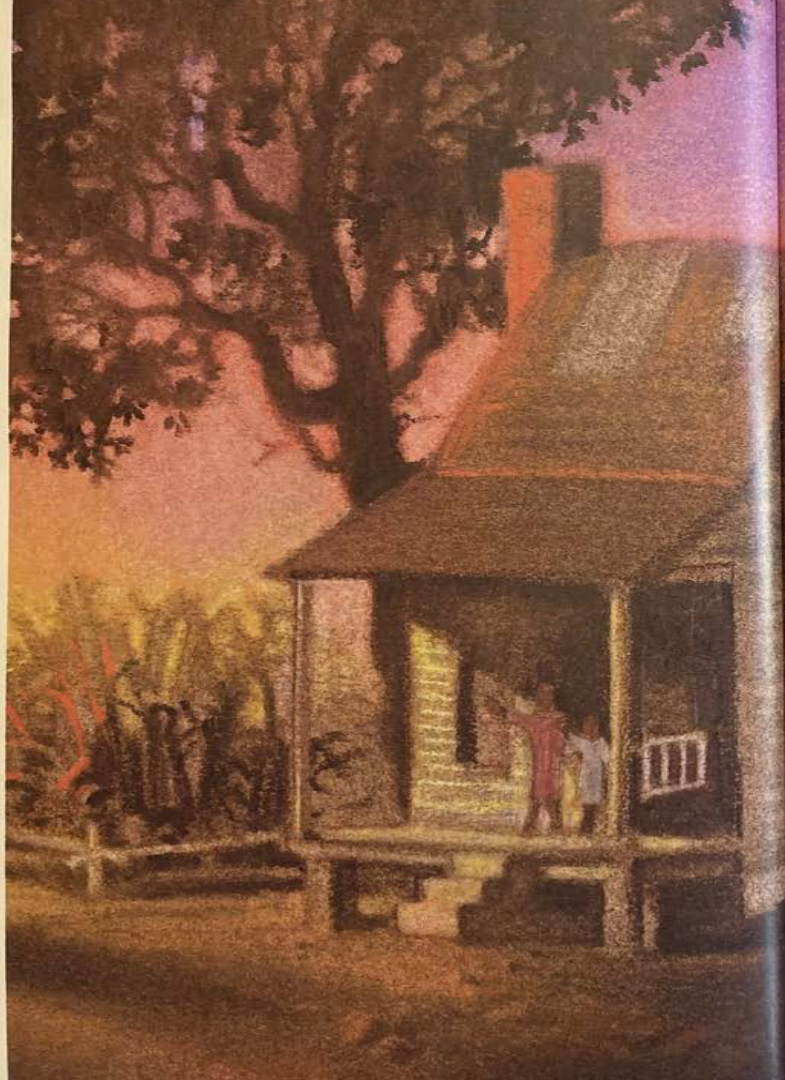
And Uncle Mitchell smiles and says,
“I know. He said it to me, too,
when I was a little boy.”

“And me, too,” Aunt Delilah says,
handing me some flowers.
“When I was no whit bigger than you.”

“And me, too,” my cousin Randy says,
“last summer—out there in his garden.”

“And me, too,” I say,
feeling a smile coming on.
“All the time.”





Outside, the sun fades
and the crickets' song grows loud.
The day is ending. Like always.
Everything and everyone going on and on.

Late in the evening, more
hugs and kisses, then the
cars start pulling slowly
away from our house.
Grandma starts humming.
A song she always hums at the end of the day.



And we wave good-bye until
we can't see a single car light.



Then we wave a little while longer,
turn the porch light off, and sit on
the porch swing in the darkness.

Like always.

"Soon the sweet corn will be ready
for picking," Grandma says.

"He loved to plant, your grandpa did.
Soon I'll make us a nice meal
with all the vegetables from his garden."
Grandma smiles. "We'll eat sweet corn
and have a sweet, sweet memory.

"What will you remember, Sarah?"
Grandma wants to know.



I smile, leaning against her shoulder.
In the garden there are crickets and
katydids singing.

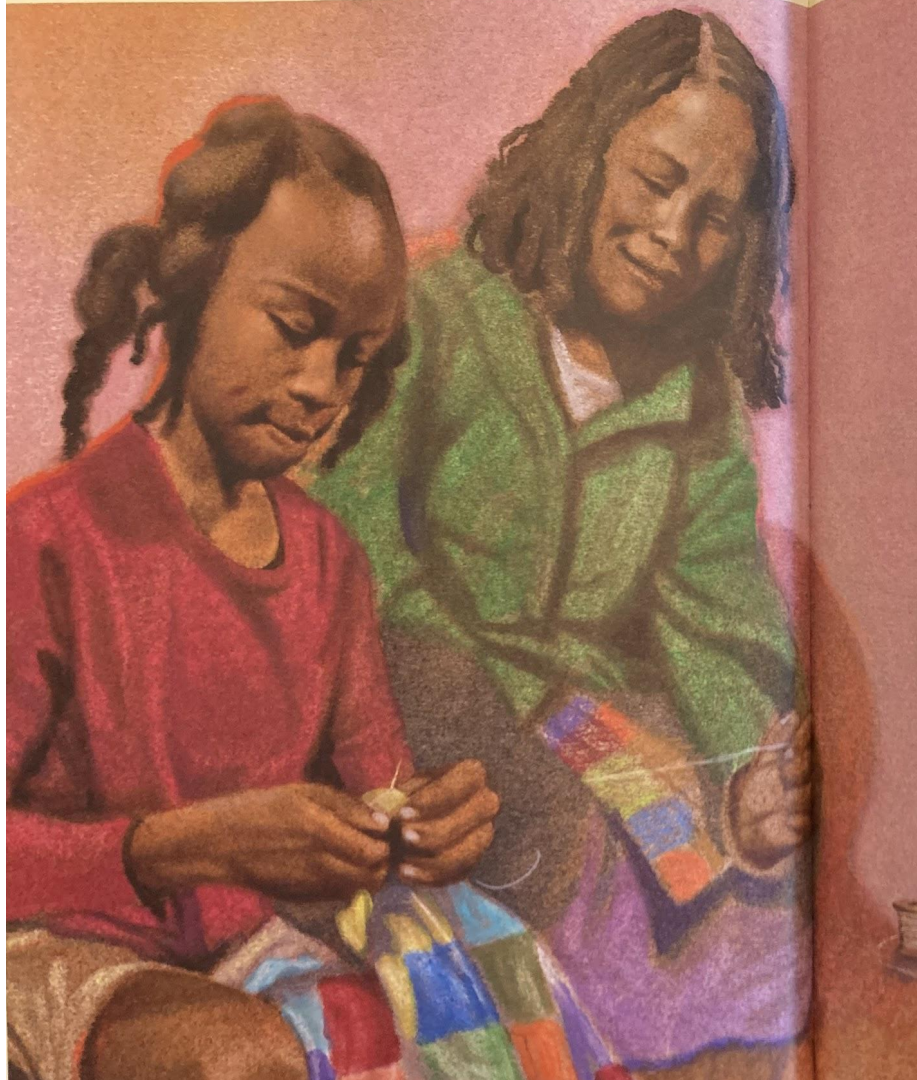
“Grandpa said to listen to things,” I say.
“Listen to the way life goes on and on.”

Somewhere an owl
is hoo-hooing soft and low.
Under the porch there are field
mice moving around.
Maybe a frog or two.

“**A**nd he used to talk about being a boy,” I whisper. “He would smile when he talked about the picnics they would have in the summer. And he’d say, ‘Oh, if you could have been there, Sarah! My memory sure is sweet.’”

Me and Grandma laugh and remember long into the night.





But for a time, there is sadness before sleep.

Watch the world, Grandpa said, digging
in his garden. *Watch the way it grows*.

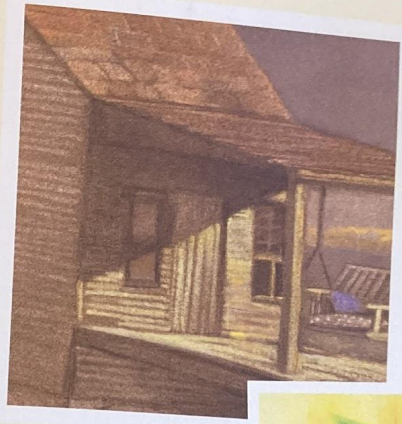
So I watch it, as summer fades to fall.

Watch it, as me and Grandma begin
to pack away our summer clothes and
take down our sweaters.

And start a doll-bed quilt.
And finish it.

I watch the world
as the days grow shorter.

Watch it as harvest comes,
bringing with it Grandpa's collards and
cabbage, tomatoes, squash, and sweet potatoes.



And supper on the porch
with the sun going down.



Sweet, sweet
memory,
and everything
and everyone . . .



going on and on.