

Why Are You Crying, Mama?

by

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A Historical Romance Novel

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*Dedicated to my Parents, Brother, Sisters,
my wife and our daughters*

CHAPTER 1

(7th May 1934 – Monday – 8 p.m.)

The place was Florenville, Belgium.

“Why are you crying, Mama?”

The small girl’s faint voice was filled with sorrow. She meekly stood at the door of a living room, quite spacious, luxuriously decorated, and dimly lit. The woman quickly dried the tears on her cheeks and turned toward the little girl.

“Oh, my dear, I didn’t know you were there. Come hug me.”

The girl was about six years old and biracial, African-Caucasian; she seemed to have slightly more prominent African features than Caucasian. She went to her mother, who was sitting on a large sofa. Her mother, who held a book in her hand, put it on a nearby table, stretched out her arms, and took the child tenderly to her side. Outside it was not yet fully dark. The clock on the wall read nine o’clock.

The woman was in her mid-twenties and Caucasian. In a soft voice, she asked her child, “How often do you see me crying, darling?”

“Quite often. Whenever I see you crying, I am so sad, Mama.”

“My child, I’ll have to repeat what I’ve often told you whenever you asked me this question: Women are very odd beings. Women are very odd beings. They cry for many reasons. They cry when they are happy; they cry when they are sad; they cry when they reminisce about old memories, good or bad; they cry when they see beautiful things; sometimes, they cry without even knowing why.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you will know when you grow up and become a woman.”

“But why are you crying right now, Mama?”

“I’m crying right now because I’m so happy to have a lovely and intelligent daughter like you.”

“I don’t believe I’m intelligent and lovely. All the boys and girls I meet on the streets call out, ‘Hey, you ugly, stupid nigger.’”

“Don’t take them seriously. They’re just children like you.”

“Even many adults call me the same thing.”

“Oh really? I’m so sad to hear that. But try to be strong, okay?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for years. I have secretly cried alone many times because I don’t want to make you sad with my own sorrow.”

Upon hearing these words, the woman could barely contain her emotions. With a trembling voice, she said, “I’ve always thought so, my child, but I never dared to ask you.”

Both of them sobbed for some minutes. Then, the child spoke with a broken voice. “Mama, you said you were crying out of happiness because you’ve got a lovely and intelligent daughter like me. Would you still cry with happiness if I were an ugly, stupid child?”

The woman was quite surprised and saddened by the child's unexpected question. She answered with an effort, “Even then, I’d still cry out of happiness, my child.”

The woman was interrupted by her daughter. “I don’t believe that. You just said you’re crying out of happiness because I’m a lovely and intelligent child, but that means you’d not cry out of happiness if I were ugly and stupid.”

Tears were streaming down the woman's face.

“Even then, I’d still love you because you’re mine. Beauty and ugliness are superficial things. For example, when you see a stranger, you might think they are beautiful or handsome at first glance. But if they said or did something awful to you, you wouldn’t find them beautiful or handsome anymore. In the same way, you might find a stranger ugly at first glance, but if he is kind to you and does nice things for you, you’d find him ugly no more, and you’d like and love him. To you, he could become the most handsome guy. The most handsome or beautiful guy in the world is the one who likes you, who loves you, who cares for you and who helps you when you’re in need.”

“Do you really mean it, Mama?”

“Yes, I really mean it. But you’ll find out that it’s true when you grow up and have more experience in the world. Sadly, countless people leave the world without ever having learned this priceless lesson. Just one example: If I saw your papa on the street somewhere, I wouldn’t find him handsome or attractive, although he’s not ugly. He

was not the type I'd fall in love with quickly. If he had not saved my life, I'd have been hit by a car and most likely killed on the spot, or I could have been handicapped my whole life. He not only saved my life, but he's so kind and warm that he became one of the most handsome guys in the world to me. And I wonder if my love for him is also partly the result of my feelings of pity for his hard life. Some people say that if you love someone out of sympathy, it's much stronger than a love that results from physical beauty or attraction."

The child was attentively listening to what her mother was telling her.

"Mama, is there anything about him that you don't like – at least sometimes?"

"Before I met your papa, I always dreamed of having someone humorous and exciting as my husband. Sometimes, I find him a little bit boring because he rarely says 'No' to whatever I do or say. But then I've slowly become used to his behavior. His whole life, he has had to fight all kinds of hardship, like racial discrimination and poverty, so he always says he needs peace as much as possible. And he feels very insecure."

"Mama, what does that mean – to feel insecure?"

"He's not sure whether I truly love him deep in my heart. He sometimes thinks I pretend to love him simply out of gratitude for saving my life. And he's worried about whether our marriage will last, and so on. But over time, he's become more convinced that my love for him is real."

"Mama, you and Papa used to tell me some years ago how he saved your life, but you said you'd tell me about it more in detail when I was a little bit older. Would you tell me about it now?"

"Yes, we did promise you that every time you asked us. I think we can tell you about it soon. In the past, we've hidden many secrets from you because we didn't want to burden you with problems that we were – and still are – confronted with."

"Mama, when is Papa coming back from Paris?"

"Tomorrow evening, around six o'clock. We'll pick him up at the station. Now, it's getting late. Let's go to bed, okay?"

"Mama, I'm happy you're going to tell me about you and Papa."

“We won’t exactly *tell* you about it, but I’ve written our life story up to now as a novel, and I’m going to keep on writing it as we go on living. So far, I’ve written seven chapters. It’s something like an autobiographical novel. I’ll read these chapters aloud to you, okay? But let’s go to bed now. Good night, my dear.”

“Good night, Mama. I’m already very excited about it.”

The next evening, Jane, the mother, and Jennifer, the young girl, went to pick John, the father, up at the train station. After dinner, Jane, Jennifer, and John were comfortably sitting together on two sofas around a table in the same spacious living room where Jane and Jennifer had sat the previous night. John was a stoutly built, medium-sized man, about 170 centimeters, just a few centimeters taller than Jane, in his late twenties. Jennifer was the right height for her age. The clock on the wall read eight o’clock sharp.

“Mama, yesterday evening, you promised to read me the seven chapters of the novel that you’ve started writing about your meeting Papa and how you got married. I’ve been thinking about it the whole day, and I’m very excited to hear it. If possible, could you please read it now?”

“Yes, I promised I would do that . . .”

Jennifer was curious. “Mama, what will you call it?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m thinking about three titles. Maybe I’ll call it *Why Are You Crying, Mama?* Because it’s the question that you ask me most. Or simply *Jane* – my first name. Or perhaps another thing you often say to me: *Whenever I See You Crying, I’m So Sad, Mama.* I’ll probably let you choose, okay? Which one do you like most at this moment?”

“I like the first one: *Why Are You Crying, Mama?* But I don’t know why.”

“Let’s discuss it when I finish the whole manuscript, okay? What happened yesterday and today between us in this room will become Chapter 1. Now, though, I’m going to read chapters 2 to 7. Listen!”

CHAPTER 2

(24th December 1926 – Friday)

On the evening of 24th December 1926, a Friday, the time was about ten o'clock. The whole town of Bastogne was well lit with Christmas decorations; it was covered with thick snow and extremely cold. The main streets were full of pedestrians, and the mood was very joyous. Church bells were ringing out through the town. Jane was in town with her mother and a couple of her cousins to spend Christmas with their maternal grandparents.

They were on their way to the Church of St. Francis, on the Avenue de la Gare. The rest, all except Jane, had already crossed the road, but when she started to cross the street at the junction of Avenue de la Gare and Rue de Neufchateau, someone suddenly grasped her from behind and swept her forcefully aside. She was unsure of what had happened. Then she saw a young black man, and now she realized that he was the one who had swept her aside. What she did not see was that an old man had been driving relatively fast toward them, and when he'd tried to turn to the left, he'd lost control of the car and careened toward her. Jane did not see this, as she was looking in the opposite direction. If the young black man had not acted at the last moment, she could have been hit from behind and perhaps killed on the spot. When she realized this, she was overcome by shock. Trembling and looking at the young man, she could barely utter a single word.

"Hello!" the young black man greeted her in English. "Hello, my name is John. Good evening."

She also replied in English, still shaking from shock. "Hi. Good evening, John. I'm Jane. Oh John, I don't know how to thank you. If you hadn't saved me, I'd be dead now, or at least severely injured."

"Good evening, Jane. It's God and not me who has saved you. So please, thank God and not me."

"But I only see you. So, for me, you're the one who saved my life."

As people started to gather around them, John looked worried. “Jane, I’m sorry. I’m rather in a hurry. So goodbye and good luck.”

“John, could you at least give me your address so I can contact you?”

“I’m an American visiting this country. I’m living in Brussels at the moment. I cannot give you my address now.”

“Why not, John?”

“I simply can’t. There’s a reason, Jane.”

“I see. Okay, then. At least take my card. Please contact me as soon as possible, okay? Goodbye and take care. Thank you so much once again. I’ll think of you, and I hope we’ll meet again someday.”

“Goodbye and good luck, Jane. May God bless you.”

John hastily took Jane’s card and disappeared into the crowd. Jane was upset and shedding tears. Many people were helping the elderly driver. Jane’s mother and cousins hurriedly came back to comfort her, and then in a few moments, they were all heading toward the church. After the worship service, they all went to Jane and her cousins’ grandparents’ home. Jane could not sleep the whole night for she was thinking about what had happened all night. Her mind dwelt in particular upon her young black rescuer, and she wondered whether she would ever meet him again. The family stayed there until the New Year and went home in the first week of 1927.

CHAPTER 3

(March–June 1927)

Jane thought about John day in and day out and waited for a phone call that never came. She often waited for the postman, too, and when he came, she frantically checked her mail. Three months had passed, and nothing had happened; she became restless and depressed. Whenever those who knew the story and her obsession with him wanted to know why she felt like that, she told them that she would like to thank him more profusely and that she wanted to know a little more about his life and so on.

On 20th March, she decided to revisit the town where the accident had happened. She stayed with her maternal grandparents again. Every day, she went into the town center around eleven o'clock in the morning and remained in the vicinity until three or four o'clock in the afternoon, hanging around near the spot where the accident took place, hoping that perhaps her rescuer might revisit it. She also went out in the late evenings and observed passersby around the same site. Every time she saw black people, she ran after them and asked them if they knew a black American named John in Brussels. But as her search for him proved fruitless, she returned to her hometown after three weeks on the 21st April - sad, exhausted, and depressed.

She was so obsessed with John that she could not concentrate on her work at home. Her parents, grandparents on both sides, and close friends and relatives tried to console and persuade her in many different ways to forget about him, saying that he must have a good reason for not contacting her. But she counter-argued that it could be that he had lost her card and that she wanted to know the reason. Her obsession was so intense that her relatives began to suspect that her motive might be more than just gratitude. So her parents advised her to go to Brussels and continue her search for him there. She thought she would never find peace in her life if she didn't find him, so she was determined to continue her quest, no matter how long it might take until every effort had been exhausted.

After two weeks of rest at home, she went to Brussels by car on 4th June and stayed with Maria, her mother's youngest sister, who lived in the city center. Jane decided to stay for at least a couple of weeks. On the day of her departure, her parents and cousins gathered to say goodbye to her. Just before she left, her mother said, "Jane, I wish you the best of luck in your search for him. If he is just a normal human being and not an angel, you'll surely find him. By the way, the other day, one of your aunts said she thought you might have fallen in love with him, at least unconsciously. Although you don't believe in God, if I were you, I'd pray to him anyway. I'll pray for you every day, darling. Take care, and good luck and goodbye."

"Mama, I don't think I've fallen in love with him. Although he's not ugly, he's not the type with whom I could fall in love. And our encounter was so brief. Thank you so much, Mama, Papa, and all of you for giving me support and strength during the last few months. I'll inform you immediately if I find him again."

They hugged and parted. Jane drove straight to Brussels. Maria pitied her so much that she promised to help her in her search. As she had done in Bastogne, Jane left her aunt's apartment every day at different times and walked around or hung about, observing all the black people she came across. Maria accompanied her several times, and they asked nearly every black man and woman they met on the street if they knew a black American named John. Days had come and gone, but nothing happened. Jane had already spent four weeks in Brussels. She was sad and exhausted, both physically and mentally. So she finally decided to go home. But she first wanted to go to Barbara's birthday party at the well-known restaurant *Chez Leon*, located at Rue des Bouchers 18, not far from Maria's apartment. Jane and Barbara studied economics together at the Free University of Brussels. There were about thirty invitees.

Jane and Maria arrived at the restaurant at about eight o'clock. Nearly all the other guests had already arrived, and they introduced themselves to each other. After they had finished the luxurious dinner at around ten o'clock, people formed groups here and there and start-

ed making small talk. Jane and her aunt chatted with some guests. At around half past eleven, Jane, Maria, and a few other guests prepared to go home and said goodbye to those around them. Then, Jane excused herself from the group and went to the toilet. On her way, she inadvertently peeked into the kitchen through a half-open door, and there, to her great surprise and excitement, she saw John washing the dishes. She shouted out, “Hi John!”

John looked back at her blankly, perplexed, and said nothing.

Jane continued, “It’s me, Jane! I’m the one you rescued on Christmas Eve! Don’t you remember me?”

John recognized her now and was very excited too. He rushed to her and shook hands with her and said, “Hi Jane, now I recognize you. Oh, how nice it is to see you again so unexpectedly.”

“Oh John, how happy I am to see you again.” She could only utter these few words and was so excited that she suddenly hugged him and, at the same time, burst into tears. John also hugged her back. Then, with great effort, she said through her tears, “Oh John, I’ve been looking for you everywhere, in Bastogne and here in this city, for several weeks. You don’t know how happy I am!”

John’s eyes were also full of tears. After a short while, John freed her from his arms and said, “Yes, I’m also so happy to see you again, Jane.”

Those in the kitchen just stared at them without having any idea what was happening between the pair. Jane looked deep into his face, still tightly holding his hands, and said, “John, I have waited for a call or a letter every day since the accident. Why didn’t you contact me?”

“Jane, I wanted to, but I’ve overstayed my visa and am working illegally in restaurant kitchens, trying to earn money for my return journey.”

On hearing these words, Jane once again burst into tears. “John, why didn’t you contact me and tell me about it? I could have helped you. I thought you might have lost my card, and I didn’t know where to look for you.”

“I’m so happy to hear your kind words. Thank you so much for your willingness to help me, Jane. But I think I can manage on my own.”

“John, I’m going back home tomorrow. I’ve got many things to do, so I cannot stay here longer. Can you come with me? My parents and other relatives would be very pleased to see you. You can stay with us as long as you like.”

“Thank you so much for your kindness and generosity, but I can’t do that. I have to work for at least two more weeks in this place. Then I could probably visit you for a few days. But I must avoid traveling as much as possible because I could get caught at any time by the police for overstaying.”

“Would it be possible for the restaurant owner to find someone to take your place now?”

“No, I don’t think so. And I can’t leave my aunt and uncle so suddenly. I’m living with them, and they’re not feeling well at the moment.”

“Oh, I see. Yes, I understand your precarious situation. Should I come back here and pick you up and drive you to my home?”

“No, I don’t think you’ll need to. Three good friends of mine are going in your direction soon, and I could ask them to take me with them and drop me at your place. If that doesn’t work, I’ll take the risk and come by train.”

“Are your friends black or white?”

“They’re white. Two are Americans, and one is Belgian.”

“Do they know that you’ve overstayed your visa?”

“Yes, they know about it. But traveling with whites is much safer than traveling alone or with other blacks.”

“Aren’t they racist?”

“They were somewhat racist when we met. But I won their friendship with my patience, humility, forgiveness, and friendliness.”

“That’s very interesting ... All right, then. But if you’d prefer me to come and pick you up for any reason, please just let me know, okay?”

“Yes, I’ll do that.”

“Here’s my card again. Please call me, and we’ll arrange your visit. Well, it’s rather late, so we’ll have to leave now.”

Jane then introduced John to Maria. Observing the pair, Maria silently shed tears of happiness. Jane reached into her purse and took out some money and handed it to John.

“John, here are a few hundred francs for your train ticket if you have to come by train, and the rest is for your other needs.”

John refused to take the money at first, saying that it was too much. But Jane insisted that he accept it. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she hugged him affectionately once again and said goodbye, and then hurried out of the kitchen with Maria. His eyes were also full of tears.

CHAPTER 4

(1st July 1927 – Friday)

It was six p.m. on a sunny day. In their large and luxuriously furnished two-story house, Jane and her parents waited in the upstairs guest room for John's arrival. He was on his way, and if everything went well, he would be arriving at any time. Jane went to the window now and then and looked for any sign of him. And then, suddenly, there he was, rounding a distant corner and walking toward the house, carrying a small bag in his right hand.

As Jane saw him, she shouted, "Hey, John, is here!" and ran down the staircase to greet him. They met each other at the garden gate. She heartily hugged him. He hugged her back, but with some slight hesitation.

"Oh John, I'm so glad to see you again. I hope everything went all right on your journey."

"Yes, I'm also delighted to see you again. Everything was okay on the way here."

Jane's parents came down and met him at the main entrance of the house. She introduced John to them. "John, this is my mother, Christine, and here's my father, Paul."

"Hello John, we're thrilled to meet you. You're most welcome here; please make yourself at home right away. Where are your friends?"

"I'm equally pleased to meet you, Christine and Paul. I asked them to drop me at the corner before they went on to their destination."

Christine and Paul were as tall as John and in their late forties or early fifties. They entered the house and went straight into the living room. John was seated in a corner close to Jane. He discreetly observed the whole living room and said, "You've got a very nice house and a huge, beautiful garden. When was it built?"

Jane answered, "Thank you. It was built more than a hundred years ago. My father inherited it from his parents."

“Oh, I see. Since I was a child, one of my dreams has been to have a house and garden of my own.”

Jane said, “John, someday you may have such a house and garden, or even one much bigger and more beautiful than ours — who knows? You’re still young.”

“No, I dare not have such an ambitious dream. My simple dream is to have a small house with a small garden where I can plant vegetables and fruit trees. And above all else, to have a small library and earn a modest sum so that I can afford to buy the books I’m interested in and have enough free time to read them. How lucky you are that you’ve got such a huge library.”

The living room was indeed full of books. Paul commented, “Yes, you’re right. Other rooms are also full of books.”

“From when I first learned to read, I read all the books that I could get my hands on. Although we’re poor, I’m fortunate enough to have had time for reading. My parents are also passionate readers, and we’ve got a small library at home. Even so, I could not afford to buy many of the books that I wanted to read. And the small local libraries in our neighborhood don’t have them. You’ve got many books in English that I’ve always wanted to read. If my family could have supported me, my strongest desire was to go to college or university and become a teacher, even a professor. I was always the brightest student from the beginning of my schooling until I left school. But I know it’ll remain just a daydream in this life...”

John’s words moved Jane, Christine, and Paul to tears. They immediately noticed that John was brilliant. After a few minutes, Christine said, “John, we’ve prepared dinner. When we’ve finished eating, we’ll sit down here again and get to know each other better. Is that all right with you?”

“That’s all right with me, Christine.”

“Good. Well, it’s not polite to ask you this question, but to arrange our time together here – what’s your plan? You may stay with us as long as you like.”

“That’s very kind of you, but my friends are passing through again

on Sunday around two o'clock in the afternoon, and I'll have to go back with them. My aunt is not feeling well at the moment, and I need to look after her."

"I see. After dinner, let's discuss how best we could spend our time while you're here."

Jane showed John the guest bedroom. They then went into the dining room, and Jane and Christine prepared dinner. They finished dinner an hour and a half later and entered the living room again, and took their seats as before. It was eight o'clock.

Jane began the conversation. "John, first of all, my parents would like to tell you how indescribably grateful they are to you for saving my life."

Paul said to John, "Yes John, we don't know how to express our thanks to you for saving Jane's life. Our oldest child was a boy, and he and I were caught in a battle ten years ago in the Great War, and he died from his wounds. I was also severely wounded, but I partially recovered after a long course of treatment. I still have difficulty walking long distances, though. Jane is our only child now. If you had not saved her life, we'd be alone, and how sorrowful we would be without her."

Paul's words visibly moved John, and he expressed his sympathy. "Christine and Paul, I'm so sorry to hear about your son. But you don't need to thank me for what I did for Jane. I am so glad that I could, but it was no effort on my part. It happened in a second. And I'd have done the same for anybody else as well. As a deeply religious Christian, I firmly believe that it was not me that saved her life but our God. So please thank Him, not me."

Christine spoke out. "Yes, as a devoted Christian myself, I also believe it to be the work of God. But I believe that he used you in particular, John, to do it on his behalf. So you also deserve our gratitude."

Just as John was about to say something, Jane interrupted him. "John, please excuse me, but I can't wait to reiterate what I told you when we met again in Brussels and also on the phone – that I cannot

describe how happy I am to have met you again and to have you here now. John, please let me tell you very briefly what happened between the incident in Bastogne and when I met you again in Brussels. After we parted from each other, I expected a sign from you – a letter or a call. I waited and waited. I wanted to thank you more, and I wanted to know who you were and where you lived, and about your life. Not a single day passed when I didn't think about you. Then, slowly, as I lost hope of ever hearing from you again, I decided to go to Bastogne again to search for you. I stayed at my grandparents' house for two whole weeks and went out every day to hang around the place where you rescued me in the hope that you might be there. After that, I spent five months here at home and then went to Brussels to continue my search for you. I stayed with Maria and looked for you for four full weeks, in vain. Very often, Maria accompanied me. We ran after every black man and woman we met on the street and asked them if they knew a black American named John, and we described your physical features. So I'd already given up all hope of ever seeing you again in this life when we met again by chance. That's my story. Now, if you don't mind, would you please tell us something about yourself? And we'll also tell you about us. You may tell us only what you're comfortable sharing. Would that be all right? Or should we start with our story first?"

"I don't mind starting with my story, Jane. I've got nothing to hide from you. But I'm afraid I may not have much to tell you that could be of interest to you. I was born on February 15, 1905, a Wednesday. I've got a younger sister named Betty. Andrew, my father, was a Methodist pastor in our small community until two years ago. My mother, Anne, is a teacher in a small primary school. We've been living in a shabby, three-room apartment in New York City since my childhood. I finished high school four years ago. As my father's health deteriorated four or five years ago, I had to start working part-time when I was still in school to support my family, sometimes as a carpenter's apprentice and sometimes as a farmhand. We're descended from slave families more than three hundred years ago."

Jane immediately liked him for his honesty and humility, and she deeply sympathized. John continued, “About ten months ago, I came to visit my paternal aunt, who married a black Belgian more than ten years ago. They’re childless. I’m staying with them and working illegally in restaurant kitchens to pay for my journey home and perhaps also for some savings for my family back home. I’ve already overstayed for six months.”

Jane, Christine, and Paul listened attentively, and their eyes were filled with tears. Then Jane asked, “John, if you get caught by the police, what will happen to you?”

“I don’t know for sure because nearly every case is handled differently. I could be put in jail for some months and then deported, or I could be fined and deported—provided, of course, that I’ve got enough money to pay for my journey.”

“But what if you don’t have enough money for your return trip?”

“I could still be deported at the Belgian government’s expense because it’d still be cheaper for the government to deport me than to put me in jail since sooner or later, they’d have to send me home anyway.”

Jane continued the conversation. “How much have you personally experienced racial discrimination here and in your country?”

“Oh, racial discrimination? I don’t even think about it anymore because it happens every day and everywhere.”

“How do you do it? How do you survive the bitterness, the hardship?”

“We blacks don’t have any alternative except to commit suicide if you’re not strong enough to withstand the humiliation. If you dare not kill yourself, then you have to try to survive against the odds. In my case, it’s a bit better, thanks to a very wise grandfather. He passed two pearls of wisdom down to his children and grandchildren, including me. One of those is not to blame white people too much for what they’re doing to you because if you were white, you yourself would most likely behave similarly. The other pearl of wisdom is to react to every case of discrimination with patience and forgiveness. I’ve