

THE WEATHER OFFICER



THE STORY OF ALONZO SMITH JR.
AND HIS EPIC JOURNEY
THROUGH
FORECASTING
AND
FLIGHT



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The Negro can be made proud of his past
only by approaching it scientifically himself
and giving his own story to the world.

—CARTER G. WOODSON,
The Miseducation of the Negro, 1933

PART I

COMING OF AGE

And once you realize that you can do something, it would be difficult to live with yourself if you didn't do it.

—JAMES BALDWIN

Clouds Have Names

Harlem, New York City, 1937

Alonzo didn't know how long he'd live on 127th Street. After all, home was fleeting, a series of brick and brownstone buildings on numbered city blocks—places wherever his grandmother could afford the rent, and that seemed to change as often as the weather. This was their fourth apartment, the result of moving every other year since they'd been in New York.

Near the front entrance of his newest tenement, beneath a perfect pattern of iron fire escapes, Alonzo stood among a small assembly of barely teenage boys. They weren't chatting about his favorite topics, like the Black Yankees baseball team or how Joe Louis had just won the world boxing heavyweight title. Instead, Alonzo and his friends were discussing something kids their age shouldn't have to contemplate: how to stay alive. Or at the very least, how to stay out of jail, and that meant avoiding confrontations with the gang members in their neighborhood. Wisely, they decided to not form a gang of their own or organize into any type of group, as even the appearance of such could attract the wrong kind of people. However, as Alonzo would discover, that didn't prevent the wrong kind of people from trying to attract him.

Any twelve-year-old Colored boy like himself could be ushered into a life of crime if he wasn't careful. Gang members were smooth cats. Clever too, preferring to call their organizations “social clubs.” Alonzo had already learned to navigate around hustlers on the corner and skirt by the fellas who roamed the streets using three-card monte schemes to bamboozle people out of their money.

He used caution when he passed the neighborhood pimp swaggering down the block in his freshly pressed zoot suit. The Great Depression had ushered out Harlem's booming cultural renaissance of the previous decade, leaving behind dangerous people who lurked in plain sight, peddling remedies for every ailment doled out by the school of hard knocks.

Harlem was home to nearly all of New York City's Black residents, confining them between Park and Amsterdam Avenues, north of Central Park up to 155th Street. Housing discrimination marked the boundary lines. It squeezed rent money from Black folks' pockets, and, along with the economic downturn, it spread poverty around like butter on a warm biscuit. People were desperate to make money any way possible, and representatives from the so-called social clubs were on the prowl for whoever might be vulnerable.

A few times, they popped up at Alonzo's apartment, pounding on the door looking for him, and each time, Grandma Mam would have none of it. "Alonzo ain't coming out! Y'all git 'way from here, now!" Mam shouted in her southern drawl, before slamming the door in their stunned faces. She was as fearless as she was protective, making sure Alonzo understood that fraternizing with delinquents could lead to trouble.

"You're judged by the company you keep," she told her grandson.

Alonzo was old enough now to get swept up in the streets. While Mam intervened whenever she could, no longer was she able to shield him like when they first arrived in New York. Alonzo was five years old then, and one day as they walked home from the market, they happened upon a police raid at a nearby tenement. Through the windows above, frantic-looking men scurried about and began tossing small bags of something down below, where they plopped onto the sidewalk just inches away from where Alonzo stood with his grandmother.

"What's that?" Alonzo asked, captivated by the white packets strewn across the pavement.

"Oh, that's flour, baby," Mam answered before tugging his

small hand and whisking him away. With God as her witness, she swore to protect Alonzo from the things he was too young to know about. A big city in the North could snatch a Colored child's innocence just as easily as Jim Crow in the South. Fortunately, Mam was tough enough for both.

Born in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in 1882, Josephine Smith worked as a domestic nearly all her life. As long as anyone could remember, they called her "Mammy," though she bore no resemblance to the stereotypical nursemaid. Her skin was fair, her face freckled, and she had reddish-brown hair. At some point, the family shortened her nickname to Mam, perhaps giving her the proper respect rarely afforded a Colored woman in the South.

Mam was a make-doer—a creator of clothes, household cleanliness, and mouthwatering meals. Despite a pair of divorces and her inability to have children, she'd also created her own family. She "adopted" her nephew, Senior (Alonzo's father). Then she took in her niece, Magnolia. Although the two were cousins, Mam raised them as siblings in Orangeburg, and they considered her their mother. Now, as a New Yorker, Mam found her second wind. She was bringing up two of Senior's kids—Alonzo and his five-year-old sister, Maggie (Magnolia's namesake), and they considered her their grandmother.

Mam always spoke about the importance of having good character, even explaining to Alonzo why she never wore underwear with holes in them. Best to avoid disgracing herself if she ever got into an accident or something. While Alonzo found it amusing that anyone would ever see his grandmother's drawers, let alone his, he got the message. Heeding Mam's advice about whose company he kept was always much trickier.

Alonzo possessed an innate charm that defied his youth. With his smooth brown skin, long eyelashes, and dark wavy hair, he could convince a streetlight to stay off until he was finished playing. Regardless of moving multiple times, he had a knack for making

friends and drew others to him with ease. Some of the fellas Alonzo knew were petty thieves or had committed armed robberies. A few of them sold drugs and used them, too. Alonzo didn't necessarily want to be friendly with any of those jokers, as he was well aware that the fallout from their crimes could spill over and splash onto him. Yet surviving the streets required the illusion of solidarity. *Act normal. Don't look surprised by anything.* Not even the thought of wrongdoing crossed his mind. A run-in with the police would be scary enough, but the idea of having a run-in with Mam was mortifying. Alonzo never wanted to disappoint his grandmother. More than anything though, he was afraid of disappointing himself.

Thankfully, he never found himself in a clash with the fellas in the neighborhood, and they even gave him a street name, "Smitty," which he liked better than being called the name of his father. Alonzo Smith Jr. didn't have a close relationship with Alonzo Smith Sr. or his mother, Corrine, and he couldn't remember it being any other way. The only thing that stood out to him about living with his parents in that little house in Washington, DC, was the day he left.

It was balmy on that morning in 1930, when Senior loaded their luggage into the Ford Roadster before climbing into the rumble seat alongside his cousin, Levi. Inside the car, Alonzo nestled between Grandma Mam and another cousin, Ronald, who was driving. With the car packed to the brim, they headed off. Soon, the shanty, where Alonzo lived with his parents and two younger brothers, was far behind them as they headed north on Route 1 toward New York City. They must've been on the road for three hours or so when the Roadster took a violent dip, jolting everyone sideways and back. A wheel from the car had ripped off and was spinning across the highway, where it vanished into a cornfield.

Alonzo's heart practically pounded out of his chest as he watched his cousin fight the steering wheel, which now seemed to have a mind of its own. Despite Ronald's efforts, the car swerved off the road and as it began to topple over, Senior and Levi leaped out of the rumble seat just seconds before the vehicle crashed to the

ground. Alonzo, Mam, and Ronald were trapped inside. After several frightening moments, Senior managed to free the three family members from the car. Everyone was shaken, but by the grace of God, no one was seriously injured. As the family stood on the side of the road beside their crippled Roadster, Alonzo felt the slight stinging from scratches on his arm.

While the adults contemplated what to do next, a concerned-looking White couple in a black sedan pulled up slowly alongside the group and stopped. Following a brief conversation with Senior, the couple offered to drive Alonzo and Mam the rest of the way into the city. After their belongings were tucked into the trunk of the sedan, Senior, a tall imposing man, squatted down to bring his son into a snug embrace. Alonzo and Mam climbed into the back seat, and off they went.

A short time later, they were engulfed in darkness as the sedan cruised through the Holland Tunnel. When daylight greeted them again on the other side, Alonzo was astounded. He hadn't seen anything like this in all his young life. Buildings were giant walls that touched the sky, and people were walking in every direction. Cars and taxis the color of sunshine crowded the streets. Engines roared, and honking horns created a symphony of sounds. Alonzo pressed his face against the window as the couple drove north through the city, passing stores, signs, and people sitting on rust-colored steps. Finally, they reached 5 West 117th Street, the tenement where Aunt Magnolia lived. The aunt with those mysterious gray eyes, she and Mam had been Alonzo's guardians ever since.

Harlem was at the end of a long route that took tens of thousands of Black southerners far away from White hostilities that ranged from harassment on the weekdays to a lynching every weekend. That was reason enough to leave. However, migrants from the South weren't only running away in fear. They were seekers of hope, willing to go wherever the ground felt steadier, where they could create better lives for themselves and work with dignity. Aunt

Magnolia was among those hope seekers when she left Orangeburg in the late 1920s. A few years later, Mam decided to join her, bringing Alonzo along.

The pull of Alonzo's family in DC often competed with his love of New York. Mam must've felt the tugging as well, because in the summertime after school let out, she put her grandson on a train for annual visits back home. He looked forward to the trips, even if that meant adjusting to whatever had changed since the previous year. Sometimes the family lived in a different house, or they seemed poorer than the last time. Alonzo always had a new sibling or was told a baby was on the way. He was the eldest of seven children and only eighteen months older than his brother George. Two hundred miles separated Alonzo and George for most of the year, yet the two oldest Smith sons were kindred spirits and had a friendly sibling rivalry. They were two peas in a pod during the summer months. In contrast, Alonzo spent little time with his parents.

Senior, a storefront preacher, was usually off preaching somewhere or working odd jobs, and the bustling household full of young children demanded Corrine's constant attention. Alonzo could never quite reach that soft spot in his mother's heart. She never came to see him in New York either. In fact, he could only count two occasions when Senior paid a visit. The first time, he brought Samuel, the third oldest son, for a short stay. When Alonzo was ten, Senior returned with Alonzo's freckled-faced baby sister, Maggie, who was three. To his surprise, she stayed for good.

No one ever explained to him why they decided Maggie would live in New York. He just figured it was for the same reason he'd come to the city. All along, Alonzo sensed Mam was his angel, the woman who rescued him from a life of hardship in DC, where his family was barely scraping by. In spite of Mam's own financial challenges, he felt secure in her care. Between his grandmother and Aunt Magnolia, he had everything he needed.

Each time he left DC at the end of the summer, Alonzo's long face transformed into a wide grin upon seeing his friends back in Harlem, and he was always a ball of excitement on the first day of

school. The classroom was his sanctuary, the one place that nurtured his love of learning and stretched his universe toward all that was possible. Being an outstanding student was something he took pride in, and he stayed at the top of his class.

Ever since he was a preschooler, Alonzo constantly made keen observations about the world around him, taking in every detail and processing information quickly. He asked grown-up questions and had a knack for remembering numbers. This prompted Aunt Magnolia to tutor him prior to his enrollment at P.S. 184, the elementary school one block over from their first tenement. He could hardly wait for his daily lessons. The only downside was that he was left-handed, as if that was a legitimate problem. Mam considered left-handedness a flaw in need of correction, and she or Aunt Magnolia would smack Alonzo's left hand whenever he used it to write. Not wanting to endure anymore whacks to his knuckles, he adjusted to using his right hand, and for a time he was able to write rather skillfully with both hands.

Due to his home tutoring, Alonzo bypassed kindergarten and was placed in the first grade. The following year, he skipped half of the second grade. He thrived in the classroom, despite the fact that it was sometimes a hostile place, even for a gifted child. Black children made up most of the students in Harlem, reflective of the community. In contrast, nearly all the teachers were White, many of whom carried their biases into the classroom like lesson plans from a textbook.

"Colored kids shouldn't go to school because you're going to end up being janitors and bus drivers anyway," Alonzo's White teacher said one day during class.

He'd never heard talk like that before, and something inside of him stirred with agitation. Perhaps an intrinsic feeling that those comments were contrary to everything he would set out to achieve. He went straight home and told his grandmother what his teacher said, and Mam didn't waste any time marching over to the school and giving that teacher a piece of her mind.

Like so many Black Americans born in the South during her time, Mam could neither read nor write, and while she lacked a

formal education, she understood the value of going to school. That day, Mam looked steadily into Alonzo's eyes and told him he was just as capable as any little White boy. Smarter too. He just needed to keep paying attention in class and earn good grades.

“Get as much education as you can, ya hear?” she told her grandson.

Alonzo didn't know how much education was enough, but whatever that was, he promised to get it.

After that incident, defiance became his greatest motivator. He was driven by the idea that he could have doubters and prove them wrong. Many Black parents in Harlem were rallying together out of that same conviction. They were sick and tired of the low expectations White teachers were putting upon their children; how they often steered Black students toward labor and domestic jobs instead of encouraging them to consider college. It was the parents' civic action that forced P.S. 24, the school Alonzo started attending in the fourth grade, to hire the city's first Black woman principal, Gertrude E. Ayer, in 1935. Under her leadership, Alonzo became an honor student and excelled in math and science.

At home, he talked nonstop about his science lessons. So much so, that Mam bought him a chemistry set for Christmas one year. Hours passed as he pretended to be in a lab. He immersed himself in his creations—stink bombs, smoke bombs, and a host of other mind-blowing concoctions. He had dreams of becoming a scientist, although he didn't know what kind of scientist he should be. After all, he couldn't point to a single scientist who looked like him.

When Alonzo reached James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School in the late 1930s, he was placed in the Rapid Advancement (RA) program for consistently being in the top quarter of his class throughout elementary school. Only the brightest students were admitted into RA, a program that compressed three years of learning, seventh through ninth grades, into two years, while also covering a few high school subjects. During science class one day, Alonzo learned something that fascinated him more than any chemist's potion ever had.

Cumulus, stratus, cumulonimbus, cirrus ...

Clouds have names?

No one liked a cloudy day. Yet, somehow, clouds were important enough to have fancy names. They weren't just hanging around up there waiting for the right time to send some rain. Clouds were special and maybe even smart. After this thrilling discovery, Alonzo gazed into the sky more often, attempting to solve its riddles and understand the ever-present changes happening miles above his head. He'd never really noticed how different clouds were—thin wisps gliding, cotton balls floating. Sometimes they changed shapes or cast shadows. Alonzo never imagined clouds could also foreshadow, because unbeknownst to him, every time he looked toward the sky, he was looking into his future.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KELLY V. PORTER is a graduate of Howard University, where she earned a degree in communications. Early in her career she worked in public affairs at The National Endowment for the Humanities. Later, as a business owner and contributor, she honed her craft as a freelance writer. Kelly lives in the Washington, DC area with her husband, Wayne. *THE WEATHER OFFICER* is the true story about her father, and it's her debut book.

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