

THE ROSE OF EDENTON

Written by

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Based on, The Life of Rosa B. Howcutt

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INT. ROSA'S FOYER - EVENING

1

An OLDER ROSA, a dignified salt and pepper haired beauty in her sixties stands at her screen door looking through a box of memoirs. She looks up to see her granddaughter, ELISE, a pretty girl of 10 years, dancing on the porch to the radio.

FRANCES, Rosa's youngest daughter, enters the foyer and watches Rosa for a few moments. Behind Frances we see the, "CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR RETIREMENT," banner hanging on the wall.

FRANCES

What you doin', Mother?

Rosa startled turns away from the screen door.

OLDER ROSA

Just putting this old box away.

As Rosa is walking away she pulls out an old worn leaflet advertising Josephine Baker. She watches Elise dancing a few moments more and then looks back at the leaflet.

FLASHBACK BEGINS

2

INT. ROSA'S ROOM - DAY 1923

2

ROSA, a pretty, nicely figured young woman of 16, is looking at a leaflet pinned to her wall advertising Josephine Baker. She pulls off the leaflet, folds it and tucks it into a suitcase on her bed. She then moves about her tidy bedroom.

She straightens her high-school diploma and the photograph of her parents on the wall. The Bible on her dresser is open to Exodus 20 and we see, "HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER..." Rosa pauses, closes the Bible and places it in her suitcase beside the leaflet.

She reaches to close her closet door and notices the horn of a phonograph peeking out. She slowly pulls it out and plays the record that's on it. BIG BAND MUSIC languidly starts. Rosa starts dancing too focused to see her mother, MRS. HOWCUTT, a beauty in her thirties, appear at her door.

Rosa twirls and ends face-to-face with Mrs. Howcutt.

Mrs. Howcutt clears her throat.

MRS. HOWCUTT
Time to go, Rosa.

Suddenly, we hear HEAVY FOOTSTEPS on the stairs Rosa to abruptly brings the phonograph to a scratching halt.

3 INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 3

Rosa clamors to the top of the staircase and peers down at MR. HOWCUTT, a handsome, thirty-something year-old, African American man. Mrs. Howcutt closes Rosa's suitcase.

MR. HOWCUTT
Gettin' the car. Help your Momma
with your bag.

Mr. Howcutt starts back down the stairs.

ROSA (NERVOUSLY)
I need help with...my...my
phonograph.

Mr. Howcutt stops and looks sternly at Rosa.

MR. HOWCUTT
College is for make something of
yourself. Not for playin' 'round
with that 'traption. You grown now.
Leave all that jitter-buggin'
alone.

Dejected, Rosa goes and helps her mother.

4 EXT. ST. AUGUSTINE'S COLLEGE GATE- HOURS LATER 4

Mr. Howcutt pulls the car between two iron gate doors. A SIGN reading, ST. AUGUSTINE'S NORMAL COLLEGE introduces the campus.

5 INT. DORMITORY ROOM - MOMENTS LATER 5

Mrs. Howcutt unpacks Rosa's suitcase. Rosa looks around her room as SADIE SAVOY AND EFFIE MAE SINGLETARY, Rosa's roommates, dressed in their Sunday best, enter with their PARENTS. The Howcutts introduce themselves. Sadie bounces over and sticks her hand out startling Rosa.

Rosa shakes it.

SADIE

Hi! I'm Sadie, how you? This is all so excitin'! I just know we gonna be the best of friends. Just like sistas!

ROSA

I'm Rosa. Nice to meet you.

Effie Mae sniffs and turns away.

EFFIE MAE

I already have sisters, and just like home, looks like I'm the beauty of the bunch.

Effie turns back to Rosa.

EFFIE MAE (CONT'D)

Then that must make you Rosa. You 'sposed some kind of smarty pants? Said you skipped a grade or something? Whole ride here my folks going on and on 'bout the brainy roommate the school set me up with. Telling me I'ma need your help if I'm gonna get through school. Like I'm some beautiful dummy...

Effie fluffs her hair.

I got in here didn't I?

Then Effie walks up close to Rosa.

EFFIE MAE (CONT'D)

You ain't no better than me and I'ma tell you just like I told my folks. I don't need your help!

Rosa glares at Effie as Sadie slides over, grabs Effie's hand and shakes it hard. Effie glares back at Rosa.

SADIE

You must be Effie Mae. Well, you most certainly are pretty. I call it like I see it.

Effie snatches her hand back.

EFFIE MAE

Alright already!

Mrs. Howcutt pulls Rosa to her.

MRS. HOWCUTT
Your father has worked his fingers
to the bone for this.

Mrs. Howcutt takes in the surroundings.

MRS. HOWCUTT (CONT'D)
Most everybody's hands gon' be
calloused from the cotton stalks
this season but, not yours, this is
the best Negro teacher's college in
the land.

ROSA
Yes, ma'am.

Mrs. Howcutt finishes unpacking.

MRS. HOWCUTT
Helping people understand things
comes easy for you. You got a gift,
Rosa...and not just for dancing.

Mr. Howcutt enters Rosa's dorm room and stands in the middle
of the floor.

MR. HOWCUTT
Not bad for a fruit and vegetable
man. Not bad at all!

6 INT. DORMITORY HALLWAY - HOURS LATER

6

Rosa walks toward her dormitory door with school books and
keys in hand just as Sadie is coming out of their room. Rosa
stops short when she notices a poster calling for dancing
girls for the Silas Green of New Orleans traveling road show.
Sadie walks up behind her.

SADIE
Girl, you gonna stare a hole
straight through it.

Rosa keeps her eyes riveted on the poster. After a moment,
Sadie puts her hands on her hips.

SADIE (CONT'D)
Well, Ms. Rosa I think maybe we
should get to know each other over
supper since we're gonna be livin'
together.

Rosa remains SILENT and continues to read the poster.

SADIE (CONT'D)
Come on, girl!

Sadie links arms with Rosa and drags her down the hallway.

7 INT. CAFETERIA - MINUTES LATER

7

Rosa and Sadie are seated at the table eating.

SADIE
So what was so all fire special
about that paper on the wall?

Rosa reaches into her purse and pulls out a folded piece of paper. She smooths out the folded sheet and shoves her flyer of Josephine Baker in front of Sadie.

SADIE (CONT'D)
Josephine Baker? You wanna see
Josephine Baker? That's nothing
special Rosa we all like her.

ROSA
I don't wanna see Josephine Baker,
I wanna be Josephine Baker... but,
better. Everybody says I am.

SADIE
And, you got all this from that ad on the wall?

Rosa leans forward.

ROSA
Everybody at home says I'm as good
as Josephine if not better. Silas
Green from New Orleans is looking
for chorus line dancers. Think I'm
gonna tryout, Sadie.

Eavesdropping, EFFIE MAE walks up with her tray of food and snatches the picture.

EFFIE MAE
And who's wants to see some nappy-
head from the country?

Startled, Rosa snatches it back. Effie laughs and then leaves.

Rosa half-stands as if to follow Effie and then sits back down.

SADIE

Rosa! Your people sent you here to become a teacher not no shimmy-shakin' chorus line dancer!

Rosa gets up from the table and picks up her tray.

ROSA

Teaching's their idea...it's alright and all. But, Sadie, I gotta at least try...for more.

Sadie gets up from the table, grabs her tray and runs behind Rosa.

SADIE

Ooh, you go and your daddy gonna skin you 'live! Mine would!

8

EXT. FIELD - DAY

8

Rosa is walking quickly along the roadside with Sadie almost running to keep up. Their book bags swing on their shoulders.

SADIE

You can't miss class to be 'round them heathens shimmy' shakin' for money!

Rosa ignores her and quickens her steps. Sadie quickens her's too.

SADIE (CONT'D)

What if your parents find out? Why can't you just be like the rest of us? Teaching is a good livin'.

Rosa stops walking abruptly and Sadie runs up on the backs of her heels.

ROSA

(Exasperated) I'm not like everybody else! Besides, how would my parents find out, Sadie?

Rosa glares at Sadie then starts walking again leaving Sadie standing in the road.

Sadie YELLS behind Rosa.

SADIE

Well, I'm goin' to class Rosa. You coming?

Rosa turns around and looks at Sadie.

SADIE (CONT'D)

(Concerned) Be careful.

Rosa nods. Sadie turns and walks in the opposite direction.

The wind blows open Rosa's book and the Josephine Baker flyer is blown out and into the field. As Rosa retrieves the flyer she notices SONNY, a barefoot African American boy about eight years of age, dressed in dirty work overalls peering at something from behind a tree.

The VOICES of a SHARECROPPER, an African American male about 30 years old dressed in work overalls, and two stern-looking WHITE MALES, wearing white shirts and dress pants can be heard.

The Sharecropper addresses them. The white men look back at him sternly. Sonny looks on...frightened. The Sharecropper points to his crops.

SHARECROPPER

Yes Sir, I understand but, if I give what you're askin' I ain't gonna have hardly enough to take to market.

As she puts the flyer into her bag, Rosa catches a scared Sonny gazing up at her. She reaches into her book bag, pulls out a small book with pictures and hands it to Sonny. He smiles, she keeps walking.

9

INT. TENT - HOURS LATER

9

A PIANO PLAYER, in his twenties dressed in a white button down shirt with rolled up sleeves, is tinkering on the piano.

HERBERT T. ROLLCUT, stage manager for Silas Green from New Orleans, a tall man in a brim hat, paces with a cigar as scantily clad dancing girls walk by in the background.

HERBERT

(Animated)

High and dry! That high-yella heifer done left me in the lurch!

The Piano Player doubles over his piano in laughter.

PIANO PLAYER

Oh, she a heifer now that she done
run off with that other cat. Look
on the bright side, you still have
the Mrs.

HERBERT

Don't play with me at a time like
this. Ain't none of those country
bumpkins 'round here cut the
mustard.

PIANO PLAYER

Silas Green is the best tent show
in the south. One chorus girl won't
stop no show, Boss.

HERBERT

Fool, she's the lead dancer! Our
audience ain't stuttin' the Rabbit
Foot Minstrels or the A.G. Allen's
Mighty Minstrels but just let our
chorus line look weak...

Piano Player tinkers on the keys. Herbert takes a long draw
off his cigar and paces the floor rubbing his hand over his
head again and again.

Rosa enters the tent. Rosa stands still momentarily then
clears her throat.

ROSA

Eh, um. Excuse me.

Piano Player and Herbert turn around.

ROSA (CONT'D)

I'm here for the audition.

The men look her over and start laughing. Herbert approaches
Rosa.

HERBERT

Lil' gal, go on back to the farm,
now.

ROSA

It's Rosa from Edenton, North
Carolina, not a farm!

Piano Player laughs.

HERBERT

Don't make me no difference. You
just some little ole' gal that
don't know nothin' 'bout nothing,
just like the rest of these
bumpkin's round here. I need a show
stopper!

Herbert turns his back. Rosa chucks her bag, kicks off her shoes, pulls off her stockings and starts dancing. Twirling, flipping and shimmying until Piano Player takes notice.

PIANO PLAYER

Boss!

Piano Player accompanies her on the piano. Herbert turns around and looks dazzled as his cigar drops to the stage. Rosa ends her routine by flipping and landing on her feet within inches of Herbert. Rosa turns and slowly walks away.

PIANO PLAYER (CONT'D)

You gonna let her leave, Boss?!

Herbert grabs a paper bag off the piano and catches up to Rosa. Holding the paper bag up to compare it to her mocha cheek, he shakes his head.

Herbert SUCKS HIS TEETH.

HERBERT

Too bad.

Rosa launches forward seemingly to snatch the paper bag from his hand but instead snatches up her shoes, stockings and bag and storms out.

10 INT. DORMITORY ROOM - DAY

10

Rosa is studying at her desk surrounded by books and papers.

SADIE

I'm glad to see you with your head
in the books but, you've hardly had
two words to say since your
audition.

Rosa looks up at Sadie and turns back to her work.

SADIE (CONT'D)

How'd it go?

Rosa looks back at Sadie with tears in her eyes.

ROSA

Guess now I am just like everyone else. And, apparently too dark.

Effie Mae hops down from the top bunk.

EFFIE MAE

I could have told you that. Wonder how yo' Momma & Daddy would feel about yo' lil' escapade. Well, it figures lil' Ms. Twinkle Toes got the ax. If I had auditioned there would have been no question...

ROSA

That you would have looked like a big ole' cow! And, why are you worried about my Momma and Daddy? Did you say something to them, Effie?

Effie simply smirks as Rosa takes a step closer to her. Sadie inserts herself between the two girls and attempts to gently push them apart. Rosa doesn't budge, doesn't break eye contact. Sadie to guides Effie back to her side of the room where she quickly grabs her books and purse and leaves.

SADIE

Rosa, at St. Aug, we have a chance here most of our people don't get. We owe it to everybody to try our best. Ya know?

11 EXT. FIELD - EVENING

11

Sadie and Rosa are walking toward their dormitory.

ROSA

The folks are coming for the parent's luncheon next Sunday. Did you finish the lesson plan assignment? I'm still working on the paper professor wants. I need to get it all done before they get here so I can spend some time with them.

SADIE

I don't know how we're supposed to get everything done on time!

Sadie SIGHS loudly.

SADIE (CONT'D)

I asked if they could reschedule the lunch but, Effie Mae is head of the committee and she said she already sent the invitations.

As they pass the Sharecropper's portion of the field, Sonny runs out to meet the girls with the book Rosa gave him in his hands.

SONNY

Hey!

The girls turn around to see Sonny running their way.

SONNY (CONT'D)

Hey, lady!

ROSA

It's Rosa.

Sonny catches up to them holding up the book.

SONNY

Thank you for the book. Real nice pictures but, um... don't know all the words.

Sadie starts to GIGGLE. Rosa stares at the book Sonny is handing her.

MRS. HOWCUTT (V.O.)

Helping people understand things comes easy for you. You got a gift, Rosa...

Sadie nudges Rosa who reaches into her bag, pulls out a sheet of paper and a pen and scratches out a few lines. Rosa hands the note to Sonny.

ROSA

Meet me at St. Augustine's, this room, five o'clock tomorrow.

Rosa struggles down the hallway with a stack of books and papers, dropping a few as she approaches her door. Rosa is snatching up papers as she fumbles to get inside. In doing so she knocks off the note taped to her door. She snatches up the note along with the other papers and enters her room.

13

INT. DORMITORY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

13

Rosa slams the jumbled mass down on her desk. She separates them and puts them on either her desk or throws them in the trash. She finally gets to the note that was taped on the door and tosses it into the trash.

She stops suddenly and begins to rummage through the trash can tossing papers here, there and everywhere until she finds the crumpled note and reads it.

HERBERT (VO)

I must admit your little shake and bake did impressed me, Rosa-Straight-off-the-Farm. Couldn't really get you off my mind. So, there's a spot in the chorus line for you if you're still interested. Be here at 5 o'clock sharp. You got a lot to learn by Saturday. Herbert, stage manager.

The now crumbled letter hits the floor during Rosa's celebratory dance. Rosa partially regains her composure when she hears footsteps coming her way and snatches the letter off the floor. She starts YELLING and flapping the letter. Sadie enters looking confused.

SADIE

What the...

Still SHRIEKING, Rosa slaps the wrinkled letter down on the desk. In all the excitement, the girls don't notice Effie Mae enter. Effie looks disgusted at the display while Sadie reads the note out loud.

SADIE (CONT'D)

Blah, blah, blah...a spot on the chorus line! Oh, Rosa you did it!

Hugging and jumping, Rosa and Sadie spin right into Effie Mae.

EFFIE

Humph, guess they'll accept any ole' joker nowadays!

Rosa gets nose-to-nose with Effie. Neither one backs down. Sadie steps between the two.

SADIE

Rosa, you gonna be late if you gotta be there by five! Wait, isn't Sonny supposed to...

Rosa turns, grabs her sweater and flies out the door running into Sonny, almost knocking him down.

SONNY

Hey Ms. Rosa! Daddy made me stay and stack the cotton bails but I made it anyway. I'm here for my lesson...Ms. Rosa, where are you...

Rosa pauses only long enough give Sonny an apologetic look.

SADIE

Uh, Sonny, come on in. Rosa, um, has an emergency right now.

EFFIE MAE

Yeah, to get to that audition. She goin' dancin', boy and she ain't got time for you.

SONNY

(dejected)

Dancin'? Well, um, I gotta finish stackin' them bails for Daddy anyway. So just...never mind.

14 INT. TENT - DAYS LATER 14

CHORUS GIRLS, in flapper dresses, flit to and fro. The tassels of Rosa's flapper dress shimmy as she whizzes by. Herbert barks orders to EVERYONE in costumes on the stage.

15 INT. DORMITORY HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 15

Mr. and Mrs. Howcutt reach Rosa's dormitory door. Mrs. Howcutt KNOCKS. Effie Mae opens it and Mr. Howcutt takes Mrs. Howcutt's arm and leads her in.

EFFIE MAE

Won't Rosa be glad you made it. And a day early! Did I write today's date on that invite? Silly me, the luncheon is actually tomorrow but since you're here now why don't you join me? I was actually headed to the Silas Green show. You simply must come along. It's opening night!

MR. HOWCUTT

No, we'd better wait here for Rosa.

Effie takes Mr. and Mrs. Howcutt's arms.

EFFIE MAE

Nonsense, do come! Rosa is hard at work hard on her paper. No telling what time she'll be back here.

Mrs. Howcutt nods and the couple turns and leaves with Effie.

16 INT. TENT - CONTINUOUS

16

Ma Rainey is on stage soulfully belting out the final refrain of her solo. The crowd goes crazy. Herbert steps up and takes the microphone.

HERBERT

Blues legend, Ma Rainey!

Ma Rainey bows, the audience goes wild. Then Herbert falls back and the curtain opens to dozens of dazzlingly displayed, high-kicking, chorus line girls. The crowd goes wild.

Mr. and Mrs. Howcutt are seated with Effie Mae enjoying the show. Rosa comes out kicking high alongside the other chorus line dancers. Effie Mae feigns surprise, whispers to Mrs. Howcutt and points toward the stage.

Mr. Howcutt peers in closer and recognizes his daughter. He's shocked. Mrs. Howcutt jumps up and SCREAMS. Effie Mae smiles.

MRS. HOWCUTT

Rosa!

17 INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

17

Rosa quietly rides in the back of her parent's car.

MR. HOWCUTT

You've got two choices. Stay in school and become a teacher or come back home with us.

Rosa SIGHS loudly.

MRS. HOWCUTT

Neither of your options includes you traveling with that circus! Half-dressed, shimmy and shakin and God-knows what else...

MR. HOWCUTT

What possessed you, girl?

Exasperated, Rosa throws up her hands.

ROSA

I've loved to dance all my life you know that! Anybody can be some ole' school teacher.

MRS. HOWCUTT

You got 'till we get back to the school to decide.

PRESENT DAY

18 INT. LIVINGROOM - 40 YEARS LATER

18

Older Rosa gets hugged and kissed as PARTYGOERS, of various ages exit. Rosa's son FRED, a tall handsome gentleman, gives her a kiss on her cheek as he leaves.

FRED

Ok, Mother. I'm heading out. Sonny, meet me at the car.

Her daughters, JOYCE AND FRANCES, beautiful brown-skinned twenty-somethings in trendy clothes, carry trash bags out of the door. JAMES, Rosa's oldest, a tall dark-skinned, handsome man, guides his wife, PATRICIA, a petite, beautiful, pregnant woman, out of the room.

JAMES

Pat needs to lay down for a while. Congratulations, Mother!

A middle-aged man in a sports coat and slacks throws his arms around Rosa's neck.

SONNY

I have a confession. Remember when I told you I could only read some of the words in that little book you gave me all those years ago? Truth is I didn't know any of them.

ROSA

I knew that the moment I started tutoring you! Now, I have a confession. If you hand't given me a second chance after I left you standing in my room that day, I don't know if I'd be having this teaching retirement party right now. Thank you, Sonny.

She embraces him once more and Sonny leaves. Rosa lays her teaching retirement plaque down. As she does, she notices her box of memoirs on the floor. Fingering through the stash, she comes across a photo of her late husband.

After admiring it she, digs through the memorabilia until she pulls out photos of each her four children. James graduating from college and then as a captain in the army; Fred as a scholar in London and Joyce and Frances graduating from college.

She flips another photo over in the box and realizes it's a picture of some of her former students including Sonny. After a moment she, pulls out several photos of her playing the organ in her church. Looking up from the box she sees her granddaughter, Elise, on the front porch DANCING up a storm.

Last, she finds the flyer of Silas Green from New Orleans and stands motionless for a long moment. Rosa runs her hand over the flyer and closes her eyes. We hear BIG BAND MUSIC playing, Rosa begins to sway.

FLASHBACK

19 INT. TENT-CONTINUOUS 19

Young Rosa, in full flapper-girl regalia, shimmy-shakes her way across a stage, first with a line of chorus girls, then they fade out and it's just Rosa. Rosa dances solo--full out.

PRESENT DAY

20 INT. LIVINGROOM - CONTINUOUS 20

Older Rosa shimmies and does a flapper girl leap the best she can, tossing the box of memories in the air.

FREEZE FRAME