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NON-FICTION | FALL 2012

## **Ms. Johnson**

By Monique Hedmann

As the adage goes, it takes a village to raise a child. I was no exception. My mother, a single physician, reached out into her network of real and fictive kin to get some much needed help from those she could trust. Thereby my life was touched by Oradee Johnson. A glorious display of 75 years, culminating in a bad knee, tiny stature, thick hips and glasses, an impressive gray mane, and the beautiful glow of wisdom. Her losses were heavy: her husband to alcoholism, her youngest son to AIDS, and the independence of her eldest son, who tragically carried on his father's legacy. But still she pressed on with a divine smile, brilliantly white from brushing with baking soda. I watched, with curiosity and concern, the triple jeopardy she carried everyday: Old. Black. Woman. She used to constantly tell me stories of her young life, and although she was getting older, her stories never did. Of course I had my favorites, like the time she served James Brown a cup of coffee when working at the restaurant we always passed when she picked me up from school. He left her a whole dollar for a tip! I never got tired of that one. Then there was the time she confronted a lady, telling her, "If you cut your arm, your blood is red, and if I cut mine, my blood is red too!" I loved that one too. Whenever I would playfully tease her for walking slowly or forgetting something or losing to me in I Declare War, she would always say "Keep on livin' honey!" The last time I saw her, she had settled into a peaceful senility, incessantly repeating the same stories that have molded me into who I am now.

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