

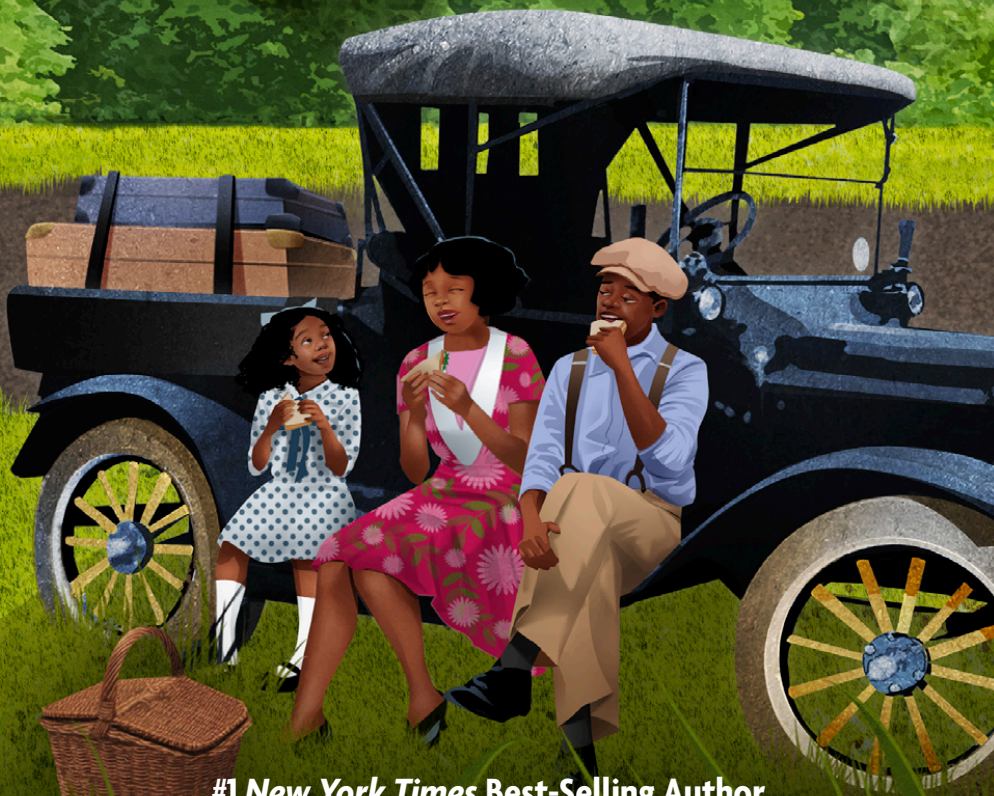
American Girl®

INCLUDES SPECIAL  
INTERVIEW WITH  
THE AUTHOR

# ADVENTURES WITH CLAUDIE

AN AMERICAN GIRL

1922



#1 *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

# BRIT BENNETT



# ON THE ROAD

## CHAPTER I



On the Atlantic Highway, Claudie Wells learned two very important things about herself. One, she loved the open road. And two, she missed Harlem.

She learned the first lesson when she awoke, hours after they'd left New York City, to suddenly find herself on a vast stretch of open highway. Like magic, the city had faded away, the clanging trains replaced with singing birds. As Cousin Sidney guided his Model T past trees stretching overhead, Claudie leaned over her mother to stare out the window at the purple-pink sky. Mama laughed.

"Nice, isn't it?" Mama said. "Getting out of the city?"

Claudie agreed that it was, and for the rest of the morning, as the truck rattled down the road, she watched the country roll past. The distant mountains, long dirt roads, and houses she passed, all the people she would never meet living lives that she would never understand. It overwhelmed her a little to think about how large this country was. Even in a city as big as New York, Claudie had seen only a tiny slice of it. For some reason, as they drove miles and miles away, she couldn't stop thinking



about Harlem. As freeing and fascinating as she found the open road, she missed her little brother, Jody, and Daddy and all the boarders at Miss Amelia's boardinghouse. But, she reminded herself, the only reason she had left her home was because she wanted to save it. Soon the back rent would be due, and if the boarders couldn't come up with the money, they would all be scattered across Harlem. So she was casting her hope on one wild plan: She would direct a variety show starring the boarders, and they would sell enough tickets to save the boardinghouse.

But Claudie still had no idea what to write for her sketch that would close the show. She'd thought that traveling would spark her imagination. She'd been inspired by all the boarders who had traveled far and wide, all the way to Harlem. Miss Amelia journeying from Jamaica, singing Selma arriving from Texas, Porter learning to play the cornet on the street corners of New Orleans. Claudie had never ventured outside New York City, so she imagined that as soon as she left, she would feel her mind blooming with new ideas. Isn't that what Gwen had told her in her painting studio? *Go someplace different, she'd said. Experience something new.*

Somehow, the ideas never came. Claudie's notebook lay unopened in her lap, and every time she glanced down at it, she felt distracted by the wide highways beckoning her

south to Georgia. Maybe, she worried, Gwen was wrong. Maybe she hadn't felt a rush of new ideas because she wasn't like the other boarders at all. They were artists, and she still hadn't found her own special talent.

"You city kids don't know what you're missin'," Cousin Sidney said. "There's nothin' like a Georgia summer."

"What's it like?" Claudie asked.

"Hot," Mama said. She spread the map across her lap, but she wasn't looking at it. She seemed distracted, too.

"More than just hot," Cousin Sidney said. "You ever been on a farm, Claudie?"

"No," Claudie said, "never." She giggled, trying to imagine a farm in Harlem, pigs oinking down Fifth Avenue.

"Well, you gotta help out with the chores, first off," Cousin Sidney said. "Milk the cows. Collect the eggs from the hens. Clean up the pig slop."

Claudie gasped, grabbing her mother's arm. "Mama, do I have to clean up the pigs?"

Her mother smiled, shaking her head. "He's teasing you."

"I'm just saying," Cousin Sidney continued, "there's plenty to do on a farm. And your cousins will be excited to meet you."

Claudie swallowed. She was excited to meet all of her

family that lived at the Coleman farm—her grandmother, aunts and uncles, and especially her cousins Ross and Mavis. But she felt nervous, too. What if her cousins didn't like her? The twins were eleven, and what if they thought she was a baby? What if they thought she dressed funny or talked strange? What if they thought she was a silly city girl who was too prissy to clean up pig slop? What if she and her cousins didn't get along like Mama and Cousin Sidney did?

"It's not just fun and games," Mama said. "You remember what I told you?"

"I remember," Claudie said. "The rules."

She was thinking about her mother's warning, the night Mama had agreed to bring Claudie on the trip. *There's different rules we got to follow*, she'd said, but she hadn't explained exactly what she meant. What were the rules? How was Claudie to even know?

Cousin Sidney glanced at Mama and said, "There's rules everywhere, Gloria. You think Harlem's so free? They got you jammed up together in those run-down spots. At least in Shellman there's the farm. We got something that belong to us."

There was a big difference, Claudie had to admit, between owning and borrowing. After all, if Miss Amelia owned the boardinghouse, Claudie wouldn't have to worry

about her family and all the boarders getting thrown out on the street. But she didn't know many people in Harlem who owned much of anything. Was it freedom, really, if you were always just one bad break away from losing all you had? Maybe Cousin Sidney was right. Maybe it was better to have land you owned, land that could never be taken away.

"I never said Harlem's perfect," Mama said. She patted Claudie's leg. "But the South is different, Claudie. I just want you to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Claudie asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means we've gotta be nice and quiet and stay out of trouble." Her mother gave her a wry smile. "I've never been too good at that."