

# Everyman

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THESIS

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## SUMMARY

Raised in Chicago during the Civil Rights era, Every Mann knows nothing of her parents – only the overbearing love of the aunt who has raised her. By her teens, she'd learned to stop asking her aunt questions and remake herself as “Eve” distanced from the strange name bequeathed by her mother's final breath during childbirth. Yet the 1970's brought Black Studies to several college campuses, and Eve's best friend Nelle convinces her to enroll in an effort to connect with an ancestral past if she could not identify with her familial one.

To her disdain, Eve's professor is more interested in “Black genealogy and uncovering the unknown 'ne(g)heros' before discovering the African kings and queens to which we all claim relation.” With his encouragement, Eve scavenges her aunt's basement and discovers information that directs her to Macon County, Georgia and the harsh realities of her family's early 19<sup>th</sup> century living which have culminated into her existence.

## Chapter I: In Search of Beginnings

It was 1972 in Chicago. Some remember it for bringing the worst commuter rail crash in the city's history when the Illinois Central Gulf train overshot the Twenty-Seventh Street Station and received the clearance to back up just as the heavier 720 Express was huffing and puffing its way full-speed ahead on the same track. Forty people were killed and over 300 injured.

Elvis fans recall 1972 as the year that the King himself gyrated across the Chicago Stadium stage, debuting the new two-piece suits and flamboyantly ruffled shirts that he would sport in performances for that entire summer before returning to his trademark jumpsuits after a series of wardrobe malfunctions. His new belt made of mirrors interfered with his guitar's arc from back to full frontal swinging hips.

That same year in the Windy City -- as at least 2,000 audience members can attest -- Jesse Jackson, donning a large afro, corduroy trousers, leather vest and Martin Luther King medallion entreated them in call-and-response fashion with the mantra, "I am...somebody." Even the dope fiends, the poor, and the uneducated were not exempt from its proclamation.

No one remembers offhand the Chicago Bears' five-and-eleven record, although they may recall Pro Bowler "Dick" Butkus for perhaps the most memorable moniker in football.

1972 Chicago hurled events, disasters, and milestones in a fierce competition to memorialize itself in the minds of its citizens against the previous decade's race riots. It contributed its fair share of blaxploitation movies -- such as *Blacula*, *Across 110<sup>th</sup> Street*, and Shaft's second installment, *Shaft's Big Score*. Later decades would launch criticisms arguing that these flicks pandered to stereotypes of African Americans as pimps, prostitutes, or private eyes that were also in some way working as pimps or prostitutes. Yet 1972 would triumph as a catalyst for individual memories tied to its births, deaths, tragedies and nuptials.

For Eve Mann, 1972 Chicago placed her in a Black Studies class at one of the city colleges. The class itself wouldn't be memorable. In fact, Eve didn't return to it after the first day.

He introduced himself as Brother LeRoi -- not LEE-Roy, as many in the class were accustomed to hearing the name, but Luh-ROY. For some reason it sounded more intellectual that way and this Brother LeRoi, by virtue of spelling and syllable shift, was distanced from the Leroy's that they knew.

"Who are you?" His voice rumbled and encompassed the class with the query. "Who am I?" he continued. "Who are we?" Standing just over six feet tall with the light from the overhead fluorescent bulbs reflecting against his clean-shaven scalp, Brother LeRoi commanded attention and the students at once ceased their knapsack fumbling, nail picking, and first day chattering. The class was silent save for the occasional creak of chairs, unfortunate holdovers from years past.

The students were mostly young, black men and women -- some too scared to leave the comforts of home and go away to a four-year college. A few had grown up with southern parents who had terrified them with stories of the south and continued to seek refuge in what was still thought of as a land of greater opportunity. Several, like Eve, had actually struck out on their own as prodigal children only to return to their homes, products of having too much of something or not enough of something else. These were the older ones in the class. Ranging from early to mid-twenties, they had acquired just enough maturity to prompt skepticism of Brother LeRoi and silently question whether or not his dashiki was real, as in really from Africa,

or one of the Taiwanese knockoffs sold out of the trunks of T-birds on Forty-Seventh Street. Some were taken aback by the contrast of his light skin against clothing that had been long associated with blackness. But they all were mesmerized by the voice that reached out to them -- both beckoning and promising, beseeching and bequeathing connection to a shared legacy. They were a generation that turned towards Pan-Africanism when previous ones shunned it. Brother LeRoi could deliver Africa, a visage that bestowed value upon their westside, southside, Cabrini Green, Ida B. Wells' housing project existence. They wanted to know the origins of their rhythms. They wanted to know whose children they were before they were the children of slaves.

Eve sat in the last row, close to the exit, a view that afforded her the backs of several afros of varying heights, two bobs, a press and curl like her own, and one long blond -- no straightening agents needed. The blond sat in the front of the class, pen scratching out each of Brother LeRoi's words. Whenever he paused, the blond head turned slightly upward and the strands cascaded away from the face to reveal a pale cheek and angular jaw line. Eve's weren't the only thoughts that shifted from Brother LeRoi's inquiry of "Who am I" to who is she? Brown eyes of various shades periodically grazed over the drop of buttermilk spilled amongst flies. Their gaze demanded to know *who is she* to infiltrate this space that had been carved out and demarcated for Black Studies, the study of blacks for blacks. And so the burden of proof shifted from Brother LeRoi's light skin to the blond's presence in what was becoming a sacred space with every term for blackness that escaped Brother LeRoi's lips. They listened and each managed a glance as the blond hair pendulumed slightly against the chair and its owner

continued to scribble copious pages of notes in a thick, leatherbound journal that would seem more at home in a study filled with mahogany furniture than in the sparsely furnished classroom. The blond's legs appeared pale between the gold miniskirt and matching platform shoes. A macramé bag rested against her leg. Watching her, Eve absently raked fingers through her own pressed hair. Her hands came away slick with the remnants of Ultra Sheen, that aqua-blue tinged grease that promised to lubricate black hair into submission when slathered on carefully parted scalps. The Proud Lady emblem etched into its glass jars assured "consumers that the product was manufactured by a stronger Black America," which it found from the shelves of Korean-owned beauty supply stores in their south and westside neighborhoods. Eve rubbed her greasy fingers on the ends of her hair, which always seemed to dry out quicker than her roots, being so far from the Ultra Sheen's initial point of contact.

Brother LeRoi rumbled on about cultural identity as he dropped mimeographed papers onto their desks. They were hot off the press and immediately smudged black ink on fingertips. Eve's attention returned at the lure of the freshly deposited syllabus and reading list. She was reaching for the syllabus when Brother LeRoi cleared his throat and adjusted the black-rimmed glasses that rested on the bridge of his nose, "But let's not get too far into things. Back to my first question...who are you? Not as a people. Not yet anyway. Who are you as an individual person? Who are your people as you know them? Mother? Father..."

Afros nodded in agreement, blond hair swung, and a quiet but distinct, "Right on," acknowledged that he had their attention. Brother LeRoi dabbed away a trickle of sweat that ran from under his kofi with a crisp handkerchief -- a mannerism familiar to those who had attended

the evangelical or the Baptist or the revivalist services from various churches *sans kofi*, of course. It subconsciously signaled the impending crescendo in a sermon, a song, or speech. And they responded in kind, with “right on” in lieu of “amen.” Like her classmates, Eve was entranced as Brother LeRoi rattled off bits and pieces about Black genealogy and uncovering the unknown “ne(g)heros” before discovering “the African kings and queens to which we all claim relation.” Brother LeRoi slowly exhaled the decreasing cadence of his lecture, “Before we get into all this theory, let’s start with a little genealogy project of our own.” He explained that they would be tracing their own genealogies by gathering information from their relatives. They would be looking for family pictures, legal documents and obituaries.

“Careful though,” Brother LeRoi warned. “Obits don’t always contain accurate information. They share only the information that the relative providing it wants the public to know.”

The blond lifted manicured fingertips and giggled, “Brother?”

“Sister...?”

“Amy,” the blond supplied.

“Yes, Sister Amy?”

Amy blushed before continuing, “Then why use them? Obituaries, I mean. If they’re inaccurate?”

Brother LeRoi sighed, “Because some of us, Sister Amy, don’t have birth certificates, family wills, or the luxury of legality.”

Eve's smirk quickly disappeared with the realization that she would be unable to complete this first assignment or any if they involved speaking with family members. In her case, it was family member – singular. Her attention waned and like church parishioners who hung their heads when the collection plate circulated, Eve busied herself sketching a similar scene on the backside of the syllabus, no doubt inspired by subconscious connections. Eve had sketched a fairly accurate likeness of Brother LeRoi standing in front of a pulpit. She had converted his dashiki into a flowing robe. Instead of desks and chairs, Eve had drawn pews in which her classmates sat with their afros framing their upturned faces like halos. The cadence of his voice, the concurring murmurs that rippled around her, and exalting gawks from her classmates created a messianic aura whose fervor could have swept Eve if not for that first assignment. Oblivious to the rapidly emptying classroom, she continued to sketch. In it the blond's halo was held in place by horns protruding from the forehead. It wasn't until a blue-jeaned bell bottom whipped past her ankle that Eve noticed the dismissal.

“Well, that's a bit of a dramatic interpretation, don't you think?” Brother LeRoi peered over Eve's shoulder.

She stammered, “Oh, um...this is something else.” Eve quickly closed her notebook over the drawing. She shifted uncomfortably in the chair-desk combo and for a fleeting moment felt herself relapse into her childhood as Every Mann -- dark, chubby and always squeezing into and out of spaces built for smaller bodies.

Brother LeRoi's eyes shone brightly behind his glasses. A smattering of freckles adorned his cheekbones. He waited as Eve silently debated with herself. She hadn't enrolled in the class

just to give up on the first day. She had known that it would place her face to face with the gaps of her family history. In fact, she had counted on it, although she hadn't realized that it would occur so soon. Eve struggled with forming the words that would open one of her deepest internal conflicts to this stranger. She wanted to share but not overshare. Not that she had enough information to constitute an overshare.

“Well, Mr. LeRoi...”

“Please, Brother LeRoi.” He interjected.

“Ah, right. Brother LeRoi, I'm not sure how successful I'll be with this first assignment. My...” Eve stopped short as she caught sight of movement from the door, a flash of blond hair and a, no, *the* macramé bag that she had admired earlier. Brother LeRoi followed her gaze and cleared his throat.

His eyes returned to Eve but his tone was clipped, impatient. “Look, sista...um?”

“Eve.” She stood, compelled by his sudden urgency yet not fully understanding its motivation.

He smiled, “Sister Eve, first woman, I like that. See me during office hours tomorrow. It's on the syllabus. I'm sure we can work through whatever hesitations or problems you're having with the assignment.” Brother LeRoi's eyes darted quickly towards the exit, still he waited with raised eyebrow until Eve smiled and agreed. He then covered the distance from Eve's seat to the exit in a few long strides. As Eve packed her bag she glimpsed the simultaneous departure of gold platform shoes and the macramé bag.

Eve let herself into the house that she shared with her aunt. She dropped her bag beside the couch and watched the contents including Brother LeRoi's syllabus, spill out onto the floor.

"Every, is that you?" Ann called from her bedroom at the rear of the house.

"Yeah," Eve sighed. "It's me." Entering her bedroom, she switched on the radio, collapsed onto the bed, and let herself believe that the Staple Singers could fulfill their promise of "I'll Take You There." This was one of the times when she wished she had kept her own apartment. But Ann's strange illness, that first manifested when Eve went away for school and for which doctors could find no cause or cure, seemed to recur in Eve's absence from her. One nurse had slipped and mentioned the word *psychosomatic* within Eve's hearing. It had not been a shock to her. But she didn't know what to do.

Ann appeared in her doorway. "Well?"

Eve sat up. "Well what?"

"How was your first day?"

Eve sighed. "I've got a project but I don't think I'll be able to do it."

"Of course you can do it. You're such a bright girl..."

Eve cleared her throat and Ann corrected, "...a bright young lady. You'll always be a girl to me, Every. Keeps me from becoming an old woman." But Ann had been an old woman for a long time, not in years, not even in experience. She had inflicted age upon herself in her inhibitions, hesitations, and the strange illness that left even her questioning and suspecting some unknown mental culprit.

"It's a family *history* project," Eve stressed, searching her aunt's face for emotion.

Ann sucked her teeth, “Hmph. I thought this was a *African* Studies class you was taking? What they need to know about your history for? I tole you, you gots to be careful about giving personal information to those folk.”

“What folk, Mama Ann?” Eve tucked her legs beneath her. “The *black* professor? The university...?”

“It’s all the same thang. Government. It’s a city college, ain’t it?”

Eve pursed her lips. “Tell you what. I’ll drop the class if you just tell me the information. That way, we can keep the *government* out of things.”

Ann didn’t know why Eve insisted on baiting her. She thought to tell Eve that perhaps the class wasn’t such a good idea after all, but as she looked into her niece’s eyes she knew that it was not the time to argue her point. Eve stared at her aunt. It was a practiced look, not a glare which could be construed as disrespectful but a wide-eyed questioning, defiant only in its openness. Ann pressed a hand to her forehead and left the room.

Eve grabbed the receiver of the telephone and spun out her best friend’s number on the rotary dial. It was Nelle who had urged her to take a Black Studies class as they sat one evening having dinner at Gladys’ Restaurant in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Eve had been in the middle of trying to explain to Nelle the emptiness that she had been feeling.

“Maybe I should’ve stayed in Atlanta and finished school with you,” she confided as Nelle pulled a compact from her brown suede knapsack whose fringes reminded Eve of moccasins. At eighteen Eve left her aunt’s house for the freedom that college promised all new

adults. She and Nelle had both been accepted into Spelman College in Atlanta, but Ann had been less than happy. It was around that time that her aunt's headaches began.

Nelle reapplied her lip gloss and frowned in the mirror as she patted her hair. It had been her attempt at an afro, but it had more curl than the regal fluff required for an impressive girth. She looked at Eve's hair, which had been pressed into submission by Ann's hot comb. "You don't know how blessed you are, Every. I mean, can you even *dig* it?" Nelle's inquiries were always punctuated by the latest slang. It would have been an annoying habit, especially as it was shared by so many of her contemporaries, but Nelle had a way of owning such indulgences of popular culture so that they seemed to have belonged to no one before her.

Eve sighed, "Take the damn hair, Nelle! I don't want it."

"Chill, *sista*," Nelle gushed. "C'mon, Every. It's time. You got all this confusion inside like so many other cats out here. We're all trying to find out about ourselves as a people. You don't have to do it by yourself, *dig*?"

"But Mama Ann..." Eve had only been at Spelman for one semester when Ann's illness worsened. She came home that winter break and never returned to the college. But Nelle had stayed and graduated.

"I ain't talking 'bout Mama Ann," Nelle smiled. Eve had been curious and the more Janelle spoke about how blacks were doing research to uncover their family histories, their ancestries, and even reaching back to Africa, she began to feel less restrictive in her chest.

"You *jivin'* yet?" Nelle extended her palm out to Eve. Eve sighed. "Just sign up for one class, sis." Finally Eve returned her friend's smile and slapped her palm.

In her room, Eve continued to stare with the phone pressed to her ear at the space her aunt had occupied moments before. When Nelle answered, all that Eve could muster was a half-hearted, “hey.”

Nelle read Eve’s tone, “You could always bunk with me. We could get a righteous two-bedroom in the old neighborhood right now.”

Eve was silent. It wasn’t an option for her. Nelle was her best friend and there wasn’t anything that she wouldn’t do for her, but living with her was out of the question. She groped for what had become a familiar excuse, “Mama Ann’s health...”

On the other end of the line, Nelle sighed and wondered why she continued to offer. “Yeah. Sure. Mama Ann may not realize it and you for damn sure don’t realize it. That woman ain’t but forty years old! Shit, my own mother is knocking on fifty. Mama Ann is gonna tap dance on all our graves.”

In the background of Eve’s room, Mavis Staples crooned, “*I know a place...ain’t nobody cryin’...I’ll take you there...*”

“Thanks for the offer. But I just... you know,” Eve lowered her voice, cowering away from their unspoken issue.

“Yeah, I know.” Nelle conceded. “So what’s it gonna take to get you out your funk this time? Food? Drink? Both?”

The smooth sounds of the Staple Singers gave way to the strong percussion rap and fierce electric guitar of Parliament’s *Cookie Jar*. Eve’s lips cracked into her first smile of the day.

“How about getting deeper into the funk?” She cranked the volume up and she and Janelle sang

along, temporarily drowning out her anxiety and seconds later, Ann's timid knocks on her bedroom door.

## Chapter II: Coon Chicken

Before Every Mann and her aunt moved to the house in Avalon Park, they lived in Bronzeville. In 1955 Bronzeville was a thriving area for blacks in Chicago. It was before the overcrowding due to large influxes of southern blacks migrating for jobs. Before the lack of housing options precipitated a real estate decline that wouldn't begin to reverse itself until the new millennium's gentrification efforts. Before drastic property tax increases made it impossible for long-term residents to afford their already paid for homes. Before the evictions of the very senior citizens who, in 1955, had been the young and vibrant lifeblood of Bronzeville.

Every's earliest recollection from that time was of a crush that she had on a boy when she was nearing five years old. Ann had often teased her whenever she came home full of stories about what the precocious little boy had done in school. Her aunt thought the crush funny until she saw him one afternoon as she was picking up Every from school. The boy was hanging upside down from the monkey bars, doing his best monkey imitation for his adoring five-year old fans. His dark skin glistened with sweat and his woolen hair stood more pronounced on end as he dangled. The display – by that time already a trademarked stereotype – had traveled through centuries of propaganda by the time it greeted Every and her aunt on the playground. Bucked eyes, grotesquely large red lips, and a bulbous nose all planted on a simian-shaped caricature had graced advertisements for everything from nineteenth-century minstrel shows to twentieth-century Lux Soap which featured the backs of two of such characters, hair drawn explosively outward with the guarantee that Lux Soap “won't shrink wool.” By the 1950's the chicken and watermelon themes had emerged and Coon Chicken used the same image with a red and black striped bellboy hat perched atop its head and the words “coon chicken” inlaid within the teeth of its massive mouth. This visage greeted Ann as she stared with open contempt at the

boy. Her horror-stricken eyes darted from him to a couple of white teachers on the playlot. She snatched Every's hand and charged down the street as quickly as she could, her niece struggling to match her stride. Ann muttered about "colored folk acting like monkeys," her mind far from events beyond the bubble of Bronzeville, like the Vietnam War which was just getting underway. She sought to distance Every from boys like this one, who would be shipped off to Vietnam thirteen years later.

Every stopped mentioning the boy to her aunt after the monkey bar incident. She especially did not recount their encounter two years later when he said that she could watch him urinate behind the school building. Every had stared amazed as he lowered his pants and gently removed his "thing" with pride. Afterwards, she watched as his wide eyes narrowed with disappointment when she squatted over a bush to show him that she could also pee outdoors. Her spray, seeming to come from nowhere in particular, lacked the showmanship of the "thing." Strangely prophetic, this two year juvenile romance from kindergarten to second grade ended with the disappointment that often results after nudity is introduced into a relationship. Mystery gave way to disappointment and the boy's attention drifted towards a potato bug before she had even finished.

Every's childhood memories were packaged in the small Bronzeville apartment that she and her aunt had called home. She had used these times to question her aunt for information about her deceased parents. When her aunt came home exhausted from emptying bed pans days at the hospital and cleaning office buildings nights downtown, she would boil water for a hot toddy, carefully measuring a half of shot of whiskey, and sometimes she'd beckon Every to her. *Let's see 'bout that crow's nest on your head.* During those times, Every sat on the floor with her

back between her aunt's legs as Ann carefully took down the plaits in her hair and the warm whiskey and honey coaxed small details of her childhood to Every's hungry ears. Every sat afraid to draw a breath for fear that it would disrupt the flow of information. Ann would share stories about growing up in the church and chores, even a tale or two about a boy she liked. Sometimes she'd give Every advice that she claimed came from her own mother, Gertrude. *Daddy used to call her Trudy*, Ann had said. "I can't believe I remember that." Her face crossed with nostalgia for a brief moment and then it was gone. Returned to an unknown place, it was repackaged and put away like unwanted Christmas gifts rediscovered, remembered, and revoked.

Every's teenage years brought more probing questions. As she grew, the hair straightening sessions moved to the kitchen. She sat as her aunt parted a small section of hair and oiled the part. Every closed her eyes and inhaled the acrid smoke from the steel-toothed comb being heated on the stove's eye. Next was the muffled thump of her aunt briefly placing the comb on a towel, a primitive attempt to regulate its heat. Eve's muscles clenched as Ann placed the fire-heated comb millimeters away from her scalp and pulled it through her tight curls until they were crisp and straight.

The weekly hair sessions could not help but place Every's thoughts on unanswered questions. After each press, she opened her eyes and stared across the kitchen to a wall of black and white photographs. Every's glance fell on one photograph in particular. Her gaze often lingered on the black and white of the smiling woman in the picture who resembled her so much. Rooted to her chair, her movements limited, and eyes only able to either stare ahead at the photographs or close and commit to a mental facsimile of the image, Every was in weekly communion with her unfamiliar heritage. The close physical proximity to the pictures and her

aunt hovering above her head with an enflamed comb was a unique torture. There was rarely any face or eye contact between Every and Ann, which made it easier for Every to ask those questions as if the thoughts belonged to her eyes, searching the photographs for hidden messages.

But her aunt's tidbits of information dried up. "Leave the past where it is, Every."

"Mama Ann, please!" She begged. "I'm old enough to know something more."

"Age don't got nothin' to do with it, Every." Ann tightened her lips. "Some things young and old just need to let lie."

"What things?" Every tried to turn her head but felt the heat of the hotcomb dangerously close.

"Hold still, Every." Ann hissed. "You know how you get when this grease burns you."

"Blame it on the grease."

"What?"

"Nothin," Every sighed. "What things need to let lie?"

"Hold still!"

"I am holding still." Silence swirled upward with the smoke from Eve's half-pressed hair. "Mama Ann?"

"I cain't tell you what I don't know, Every."

Every paused before delivering her final attempt, "But you know more than what you say."

"Well," Ann exhaled slowly, "let that be my cross to bear then."

Every dejectedly slid down into the chair. She'd been here before over the years, asking about her mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, if any, everybody, somebody, anybody. But Ann had to exorcise her own demons of the past, leaving Every with nothing but a sense of weightlessness.

“Sit up, baby,” her aunt spoke gently. “You should be happy you can make your own past. What you do from here on is up to you, Every.”

This was no consolation. Every sighed and stared at the woman in the photograph. In it, her mother was laughing and her pose, unlike the stoic, unsmiling ones of the other black and whites, was full of motion. Her hands rested protectively on her stomach and her head was slightly thrown back. She was seated in a wooden chair with one foot rested on its lower rung. Only her eyes, staring directly into the camera revealed that the shot was not candid, but intentional. It was as though the antiquated camera, in a feat to match that of its successors, had clearly caught Mercy in a fit of boisterous laughter. It was unblurred. If Every stared hard enough, she could see Mercy's skirt move slightly in the draft.

Every longed for the warmth of reminiscent feelings. Although she could think back on countless of activities with her aunt, her main memories involved the probing questions of her classmates during the earlier years of her childhood. “Ain't you got a daddy?” Not a daddy. Not an uncle. Ironically, the Mann family had a shortage of men. Thinking of her aunt's words advising that she was in control of her own life, Every began to make a very conscious step to enact that control.

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It is said that in the early 1960's, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad used a ghost buyer to purchase twenty-six homes in the southeast neighborhood of Avalon Park. The brick ranch-style houses and impressive Georgians were sprinkled in a quaint area extending eastward from Stony Island Avenue to the lakefront and ended south at the boundary of the Pill Hill neighborhood, so named for the number of white doctors residing there.

The purchase placed a Muhammad on nearly every block. As the Nation of Islam grew, so did the financial prosperity of the Muhammads and by extension, middle-class blacks who further integrated the neighborhood in the footsteps of their black Muslim neighbors. The flight of white residents from Avalon Park and Pill Hill, like other Chicago neighborhoods, presented an evolved segregation. 1965 brought the Chicago Freedom Movement, the collaborative effort of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Council to end slums in the city. While King moved his family into a North Lawndale slum in protest, Every and Ann were taking advantage of the south side's Muhammad legacy.

In 1965, Ann purchased one of the recently constructed, brick ranch homes. Every bragged about how "fly" it was to Nelle. Ann testified in church to how "blessed" she was to be just "a stone's throw down yonder from Pill Hill." She hadn't forgotten the sight of that boy hanging like a monkey in the Bronzeville playlot and felt that her niece needed to grow up with a yard of her own. Some place away from the dangers of the city and, in Ann's mind, little nappy-headed boys who would grow up to be hoodlums.

Every flourished in the house, dancing her baby fat into shapely features in front of the new black and white television to *Red, Hot and Blues*, the early show that featured in-studio black dancers and music, and a precursor to the infamous *Soul Train*. With the change of home

and school, and a figure that was more womanly than girlish, Every began to change. One evening while her aunt worked the hospital night shift, Every and Nelle snuck out to a basement party where she had her first kiss from a shy brown-skinned boy named Jericho. His lips were soft and she would've continued to press against them had she not been caught by the surprise of his tongue wiggling into her mouth. It was weird. It was wet. But later that night, it had been all that she could think of as she hugged her pillow and willed sleep to stifle the shivers that pulsed from her abdomen downward. This new confidence, nurtured by her friendship with Nelle and a burgeoning young, gifted and black climate was creating a desire for change.

She became Eve, successfully manipulating clerks at her new high school to lose the 'ry' in this record or that document, assuring them that it was one clerical error gone haywire. And who could doubt such a story? Who would ever name their child Every? Every Mann at that. She had endured the grade school teasing in her old neighborhood. By taking the subject "every man," they would use it in whatever horrid sentence imaginable. *She so fat cuz she ate every man. Which man? Every, man!* Then they would deny that they were referring to her, insisting to the teacher, "Not *her*, but every man like all men. I would *never* say something like *that* about *her*." But they did and far worse.

Eve wasn't attached to her name. Her name adaptation was trivial compared to the changes of the time. Chemically straightened hair was slowly being abandoned. Skirt hemlines were creeping higher. Surnames were replaced with X's to cease identification with ancestral slave names. Because Eve didn't know the origins of Every, she sought to distance herself from it. Eve stepped further away from the chubby, thick-haired girl who cringed at her name every time she sat in the straight-backed kitchen chair in front of the stove.

When Eve stopped questioning her aunt, Ann was grateful for the respite. All she wanted to do was raise her sister's child to be an upstanding, God-fearing woman who would not repeat the mistakes of her mother. Ann was afraid to answer her niece's questions. *When you shut the door to keep Satan out, you don't crack it open for a few questions.* The only thing that her niece needed to know was that her mother, Ann's sister, had died in childbirth and that she was her legal guardian. But the truth was that Ann didn't know how to package into words the visual of her sister, bleeding out on a hospital table and blabbering seemingly incoherent phrases. Nor did she know that her sister Mercy, looking up at those white faces in their surgical masks, died praying not for herself, nor for her child, but for the *Every man is a child of God* to which she felt a moribund connection. Ann could not communicate these things and so she took relief in the absence of her niece's inquiries.

Yet the questions hadn't disappeared from Eve's mind. They remained never too far from the surface, sharing space with adolescent thoughts of who could dance the best Watusi and who would be the first to buy the new Temptations album. Eve's adolescence ended amidst an increase in cultural tension throughout the city. A few months after they moved into their home, Malcolm X was killed. It was widely speculated that the Nation of Islam, from which he had recently been ex-communicated, had arranged his murder. The Muhumads in the twenty-six homes gave way to Johnsons, Williams', and Washingtons. By the time King was assassinated three years later, non-violent movements went the way of shirtwaist dresses and straightened hair.

### Chapter III: Motherless Child

In the mid-1960s, Chicago's racial landscape was taking on the dimensions to which it would cling well into the new millennium. Blacks were staking claim to southeast and west side neighborhoods. Southwestern pockets like Bridgeport – which laid claim to Comiskey Park (later renamed U.S. Cellular Field) home of the Chicago White Sox – remained largely populated by whites. Racially-motivated hate crimes encouraged blacks to avoid the area, and more than a few wondered if this was the motive for the mayor choosing to reside there.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Chicago in 1965, he targeted two white neighborhoods to stage protest marches against unfair real estate practices, Cicero – site of the prior decade's infamous race riot – and the southwestern neighborhood of Marquette Park. King's safety was entrusted to the Blackstone Rangers, both a street gang and political organization – a double consciousness that was non-existent in successor street gangs.

Lee Roy Duncan found a home with the Blackstone Rangers that provided a stability that had been missing in his own home. Raised by his paternal grandmother, he had felt the absence that the Rangers spoke of when recruiting men who were missing men in their lives. His grandmother was old and they moved around taking care of each other in the ways of people who care but really have nothing in common outside of their mutual responsibility for one another. Lee Roy's condition couldn't be reduced to a simple need for a father figure, or peers, or a mother; it was all of them or maybe even none of them. But when he wore the Rangers' trademark red beret and strolled through their Woodlawn neighborhood, he felt whole. He felt strength unparalleled in any other aspect of his life. He joined in their refrain, *“Look out, stranger. Here lurks danger, if you're not a Blackstone Ranger.”*

He could have stayed in that place forever locked in time, locked in brotherhood. But the Rangers were about progression and movement, even if their progression did not result in a political movement. They absorbed twenty-one local gangs and became the P. Stone Nation, symbolized by a twenty-one stone pyramid. What occurred afterwards was somewhat typical of large organizations: opinions differed, focus changed, and leaders split off into their own factions like the Islamic-based El Rukns. Street gangs dropped politics and picked up drug distribution. Criminal activity was no longer a means to an end. It was the means and the end. The drug game was not for Lee Roy. He needed something else. At twenty-five years old, he left for Savannah State College. He returned to Chicago five years later to attend his grandmother's funeral.

That day he sat in her small apartment and cried until his shoulders ached from convulsion. He cried harder than the time that his grandmother told him that his father wasn't coming home. Harder than he cried when she told him that his mother was a white woman – which was a fate like death to his seven-year old sensibilities. He cleaned his tear-streaked face and took the Cottage Grove bus to Leak Funeral Home.

A.R. Leak Funeral home had been laying out dead black people since 1933. Six years prior to Lee Roy's grandmother, Leak opened its doors to thousands who attended services for legendary soul singer Sam Cooke. The crowd swelled until it crushed the parlor windows and James Brown had to leave before paying his respects. There was no swollen throng of grievors at Lee Roy's grandmother's funeral. No Ray Charles to sing "Angels Keep Watch Over Me." Just Woodlawn neighbors, an organist and soloist singing "Trouble of the World" in a voice that was nothing like Mahalia Jackson's. It was too high to convey the trouble of the world as

tiresome and burdensome such that the decedent found relief in death. This soloist sang as if the trouble were manageable.

Lee Roy sat in the front pew feeling a loneliness that paled whatever he had felt that compelled him in those earlier years to join the Blackstone Rangers. Neighbors spoke of his grandmother in two-minute praises. Community organizations gave resolutions in her name. She was eulogized by a minister that Lee Roy did not know at a church that he had not attended. Then people filed in a line to his seat. They squeezed his shoulder. Embraced him in heavily powdered bosoms. Pressed envelopes into his hand. It was a parade of sympathetic brown eyes and then... a pair of blue ones.

He looked into a face that was so similar to his own, but much paler, that he knew it instantly. "Your grandmother was an amazing woman. She was more of a mother than I could have been, you know."

He was paralyzed. It wasn't until her gaze shifted to a teenage girl beside her that he blinked. She told the girl, "Go ahead." The girl had been clutching an envelope to her chest. Once receiving the woman's permission, she thrust the envelope into his hands.

"Sorry for your loss." The girl added shyly.

He nodded and watched them descend the aisle to the exit. Not knowing what to do with the experience, he filed it away like he did the unopened card when he returned to his grandmother's apartment. He loosened his tie and sat in the living room surrounded by people whom he hadn't called friends in six years. In the kitchen and dining room, women he didn't recognize bustled about, dishing food onto Dixie plates and cramming aluminum foil-covered dishes into the refrigerator.

The boys with whom he had once ran the streets of Woodlawn were, like him, now adult men but that is where their similarities ended. One kept refilling the plastic red cup in his hand. “This my nigga, right here!” he exclaimed, sloshing Crown Royal from the bottle to the cautioning cries of the others.

“Yeah,” he clasped Lee Roy on the shoulder nearly upsetting his drink. “Nigga all high falutin’ nah! Got hisself a shitload of degrees.” He beamed at Lee Roy who stared blankly back. “Man, we gon’ hafta call you Luh-Roy. You too sharp to be a Lee Roy.” The others murmured their agreement.

“Hey, Tiny, how long you gon’ hang on to that Crown, man? We thirsty over here.” As the bottle made its way across the room, Lee Roy felt his body relax and his mind numb. He found himself smiling and laughing with Tiny and the others. When they slipped into calling him Luh-Roy, he didn’t correct them.

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Brother LeRoi sat in his office. It was the two-year anniversary of his grandmother’s death. Later in the evening, he would meet his old neighborhood friends to toast her memory. He’d pick up a bottle of Crown Royal, knowing they would feign surprise and promise to grab the next one.

He thought of his students. There were those who diligently took notes, and would return with the requisite amount of information and would uncover enough “new” family history to have judged the course a success. Then there were the few who wouldn’t want to do the work. He’d find the class enrollment decreased by this number in the upcoming weeks. What he searched for were the ones that had more questions than answers. They came to his class

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searching because they had not found answers in the comforts of their own lives. Under his tutelage, they emerged from the cocoons of their own darkness into the knowledge of daylight. This is what he perceived as he waited for Eve Mann to arrive at his office.

There was a knock on the door, and when he said, “Come in,” he was only partially surprised to see pale skin and blond hair instead of the darker woman he had been expecting.

“Brother...” she began.

“I have an appointment,” he interrupted.

Unperturbed, she plopped into the chair across from his desk and dropped her macramé bag onto the floor. “Well, it’s not like you’ve allowed me to make an appointment. So I thought the element of surprise would be best.”

“Oh? And you felt you didn’t achieve that when you showed up for my class?”

“Brother...” she began.

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“Stop calling me that.”

“Why? Everyone else gets to. But I guess it’s just weird from me, huh?”

Brother LeRoi leaned back into his chair and exhaled. Perhaps he was going about things the wrong way. “Look, Amy, I guess I can understand things from your end. But this is not the way to forge a relationship with me.”

“So what would you suggest, Bro... I mean, professor?” She smirked.

Brother LeRoi removed his glasses and slowly cleaned the frames with one of the many lens cleaning cloths that he kept. “Drop the class, Amy. You don’t need to be here.”

Amy stood quickly, nearly upsetting the chair. She snatched her bag from the floor. “This isn’t fair. How can you be so hypocritical?”

“This whole thing has been unexpected. Just give me some time. We’ll talk.” He gave a reassuring smile.

“You promise?” Amy wavered.

He did not want to give her promises. He wanted to reject her like his mother had rejected him. But she was not his mother and he couldn’t take out the ambivalence that he felt towards his mother on her. “I promise.” He searched her face. “But I need you to drop this class.”

“Fine, but I’m not going anywhere.”

“Duly noted.”

Outside of the office, Eve listened and quickly jumped back upon hearing noise moving towards the door. When Brother LeRoi opened the door and ushered Amy out, his eyes rested on Eve’s. He wondered what, if anything, she had overheard. She entered and took a seat on the opposite side of his desk and they proceeded to play a game of manners, knowing but denying with their silence that they each had engaged some taboo.

Brother LeRoi was the first to speak. “So, you have concerns about the assignment?”

“Yes.” And now she had concerns about other things. His ethics. His personality. His taste in women. His professionalism. His commitment to the community.

He interrupted her thoughts. “What seems to be the problem?” The tension was palpable. He knew what she was thinking, or at least some version of it. They were employing a game of double talk. Inquiring on two levels of conversation.

“Well, it’s kind of personal...”

“I see.”

They were at a verbal standstill. Eve, unconvinced to share personal information. Brother LeRoi called to convince that he was deserving of such information. He tried a different tactic. “You know, whatever you discuss here with me is confidential. I can’t share your personal information with anyone.”

She smiled. This was a chess game and he had her in check mate. He couldn’t share her personal information, neither would he be able to share that of another student, a white one in particular. Eve relented. “I don’t have a family history to gather information from.”

“Well, that can’t be right. We all have family histories. Some, many in fact, just aren’t known to us. Is that your concern?”

“Sort of.” Eve inhaled and exhaled several times. She’d never discussed her feelings about her lack of family history to anyone other than Nelle.

“Please, go on.”

When Eve finally spoke, it all came out in a rush. She told him about her aunt and the little that she knew of her family, which only amounted to her mother’s death and her grandmother’s a while later from cancer. She searched his face for the hint of teasing that she had experienced as a child, for the sign of pity that she sometimes got from Nelle, for the irritability that her aunt often displayed. She found none of those things reflected back at her.

The information surged over Brother LeRoi. “Mother’s sister?”

Eve nodded.

“I assume,” he began but stopped himself. He did not want to make assumptions. History is buried for many reasons. When one digs, one must be ready for what may be uncovered. “Why are you here, Eve?”

“Because you told me to see you during office hours.”

Brother LeRoi raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” she said and took a moment to compose thoughts that had coalesced into the most intense desire of her life. “I’m here because I’m tired of not knowing. I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what it means. I sometimes feel as if I don’t know a very large part of myself.” The confession, in its unfamiliarity, brought unexpected tears.

Brother LeRoi handed her a tissue and busied himself cleaning his spotless glasses while Eve dabbed at her eyes. “Well, I can help you.”

“How?” she asked.

“In class we’ll be looking at many resources for gathering information outside of the family. I’m sure once your classmates start sharing their stories...”

Fear surged inside of Eve and she stood. “No. I can’t do this in class. It’s hard enough talking to you about it here. I can’t...”

Brother LeRoi stood with raised palms. “Okay, okay. Calm down. Have a seat. Let me think. I’ll think of something. Just, please...sit.” He handed her another tissue for the new batch of tears that threatened at the corners of her eyes. He pulled out a pack of chewing gum and held it towards her, “Juicy Fruit?”

Eve looked at Brother LeRoi, his eyes wide like a child fearful of losing something, and laughed. She took the gum and relaxed in spite of herself. She felt some strange kinship with him in this moment and wondered about his own story. Yet unlike Eve, Brother LeRoi had no questions. He knew his mother’s identity, had even met her briefly at his grandmother’s funeral. But there was nothing more that he cared to know about her. It was fully understood why a

white woman would give away a black child even at this moment in 1972, and it was understood even more when he was born, some thirty years prior. He felt that he had nothing to search for. But Eve's plight ignited his historian's thirst for a vicarious treasure hunt.

"Don't come to class," he said.

"What?" Her thoughts flashed back to the eavesdropped conversation and she feared that he might be telling her to drop the class.

"Don't come to class. This can be like an independent study. You can meet with me here once or twice a week." The idea came so suddenly, that it even took him by surprise.

"We can do that?" Eve wondered how many times he had offered this arrangement to other students and if his previous visitor had a similar agreement.

"Yeah. Yes we can." His voice deepened in an effort to appear more confident than he felt. There was doubt in his tone, but it was the hopefulness – previously foreign to her – to which she responded.

"Give me a few days to gather some helpful information for you," he added.

"What should I do in the meantime?"

"You live with your aunt?"

She nodded and he hesitated before continuing, aware of the implications of what he was about to recommend. "There's information in that house. Somewhere. You see, we hide things from others and ourselves. We don't want to see them, but we don't want to destroy them either. It's there, Eve, you just have to look." His own was still buried in an unopened envelope in a box in the back of a closet. Had it contained perishables, it would be foul-smelling and leaking. He regarded it as if it were such, from the scripted name which he no longer claimed written in

block letters across its front to the weighty thickness of its unknown contents. He thought of the hidden envelope even as he suggested to Eve that she violate her aunt's dark corners and closets. His hypocrisy was not lost on him and he recalled that he had just been accused of such by Amy.

Because Brother LeRoi and Eve didn't know what else to do – having shared what felt like too strong of an intimacy for their relationship – they shook hands. Determined to escape the sentiment foretold in the popular refrain of a Negro spiritual, “sometimes I feel like a motherless child,” they were two people living alternate versions of themselves -- from their conscious revisions of their names to their decisions to rewrite the life stories that they had been given to perform.

## Chapter IV: The Hillbilly Highway

The Hillbilly Highway included Interstate 75 and U.S. Route 23, running north-south between Jacksonville, Florida and Mackinaw City, Michigan. Migrants listed it as part of Three R's – reading, writing, and Route 23 – needed to leave Appalachia and make a home in the industrial urban cities of the midwest. They left Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia for Ohio, where they were called Briars. For most, The Hillbilly Highway ended in Dayton, Detroit, Columbus and Ashtabula. It ended in the automobile production companies of Detroit. It even snaked west and stopped in California. It ended in Chicago, where their arrival --a tangential line to the Great Migration -- was described by the press and police as a pestilence of immorality, uncleanliness, and heathenism upon the city. Confined to the same slum areas as blacks, few privileges were afforded them. Chicago, comfortable with its racial divides, was confounded by a lower class of people who, except for their deep accents, could not be distinguished and isolated from the middle and upper classes. Chicago had a hillbilly problem.

Contrary to the popular belief of the time, not all hillbillies were created equal. Race painted Appalachian regions as it did the rest of the country. Even the Hillbilly Highway had its colored paths as whites mostly migrated into Ohio and Pittsburgh and black Appalachians landed in cities like Detroit and Baltimore. Yet some of the black Appalachians were not, in fact, black. Melungeon was an early 1800's slur for families with darker skin that resided on the Tennessee-Virginia border. These dark-skinned Appalachians were considered free people of color. They paid taxes, voted, and owned property.

Melungeons claimed to be descendants of Portuguese explorers of the continent. Their stories were of ancestors who settled it hundreds of years before Columbus's arrival. They were the natives who survived white nationhood. They were the friendly "Indians" who had intermarried with European colonists. They were of Turkish blood. Of Gypsy lineage. Melungeons were black in complexion and ethnicity, but they were not ever to be black in race. Then the Mine Wars started. Coal companies, primary employers in the region, fought against unionization. Mechanical loaders revolutionized deep mining and displaced most of the workers. Pension funds were overwhelmed. No longer able to afford to live in the wasteland of coal production byproduct and stench, they left in a white, black, Melungeon exodus from their Appalachian home states. Their out-migration introduced the people of Appalachia to the rest of the country. It was not a kind introduction. It was as if the Hillbilly Highway issued Melungeons a passport into Negrohood. Its most relevant visa stamp was the letter hidden in Brother LeRoi's closet.

It would have been an easy task for Brother LeRoi to burn his mother's letter. He could have thrown it out on trash collection day and most assuredly never have come in contact with it again. He could have used it as kindling and set it ablaze during one of the community cookouts. Shredded it and flushed the fragments down someone else's commode. Heaven forbid a paper floater claim determined resilience in his own toilet. But people have a habit of hiding things that they wished never existed. When faced with possessing what could arguably be the very key to their physical, emotional, mental undoing, something prevents them from destroying it.

So LeRoi didn't discard it, nor did he open it. Not that either mattered when the information contained in its pages sauntered into his classroom, pressured him to meet, and

presently sat across from him in a small southside coffeeshop. Amy generously poured cream into her tea until it mirrored the milky dusk complexion of LeRoi. She rambled about school and witnessing northside racism as if her first meeting jitters compelled her into a false sense of familiarity. LeRoi waved away the proffered cream and silently sipped his coffee. His thoughts drifted to the price of coffee which had steadily increased over the past decade. His attention pushed away towards the South American farmers who produced the beans and snapped back as Amy continued.

“And mama's been a little under the weather...”

LeRoi frowned but said nothing.

Amy's brow creased. “Don't you even care to hear about your mother?”

LeRoi slowly set his mug on the table. “The woman who mothered me died several years ago.”

“Yeah, your grandmother but...”

LeRoi interrupted. “There is no but.”

Amy sighed. “I'm sorry. I...”

LeRoi held up his hand. “What is it exactly that you think I can do for you, Amy?”

She smiled widely. “Actually, it's what I can do for you.”

“What does that mean?” LeRoi sneered. His thoughts were on unwanted trust funds and family relics. Perhaps his mother was dying and needed an organ donation. He did not want to give to them or receive from them. Not that he had choice in the matter.

“Have you ever heard of the Melungeons?” Amy asked and then it did not matter at all how long their mother's letter had been wedged into the recesses of LeRoi's closet. The letter

was an errant thread which threatened to unravel the entirety of a garment. In a most callous well-intentioned act, Amy opened her mouth and freed its contents. She released his parents, LeAnna and Roy.

There's was no love story. It was not the strangulation of young love by feuding families. Nor was it the controversial tale of taboo miscegenation between a president and his slave mistress. They were not even an Othello and Desdemona. LeAnna and Roy hadn't had much of a chance to be anything more than two equally poor teenagers working the same land that neither of their families owned. Whites had simply been too poor to segregate themselves from their black counterparts. Poverty may have made better neighbors than good fences. Between white and black lived the Melungeons, isolated on a ridge just beyond the small town of Sneedville, Tennessee. Their features varied, as did the curl patterns of their hair. They were any combination of pale, olive, bronze, brown complexion and kinky, curly, wavy straight hair.

Nowhere were these variations more present than in Roy's own family. His widowed mother Clara was buttermilk in tone with a broad nose and full lips. Both brothers possessed olive skin associated with those from the Mediterranean and straight hair. Roy was as brown as the Tennessee soil on which they lived with hair that curled against his scalp when short and became fuzzy if left untended. His father had been a dark man. So dark that he had been thought to be black. Unable to prove his Melungeon heritage, the family had been excommunicated from the community and forced to relocate to the bottom of the ridge. Clara had violated a fundamental basis of Melungeon freedom: the distinction between them and Negro. Melungeons best resembled those with whom they were in close proximity. It was no wonder that they tended to marry their white neighbors and lighter variations of their own race.

LeAnna and Roy did not fall in love, nor did they fall in lust. Their fall was in fear. They were not colorblind, for such a thing does not exist. LeAnna, did not just notice the expanse of Roy's muscles. She reveled in the contrast, the coloring within his body lines. Roy as her polar opposite – male and dark. While Roy could not see her absent the paleness. Color had been such a part of their lives that it certainly must have infiltrated their attraction. Yet they shared the same heritage. Their most recent ancestors had successfully argued in early court cases that they were not of the Negro race. It allowed them to remain free as many of the same skin complexion were enslaved and subsequently legally discriminated against during LeAnna and Roy's time. Their freedom came with a shadow that Roy knew all too well -- a constant threat of it being upended should there be one dark smudge on the Melungeon lineage. They were Melungeon, but Roy -- with his dark skin and coiled hair – was a dead vine on the tree.

LeAnna and Roy didn't make eyes at each other as they passed in town. They didn't carve hearts with their initials in trees. They ended up at the same place and the same time in a manner beyond them arriving at Mullens Field at a specific time of evening. Rather they both were running from the inescapability of their lives on the ridge. The expectation of being Melungeon and the realities of propagating an ethnicity that seemed only to exist in Appalachia. They were trapped.

LeAnna often snuck out of the house to sleep under the stars. It wasn't a romantic engagement with nature. She fled because she had exhausted all of her resources to keep her drunken uncle from entering her room in the night. She found a haven in the field they sharecropped. Shrouding her thoughts of leaving the ridge in the darkness of night, LeAnna wondered if her history would exist outside of the ridge. What would she be? She wasn't white

or black. Would she only be what she appeared as to whomever looked upon her? Would they take in the straightness of her hair and grayness of her eyes and code her as white?

Mullens Field similarly harbored Roy and his feelings of stagnation. The ridge simultaneously labeled his dark skin as problematic and protected him from the harsh realities of American blackness circa 1940. He could be relatively safe if he remained at the bowels of the ridge. Yet the knowledge that his station was tied to the complexion of a mate and children, since his own already counted against him, kept him up nights and visiting the field. Since work at the mines had been greatly reduced, many were packing up and leaving the ridge. He worried about what could happen if he left. Roy's thoughts were that on the ridge, he *might* be black. Away from it, he'd be nothing other than it. He'd be nothing other. He'd be nothing. Some nights as Roy sat silently gazing at the stars, LeAnna slept soundlessly across the field -- each unaware of the other's presence.

Until one night, the sky opened. Lightening illuminated the field in bursts of near daytime intensity. A deluge of rain and thunder accompanied it. LeAnna was afraid of lightening. It reminded her the times that her uncle crept into her room, shining a blinding flashlight in her face. He'd smile. *Just a joke, baby girl.* His eyes lingered on her. *But you ain't a baby no more, is you?*

Roy feared thunder. It sounded like shotgun blasts, and snapped the sky like a whip crack. He thought of the loud noises in the night that often accompany the deaths of colored men in the south, even within the purview of the ridge. He shuddered and although the sounds were escorted by flashes of light, Roy was not entirely convinced that some dark body was not being brutalized by the sounds. He stood, eyes scanning the horizon for lynch mob shadows. They

landed on LeAnna and his first thought was that his imagined vigilante posse was just a premonition because it didn't get much dire than being a dark man in a field with a soaking wet white-enough woman. He resigned himself to the fate of being a dead man, already tried and punished for whatever did, could, or was about to happen.

Hail fell or hell fell. It was all the same to LeAnna and Roy as they moved towards each other, hurried along by a fear of everything outside of themselves. Their progress was revealed in flashes of lightening. Their mud-caked footfalls silenced by thunder. They clung to each other until all that remained was night and a steady rain.

She kissed him. She didn't know why but she did. He responded. They, who moments earlier lamented the constraints of their lives, cast them off in the first way that presented itself. Without speaking, they disrobed slowly. They reached for each other because there was no one else there...to reach for...and there was no one else to see them reach. They were young birds exercising their wings before attempting flight. Their same time and place was one night's moment of freedom. Then light returned and so did they to what they were.

LeAnna's family did not care about the origins of her stomach bump. Some figured the uncle had finally won. Others chalked it up to the inevitable result and purpose of menstruation. What mattered, and what eventually incited the questions, was their concern about where this latest addition would sleep in their already overcrowded three room shack. Marriage suggestions brought inquiries and her silence, first was denounced as shame for being a spurned lover and then began to cause greater concern amongst her relatives. Not who's baby, but what baby was in her stomach.

She was eight months swollen and constricted by her nightgown the next time that her uncle visited her bedroom. Because LeAnna was on her right side, facing away from the door, she didn't hear him enter. There was the click, click, click of his flashlight and depression of the bed as he lowered himself on it. He placed a hand on her stomach.

“What's in here?” He hissed in her ear.

“My baby.” LeAnna whispered.

“What's it gon' look like? Ain't gon' look like me, is it?”

Moisture spread from her. Her uncle dabbed it with his fingers. He knew before she did. Her water had broken. He ran a hand through his sweaty black hair. “Imma go wake your momma.”

LeAnna faced the door and wiped her face of tears. Pulling herself up, she slid her bare feet into workboots and shuffled out of the house as quickly as her contracting body would allow.

When she knocked on the door, she was in full labor and could only manage to gasp in front of the older black woman who opened the door. Brown faces peered at her. The youngest with curiosity and the oldest with fear. LeAnna's eyes found Roy's and he reached for her and guided her into the room he shared with his two brothers. His mother Clara followed, soon ushering everyone else from the small bedroom, barking orders for towels and hot water before staring at Roy, her eldest son, with such despair then closing the door in his face, isolating her and LeAnna from the rest of the house.

It was five hours before the door opened, bringing the shrill sound of a crying newborn. The baby entered the world swathed in fresh sheets laundered for middle class white women by his paternal grandmother Clara, the woman who would raise him. He lie nestled against

LeAnna while Roy sat beside them. The fear was palpable in the house. They noted his pale hue, aware that color darkens as infants age, before counting his tiny fingers and toes.

Baby Leroy, later known as Brother LeRoi, darkened and their fate was attuned to it. When he reached the color of cinnamon they knew that they would not ascend up the ridge. Roy and his family wouldn't return to the Melungeon community and LeAnna would be similarly expelled from it. They would leave like so many others had on the Hillbilly Highway.

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With great flourish, Amy sat across from her half-brother LeRoi and announced, "You're not black. You're Melungeon. We both are. We're the same, LeRoi. The exact same."

Brother LeRoi laughed. He belted out a deep guttural chortle that shook the table and caused a questioning glare from Amy.

LeRoi didn't need to hear the details of his mother and father's migration from Appalachia. He had no knowledge of their multiple stops along the way and how many places refused them service and entry. LeRoi didn't need to know about the final time his father Roy claimed not to be Negro to two white men at a filling station not far outside of their Tennessee home.

"Nigger says he ain't a nigger."

"What kind of nigger is he?"

"Whatever kind of nigger he is it comes with a nigger lover." One nodded his head towards LeAnna seated in the pickup truck.

"That right?" The other answered.

They beat the Melungeon out of him. When Roy arrived with his family in Chicago, he was Negro and LeAnna was white. The only way for them to live was apart as pegs pressed into the holes where they closest fit.

Amy began to repeat, "You're not black. You're descendant of..."

LeRoi grabbed her hand inciting an audible gasp to the mostly white patrons around them in the coffeeshop. A white man seated across from them half-rose until LeRoi removed his hand and stood.

"Right." LeRoi winked at her. He tossed enough money to cover his coffee and her tea on the table and left.

## Chapter V: Marie Laveau

The past is not so much hidden as it is buried by people's shame. They tuck it away as unopened envelopes in the far recesses of dark closets. They cram it into crawlspaces, faded chifferobes, and dusty basement storage areas. People bury the past like Edgar Allan Poe narrators – beneath floorboards and behind bricked walls, often still alive. Still relevant. To them, still shameful. In its conspicuous absence they weave stories, first omissions that absolve them of their deceit. Then tall tales that glorify their presence. This faux past weaves its way into historical narrative like a wolf straining the downy white seams of a sheep's clothing.

It is rumored that New Orleans Voudou Priestess Marie Laveau lived an unnaturally long life and bore fifteen children. Her life has been heavily sensationalized and fictionalized in works that purport to present the past. But how many Marie Laveaus are being pressed into a single narrative? Marie Laveau I – born around 1800 – had two sisters also named Marie Laveau. She had five children but only two survived infancy. They too were named Marie Laveau – Marie Eucharist Heloise Laveau, known as Marie the Second and Marie Philomene Laveau. Each of these second wave Marie Laveaus had five children.

Written record is privileged over oral tradition, and in the burying of the past it is the written word that must be plunged into hiding. It opens itself up to the reader, formed and solid. Nothing changes it. While the spoken history is in constant manipulation by the speaker. New tone. New emphasis. New words. New omissions. New additions. Marie Laveau II, the eldest, continued her mother's work and perpetuated the rumors and folklore attributed to her mother in an effort to continue the legacy and create a distance between the real Marie Laveau and the not always accurate legacy.

Several generations later and far from New Orleans, the only magic that Janette Marie Laveau Baptiste possessed was in her ability to bewitch male suitors – a skill that she sought to instill in her daughter Nelle, hoping that Nelle’s own Laveau magic would supply the missing element required to maintain it. For Janette Marie Laveau could charm men into her life, but nothing that she had could entreat them to remain there. Her husband, Nelle’s father, had disappeared shortly after Nelle’s birth. But it was no Laveau magic that vanquished him. In their neighborhood, single-parent households were not rare. Some men had left pregnant wives and girlfriends while they looked westward for better work. Births occurred in their absence. A few men made it through their offsprings’ early childhood years, only to disappear after a quick run to the store for cigarettes... or in the dead of the night... or with another woman... or after being threatened by the local dope man... loan shark... gangster. Frederick Baptiste, Nelle’s father, had a penchant for all three – heroine, borrowing money that he could never repay, and gambling with borrowed money. He’d have been lucky to have made it west for work or to have found love in the arms of another because chances were good that Frederick Baptiste started spending Nelle’s formative years at the bottom of a shallow grave.

About the time that Nelle befriended Eve, her mother had taken up with a man called June Bug. *Uncle* June Bug to Nelle, who had acquired many temporary uncles over the course of her young life. She had had Uncle Paul, Uncle Harry, and Uncle Harold; and Nelle was growing tired of sharing her mother. She was tired in the way of young girls who feel more than they are able to yet comprehend.

Yet her mother had managed to hold on to June Bug for three years -- although to those who observed them, it wasn’t a feat of difficulty or merit. June Bug rarely worked. He was a

man of small stature who compensated for it with a loud voice and a lot of talk. He was always tapping a foot or fidgeting with his hands. His eyes, which often darted fervently around the room, fixed themselves on ten-year old Nelle. Janette Marie Laveau immediately took notice of his notice.

June Bug liked women who were so light-skinned that they could be called white; so enamored with love that they could be manipulated; and so young that they could be called girls. With Nelle's mother, he had found two out of the three. June Bug considered himself to be a pioneer of sorts. Yet he lacked the actual motivation and follow through to make any strides in any movements of racial or political importance. Seated at the dinner table of Janette and Nelle's small apartment, he dismissed his lack of involvement when the conversation turned to civil rights.

"I leave all that marchin' shit to Martin Kang and 'nem." He chuckled and took a swig of Night Train.

"You know they're always looking for men to help out." Janette scooped a spoon of mashed potatoes from the bowl to refill her plate.

June Bug shoved his plate above Janette's and she plopped the last of them onto his plate instead of her own. "Well it ain't gonna be me. You see that nigga got hit with a brick? Shiiiiiiit, that wouldn't be my ass!"

"Who got hit with a brick?" Nelle asked. They looked at her, temporarily having forgotten that she was at the table.

"Martin Luther the Kang." June Bug answered and laughed. "That nigga got smooth busted upside his head."

“June...” Janette interrupted.

June Bug swallowed a mouthful of potatoes and glared at Janette. Her eyes lowered slightly. “Baby, I just don’t think she needs to be hearing about all that violence.”

“You right,” June Bug responded. “You just don’t think.”

Tension crept in like the draft that chilled the remaining green peas into coagulation on Nelle’s plate. “May I be excused?” She asked.

“Hell nawl,” June Bug answered before Janette could respond. “You asked a question and I got answers for you. Now, your mama wanna keep you shielded from all the shit in the world. But I’m a man, and I know what you need to prepare you for the shit that’s out there.”

Male companionship was important to Janette. She took great pains to maintain her physical appearance and stressed the importance of proper care to her daughter. That said, having a daughter – a biological legacy to receive and continue the life’s lessons which at the time of Janette’s generation of Marie Laveaus had withered down to physical vanity – was of the utmost importance. And although Janette was missing the conscious cultural, spiritual, and political substance of Marie Laveau, she did possess the feeling that compelled her to protect and propagate the essence of her ancestor contained in dreams that she did not fully understand and intuitions that she blindly followed. June Bug’s beady eyes had penetrated her daughter, and Janette intended to make sure that nothing else of his would do the same.

One day as she braided Nelle’s hair, she asked, “Nelle, has June Bug put his hands on you?”

“Has he hit me?”

“Nooo...” Janette drew out the query.

“Um, he touched my hair one day. Said it looked nice?” Nelle raised the pitch of her voice towards the end, still reaching for a suitable answer.

“That all?”

“Yeah, mama,” Nelle answered slowly, her mind raced. Their mother-daughter bonding time had gradually been reduced to weekly hair braiding sessions. Her ten-year old brain reached for something that would prolong the rare moment in which her mother showed some interest. She thought of the way June Bug’s beady eyes lingered over the softening places of her body. How he stuck out his tongue at her when her mother wasn’t looking, and made it wiggle suggestively of things that she wouldn’t be aware of until years past. Without touch, he had made her feel soiled and aggrieved in a way that she could barely comprehend much less communicate to her mother. So she did what girls often do when they are negotiating a space beyond their years. Nelle lied. The words slipped from her mouth without the benefit of foresight as she described a scene that was a masala of eavesdropping on her mother’s phone conversations and of sneaking to read pulp romance novels with Eve in her basement.

Had Janette not been so incensed, she would have been able to discern the lie with its obvious fantastical elements and omissions of the less romanticized elements of first-time sexual experience that every girl remembers. But Janette did not hear the words as much as invent them to accompany the visual image that etched itself inside of her head. An image of June Bug and her little girl. An electric current of tension shot from Janette’s fingers into her daughter’s hair follicles.

Nelle reached up and tenderly touched her scalp, “Ow, mama. Not so tight.”

Janette relaxed her hands, leaned down and kissed the back of Nelle's head, "Sorry, baby." She rubbed oil onto the parts that she'd made in Nelle's hair, placing particular care on those that were reddening. "You gonna go stay with your friend Eve and her aunt for a little while, ok."

"Why?" Nelle asked. Her heart raced with panic and she grew anxious that the lie would bring Janette closer to June Bug instead of closer to her.

Janette thumped the back of Nelle's scalp where moments earlier she'd planted a kiss. "Don't you worry me! You just do as I say. You hear me, Nelle Marie?"

Nelle placed a hand on her sore head. "Yes, mama."

They sat in silence as Janette continued to braid Nelle's hair; yet her mind refused to be silent. Her hands worked through her daughter's long tresses on muscle memory and her thoughts turned to that unknown ancestor of which she knew so little. Even the stories and speculation of her lineage had been so distant that they appeared more rumor than truth. She wished for it to be true. She longed to be able to take care of things, as Marie Laveau had.

No one knows what happened to the first man that Marie Laveau married. He disappeared into the creole-thickened New Orleans air and was never heard from again. A death certificate was issued years later, although no body was found. There was no inquiry. It had been a thing that was taken care of in the way women have been known to take care of things. Almost magical in its mystery and craft. Yet, something of it remains. It must, because nothing ever truly disappears into nothingness. There are bones to be buried. Trinkets to be stashed. Souls to be exorcised. Laveau's first husband was never found, not that anyone dared to look for him, yet in its stead, looms the disappearance itself.

While Janette silently plotted June Bug's exit from their lives, Nelle couldn't wait to share the recent developments in her household with Eve. They would escape to the basement of Eve's house, where all secrets were shared, and exchange ideas about the adult world within its cold concrete walls.

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Years later, the basement walls had been insulated for warmth and covered in wood paneling. Although they were better equipped for keeping secrets, none had been told between Eve and Nelle in quite some time. Still the closest of friends, the dismissively classified 'separate paths' had redefined closeness. It was apparent in the stiff one-armed hug that Eve gave Nelle when she entered the house. Nelle briefly pressed her cheek against Eve's and they both pulled apart, relieved to be done with a ritual that had become archaic to their friendship.

The living room had changed little since they were girls. Ceramic elephants littered the surfaces of the faux fireplace's mantel. They threatened to burst from the glass curio cabinet. They loomed majestically from several paintings on the walls. They had doubled in number since the time of Nelle's two-week stay while her mother rid the world of June Bug. Elephants have long memories.

Nelle eased past Eve into the living room's interior just as Ann arrived there from her own room down the hall. Ann welcomed her in a warm embrace. "Nelle! I been asking Every where you been."

"Hey, Miss Ann. It's good to see you. How you feeling these days?"

“Oh, I’m fair de middlin’.” Ann slipped into the familiar drawl of the south reserved for home. The tension Nelle felt moments earlier eased. Ann reminded Nelle of the south where the weather, food, and people were all warm and soothing. “How’s your mama?”

Nelle smiled. “Oh, you know mama, Miss Ann. Looking for a new husband.”

Ann and Nelle’s chuckles drifted conspiratorially into a simultaneous “hmph.” Eve brushed past them and walked down the hall, through the kitchen to the basement stairs. She paused and turned her head back slightly, “You coming?”

“What y’all gotta be runnin’ down to the basement for at this age?” Ann asked, nervously clutching Nelle’s arm. “I know y’all don’t have little girl secrets still.”

Eve sighed. “We already talked about this, Mama Ann.”

“But, Every...” Ann began to protest but thought better of it.

Nelle reassuringly patted Ann’s hand before detaching and excusing herself to quickly follow Eve down the stairs. Ann reluctantly returned to her bedroom and the Harlequin romance book that awaited her.

In the basement boxes of varying sizes had been pulled from the storage room at the rear and now sat in rows blocking sofa and loveseat. They sat atop the wooden card table. They leaned against the secretariat and perched haphazardly on the mahogany floor model television.

Nelle pressed Eve for more information on their goal. “So you’re just gonna go through her personal things then?” Although it was apparent that Eve had already begun her search. Some boxes were open, their contents spilled out in front of them like eviscerated organs.

“What other choice do I have?” Eve defended as she tossed two pillows with stitched images of elephants.

“You could try talking to her again.”

“I’ve been trying to talk to her about this ever since I could talk!” Eve lowered her voice. “Funny you giving advice on talking to parents.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nelle frowned and in the manner of carrying multiple conversations simultaneously, she added, “What are we even looking for?”

Eve searched her brain to remember information from her meetings with Brother LeRoi. “Letters. Photographs. Obituaries.” Then added, “And you know exactly what it means.”

Nelle sat on one box and began rummaging through its neighbor. More elephants. Little bags with elephant earrings and broaches, gifts that were too ornate for Ann’s prudish tastes. A dark purple Crown Royal bag stuffed with other balled up velvety Crown Royal bags. Nelle held up a small, glass elephant figurine and peered at Eve through its translucence. “So we’re finally going to talk about the elephant in the room?”

Eve suppressed the chuckle that threatened the seriousness of the mood, “So, you want me to talk to Mama Ann, which I’ve done practically all my life, but you haven’t given so much as a whimper to Miss Janette about yourself.”

Nelle’s face twisted. “It ain’t her business.”

“No? She seems to think it’s her business to get you married off to some Billy D. Williams. It’d save her a whole lot of trouble if you just told her.” Eve smirked. The onus of the conversation had switched and she gladly shared the guilt of conversational omission. Their conversation overtook their initial task and neither noticed as they pilfered through the boxes that they had entered the age of the owl, the elephant’s predecessor. They had ceased to unwrap the newspaper bundled trinkets, assuming them all to be elephants. They were too engrossed in

personal conflict to read the newspapers that had been repurposed as wrapping paper. Nelle missed reading about the “accidental death” of one Jesse “June Bug” Birch in the Chicago Defender dated twelve years prior. The words “June Bug” nestled in the palm of her hand as she replaced the wrapped owl with moveable beaded eyes into the box. A small sound escaped as the eyes shook in their plastic sockets, but neither Nelle nor Eve heard.

“Told her what?” Nelle feigned innocence and Eve was taken aback. She looked around but had no reply. Nelle smirked. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. You wanna talk about it? ‘Cause I’d love to talk about my life with my best friend who completely lost interest in it once I told her I was a lesbian.”

Eve’s eyes widened and Nelle’s confidence bolstered. “Yeah, I can say it. I can say it all day long and you’d be used to hearing it by now if you quit acting like that part of me didn’t exist. Don’t you even care?”

“I care about you, Nelle. But...”

“But?”

“But I just don’t care to hear about *that*.” Eve’s words swirled around them commanding time to slow itself just enough so that they could float weightlessly between an intake of breath and its inevitable exhale. They spread themselves amidst the boxes of the storage room, climbed the shelves of the storage racks, and stole away into the cedar closet snuggling with quilts and spare pillows. The words filled the small storage room so that there seemed little room for Eve and Nelle. Little room for conversation, so they continued to rummage through boxes in silence. Eventually it seemed not enough space for the words themselves, and they drifted upward to a

vent and slid through its evenly cut slits into the aluminum shaft that circulated cold air in the summer and heat in the winter to various parts of the house.

Unknown to Eve and Nelle, the vents distributed more than air. Sound, too, traveled through the air shafts and it was in this way that their words reached Ann as she sat reading her romance novel in her room. It was no secret to Ann that the vents served as the house's informal intercom system. Actually, it was more listening device than intercom, as sound seemed to only be interested in traveling upward from the basement and not the reverse. Ann had made sure years ago, after discovering that she could hear her niece's basement activities, that it was a one-way transmission. It had always served as a secret resource like so many others to which only parents and guardians are privy that reinforce their omniscience in their children's lives.

Through the years Ann had learned more about her niece from eavesdropping than actual conversation with Eve. She listened as Eve described her first kiss to Nelle with a boy named Jericho. Eve had been surprised by an uncannily random talk about the sexual motivations of teenage boys. She shakily listened to details of Eve's first sexual experience and the following day Eve found a pack of Trojan condoms on her bed with the note: better safe than sorry. Eve had been more disturbed by the note than the condoms, which she had immediately discarded. Her aunt was an unwanted presence in her sexual acts. But she had kept the note, rereading it nearly every day for months and wondering whether her birth had been a sorry consequence of sex. Eve hadn't asked her aunt for clarification. Their cycle of indirect communication continued with Ann listening through the bedroom vent to Eve's life and commenting on it in ways which she felt were appropriate, and Eve in turn adding those comments to the growing list

of questions that she had about herself, her aunt, and what intersections, if any, existed between their lives.

As Eve and Nelle sat in the basement, Ann received their conversation as disembodied voices floating into her room. There were no elephants or owls in Ann's room. There were no trinkets or figurines. No photographs. No knick knacks. The bed was a modestly full size. She had a white nightstand, white dresser, and white chest of drawers. Everything else – from the curtains to the bedspread, from the throw pillows to the carpet – was some shade of green. Celery-colored doilies adorned the furniture. Forest green pillows were carefully arranged on top of a mint green duvet. Pastel, blue-green, olive and asparagus hues leapt at the eye from different items.

Ann placed the laminated bookmark that she had received from church during Lent between the pages of her romance novel –which she had previously learned through the vent conversations was called “Mama Ann’s soft porn” by her niece. The quote on her bookmark was taken from the book of Mark, chapter one verse thirteen, “And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered unto him.” The biblical quote pressed between pages that included, “she could feel the palpitations of his throbbing manhood against her and could no longer resist unbridling her own passion.” And so temptation existed in a strange space with Christ and two others in a dance of resistance and surrender. Ann placed the book face down on the bed and gave her attention to the vent. She thought that it was no wonder Nelle had turned into a lesbian after the June Bug fiasco. Ann was just relieved that Eve hadn’t “turned funny.” There was bad blood in every family. She had tried

to share some information with Eve the last time she asked. She had hoped that it would satisfy Eve's curiosity. But her version of events was truncated.

Eve's voice rose through the vents. The cadence was so much like that of the mother Eve had never known. At times, Ann would close her eyes when Eve spoke, and she could see her sister Mercy as clear as day in her mind's eye. It seemed to her that Eve was becoming more and more like Mercy, and Ann couldn't understand how it was possible. Ann always thought of her sister Mercy particularly during the times that Eve and Nelle were huddled together in the basement. She had told Eve that Mercy had come to Chicago pregnant and disgraced. *We had some people up this way, and your mama came for a fresh start, I suppose.* But now Ann allowed her thoughts to travel backwards past Mercy's death, past Eve's birth, past Chicago to Macon County, Georgia in 1950.

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Sixteen year old Ann crept silently through the woods keeping a careful eye on her target, the two giggling girls weaving their way around the trees. She was tired of having to always look out for Mercy, who still seemed too young for her years in so many ways. There were chores to finish. Yet when Ann looked out of the kitchen window to see how Mercy was coming along, she found the back stoop empty. Instead of cleaning the catfish that Uncle Cornelius had dropped off for them, Mercy was trolloping through the woods with her friend Geneva Thompson.

It didn't matter how many times Ann caught her sneaking off from her chores. Their mother's punishment didn't even seem to set Mercy back in her place. Mercy acted as if whatever she was getting herself into was worth all the trouble. She didn't even get mad at Ann

for telling on her. In fact, she was nice towards her older sister. Ann could not help but think that maybe Mercy felt sorry for her, which did not make Ann feel any better. She did not want Mercy's pity.

Ann continued following at a safe distance. She didn't have to worry about being quiet. Mercy and Geneva were in their own world, singing and swinging around the trees. Ann wondered where they were going. An abandoned shack loomed ahead, and the girls raced towards it. Geneva reached it first and jumped up and down shouting, "I won! I won!"

Mercy panted beside her. " 'Bout time. I guess I got tired of winnin'."

"Oh no you don't, Mercy Mann!" Geneva argued. "Don't even think 'bout tryin' to say you let me win."

Mercy grinned. "Naw, you won alright. Let's go in and you can git yo' prize." They hurried into the shack.

Ann wasn't sure what to do next. There were things that she needed to finish before their mother returned from her work at the church. If Mercy continued to play around, then Ann would also have to do her chores too. But the chores were not the biggest thought in her mind at the moment. She wondered what prizes Ann and Geneva exchanged. Maybe she could stay a little longer and peek through one of the windows.

Her decision made, Ann made her way to the back of the shack and peered into the darkness. As her eyes became fixed to the dark, she gazed around the space. She recognized a quilt from their house spread across the floor. There was an oil lamp and stacked wood was being used as a table. Ann and Geneva sat in the middle of quilt.

“C’mon, Mercy.” Geneva scooted closer to Mercy, and Ann frowned as her view was blocked. She heard them giggle but could only see their backs.

Ann racked her brain to figure out what the prize could be. She wondered if it was the cookies that she baked. She became incensed with the mere thought of it. Her fists tightened against the wall of the shack. Finally Geneva moved slightly creating a gap between her and Mercy and there was a break for for Ann's line of vision. Ann breathed a sigh of relief. There were no cookies present but moments later, she wished that there had been. Her breath caught in her throat. Eyes and mouth agape, she stared unbelievably at her sister and Geneva with their arms wrapped around each other and their lips pressed together like how she imagined hers with her unrequited love, James.

Her mind ran through the usual intimacy exemptions: women sometimes kiss each other to say hello. Sometimes it’s to say goodbye. But none made the uneasiness building in the pit of her stomach subside. She could not look away and began to count in her head. *One, two, three...* And the realization that women don’t kiss each other that long. *Seven, eight, nine...* brought the thought that only husbands and wives kiss like that.

Ann's mind latched on to one of the foremost principles in the bible belt south, that intimacy was between men and wives, and even then only belonged in private thoughts and holy matrimony. It did not belong in a shack, in the woods of their property where Mercy and Geneva sat with their lips pressed together. *Oh, God, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen...* Ann hated her sister with more power than she had known existed. Hatred incubated in their sibling rivalry and fed on Ann's resentment for being older and more mature; for having to complete Mercy's chores when she left them unfinished; and for being invisible to James while he pined for Mercy.

Hatred coursed through her body and pulsated violently. She bit down on her lip in an effort to regain control. She tasted blood and tears.

“Eighteen! Nineteen! Twenty!” Ann's rage found voice and Mercy and Geneva were startled out of their kiss. It was a disturbing image, Ann immobile and enraged with a trail of blood on her chin and eyes glossy.

Inside of the shack, Geneva's mouth froze in a cartoonish circle as she expelled an “Oh God!” The words released Ann and she fled through the trees. She was running, panting, without thought but moving instinctively towards home. Branches scratched at every bit of skin exposed by her sleeveless sundress. Her ears attuned to the sounds of twigs snapping behind her revealing Mercy's pursuit. Ann pressed harder allowing her anger to fuel her pumping arms and burning thighs. Her toe impacted something hard. Before she could process the pain, she felt herself falling.

The memory was a haunting dream for Ann, and it took several moments to calm her breathing and return to the present moment. Scientists say that the brain doesn't distinguish between memory of an event and its actual occurrence, and thus to remember is to re-live. Re-experience. Re-inflict. Ann sat amidst her tossed green covers and willed away Mercy's voice from her head as she slowly left Georgia behind. It all had nearly disappeared when that same voice, more ghostly than ever, seeped through the vents and returned her attention to Eve and Nelle in the basement – both digging for some sort of connection.

Eve searched for history, while Nelle hoped that by supporting the process their friendship would return to its former intensity. The photo that they found -- not in any of the boxes but crammed in the recesses of the storage closet -- was a notable step for each of their

goals. Eve's hands trembled as she passed swiped her hand across the dusty, black and white image. Her fingers traced the face of Mercy, who she recognized from the only other photograph that she had seen of her mother. The tension between Eve and Nelle was forgotten, as Eve scooted next to Nelle and shared view of the picture. On its backside was scrawled, *Cornelius, Gertrude, Mercy, Ann. (Ideal) Macon Co., GA. 1950.*

## Chapter VI: The Uses of Salt

There are more than 14,000 household uses for salt. In addition to accenting the flavor of meats and vegetables, salt solutions have valuable uses outside of food preparation. Yellowing in enamel bathtubs and toilets can be reversed with a salt and turpentine solution. Salt drives moths and ants away. It has antiseptic properties that make it an effective mouth rinse. It can also improve skin complexion when used as a massage mixture. It was salt that killed June Bug. Not as in hypertension. Although in the end, he had become both hyper and tense.

Nelle didn't eat salt. Not after the salt incident with June Bug. She lived a salt-free life before the advent of low-sodium canned goods and sea salt versus iodized salt standoffs. She couldn't bear the taste of it. Even looking at the tiny crystallized specs filled her instantly with disgust. Nelle even hated the smell of salt. Its acrid bitterness was an assault on all of her senses. Tears are salty, so she didn't cry. Sweat is salty, so she tried not to exert herself.

In college she found herself, as most do, discarding the old skin of childhood and discovering new things. Still the salt incident loomed large, refusing to be discarded as childhood folly. She moved from dating men to dating women, oblivious to the debates on whether her sexuality was determined at birth or through choice, if her sexual orientation was a life style or a life lived. Nelle was no advocate. The truth of the matter is that men and women taste differently, and to Nelle -- with a newly discovered aversion to the briny fluids of lovemaking -- women were simply less salty.

The salt incident occurred in 1961 when Nelle was ten years old. Everyone involved could at least agree on that. Yet it was actually a series of events that played out differently for everyone. If they had bothered to speak of it –if they could have spoken of it – the events would have spun into very diverse stories. Nelle would have said that it started with the lie that she told her mother about June Bug.

Janette would have said that it started with June Bug's interest in her daughter. His inappropriate glances when he thought that she wasn't looking.

Eve would have said that it began with a late night knock on the door, which opened would reveal her best friend Nelle, Janette, and an empty can of green peas.

Ann, upon hearing Janette recount the details of June Bug's alleged transgression against Nelle, would have surely recognized the language of Harlequin Romance novel number 528, *Wife By Arrangement*, and perhaps the salt incident would have ended there.

But they did not speak of these things. They held firmly to their silence, guarding their individual knowledge against self-incrimination, and the salt incident began as most incidents do --- as the consequence of an infinite number of choices made by people with a very limited understanding of their present moment.

The only time that Janette, June Bug and Nelle were together was when they sat in mismatched chairs at the small dining table. June Bug, seated in the brown vinyl chair, talked nonstop while shoveling food into his mouth. Janette, in the white chair with yellow printed flowers, chewed silently periodically returning to the stove to refill June Bug's plate so that her own meal became cold by the time she was able to eat it. Nelle, from her small green plastic

chair, watched them both and greedily soaked up information on male-female relations that she could later share with Eve.

It was already an interesting sort of relationship. When June Bug entered their lives three years prior, Janette was taken by the more chivalry-cloaked chauvinisms of having doors opened for her, bags carried for her, and garbage emptied for her. They both subscribed to separation of duties for men and women. Janette did not expect June Bug to cook –although at times he had. Standing over the charcoal grill with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips, June Bug would claim that he wasn't cooking, but que-ing on a man stove.

Those days had been good for Janette. At forty years old, she was his senior by ten years. Cougarism had not yet been coined in 1961. It was two years before the publication of *The Graduate* sensationalized the exploits of a younger man and a much older woman. Janette counted herself lucky to have June Bug, even when the good days began to sour. When his hustle dried up. When his chivalry turned to plain chauvinism. When his attention went elsewhere. To whispered phone calls. To late nights. To the second floor apartment. To Nelle's budding pre-teen form.

“Why you so quiet?” June Bug asked Janette through a mouthful of meatloaf. A small particle escaped his mouth and landed on the floral plastic table cloth.

“I was just thinking...”

“Oh lord,” June Bug exclaimed.

“Never mind.”

Nelle's eyes volleyed between them. “What you thinkin', mama?”

Janette smiled at her daughter and slide her eyes towards June Bug who sighed and said, “Well, if Lil Bit wanna know, I guess we gotta hear it then.” He winked at Nelle, missing the sneer that spread across her mother’s face. Not that it would have mattered had he caught it. June Bug considered himself to be head of the household. His own upbringing informed him of what that meant. Do the heavy lifting. Protect the women. And as his own father had dictated, prepare the daughters for marriage.

Janette’s eyes burned into the side of June Bug’s face. “I was thinking about going to the beach tomorrow.” She was not. She had been thinking of what she always had been thinking about since Nelle told her about June Bug. Since watching him watch her daughter. Since the thought of his hands on Nelle penetrated her waking moments such that she nearly burned dinner and plagued her nights such that she barely slept.

“What beach?” June Bug sucked at meat fiber lodged between his molars.

Janette slowly chewed her food before delivering a very calculated response. The idea was to incite an argument which would result in June Bug eventually storming off into the night. “Rainbow Beach.”

June Bug’s fist slammed onto the table causing Nelle and the plates of food to jump. Janette paused, a fork load of green peas at her lips. June Bug grabbed her wrist, shaking the peas from the fork. “I said no to that months ago, ‘Nette! Them other fools can go out there and sit-in or wade-in or whatever the hell they wanna call it. But you ain’t going.”

Nelle slid from her chair and slowly began to pick up the scattered peas. June Bug said, “Leave it. Your mama will clean up her own mess.” He looked at Janette. “Fix me some more peas.”

Janette rose and moved towards the stove. “J.B., don’t you get mad at anybody ‘sides me? Don’t you get mad at those white folk who say we don’t have the right to sit on nature’s beach and swim in the earth’s water?”

Hugging Chicago’s South Shore neighborhood, Rainbow Beach had been legally desegregated for a year. But that did not prevent the neighborhood’s white residents from forcibly keeping blacks off of the city-owned property. When the NAACP led a protest, one of its young members was hit in the head with a rock by an opposing mob. She’d still have a pronounced limp fifty years after the incident when Rainbow Beach and its surrounding neighborhoods had long become predominantly black areas. Maybe had June Bug known in 1961 that they were just a few harsh years away from equal housing legislation, he would have insisted that Janette become a part of its history.

His eyes momentarily softened, but Janette’s back was to him and she didn’t see. “Woman, you gonna get yo’self kilt just to get on that rocky patch of beach? And then who gon’ take care of Lil Bit?” He grinned and winked at Nelle again. This Janette saw. Her eyes burned with hatred and bore into June Bug. He turned his head towards her and grinned.

It was a stare off that seemed to last an eternity. Neither looked away. Nelle sat immobile, unsure whether to speak or be silent. Finally, Janette brought her attention back to the pot of peas boiling on the stove. She opened the cabinet to the right, and rummaged around until she found a small glass jar of salt that she had borrowed earlier from Ann. She sprinkled it onto the peas.

June Bug watched. “What’s that?”

“Salt.” Janette answered without turning around.

“Bring it here.”

Janette marched the jar to June Bug and set it on the table. “It’s just salt, J.B.”

“Just salt, huh?” June Bug’s skepticism was unconsciously perceptive. Salt had never been “just salt.” Biblical recountings of Mosaic law required salt to be added to all burnt animal sacrifices. The Salt Wars of 1877 allowed individual ownership of the previously community controlled Salt Lakes of West Texas. Salt preserved meats before refrigeration became standard. It was essential in the process of extracting silver from ore. Salt never was “just salt.” It always has been a form of currency, and a channel a power. It presented itself as no different in Janette’s kitchen.

Amused by June Bug’s sudden paranoia, a slight smile tugged at the corner of Janette’s mouth. “Taste it if you don’t believe it.” It was a tiny grain of empowerment, not much bigger than the salt crystals in the jar. She held on to it in the place where she nurtured ideas of Laveau magic and women’s intuition. From this same place, Janette made a choice – perhaps even a lie of omission -- to not disclose that the salt was in a jar because it was borrowed.

It is considered bad luck to borrow or lend salt. In ritual practice, salt is a finicky tool. It protects those who use it in their own homes, but opens vulnerabilities to those who deploy it in the homes of others. Salt, like toilet tissue and sanitary napkins, should be in constant supply and replenished by the person who will use them. Janette had been vaguely aware of this when she decided two days prior to borrow it. But she also had known that Ann’s apartment was closer than the grocer and she could leave the black-eyed peas that she was cooking that night simmering on the stove while she was out. Black-eyed peas are thought to have their own lucky properties dating back to the Civil War. They were planted as a food staple for slaves. When

Sherman's troops stole and decimated other crops, they ignored the vast fields of black-eyed peas. But the magic of black-eyed peas is only when they are consumed on the first day of the new year, and it was not New Year's Day when Janette stirred green peas – as opposed to black-eyed peas – with borrowed salt at the stove, while she poked at June Bug's discomfort as one does a sore, feeling the sting of weakened skin. Her voice said that it was just salt in the jar, but her tone hinted otherwise.

“I ain't tasting shit.” June Bug placed the jar on the table.

“Fine.” Janette retrieved the peas from the stove and spooned them into the bowl on the table. “Here's your peas.” The moment was passing and Janette had enjoyed the balance that the small battle had afforded her. A confidence was blooming in her gait and June Bug felt it.

“C'mere, Lil Bit.” He held out his arm to Nelle who continued to sit silently across from him.

Janette turned back towards the table alarmed. “J.B., leave her be.”

“Nawl, Lil Bit gonna taste it.”

Nelle hesitated and looked at her mother. June Bug reached across the table and grabbed her arm. “When I say come here, you come here.”

Nelle's lip quivered. “I don't want no peas, Uncle June Bug.”

“Aw, now ain't nothin' to cry over, Lil Bit. I ain't gonna make you eat no peas.” He smiled and rested her on his lap. His hand held her firmly in place by the arm. He reached for the jar with his other hand.

“J.B., stop it now, you proved your point. Let her go!” Janette tried to grab the salt jar from him. June Bug shoved her away.

“Mama!” Nelle cried. June Bug held tightly to her as he brought the salt jar to her mouth. Nelle’s head whipped back and forth as she tried to move away from it. June Bug stood with her still on his lap, pinning her against the table and forcing her mouth open. Janette scrambled from the floor. Her eyes were wild and a sound, more war cry than scream, escaped her lips as she charged towards June Bug. She reached him two seconds too late. His hand was around Nelle’s small throat. Her gaping mouth, struggling for air, received salt instead.

They arrived at Ann’s door late in the evening. Ann, early to bed and early to rise, had already started to drift to sleep when the doorbell rang. Eve, just ten but quite the night owl, was the one who answered the door.

“What you doin’ opening the door this time of night?” Ann whispered suddenly at Eve’s side. “Get over here.” She pulled Eve behind her and peered through the peephole. The distorted image coupled with Janette’s tear and makeup-streamed face, made her nearly unrecognizable. Ann slowly opened the door. “What in God’s name, Janette?”

Nelle was huddled against her mother. Her skin was paler than usual. A purple bruise encircled her neck, a large blotch on one side that had been June Bug’s palm juttied out into four elongated spindles on the other, his fingers. Her curly brown hair was tousled. A few ponytail holders and barrettes remained as vigilant reminders of the hairstyle that had existed before salt. She clutched an empty can to her small chest. On it, a red banner with white lettered words spelling out the Hanover brand was just barely visible through her fingers. Ann opened the screen door and yanked them both inside. She peered up and down the block before slamming and locking the door. They sent the girls to Eve’s room.

For Eve, the salt incident started with watching her best friend shake and spit into an empty can every few minutes. Nelle spat her salty saliva into the empty can that had contained the green peas June Bug had refused to eat. Nelle's hocking, the can, and its contents were the salt incident for Eve. She was unsure of what to say to Nelle, and so they said nothing. The salt incident struck some sort of balance for Eve. Many times Nelle had been Eve's protector on the school playlot, shielding her friend from school yard taunting about her thick hair, dark skin, and chubby limbs. Now that it was Nelle who needed protecting, Eve was at a loss for how to proceed. While every time Nelle tried to form the words to share with Eve what she had told her mother about June Bug, all of the moisture left her mouth –absorbed by the excess salt, she was sure. Their silence was punctuated only by Nelle's sporadic hackings into the can.

Nelle felt that this was punishment for the lie that she told. Ashamed, she couldn't bring herself to share the lie with Eve. In a few short hours, Nelle had matured beyond her ten years and the lie revealed itself as a juvenile ploy by an insecure girl. No longer that girl, Nelle couldn't bear to admit to Eve that she had once been such a very short time ago before salt and before tall tales spun from her lips. She had lied on June Bug, which isn't to say that he was of complete innocence. He had poured salt down her mouth, but June Bug was no child molester. He didn't lure young girls into dark places, whisper lewd lines into their small ears, or take their first time sexual experiences. June Bug looked at girls in the way that many men do with comments in their eyes and knowing smiles creeping beneath mustached lips. He was one of those who whistled at them from stoops. Told them that they "shole was pretty." Assured them that if they didn't have boys sniffing around them, that "the knuckleheads wouldn't be long coming." He gave them candy asking for some of their sweet sugar on his scruffy cheek. Yet,

his behavior was no different than that of most of the men in a young girl's life. Uncles. Fathers. Santa Claus. It stepped into the inappropriate without crossing into pedophilia. But it only took a slight shift in perception for this same behavior to be considered predatory.

In the living room, fifty eyes peered at Janette. Most were from the owl figurines and paintings in Ann's small living room. The only live set of eyes belonged to Ann, but they stared at Janette with no less inquisitiveness. "You a fool to go back to that apartment tonight." She sipped a small amount of brandy from a chipped coffee mug.

A much larger amount was in Janette's cup, which remained pressed to her lips until she replied, "I'd be a fool to let him think he can lay up in my bed after laying hands on my baby girl."

Ann began to slowly rock herself in the straight-backed armchair. "What you gon' do?"

"What you think I'm gonna do?" Janette shot back. "I'm gonna get that poor excuse of a man out of our lives. I'm gonna kill him." She drained her cup and reached for the bottle of brandy on the coffee table between them.

"Janette, let's be serious..."

Janette glared at Ann. "I am being serious. Maybe something like this is hard for you to understand, not being a mother and all."

Ann's fingers clutched at her housecoat and she swallowed suppressing the sting of the comment and the flare of an angry retort. Janette was instantly remorseful. "I'm sorry. I know Eve is more than a niece to you..."

Ann reached across the coffee table, nearly upsetting the brandy, and squeezed Janette's hand. "Let's call somebody. Let's get some of the men in the neighborhood..."

Janette gave a weary smile. “Girl, half of them run with June Bug and the other...” She trailed off on what didn’t need to be said. The other half, married or otherwise, had all been at one time or another her lovers, prior uncles to Nelle.

“At least don’t go back tonight.” Ann pleaded. Janette rolled her eyes towards Ann but said nothing.

Ann continued, “We can plan something...together.”

Janette tilted her cup down her throat and stood.

“Janette...”

“What?” Janette stared at Ann defiantly.

“Nelle needs you.”

“I know,” Janette replied. “Which is exactly why I’m going to do what needs to be done.”

When Janette left Ann’s apartment she had no idea how to do what needed to be done. She returned to her own apartment. To the low moan of Bobby Blue Bland on the radio crooning *I Pity the Fool*. To the sounds of June Bug snoring from the bedroom. To green peas and salt strewn across the kitchen floor.

She washed the dishes, gathered the errant peas and was beginning to sweep up the salt when she paused. Janette stared at the grainy scatterings on her floor. Instead of sweeping them into the dustpan, she brushed them into the corners where wall met wall met floor. It created an anthill like mound in one corner. The other corners of the room stood empty. Bare. Janette needed more salt. The urge was so strong that it could not be ignored.

Perhaps her Laveau magic – spurred by recent events – had awakened and risen within her like the kundalini snake uncoiling itself from the base of the spine. Like the Loa taking

possession of its supplicant and rejoicing in dance. Like crossing over into the place of no space and no time, she began to recall things. The placing of salt across doorways kept away evil spirits. Casting salt after the departure of an evil person accompanied by an incantation prevented their return. Consumption of communion wine and wafers only proves that religions are just sanctioned magical beliefs and rituals. Any ritual, infused with enough belief, can be a spell. To believe is to think something into existence that wasn't previously there. It is conjure. Any object can protect or harm, and too much of anything can be a poison. Janette Marie Laveau Baptiste needed more salt.

June Bug never noticed that first mound of salt and he had enough sense not to mention Nelle's absence. But when the mounds began appearing all over the apartment, he could no longer hold his tongue. He stood in the middle of the dining room watching Janette cook dinner. "What the hell is all this, 'Nette?"

"All what?" Janette cut a chunk of butter and dropped it into the pot of collard greens on the stove.

"This shit in the corners." He gestured frantically around. But it was more than in the corners. It lined the baseboards of every room. It snaked around furniture like chalk outlines of bodies at crime scenes. It traced thresholds and lined window sills.

Janette, with a Morton Salt container in hand, sprinkled a careful amount into the greens. "Keeps the ants out."

"I ain't seen no damn ants."

"Must be working then." Janette checked the chicken baking in the oven.

They ate in silence. June Bug watched Janette, wondering if her food tasted as salty as his. But their food was flavored to the same degree and whatever saltiness June Bug tasted had traveled to his senses through the moistened air molecules of the seasoned apartment. He struggled to swallow but could not manufacture enough saliva. Water did not help but seemed to intensify the problem. His only relief was in the bottle of Old Granddad. The bourbon cut through the salt mines in his mouth leaving a smooth alcohol finish in its wake.

Old Granddad was June Bug's life boat as he skipped around the apartment avoiding salt trails like a game of hopscotch. After brushing his teeth, he rinsed his mouth with bourbon instead of the salt and water mix that Janette had substituted in place of their usual Listerine. He stayed out of the apartment for as long as he could. Sometimes sleeping on a friend's couch to sober up from the excess of Old Granddad. But they eventually sent him back to Janette's. No one wanted an out of work drunkard in their home for too long. So June Bug would meander back to the apartment to find more salt in unexpected places.

One night, about a week after Nelle was sent to stay with Ann and Eve, Janette reached for June Bug in bed. His body stiffened at her touch. " 'Nette...'"

"Shhh." Janette could feel his fear. His heart beat rapidly against her palm. "You're so tense, J.B."

June Bug's breath heaved, filling the space between them with the smell of bourbon and the weight of remorse. " 'Nette, I'm sorry for..." And in that moment, he was sorry for everything. He was prepared to curse the salty oceans for fresh water bodies and purify the world of its saline dependency.

Janette shushed him again, pressing her lips against his and her body on top of him. “I know, baby. Just relax.”

June Bug sighed as her hand kneaded into his neck. His body sank into the mattress. Janette reached for a jar on the nightstand and June Bug’s eyes flew open. “What’s...”

“It’s just massage oil,” Janette cooed and June Bug slowly allowed his body to relax again. Janette rubbed the oil into her palm and massaged it onto his chest. The texture, warm and grainy, eased his tension and exfoliated his skin as she raked her fingernails down his chest. It felt invigorating. Janette’s hands moved downward and June Bug felt his arousal.

More oil. More massage. More nails. His face twisted. The grainy scrub, against his sensitive member, felt more aggressive as Janette worked her hands to every part. June Bug felt a tingle which grew into a sting. He screamed. He shoved Janette off of him, and clutching himself, ran to the bathroom.

June Bug straddled the sink. The cold porcelain pressed against his backside as he flushed his genitals with cold water. He returned to the bedroom shriveled, scratched and wet, and asked the question to which he already knew the answer. “What was in that oil?”

“It’s good for the skin.” Janette switched off the lamp and rolled over towards the wall.

His friends began to notice the weight loss. They bought him food. Perch sandwiches from the seafood place on Forty-Seventh. Chicken dinners from Gladys. Invited him over for oxtails, black-eyed peas, Friday fish fries but June Bug ate very little. The absence of salt at these gatherings loomed as large as its presence in Janette’s apartment. He didn’t taste salt in these dishes, and strangely enough, he missed it.

He was too quiet. When he did speak, he put his friends off with strange questions. Staring at the untouched plate of pork chops beside him on the stoop of George Wright's house, June Bug asked, "You think it's something out there that affects men and women different?"

George exhaled his Marlboro, "You mean like mother nature? 'Menstration?'"

June Bug slowly rolled his eyes upwards to look at George. Large bags puffed underneath and eye crust stuck in the folds of skin at their corners. He licked his dry lips and took a swig from a pint of Old Granddad nestled in a brown paper bag. "Nawl. Like...salt."

"Salt?"

"Yeah, you think salt can act different in men than it do in women?"

George scratched at the bald spot spreading at the crown of his head. "I'ont know, J.B." A concerned look crossed his face and he thought briefly about offering the couch to his friend that night. But his wife did not take too well the last time June Bug had stayed over. He'd broken one of her good glasses that he had insisted pouring his bourbon in and she swore that he'd used the large house plant as a toilet, complaining to George that it reeked of urine. So George closed his mouth on the offer and watched June Bug stagger home for the very last time.

It would have shortened the distance had he taken the alley, but June Bug was in no hurry to get home. He half walked, half stumbled in the direction of the apartment. His shoulders scraped brick walls and chain linked fences. He bumped into garbage cans and felt his chest tighten the closer he got to his destination. His thoughts did not go beyond placing one uncertain step in front of the next. He was a lemming drawn to the cliff overhang of a raging ocean. He was a bit of cosmological debris in the irrepressible gravitational pull of a black hole. He did not

want to push forward but he could not turn back. As it was with Lot's wife in the Bible, there was nothing to go back to.

June Bug reached the bottom of the back stairwell. He trudged up the first landing. The shuffle-clump of his footfalls reverberated through the empty night. The first floor neighbors, accustomed to the late night arrivals, remained fast asleep. Their five-year old son -- finally convinced that the rhythmic *shhh-cloomp* was not a monster dragging a body, but the drunken homecoming of their third floor neighbor -- slept soundlessly as urine trickled into his pajamas and spread across his bed sheets.

June Bug made it to the landing of his second floor neighbor, a single mother of two. She thought Janette was a "high-yella heifa," and had slept with June Bug out of jealousy, regretting it immediately. He'd been too drunk to perform, passing out on top her and dripping bourbon-scented dribble on her sheets.

June Bug sat on the landing a lit a Kool. He rubbed at the scruff of hair on his chin, feeling its contrast with his smooth cheeks where hair refused to grow. His eyes peered upward to the apartment where Janette murmured strains of a blues song in her sleep. The next flight of stairs leading to the apartment was a minefield of salt. It saturated the crevices of the stairs so that June Bug was forced to perch on his toes. He could not reconcile the irrationality of his fear. He knew that the salt wasn't acid, yet he was afraid to make contact with it. He had tip-toed on the balls of his feet, hopscotching over the sagging fifth and sixth steps, so many times that he could do it in his drunken darkness. Muscle memory guided him every night to land on the seventh step and take the final leap onto the concrete step at the back door.

Janette often thought that in a perfect world, he'd stumble and miss. It wasn't just the abundance of salt that put June Bug off, but its pristine appearance. He suspected that Janette frequently replaced the salt and his suspicions were correct. She couldn't stand for grains of dirt and debris to dull its luminosity like snow that had been on the ground for too long. If magic is belief plus intention and action, then clear intent must be represented in ritual. So she swept and redistributed the salt trails in his absence. Earlier that night, Janette had moved the salt line at the back door two inches closer to the stairs, and the imperfect world shifted into one moment of perfection.

June Bug stubbed out his cigarette and began the obstacle course taking the first step on toe tips. He moved with the sobering dexterity of a tightrope walker. He hopped over the two sagging steps onto the seventh. His legs, accustomed to the movements and timing, sprang just as his brain registered the new salt line. He tried to correct, but over-corrected. He tried to turn but didn't arc. He flinched. He landed wrong, teetering on the edge of the seventh step at a forty-five degree angle tilted with his back towards the stairs. He was frozen in time long enough to grasp at the wooden banister and miss. Long enough to grasp at a prayer but not to await its answer.

June Bug tumbled backwards into the night. His nose was broken on the second floor neighbor's landing. His neck was broken on the first.

The five-year old on the first floor would find blood outside his back door the next day, and once again believe in monsters.

The second floor neighbor would add the incident to her list of why she was no longer jealous of Janette.

And Janette would awaken refreshed -- *Two Steps from the Blues* lodged deep within her subconscious mind.

## Chapter VII: The Chitlin' Circuit

From the early nineteenth century well into the 1960's racial segregation prevented blacks from attending certain venues with the exception of performers. Black singers were tasked with performing for all white audiences and then utilized a network of smaller black-owned blues houses and jook joints for black audiences, often tailoring their song choices and performances when in the comfort of racial homogeneity. This string of venues, snaking its way through the body of the country, became known as the Chitlin' Circuit.

The Chitlin' Circuit facilitated black artistic subversion of mainstream performance spaces. Not only did it allow for black audiences to see live performances, it also allowed black entertainers a space unmediated by industry censorship of what had been termed "race music." Race music. Blues. Rythm and Blues and the predecessor to Rock and Roll. But most importantly, it was music associated with immorality, open displays of sex and sexuality, and blackness.

It's not so farfetched that ideas of sexuality outside of those considered the norm were associated with blackness. The early nineteenth century racial divide of Chicago pushed red light districts into southside areas making neighbors of blacks, sex workers, and homosexuals such that race and certain sexual proclivities became inextricably linked. Race music –more aptly blues and then jazz – served as the soundtrack for both the jook joints and the Black and Tan nightclubs that allowed white men to dance with black men and everything within the purview of those neighborhoods to be labeled as deviant by Chicago's renowned School of Sociology.

The end of race music, as its appropriation by white artists like Elvis integrated it into the mainstream culture, caused most to write of the Chitlin' Circuit as if it had ended. As if Elvis's version of Hound Dog opened the doors of musical equality for Big Mama Thornton, the song's original recording artist. The truth of the matter –regardless of the debate on whether Elvis stole race music or simply borrowed and popularized it – is that it benefited him more than the ones from which he procured it.

By the early 1970s, white gays -- many unencumbered by race and class issues – were able to relocate to northside areas. This de-ghettozation of homosexuality was at the apex of social and political changes that unhinged the previously attached groups. While white gays were riding the upward waves from the 1969 Stonewall Uprising, their political chants of “Gay Power” sounded eerily similar to the refrains of “Black Power” in previous years. They'd eventually settle into an area that would be renamed Boystown, its own sort of chitlin' circuit – a network of predominantly white gay clubs that became a subversion of mainstream heteronormative culture. A cornucopia of same sex desire where fierce drag queens bore more than a passing semblance to black female entertainers. Coco Taylor in white face.

The irony of white men dressing as women was in the type of women they chose to emulate. Their song, their dance, their speech patterns. They became visual homages to Diana Ross, Chaka Khan, and Donna Summer. They made black women of themselves – something even black sissies knew better than to do because the world perceived it and treated them accordingly. In dark alleys. With sexualized violence. And then the final link was made. They became the new black.

So what happened to the old black? It would be naïve to think that in such a racially polarized world that the Chitlin' Circuit was restricted to music. Film, too, provided a key platform and in the 1970s, blaxploitation films took the forefront in distinguishing between the old black and the new black. If the new black was homosexual, then the old was inherently heterosexual. The movies frequently employed white gay and lesbian characters as villains who were humiliated and defeated by black, mostly male, protagonists. Crime fighting black women also had to combat white enemies whose same sex appetites were exaggerated as unwanted advances. And so Cleopatra Jones battled the white lesbian drug kingpin "Mommy." And then again, in a sequel, Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold.

These films were sites of information, and when Eve learned of Nelle's lesbianism, it was to them that she turned. Her thoughts were on the sexual aspects of her friend's predilection. Eve was plagued and disgusted by her imaginings of lesbianism.

While Nelle hardly gave thought to the sexual acts –at least not at first. She hadn't spotted a beautiful fellow undergrad across Spelman's campus. She hadn't been seduced by an older female professor. She hadn't been abused by male suitors. Nelle had simply grown bored with male companionship and found herself preferring the company of women. Her desire did not emerge from the parted legs of a female lover, rather it unraveled itself between the pages penned by black feminist writers. It stirred her in ways that she couldn't quite communicate to Eve, although she tried. She gave her friend Nella Larson's *Passing*, but void of overt same-sex desire, Eve –still focused on the sexual nature of her friend – failed to read anything more than the surface narrative.

What Eve did understand was: “Pam Grier is Lee Daniels, a prostitute doing hard time in an island prison camp for women...chained to her bitter rival, white revolutionary Karen...” Eve, like Grier's character, understood homosexuality to be first and foremost, white. From the predatory lesbian prison warden masturbating as she spied on the prison showers through what might in later years become known as a glory hole, to Grier's chain mate, Karen. White revolutionary Karen who takes the warden's offer to make things easier on herself if only she plays nice. An offer which the prostitute Grier refuses because there is no way that she would exchange sexual favors for some sort of payment.

Because Eve couldn't reconcile Nelle's sexuality within the context of blackness, the only conclusion that could be drawn was that Nelle was inauthentic. Somehow, even at a historically black college, her best friend had been compromised. She had become a bulldagger right under Eve's watchful eye as her dormitory roommate. At a historically black college. In a predominantly black city. Eve saw her best friend become compromised in the ways of white folks. Afro and all.

Yet it was not white power, nor the man, nor the government that overthrew that bastion of black beauty and power. Afros were halos of black pride. The manifestation of Black is Beautiful. They were a declaration and refused to be demure. The bigger, the better. Still, afros were hot. Hot as in cool as in good. But also hot as in sweat trickling down the sides of faces and backs of necks. Hot. The afro would meet its final demise in the eighties. Black people wanted their hair to submit and lie down again. They found activator coolness with the advent of the chemically-lubricated jheri curl and the inconceivable ability to spray moisture on black hair and it actually lie down.

But Nelle and Eve were a decade away from the drippy coolness of the curl. And Nelle's impressively large afro was especially hot in their shared dorm room at Spelman. Eve may have ceased to be physically comfortable in the space since Nelle's disclosure, but Nelle remained true her self which included continuing to lounge in their room in her underwear when the temperature was particularly hot. Eve used to join her, similarly clad, they would throw ice on each other across the room. They had comfortably dressed and undressed in each other's presence since they were young. But the disclosure brought a close to such intimacies. Eve often dressed immediately after showering in the shared dormitory bathroom on their floor, ironically in full view of anyone who happened to be in the bathroom at the same time.

Eve couldn't help comparing disrobing in front of Nelle to the peeking eyes of the lesbian warden in *Black Mama, White Mama*, lustily violating Pam Grier's character. Nelle, too, had seen the movie. She had been amused by the obvious homoeroticism even in the midst of anti-homosexual rhetoric. Nelle wasn't concerned with the predatory warden. She had been far more amused by the amount of frolicking that the presumably straight prisoners engaged in as they showered together. And although Grier's character turned down an interlude with the warden and became hostile towards her white compadre for accepting the offer, the movie also shows the two locked together topless in a metal box in the sun. Their sweating bodies pressed together as they struggled, still arguing nemeses about personality differences.

Eve had told her friend, "What you do disgusts me," without any actual knowledge of what Nelle did. In fact, at the time, Nelle had not done anything outside of reading a few books. She was still sleeping with the Alpha fraternity pledge. Her lesbianism, in its preliminary theoretical stage, did not preclude horniness or sex with men. This did not go unnoticed by Eve,

who silently turned her nose to her friend when Nelle left on her dates with him. To Eve, the only thing worse than a lesbian was a confused one who continued to sleep with men.

Ironically, it was Eve's condemnation of Nelle that became the catalyst for Nelle's first sexual experience with a woman. As Nelle listened to Eve's disdain and disbelief that she could want to touch a woman, she actually became interested in doing so.

“I mean, what do two women even do?” Eve sneered from her side of the room.

“I assume that's rhetorical.” Nelle fanned her afro with a paper fan advertising services at a local church. She had no idea how it had come into their possession. Sometimes things just appeared as a result of communal dormitory living.

Eve recoiled. “I don't wanna know what you do.”

Nelle, having no experiential knowledge, began to wonder herself what took place between two intimate female partners. She wasn't naïve. Neither was Eve, for the matter. They both had assumptions based on their individual sexual experiences. Yet Eve's stomach turned as she tried to purge the thoughts from her mind, while Nelle's fluttered as her mind opened to embrace them. She began to date, or rather hang in the company of those who appeared as if they could potentially be intimate partners.

There was the well-intentioned white girl who was enamored with black culture. She was the only white woman who regularly attended the black feminist events on campus. There was only a shade difference between the two, yet a vast lacunae existed between their thoughts and ideals. When Nelle asked how she'd come to attend black feminist rallies, the woman confessed to often feeling uncomfortably tokenized in those situations.

“The issues of black women are ignored in predominantly white feminists organizations.”

Her blue eyes sparkled. “I...I mean to be an ally to women's causes, for all women.”

Nelle nodded, adding cream to her coffee.

“Sometimes it's hard though.”

Nelle paused and raised an eyebrow, continuing to listen in silence.

“I mean don't get me wrong, and it probably sounds so very wrong.” Her blue eyes gazed appropriately troubled. “But sometimes, I just kind of feel unwelcomed. You understand? Out of place being the only...” Her voice lowered. “...white woman there.”

Nelle gazed around the coffeehouse where she had agreed to meet, in a predominantly white neighborhood near a feminist bookstore. She glanced at the prevalence of white faces, noting that she was indeed the only black person there.

Catching her meaning, her coffee date smiled. “I know, right. But that's different. I mean, it's not cool to say. I'm not saying it's cool at all, but black people have had to get used to that. Being the only one in places, especially colleges and political activist events.”

That was their final coffee date.

Then there was the butch, in her suit and tie and highly polished wingtips. Only a slight pitch in speech betrayed the female beneath the broad shoulders and wide stride. She told Nelle that she liked her femininity. Her heels and skirts. But when Nelle met her for coffee wearing jeans, there was an issue.

“What are you wearing?”

“Gloria Vanderbilt. You like?”

“Ahem...Yeah, but...they're not very lady-like.”

“How can that be? I'm a lady.”

“Yeah, but...I like my ladies a certain way.”

Nelle's face scrunched in confusion. Her date leaned across the table towards her, “Look, sista. I'm gonna give you a head's up. Save you lots of trouble. Women who look like you...” she pantomimed an hourglass figure, “typically date women who look like me.” She straightened her tie.

“Why?” Nelle leaned in conspiratorially. “Why is that?”

“Because there's masculine energy and feminine energy...”

“But we're both women,” Nelle interjected.

“Doesn't matter.”

But it did to Nelle. That was their final coffee date. Nelle had unknowingly stumbled into the lesbian binary of gender identification. She enjoyed wearing skirts and platform heels just as much as liked to wear her bell bottomed jeans and corduroys, unaware that each change of her wardrobe signaled some dress code violation within her nascent sexual identity.

Nelle was tired of coffee dates. She'd started at the beginning of the Fall semester and had continued until final exams. The Atlanta temperature had dropped and Nelle's enthusiasm was quickly following. She began spending more time in the campus library, refocusing her energy on the gothic elements present in Chopin's *The Awakening* and thinking what utter despair it must be for a white woman to engulf herself in the ocean.

It was during one of these solo study sessions that Nelle caught notice of a young lady staring at her from the next table. She smiled and the woman took it as an invitation to join her. They were in the same Feminists Theories class. Her name was Audrey.

They talked of class. Cixious and De Beauvoir. The Feminine Mystique and The Federation of South African Women. They talked of white women who found themselves trapped in wallpapered rooms. And black women who wished for rooms of their own. They wondered if white women were the second sex, then what were they –as black women-- the unsexed. They got hungry and went for lunch.

They thought of women of the world. Colonized everywhere, even amongst the colonized. If the disenfranchised created methods of subversion in chitlin circuits, from the blacks to the gays, could the same be said of women. Were there female versions of the chitlin circuit? Female enclaves resisting patriarchy. Nelle certainly didn't think so.

“Race will always matter.” She assured Audrey as they sipped water in the cafeteria. “Between women, race will always matter.”

“Men too,” Audrey added. “But who gives a fuck about them?” She smiled. Their eyes sparkled and suddenly men didn't matter to Nelle at all. It was a moment that initiated the end of her relations with the Alpha pledge. She'd never sleep with him again although she didn't realize it at the time and he remained painfully unaware for months.

Nelle and Audrey talked until dinner time. They were comfortable enough to pool their pocket money and determine that together they could afford to go to a restaurant for dinner. They wondered aloud where they fit in the black nationalist rhetoric. Where were women located other than as support mechanisms and jock straps for men.

Audrey asked, “Where are women outside of traditional relationships with men?”

Nelle's eyes widened.

Audrey noticed. “I didn't mean to offend...”

“No,” Nelle interjected. “I’m not offended.”

“Oh, what are you?” Audrey asked.

The silence was heavy. Nelle was intrigued. Her food sat untouched on her plate. She drank her water with averted eyes. When they shifted onto Audrey, she met an unflinching gaze. In the end, it was a look that propelled Nelle into the physical exploration of her sexuality. Something behind Nelle's eyes recognized its own reflection in Audrey's.

They left the restaurant and continuing talking as they walked, but it was not an aimless stroll. It was not in the direction of Nelle's dorm, where Eve sat turning the pages of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Their meandering placed them at the steps of Audrey's dormitory. Unsure of anything, they sat on the steps and stole questioning glances at one another as what was being said became noticeably secondary to the unsaid.

Nelle was in the midst of an explication of black women's roles in the black power movement, when Audrey interjected, “My roommate is gone of the evening.” Embarrassed by her own outburst, she clamped her hand over her mouth in a gesture that was so girlish that Nelle felt comforted.

“I don't mean that...” Audrey began.

Nelle laughed and grabbed her hand. “Show me your room, Audrey.”

Afterwards, lying in her own dorm room bed across from Eve, Nelle thought of the sweetness of her evening. “You're the one who's going to have to make a choice.” Her words sliced through the darkness towards Eve.

Had she the luxury of confiding to Eve, she would have giddily answered her inquiry about what women do. She would have said that it was not so different from being with a man,

and that it also was extremely different than being with a man. She would have explained the familiarity and comfortable awkwardness of softness and warmth. Described it as sweet and scary. Erotic and tender. And of course, not as salty.

## Chapter VIII: Damnatio Memoriae

There have only been a few women to serve as Egyptian Pharaoh. The fifth pharaoh of the 18<sup>th</sup>-dynasty was Hapshepsut, who ruled as co-regent after the death of her father. She was to serve in this capacity until her stepson-nephew came of age as heir. However once he did, Hapshepsut seized complete control of the empire and declared herself as pharaoh, becoming the third woman to govern Egypt in 3,000 years.

At the time, around 1500 B.C., there didn't exist a word for female rulership in Egypt. Although Egyptian women enjoyed more freedom than those in other parts of the world, there was little support for a woman pharaoh. Hapshepsut enacted a campaign to improve what contemporary politicians call an approval rating. Images depict her in traditional male Pharaoh garb complete with false beard and head dress. Hapshepsut circulated stories of being handpicked for rule by the god Amon-Ra who, according to her legend, presented himself as her father during the time of her conception. The campaign worked and she successfully ruled one of the world's greatest civilizations for twenty years.

Upon her death, when her stepson-nephew was finally allowed to ascend to the throne, he was determined to obliterate Hapshepsut from history. He chiseled his own name over her cartouches, removed her images, and destroyed her statues. Hapshepsut was erased from history for 3,500 years. In that time, she ceased to exist. She had been dis-membered from memory. Hapshepsut's disappearance has often been described as a *damnatio memoriae*, Latin for the deliberate erasure of a person's name, image, work from historical record and memory. Perhaps there is a place for these erasures. A parallel universe in Hapshepsut's time leading to a cosmic version of a computer's recycle bin in later years. A limbo of disappeared people, untold stories, boogeymen shoved away in dark corners...waiting. Because sometimes they come back.

It is quite possible, in the realm of the impossible, that Hapshepsut is the Patron Saint of the *Damnatio Memoriae*. She leads the lost souls, damned memories, back into the world, crashing the past violently into the present and forcing acceptance. Reconciliation.

Acknowledgment. In 1903 a British archaeologist discovered Hapshepsut's tomb, unleashing her memory in a world that had developed a gendered word for her authority: Queen.

In 1907 a small town in Georgia was renamed, its identity rewritten by two railroad executives in one deft, capitalist act.

In 1923 the all-black town of Rosewood was burned to the ground from the false allegations of a white woman. A boy named Hezekiah was one of the survivors.

In 1927 the Great Mississippi River flooded, devastating the city of New Orleans. Many blacks abandoned by rescue efforts were forced at gunpoint to rebuild the city.

In 1972, Amy appeared in Brother LeRoi's classroom challenging his will to forget their mother. And although he moved with lethargic pace towards any type of reunion, it was enough to motivate him to advise Eve during that same year to seek out her own family's erasures.

And Eve, taking Brother LeRoi's advice, finally confronted her aunt with the photograph that she found, her own *damnatio memoriae*. Pulling it from the rear pocket of her bellbottomed jeans, she placed it on the counter next to the dish rack one morning as Ann washed the breakfast dishes. Ann's eyes glanced towards it but she continued to rinse the plate in her hand and placed it in the dish rack. Drops of water dripped onto the picture. Eve snatched it and pressed it against her shirt. "Careful!"

Ann continued to wash the dishes, but there was an added intensity to her scrubbing as if every plate bore the hardened remains of dried food particles.

“Who are these people?” Eve inquired.

“It should say it on the back,” Ann responded coolly.

“I mean who are they to you?”

“Dead.”

“Well they can’t all be dead, can they?”

Ann dried her hands on a dish rag. “You’re right. I’m still here. Have been all your life. The only family you know.” She faced Eve. “And now that you all grown up and smellin’ yoself, I ain’t enough.”

“That’s not true, Mama Ann. You know I love you and appreciate everything that you’ve done for me...”

“And this is how you show it?” Ann’s lips pursed into a tight grimace and Eve recognized it as a look that had shut down many conversations over the years. But she was not going to be deterred.

“Well, who were they to me then?” Eve held the photograph between them and pointed. “I know that’s you. And my mom. And Grandmother Gertrude. But who’s this man, Mama Ann?” Her aunt dropped her eyes and began to retreat into that silence where she stood guard over the secrets that Eve was attempting to pry open.

“I don’t understand how you can just...erase people, family even, from your mind.” Eve’s exasperation cracked through her voice.

Ann lifted her eyes in one final moment of defiance. “You have no idea who or what is in my mind.”

“Then tell me,” Eve plead.

But her aunt's mind held fast to her secrets, slamming the door of her mental void to ensure no one else found their way out of the *damnatio memoriae*, the metaphysical Alcatraz from which an Egyptian pharaohess had escaped and now escorted others. Hapshepsut, the Harriet Tubman of forgotten memories.

Ann untied the apron from around her waist. "I can't," she whispered and walked out of the kitchen. Eve called to her retreating form but Ann continued to walk to her bedroom. Ann heard the words, heard her niece's threat to find out on her own.

"I've already looked it up and it's a tiny town, Mama Ann!" The voice was muffled by the time it had traveled down the hallway and penetrated the closed door to reach Ann's ears. Ann sat on her bed enveloped in the greenness of her room and sighed. There were things that she felt Eve should know, yet she was conflicted with a belief that it was not her duty to speak of such things. She had raised her sister's child. She had even talked of difficult matters with her, as mother to child, woman to girl. She had educated her on body changes and hygiene and even sex, to the best of her sexually conservative nature. But there were some things that Ann could not speak of...undesirable things whose very description corrupted her sense of morality. Ann had tried various times in the past to provide Eve with information about their family. But every answer she supplied only caused questions to spring ten-fold from her niece. So Ann chose the silence and erased the undesirable elements until all that remained was herself and Eve, whose birth story gradually took on the characteristics of an immaculate conception.

But the presence of the photograph challenged the silence. In her bedroom, Ann wondered why she had even kept it only to have it resurface like Queen Hapshepsut's obelisks from behind the concrete that concealed them. Ann felt her own walls crumbling, but she had

known on some level that it would happen. In order to forget one, she had buried them all in the recesses of her mind. She could not discuss her sister, Eve's mother without having to address the circumstances of her death and Eve's simultaneous birth. It was quite the conundrum. She couldn't erase names from stories without it resulting in the dismantling of the story itself.

In the kitchen, Eve held the photograph, bringing it close to her face. She had the same high cheekbones, almond-shaped eyes and full lips as the women in her family. She had seen pictures of her aunt, mother, and grandmother before but this was her first time seeing who the scrawled writing on the back labeled Cornelius Gaines. Eve assumed that he was her grandfather and wondered why her aunt didn't just come out and say so. But she was wrong in that assumption. It was more complicated than that. Her family was more complicated and Cornelius Gaines was certainly one of the most complicated people involved in it. He would have to be, to have been removed as he was, left to hide away in a single rogue photograph waiting for discovery after death.

Cornelius was somewhat infamous during his time. He had achieved his own title of sorts when that photograph taken. They stood stoically, as was characteristically required of the long exposure film processing of the time. Eve's mother, Mercy, stood slightly apart from the group. Unbeknownst to her, the tiny fetal formations of Eve were occurring within her stomach. It would be the last picture in which Mercy would appear, and ultimately, that is the reason that Ann kept the photograph. It was their final family picture. Before their mother Gertrude dreamed of fish. Before they found out about the pregnancy. Before Mercy ran off. Before Eve was born and Mercy died. Although the picture was before these events, the choices of everyone

in it had already set them in motion by the time the photographer pressed the button and the flash bulb exploded.

Just as Queen Hapshepsut was a threat long before she decided to become Pharaoh, so too was Cornelius damned by circumstance, by birth, by family. Cornelius's own decision that would create him into a ruler of sorts came in 1920. But Macon County, Georgia was no Egypt. In 1920, Cornelius was ten years old and living with his grandmother. He suffered from trying to hang on to his own memories of the erased, often waking in the early morning hours soaked in sweat and trying frantically to cling to the pale woman who disappeared with his dreams leaving only her razor sharp words, "Black nigga." Cornelius had been having the dream fairly regularly for as long as he could remember. Sometimes it would stay away for months. Other times it hounded him nightly for weeks. He hadn't had it since summer and it was quickly approaching fall. But after rummaging around in the shed and finding a box crammed into a corner in the ways of things that are to be forgotten, the dream beckoned and the *damnatio memoriae* was unleashed.

He slept on a pallet on the floor in the one and a half room shanty that he shared with his grandmother. Her own raised pallet was a few feet away. Against the wall, the fading embers of a wood-burning stove warmed the small space. His grandmother had claimed that his mother hadn't left so much as a shoestring behind when she ran off with "that yella nigga from New Orleans," but the box told a different story. He slowly shifted his weight and turned slightly on his side, peeking at the sleeping mound just an arm's length away. Satisfied that his grandmother still slept, Cornelius slid his thin fingers into one of the large sacks that formed his mattress and snaked his hand through the hay inside of it until it closed around the smooth wooden handle.

Keeping his eyes trained on the pallet across the floor, he carefully withdrew the brush from beneath him and laid it on his chest. He gingerly fingered the silken hairs still trapped within its bristles and absently reached up to pluck at the woolen mass atop his own head. The sun began to creep upwards and enter the house through the small cracks in the roof. It lit the white bristles of the brush and the fine hairs it held. The colors of the quilt folded around him became alive, but the darkness of his hand did not go away. He didn't mind it, but his mother couldn't get past it by the time he was three years old.

His mother Luella was a lighter complexion. And his grandmother Ida Mae, whom he called Grandmere, was even lighter. The moniker --French for grandmother – and her skin tone bore testament to the genealogy of Macon County and its various inhabitants. The earliest history known indicates that the land, like most of the continent, was inhabited by Native Americans. European explorers came in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and colonists followed. The British, Spanish and French parceled out land with little regard for its original inhabitants until the French-Indian War initiated the transfer of ceded lands to European powers.

Language also migrated and words like *grandmère* leapt into the mouths of African slaves taking refuge and intermarrying with Creek Indian tribes. The 1800's brought a steady transfer of land and power from Creek tribes to the newly independent American government, and so after a series transfers and demarcations, Macon County was established in 1837. *Grandmere* lost its accent on the tongues of Black American Indians who would later fight for recognition from Native American leagues.

Ida Mae had always considered her complexion more trouble than it was worth. She did not like the attention that it brought from men –black and white alike – nor the distrust it instilled

in women. She wore her long hair braided and wrapped into a tight bun at the base of her skull. She married the darkest man that she could find and prayed to have black baby boys. When her daughter Luella was born, she kept a careful watch over her and prayed that Luella could enjoy her childhood before male attention infringed upon it. But to Ida Mae's chagrin, something far worse occurred. Luella's own desire spurred much earlier than anticipated. She welcomed the attention far too soon and Ida Mae found herself to be a grandmere and raising Cornelius alone in 1920.

“ ‘Nelius, if you wanna eat then I spec' you best gits to dem eggs,” she spoke from her bed into the stillness of the room.

“Yes'm,” Cornelius muttered and shoved the brush back into the sack. Cornelius slid from the pallet and into a pair of overalls over his skivvies. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he shoved his feet into boots, grabbed the tin bucket by the door and exited. Outside he paused and sighed deeply before trudging through the mud-caked path towards the outhouse. Once he finished his business, he continued on the path as the brush became slightly denser until he reached the well. He filled the bucket and enjoyed a cool drink before returning to the house.

The routine they shared was well-established. He deposited the bucket inside the door and returned outside to collect eggs from the chicken coop. Ida Mae bathed in his absence and began preparing breakfast –usually fried ham, biscuits, and eggs upon his return. While she finished breakfast, he bathed. They completed their chores with their backs turned to one another, the only privacy that the small shack afforded.

Now that she had her black baby boy, she didn't have much to say to him. They usually ate in silence with the sporadic interruption of her humming. She hummed pieces of church

music. Sometimes her speech was even punctuated with humming between sentences. There was much that he could ask her, but he'd learned years ago not to question her and still had the mark on his forehead from the cast iron skillet that ended his inquiries about his mother, unknown father, and absent grandfather. It was the only time that she had struck him. She'd spent the hours afterwards crying, rocking him in her arms and praying for the two of them. Every night, she insisted that he speak his prayers aloud and that he include word for word, his "crazy mammy and that no count, yella nigga that she run off with."

When the colored school was open, during the brief winter season when the crops were withered and covered in frost, he attended to learn his numbers and letters. When it closed during the planting and harvesting seasons, he continued to use what he'd learned in weighing their surplus goods and bartering them with neighbors or selling them in town to white folks, which he hated. For them, the prices lowered, as well as his eyes. "Don't look 'em in the face," Ida Mae admonished.

"Why, Grandmere?"

" 'Cuz dey always thinkin' we puttin' some kind of root on 'em," She tisked.

"*Can* we put one on them?"

"Hush yo' mouf, boy!" She gasped, but he had seen the small smile play at her lips.

There was no school now, not for the colored anyway. So after breakfast, Cornelius was allowed to run off into the woods.

"G'won git, boy. I don't know how you spec' to become a man in dis house watchin' me clean up after you," Ida Mae nudged him towards the door. "Check make sure dat mare ain't get out from the fence."

“Yes’m,” he replied, flying out of the door. In addition to raising Cornelius, Ida Mae’s second largest focus was on containing the mule. It was fairly large for its breed, the sterile offspring of a horse and donkey. She had named it after her daughter, Luella, whose departure she actually understood. Still, keeping a watchful eye on the mule became a substitute and she made Cornelius check on it several times throughout the day.

Cornelius reached the small fenced area and slid to a halt. There was no mule in sight. The gate was slightly ajar, and Cornelius hoped that she hadn’t gotten far. Following the trail of hoof prints perfectly preserved in the mud, he trotted again in the direction of the well.

“Lou!” he shouted for her, hoping that she would return on her own. Reaching the well, he faltered. The tracks grew dull where the ground hardened and brush took over. He scanned the area, his eyes stopped where the tree line began. There was a slight rustle. Cornelius shot towards it and was rewarded with a sight of the horse’s rear end. But Lou was not alone. A figure was slung over her broad back.

“Hey!” Cornelius shouted. “What you doin’ with my horse?”

Slowly the figure rose to a full sitting position on the horse and tugged gently at the reins encouraging Lou to a full stop. Cornelius heard a slight tongue click and saw the figure yank the reins to the left, turning the horse around to face him. His eyes widened, unsure of what to expect. He prayed that it wasn’t a white horse thief. That would amount to one less horse, at the very least. He didn’t want to think of what would happen in the worst instance. But the face that turned to him was just as dark as his own, and a lot harder. It was a hard-knock life face and the mouth was pulled into a tight grimace...or it could have been a weird smile. With a face like that, Cornelius couldn’t tell.

“Hey there, lil man,” the stranger said. “I found this ol’ girl wandering around. Figured maybe she’d run off from home. But I ain’t know where home was for her,” he panted. “Guess it’s a good thing you come along.”

Cornelius remained silent as the man slid from Lou’s back, which seemed to drain him of all energy. He stumbled and stabilized himself against Lou. “And,” he continued, “dis ain’t no horse, boy. It’s a mule.” He handed the reins to him.

“I know,” Cornelius finally spoke encouraged by his repossession of Lou. “Grandmere says she’s an ass.” At ten years old, he hadn’t made the connection that the animal’s name was an abbreviated version of his mother’s. Had he been older, perhaps he would have been able to draw a parallel between Luella’s running off and Ida Mae’s near obsession with containing the mule.

The man laughed, but stopped short and clutched his side. “Why don’t you let me walk with you and this ass to get a drank from that well down yonder?”

Cornelius shrugged and began to walk, leading Lou and the man leaning heavily against her.

“So you stay in that house down there, huh?” The man asked.

“Yessuh.”

“With your grandma?”

“Yessuh,” Cornelius repeated.

“You Luella’s boy?” The stranger asked.

Cornelius stopped walking. This man knew his mother. He turned towards the man, full of questions. Before he could ask the first, the man collapsed. His face was covered in sweat.

His jacket fell open to reveal a slit in his shirt and beneath it, a slit in his side that was quickly soaking the rest of his garments.

Cornelius stepped back. The stranger's eyes were closed. Cornelius scratched his head and absently reached for Lou's reins. The stranger wasn't going anywhere. He could wait until Cornelius secured Lou in the yard and swiped some rags and things from the house.

After making sure that the gate was properly latched, Cornelius raced towards the house skidding to a halt just outside of the door. Ida Mae did not allow running. He kicked off his boots and hopped across the threshold onto the wooden floor that his grandfather had installed. It was the only thing that Cornelius knew about the man -- the house was built by him and he had always been proud of the wooden floors that he had placed in them. It wasn't his grandfather's only construction. Impatient with the development of the water well, Ida Mae's husband had decided to construct his own. But wells are difficult to design and properly construct. Contaminants frequently were present and the small community had voted to turn the Gaines construction into a dry well, a receptacle for water overflow. The dry well sat as a gaping mouth in the land, a parasitic twin to the prominent cemented structure that provided clean well water to the community.

"Boy, what's all that stompin' you doin' about on your granddaddy's floors?" Ida Mae looked up from her quilting. But Cornelius was barely listening. He was busy watching her hands work with precision on the quilting squares and thinking of the stranger's gaping wound. Would it need to be sewn back together?

"Nelius!"

"Ma'am?" he responded startled.

“Boy, where is your mind?”

“I...I found a...” he began, searching for a plausible explanation that would garner advice but not curiosity. Ida Mae was not one to help some strange man that had been stabbed. She’d be afraid that he was trouble. She certainly wouldn’t want someone around that knew anything about his mother. He could say that he’d found a hurt possum. But ever the opportunist, his grandmother would just want to add it to dinner. He could tell her that Lou was hurt, but she’d insist on having a look for herself.

“Well?” Ida Mae demanded. “You found what?”

“A hurt dog,” Cornelius sputtered.

“Hmph, and I suppose you want to bring the mongrel in here?” she continued.

“No, ma’am. I just wanted to see if I could patch him up.”

Cornelius held his breath as Ida Mae took her time to answer. “You see about that mule?”

“Yes ma’am. She good. Even took her grazing by the well.”

A worried look crossed Ida Mae’s face. “Not that dry well.” Cornelius shook his head.

“You stay away from that hole, boy. Grounds too loose. You liable to fall right in.” Ida Mae paused. “Well g’won then. Look in my needle box and get what you need. Nothing that looks new though!”

When he returned to the well, the stranger was still passed out. Cornelius drew water from the well and dipped a rag in it. He then laid it on the stranger’s head. After a brief pause and a sigh, he peeled back the man’s shirt to reveal the wound, black around red edges. He took another wet rag and gently began to wipe around it. Once he finished, he sat looking at the needle and thread. Cornelius had never sewn anything in his life and was not sure how to go

about stitching human skin. He picked up the needle and twirled it between his thumb and forefinger. Picking up the thread, he tried unsuccessfully to wind it through the eye of the needle.

“I’ll take it from here,” the stranger’s raspy voice hissed.

Cornelius looked up, startled yet relieved. Silently, he handed over the needle and thread and busied himself picking at a callous on his hand while the stranger took three attempts before he was successful threading the needle.

“You got a match?” the man asked.

“Huh?” Cornelius looked back down the path towards the house and shook his head.

“I s’pose your grandma don’t know what you up to, huh?”

“Naw, suh,” Cornelius admitted.

“Alright then. Guess I gotta do this the really old way,” the stranger grinned. He placed the needle between his lips and gently drew it across, wetting it with his saliva. “It ain’t exactly purifyin’ by fire but it’s all we got.”

“Is that really gonna help?” Cornelius asked.

“Well, we shole gonna see,” the man answered. “But I guess if it don’t...” he began and extended his hand to Cornelius, “they call me Deuce.”

Cornelius accepted the handshake, “I’m Cornelius.”

“Lil C. I like that,” Deuce grinned, or rather Cornelius thought that it was a grin again.

“Guess y’all ain’t got no drinking liquor down at the house neither, huh?” Cornelius shook his head.

“Alright then, Lil C. Here it goes,” Deuce began to stitch the wound. He managed to get about halfway done before he passed out again.

Cornelius leaned towards Deuce, afraid to shake him should it undo the stitching. He gently tapped Deuce’s forehead with his index finger, “Mr. Deuce?” There was no response. He looked at the needle, stuck mid-pull between the two sections of skin. He thought about his grandmother and still could not bring himself to go get her for help, perhaps saving Deuce but definitely risking the chance of finding out more about his mother from him. He wondered if this was what his grandmother meant about going off into the woods learning to become a man. With new resolve, he firmly grasped the needle and slowly pulled it and the trailing thread through the skin. He tried not to focus on the blood collecting on the string or on the gentle resistance the skin supplied as the tension brought it together in what was appearing to be a very successful stitch.

He took his time and exhaled as he finished. Cornelius continued to hold the needle at the end of the stitch. He thought back to Ida Mae darning socks and repairing buttons, how she would bring the thread to her mouth and sever it from the needle with a quick bite. Deuce’s blood coated the needle and thread. The sight of which caused Cornelius’s stomach to churn. Whenever he tried to release the needle, the stitching grew slack so he held on to it, maintaining the tension. Frantically, he looked around for a sharp rock, shard of glass, or anything that would cut the thread. Sliding his free hand across the ground, he found nothing. He wondered how long he had been outside. His grandmother would be cross, then worried, then looking.

His palm was covered in dirt and the bloody fingers of his other hand were beginning to cramp from pinching the needle so tightly. He roughly wiped the dusty hand on his overalls then

used his fingers to try to wipe some of the blood from the thread. But the more he wiped, even as he tried to be gentle, the more it tugged and caused additional bleeding. The sun seemed to be disappearing beyond the tree line. Cornelius took a deep breath, clenched his eyes shut, and swiftly brought the thread to his teeth and severed it near the eye of the needle. He spat several times until his mouth was free from the imagined taste of blood and dirt. Deuce still had not stirred. Cornelius tied a double-knot near wound and left the excess thread standing erect from the body. There was no way he was using his teeth again for that. Deuce could take care of that later.

“Mr. Deuce?” he gently nudged Deuce’s shoulder and repeated his name until the man began to slowly regain consciousness. Deuce opened his eyes and winced. He licked his dry lips and Cornelius held a cup towards him.

Deuce drained it and cleared his throat. “Lil C, right?”

Cornelius nodded, “Mr. Deuce...”

“Just Deuce,” Deuce interrupted.

“We gotta git you somewhere. You need me to fetch somebody for you?”

Deuce sat up quickly. It was the most alert that Cornelius had seen him. “Nawl, Lil C. You ain’t got to fetch nobody for me. I need to lay low for awhile. Git myself together. Let’s let folks think that ol’ Deucey is outta the picture for a while.”

Cornelius nodded, unsure of what Deuce meant. “So what you gonna do? Where you gonna go?” he asked, fearing the answer.

Deuce grimace-grinned, wide and chuckled before grabbing his side. He looked down at the stitches. “Not bad, Lil C, not bad at all. You got ol’ Deucey in yo’ favor, and trust me, it’s a good one to have. I just needs one mo’ thang.”

Cornelius’s small frame shook as he helped Deuce to his feet and then down the path to the chicken coop. He hoped that Grandmere didn’t come out of the house and catch them or there would be holy hell to pay. As they slowly made their way, Deuce explained that he was a “bidness man,” which meant numbers runner. There had been a “disagreement,” (fight) between Deuce and a “client,” (gambler) over whether or not the client bet on the number that hit. The client “got the best of” (stabbed) Deuce.

“But,” Deuce said as he settled in the corner of the chicken coop, “dis will all blow over soon ‘nuff. I got plans to expand my bidness and I thank that that I could use a lil soldier like you, Lil C.” With great effort, Deuce dug into his pocket and retrieved a five-cent piece and handed it to Cornelius. “Whatcha thank ‘bout that?”

Cornelius took the coin and smiled. Other than selling produce in town, he wasn’t allowed to have any money. “What I gotta do?”

Deuce’s eyelids began to droop, “We’ll talk about it when you come by and feed these chickens. I know Ida Mae ain’t gonna brang her hummin’ ass out here and do it.” Cornelius’s eyes widened. He wanted to know what else Deuce knew about Grandmere. Before he could say a word, Deuce was out again. Cornelius silently crept out of the coop. Ten year old Cornelius figured that he had time.

In time he would become one of the most feared men in Macon County. His actions would incite others, like Ann some fifty years later, to deny his existence. To remain silent at the

sight of his image. To damn his memory until someone came digging. Until Eve, waving a photograph in Ann's face, opened the gate of the *damnatio memoriae* and the ghost of an Egyptian Queen smiled.

## Chapter IX: Hell on Wheels

The history of the railroad is analogous to the development of the country. Like the colonies that settled on the land, the railroad began as separate, disparate companies. There were only 380 miles of track in 1833. But it grew exponentially. Seven year later, there were 2,800 miles of track. By the time the Civil War began in 1861, there were 30,000 miles of track and two-thirds of it was located in Union territory. Lincoln enlisted the railroad to shuttle troops and supplies during the conflict and gained advantage over the Confederacy by disabling their rail systems. During the same time, the president inaugurated construction of the transcontinental railroad to link California to the rest of the nation.

Chinese workers blasted through mountain rock in the west to create tunnels. Irish immigrants, former Confederate and Union soldiers, and ex-slaves worked side by side spiking down tracks. The Central Pacific Railroad Company moved from west to east while Union Pacific worked from east to west. Coal-fueled, the trains literally puffed as they advanced towards their goals. Wherever it went, people flocked and boomtowns –gambling houses, brothels, and saloons – sprang in its wake. These portable towns catered to the railroaders and sprouted and withered along with the railroads arrival and departure. They were havens for outlaws and violence, which prompted a Massachusetts newspaper editor to label the towns Hells on Wheels.

Railroad company names were an effort to convince people where they intended to go. They often included “pacific” or “western” to boldly imply their destination, although many never made it. The Memphis, El Paso, and Pacific Railroad never made it to any of the destinations in its name. The Mobile and Gulf Railroad, a mere eleven mile stretch, wasn’t anywhere near Mobile or the Gulf.

Eventually, some companies went for abbreviated names when the long forms became particularly tortuous, perhaps moreso because of their failure to reach stated destinations than the length of the names. The Atlanta, Birmingham and Atlantic became AB&A, and eventually the “bee line.” Although it may have began as hundreds of separate companies, mergers from its inception well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the individual railroads drawn to each other like drops of mercury combining into one solid puddle: The Railroad. The Railroad revealed itself to be the Frankenstein stitched seams of America, connecting land and corporate interests.

The Railroad named towns. Townspeople renamed railroads. Railroads renamed towns. In 1907, two AB&A executives stopped in a little town in Macon County, Georgia. One said to the other, “Now this is an ideal place for a railroad.” The other replied, “I agree. I also think you’ve just named it.” Ideal, Georgia was christened, which is what happens to things, people, and places that have already been born but have yet to be accepted. In naming it, the Atlanta, Birmingham and Atlantic Railroad Company had literally placed Ideal on the map -- that cartography which parcels out value to those tracts of land that have corporate interests tied to them. Specifically, Ideal was placed on the main line between Birmingham and Brunswick.

Unlike its western cousins, Ideal was no boomtown. Still, The Railroad imbued power. A town that had a depot had a porthole to the rest of the world. This was of particular interest to those who needed to move large quantities of goods. To look closely at the seams that stitch America together reveals railroad tracks and corporations, banks, and criminal entities as the inextricably linked threads. The Railroad delivered casks of liquor until Prohibition in January of 1920. America had learned that voting a law and enacting it were two violently different processes as big city white mobsters found a more profitable and risky business venture.

Mobsters stole two freight cars worth of alcohol from a Chicago rail yard. Four casks of grain alcohol from a government warehouse. Prohibition agents became compromised. Violence was on a rise. Small time racketeer Deuce learned that alcohol became more currency than money when he was unable to payout a debt in whiskey and was stabbed.

Seven years later, Italian mobsters like Al Capone could move Tennessee whiskey into Chicago via rail. Nukey Thompson illegally imported Irish whiskey into Atlantic City. But in 1927, seven years into Prohibition, local black racketeers relied on a series of bootleggers and runners to manage small scale local markets. Deuce had seventeen year old Cornelius.

The church service at the Holy Gethsemene Rock of Jesus Church of God in Christ began later than most. The choir started their first hymnals just as other small town congregations in the area were filing out of the pews. In Ideal the roar of the trains drowned out chorus and message. Instead of competing, the church pushed back the start of its morning service. The voice of God –via Bishop John St. Paul Delano Washington -- could not compete with the roar of the coal-fired engine that shot through Ideal on Sunday mornings. Railroad time was precise. In fact, The Railroad had established standard time. How could a small town church compete with that which gave the town the life, name, and time itself?

Cornelius sat in the back pew of the church next to Deuce. Cornelius had grown tall and wide, while Deuce seemed to have shrunken. They sat glaring at Bishop Washington as he sauntered across the small floor at the front of the church.

“To the gamblers!” he screeched at the small congregation, startling a timid man with his pointed finger, “dere is Jeeeesus!”

“To the whoremongers!” Bishop pounced towards the elderly row of women clad in all white, “dere is Jeeeeeeeeesus!”

Cornelius and Deuce sat stoically continuing to stare at Bishop and the five-member choir that swayed behind his every movement singing exclamations of “yes, Jesus!” The ten-pew church swayed and Bishop danced. Cornelius could see Grandmere in the front pew with the rest of the mother’s board, her white dress gleaming, her hat enormous. When Bishop slid to that side of the church, most of his massive body was obscured behind the hats of the mother’s board.

Cornelius and Deuce were not there for Jesus. The good minister had some bad habits. A faint scar ran down his face like the Mississippi River. Slightly discolored, it squiggled downward diagonally across from his widow’s peak, crossing the space between his left eye and nose and hitting the corner of his mouth before dropping off at the cliff of his chin. He had received the scar and his call to minister during the same experience. However, the scar more than likely preceded the calling.

“If you don’t know Jeeesus,” Bishop continued, “then come know him through me!” Bishop was not a religious title. It was his first name. Yet years prior and several towns away, the name had saved his life. Throwing back his arms, Bishop lifted his head towards the wooden rafters. A quick motion of his hands started the choir singing, “Come to Jeeesus...come to Jesus...just now...”

“Come to Jesus,” Bishop beckoned and the congregation rose. Entranced they marched towards him. His new flock had replaced those previous associations of adulterous rendezvous. When he was caught dangling from a married woman’s bedroom window, the husband mistook

Bishop's name for title. He spared what he thought was a wayward preacher's life, but left the scar as a reminder. It couldn't have been any clearer to Bishop that it had been a sign.

As each person made their way in turn to Bishop, he blessed them, grasping their foreheads with his palm just long enough for the cold metal of his prominent pinky ring to press uncomfortably into their foreheads, and then nudging them head first towards the collection dish. They obliged by digging out coins and crumbled bills before making their way to the crowded exit to wait for Bishop, hoping to snatch a moment of additional time for counsel or a handshake.

Deuce's eyes opened slowly as if emerging from meditation. He rolled his head allowing his neck to crack. He had mentored Cornelius closely over the years, and neither corrected anyone who mistook them for father and son. As they made their way in line towards Bishop, Deuce switched places with Cornelius pushing him in front. "This one's all you, Big C. Make it good."

Cornelius's stomach churned with excitement. He had been waiting for Deuce to give him the opportunity to step up. Already at seventeen, he had three young runners working beneath him. He had helped expand Deuce's "bidness," first serving as a runner and then as a collector for those who didn't have trouble settling their accounts. Now it seemed he was finally making his way to being muscle. He reached Bishop and as the "hand of Jesus" reached towards his skull, he grabbed it and clasped his other hand to Bishop's shoulder drawing him close into a confidential hug. He dropped his shoulder's to lend the appearance of one humbly seeking counsel, yet the words he whispered into Bishop's ear did not match his physical demeanor. When he pulled away and released Bishop's hand, fear was palpable on his face. He and Deuce

walked past the collection plate and out of the church. They climbed into the Model T and did not speak until they had made their way about a quarter of mile down the road.

“Bishop John look like he was gonna shit hisself,” Deuce laughed. “What you say to him?”

“I tole him he was gonna git to Jesus sooner than he liked if he ain’t have that money by tonight,” Cornelius chuckled, maneuvering the automobile on the small dirt road.

“Boy, you movin’ up in the world. I knew you was good luck from when you stitched me up,” Deuce’s laugh became a hacking cough. He grabbed a handkerchief and spat, balling it up and shoving into his pocket.

“Deuce...”

“Don’t,” Deuce warned. “I ain’t dealin’ wit no damn doctors. When it’s my time to go, it’s my time to go. And I ain’t goin’ jess yet.”

“But I think you should...”

“Boy, when the hell I ever give rat’s ass ‘bout what you thank?” Deuce growled, silencing Cornelius. He sighed and lightened his tone, “You down right ornery, you know. Yo’ mama could be the same way.”

Cornelius’ hands tensed on the wheel. He had asked Deuce many questions about his mother over the years but was scarcely rewarded with anything more than what he’d already known. Now, Deuce was volunteering information. “Tell me.”

Deuce nodded, “Yeah, I guess it’s ‘bout time.”

“You my daddy?” Cornelius asked. Fear crept into his stomach.

Deuce chuckled, “I guess I got ‘bout as much of a chance as anyone in dis county. But I ‘spect you know that yo’ mama was...friendly.” Yet his mother Luella had not been friendly in the way that Deuce implied. She had been young and somewhat foolish for the times. But in the tradition of Romeo and Juliet, she had fallen for the wrong man.

Cornelius nodded but he could not have understood the full ramifications. Luella was a young colored girl and the presence of The Railroad had provided a number of wrong men. But Luella’s wrong man was a white foreman who had his sights set on her father’s land. History rewrites conquests as love stories in the tradition of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings. Who knows if the foreman loved Luella. What is true is that he courted her. He impregnated her. What is also true is that he continued to be with her even when it was clear that he would not get her father’s land. And he remained in Ideal far longer than was required. He stayed through Luella’s pregnancy, right up to the birth of Cornelius, the surprisingly dark child that shared his first name instead of his surname. When the child was born, he left for the evening train and did not return.

“But, nawl, I ain’t yo’ daddy. Probably been the closest thang you had to one though,” Deuce continued. “She got knocked up wit you and dere was some talk ‘bout who the daddy might be, but when you come out all dark like you done...well, ain’t nobody know nothin’. Yo’ mama shole did thank the sun rose and set on them yella niggas.”

Luella had waited for the pigment in her child to set. It was widely known that babies were born lighter and became darker. She had hoped that the opposite could be true. Having endured the whispers about her interracial affair, the birth of her child incited new rumors. It was a horrible offense to sleep with the enemy. It added salt to injury to sleep around as well.

To the people of Ideal, Luella was not only a traitor but a whore. There was no need to place a scarlet letter upon her bosom. The dark child that she carted with her was the constant reminder. After three years of shame, she left Cornelius with his grandmother and fled to New Orleans with a man who made more promises than she could hold in mind at one time. Luella didn't care whether or not he could keep them. She just wanted out.

“Well then who was around that coulda been it?” Cornelius pushed.

Deuce grew quiet and thoughtful, “Ain't nobody I know of.” Yet that hadn't stopped people from openly speculating. Wives accused husbands. Men mockingly teased their friends. And a few who had their intentions rebuked in the past from Luella, braggingly credited themselves. Small town conspiracy theorists of the time even posited that her own father had taken advantage. It was this particular idea that caused Deuce's silence.

Cornelius felt the lie as he heard it. It reached into the pit of his stomach and hurled up his next words. “I'm goin' to Nawlins.”

Deuce didn't appear surprised, “Well, I guess I knew that was comin'.” They rode in silence a while longer. “Sho' you don't wanna save yoself the trip and try talkin' to Ida Mae again?”

“Grandmere ain't talked about it this long. She goin' to the grave wit it, I guess.”

“When you leaving?”

“Taking the train tomorrow,” Cornelius decided.

Deuce lifted his left eyebrow but said nothing at first. “You even remember what she look like?”

Cornelius shook his head no.

Deuce clucked his tongue, “Well, I wouldn’t go round there messin’ around wit any yella womin down there til I was sho.’ Zebras cain’t change they stripes, boy.” He strolled away leaving a look of bewilderment on Cornelius’s face.

When the AB&A pulled out of Ideal the next morning, Cornelius was on it. In LaGrange he transferred to the Louisville and Nashville’s West Pointe line with its luxurious vestibule equipment. The Crescent Limited brochure boasted the vestibule experience – movement between cars via enclosed vestibules. Passengers could move freely from one car to the next without the exposure to high winds and the train’s eighty mile per hour speed. The addition of vestibules and intercar movement soon brought dining cars and parlors to the rail travel experience. But Cornelius did not experience any of these features.

The arrangement of train cars reflected the social hierarchy of 1927. The locomotive engine emitted large amounts of smoke and cinder and privileged class passengers were seated as far away from it as possible. After the locomotive engine was the mail and baggage car. Cornelius sat in the first passenger coach, the Jim Crow car. Designed by the Pullman Company for short-distance travel, the basic car was comprised of two rows of bench seats able to be reversed depending on the direction of travel. When used as a Jim Crow car by The Railroad, signs denoting “Colored” were displayed at the entryways. Cornelius sat in the packed car and gazed at the sign.

Pressed next to him on the bench, a Pullman porter struggled to free his foil-wrapped lunch with minimum motion. The bench wasn’t ideal for its two solidly-built occupants. Despite his cautious movements, the porter periodically jabbed Cornelius with his elbow, smiling apologetically each time. As a peace offering, he held out a drumstick to Cornelius. Cornelius

shook his head and muttered a thank you but his growling stomach drowned it out. He accepted the chicken and quickly devoured it.

“Where you heading?” The porter asked, offering a biscuit and his extra bottle of Coca-Cola.

“Nawlins.” Cornelius answered between bites.

The porter smiled. “Fraid not, my friend.”

“Don’t this train go there?” Cornelius reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and retrieved the train schedule.

“Well, normally, yes. But I guess you haven’t heard about the Mississippi?”

“What you mean?” Cornelius frowned.

“New Orleans is under water, son. Nothing’s going in or out of there. And if you want my advice, from what I’ve seen, colored men need to stay far away.”

“Well, from what I’ve seen,” Cornelius responded, “there many places colored men need to stay away from.”

The porter chuckled. “That’s the God’s truth.”

“So what’s Nawlins doing to us now?”

The porter sighed and his eyes grew heavy. “What you think? City’s flooding and they standing on the backs of colored men trying to stay afloat. They’re snatching folk off the roads and forcing them to dig it out.”

Cornelius’s face was set in determination and the porter recognized it. “Look here, son. You’re young and you’re strong. You think you can handle yourself and I’m sure that most times you can. But right now you’re exactly what they’re after down there.”

Cornelius turned his head towards the window and stared. The porter sighed, cleared his lunch scraps and rose. He'd return to his duties in the sleeping car section. While Cornelius would be turning over in his mind where he was going, the porter would be turning down seating into sleepers, brushing off his charge's coats, and finding a small space to wrap himself in the blue-dyed blanket that was issued to porter's after a lifetime of warming white patrons. Hours later, he'd be relieved to see Cornelius exit in the small town of Pascagoula, Mississippi.

Cornelius exited the train depot and walked towards a small storefront where several colored men sat shaded from the summer heat. They were older, perhaps Deuce's age give or take a few years. One was thin, while another wore a hat pulled low over his face and appeared to be sleeping. He made sure to make eye contact with each one as he nodded and spoke clearly, "G'Afternoon, y'all. It's a hot one, ain't it?"

The slender one grinned, revealing two gaps in the space where his front teeth should have been. Cornelius pretended not to notice.

"Boy, dis is *Mis'sippi*. Dey all hot ones!" Snaggletooth laughed, not bothering to wipe at the sweat that was slowly dragging down his face. "Where you comin' from?"

"Macon County, suh."

"Aw, well hell, you ought to know 'bout heat." Snaggletooth paused and took a long sip from a bottle of Coca Cola. "Where you headed?"

"Nawlins, suh."

"Naw, you ain't," one of the others broke his silence.

Cornelius raised his eyebrow at the new voice, "Beg your pardon, suh?"

But it was the one with the hat that responded, “Nawlins is under water. Been that way for a couple of months now.”

Cornelius directed his attention towards the latest speaker, “You talkin’ ‘bout dat flood in Mississippi?”

“Shoot, son, if da *Mis’sippi* take up in its mind to let loose like it done, it could do it anywhere from way ‘yond Chicago all way past Nawlins.”

“And dat jess what it done, too!” Snaggletooth chimed in.

“So you ain’t gonna make it. Can’t nobody git cross dat Ponchatrain.” Sleeping hat concluded, finally lifting it to look Cornelius square in the face.

“And it ain’t safe for no negroes to cross,” the final porch dweller added. “I hear its back to slavery times over dere. Dey roundin’ up as many of us as dey can and makin’ them dig Nawlins out of mud!”

“And you don’t wanna muss up yo’ fancy clothes!” Snaggletooth laughed, sending the rest of the porch howling.

Cornelius plopped down on the store’s porch and slapped his handkerchief against his thigh. He no longer cared about his Sunday suit that he had worn especially for this trip that began in his mind as a search for his mother but had evolved with each approaching mile into an introduction to big city living, a place from where he could return as someone who knew things outside Macon County. He had enjoyed when Deuce called him Big C and wanted to live up to the persona that the name insinuated.

“So what’s so special in Nawlins?”

Cornelius exhaled. He didn't know who the question came from this time. It no longer mattered. They seemed to speak as a single unit, filling in parts of the same story. "I'm looking for..." He paused, unsure of how much to divulge.

"A woman?" Snaggletooth interjected. "Dressed like that you gots to be lookin' for some tail." The porch erupted in laughter again.

This time Cornelius smiled, "Well, suh, actually I am..." He stammered, "Not tail, I mean a woman. I'm lookin' up some kinfolk I got down dere."

Sleeping hat sucked his teeth, his eyes were once again concealed by the wide brim, "Lot of dem folk up here now. You might want to stick around for a few days. Dangerous for a young negro to be movin' around."

The quieter of the three spoke again, "Who dat you say you lookin' for?"

"Her name Luella. Luella Gaines." Cornelius anxiously searched their faces. There was a scratch of a chin, an adjustment of a hat, and a last drain of Coca Cola but nothing that looked like recognition for the name.

"We don't know all dey names, the ones that come up here, but most night dey over dere at one of dem juke joints..."

Snaggletooth interrupted the quiet one, "Aw, you should go to Junior's!"

"Junior's?"

"Yeah, Junior's Bait Shop. Dey got a fish fry tomorrow. Every Friday."

"Alright," Cornelius responded. "What's the other one?"

"The other place," Sleeping Hat said.

"Yeah," Cornelius answered. "What's it called?"

Snaggletooth laughed, “That *is* what it’s called...The Other Place.” More laughter from the porch. Cornelius joined in. Snaggletooth finally wiped the sweat from his neck. “So you gon’ stick around then?”

“Look like it.”

“Well, in dat case...Me an’ da missus run us a little boarding house, nothin’ fancy but clean, um...you got any money?”

Cornelius had quite a bit of money but he was no fool. “I got a little.” He sat straighter, working to communicate that his youth told nothing of his strength.

Snaggletooth grinned, “Aw, don’t go swellin’ up, young buck. I jess wanna make sho you can pay somethin’.”

“How much?”

“Five dollars a week.”

Cornelius pretended to think. Then he slipped his hand in his pocket and pretended to count. After waiting a few seconds, hoping that Snaggletooth got the impression that he was short on money, he responded, “Well, alright. I shouldn’t be here no longer than that, I reckon.”

Snaggletooth grinned, “Well, c’mon then. Let me show you.”

Junior’s was indeed a bait and tackle shop, at least in part. The rear section of the building with its haphazardly built room additions lent a spacious area where a three man band played blues. As Cornelius’ eyes adjusted to the darkened room, he realized why Snaggletooth had recommended the place.

“Welcome to Junior’s!” Snaggletooth embraced Cornelius and clapped him on the back. “I’m Junior.” He continued to hold Cornelius’s elbow and guided him to table in the corner. “Set right here and you can see e’rybody.”

Cornelius settled into the rickety chair and scanned the room. Junior was right; it was a great view of the entire place and the door. He had learned from Deuce to never sit with his back towards a door and to always keep it in clear view. Cornelius took another look, this time slowly taking in each person. He searched the faces of the women, keenly aware that he no longer remembered his mother’s face. His suit began to feel tight on his body. He slid a finger in his collar in an attempt to loosen it. Although he wore the same suit, he had changed shirts and shined his shoes. Looking at the scattering of men, he felt appropriately dressed.

Junior appeared, slapping down a mason jar filled with clear liquid, “Here, son, try some of this ‘shine.” Moonshine is strong enough to power an automobile, and everyone makes theirs differently. Some distill it from corn. Others from potatoes. Just as Cornelius reached for the glass, four red painted nails curled around it. He followed the hand up the slender, golden brown arm upward to the face. The woman smiled before gulping half of the glass down. She seductively licked her full lips. “It ain’t half bad, shug.”

Junior gave his trademarked toothless grin, “Wish I could say the same ‘bout you.” He looked at Cornelius, “G’on finish dat and watch out for dis lady. She’ll drank you under the table.”

Cornelius looked at his table mate and examined her face. She was older, maybe younger than his mama, but maybe not. He hadn’t had much experience with women and was set on heeding Deuce’s advice. “They call me Big C.”

“Mmm,” she murmured. “Why dey call you dat?”

Cornelius smiled, “Maybe later. What can I call you?”

“You can call me whatever you want. But buy me a drink first.”

Junior, seemingly privy to some private joke, arrived unsummoned with another jar of shine. Glancing at Cornelius’s glass, he slid the lipstick rimmed glass in front of the woman and placed the new glass in front of Cornelius. “Baby Girl, at least let the man have a drank to hisself.” He disappeared before she could respond. Once again, Cornelius stared into her face.

“Baby, you keep looking at me like that and you’ll go blind.”

He tried a different approach, “So where you from?”

“Oh, round about. You?”

Cornelius took a sip of the shine and clenched his jaws shut as it burned his throat and stomach. When he could speak again he answered in voice that had been scratched and deepened by alcohol conflagration. “Macon County.”

“Is that right? I got some people up that way.”

“Yeah? Who? I might know ‘em.”

“Aw, shug, they probably long gone by now. I mean, maybe not that long ago...I’m still young, you know.” She winked.

Cornelius continued to sip and began to feel the burning give way to another, more pleasant sensation in his chest. “Anyone can see that.” And suddenly, he could see youth beyond the rouge and eye shadow, and perhaps a few years past but he was starting to see it. She reached across the table and stroked his hand. Cornelius recoiled.

“Aw, don’t worry, shug. I can go slow.”

His lips felt dry. He licked them, sipped the shine and stretched his neck to clear his vision. He looked at the woman and cleared his throat. “What is your name?”

“You still stuck on that, shug?”

Slowly, at first, then quickly he saw her spin around him, still seated. He shook his head trying to stop it. When that didn’t work, he reached out and clutched her arm. “Who are you?”

The woman yanked her arm back, knocking over his glass in the process. “Turn loose my goddamned arm! Look, I was just trying to make nice, knowing you was new in town but you ain’t got to be grabbing me...” She stood and left him steadying himself against the table.

Junior was at his side in seconds. “Son, sometimes its jess a slow hand easy touch, know what I’m sayin? You really pissed Josephine off good.”

“Josephine?” Cornelius muttered.

“Yeah, Josephine. She’s a tough little gal, but still a woman, you know what I’m sayin’.  
Uh, soft like. You cain’t be too rough on ‘em.”

“Josephine...” Cornelius repeated and weaved his way towards the exit.

Junior grabbed his shoulder, “You alright there, son?”

Cornelius stopped and turned to face Junior, “You my daddy now?” He slurred.

“Huh? Boy, you gotta speak up! The band getting started again.” Junior shouted in his ear. Cornelius nodded but continued to shuffle out the door.

Cornelius did not return to Junior’s. He spent the rest of the week sitting at the depot watching the trains pass. The trains were always timely. The 1401 hit Pacagoula precisely at 12:40 in the afternoon, central standard time as established by The Railroad in 1883. The Railroad had solidified itself into America’s landscape and it’s often mistaken as permanent

fixture. But in truth The Railroad is movement, a series of departures. Cornelius thought that he could board the same train and end up in the same place as Luella. But The Railroad is like a wormhole. Once boarded, it's not always clear where one may end. Simply put, The Railroad moves and some are just left behind.

## Chapter X: Small Southern Spaces

Small southern towns change slowly. Perhaps it's just the natural pace of southern spaces unencumbered by city slick speed. It's best represented by the southern drawl, like golden honey dripped onto biscuits. Larger northern cities are *au jus*, but small southern towns are thick sausage gravy. Everything is thicker in the south. The air seems thickened by the blossoms of various trees, and speech is thick on the tongues of its inhabitants. Thick-hipped women embrace their curves in the south, and southern men boast of other thicknesses. The south is syrup and small southern towns are sorghum molasses, the long 'e' pronunciation of *pee-can*, and restaurants with sweet tea on their menus. It's the birthplace of the blues, the music that became its soundtrack, and the deepwood shacks that played it on juke machines or better still, with in-house bands. Language meanders like the Mississippi River, and *y'all* is directed at both singular and plural subjects.

The south cultivated its reputation for being dirty in a bad means good sort of way. The dirty south breeds excess and private debauchery behind the closed doors of its southern sensibilities. It has dry counties and those that refuse to sell liquor on Sundays. Small southern towns don't seem to embrace change at all. Ideal only boasted two major changes – its initial name change from Joetown and when The Railroad left it. It preferred age over distinction and still boldly declared itself to be “the only ideal city in Georgia” as a painted slogan beaming from the town's water tower. There was a police station, a small windowless brick building with a front door on one side and a garage door on the other. Next to it was the post office, a small storefront.. There were churches – a Baptist, a Methodist, a Church of God In Christ – and there was a gun store. Located in the curve of the Bible Belt, Ideal was protected by God and guns.

There were two schools. The one high on the hill that overlooked the town served the minority white population. Down the hill and around the bend, hidden in the hind quarters of Ideal was the small brick structure responsible for educating black youth. Still, Ideal was one of those towns where children seemed to be rare, and eventually small town self-segregation would disappear. Time would bring the decaying of the “black” school just as it crept into the bones of the train depot once The Railroad ceased to stop there.

By 1972 most of the town’s residents could recite only the resolution of the name-story: that the AB&A had deemed their one-point-two square mile patch of land as being an ideal place. Yet few recollected that it was first named Joetown, and none had any knowledge of the Joe for whom it was named and subsequently unnamed. Adding nuance to the meaning of Ideal were the various pronunciations of the word as it was transfigured through the southern dialect of the majority African American township. Ideal became *I-deal* as in to distribute, manage, or handle. *Idle* as in inactive or at leisure. *Idea* as thought. And sometimes *I’da*, the bastardized contraction of ‘I would have.’

The AB&A’s name stuck even though The Railroad did not. The tracks remained. The 1907 Victorian depot complete with turret, clapboard siding and portico remained. And the trains continued to ride the rails, only in 1972 they no longer stopped in Ideal; rather they rushed past it on their way to places that had become more ideal – cities that were large enough to be called by their names instead of lumped into one collective county. Ideal had lost its trains and much of its identity. Residents traveling outside of its borders told people that they were from Macon County, Georgia –as did the citizens of the other two small towns that constituted the

county. Two years later, the brown Victorian depot would be painted blue and donated to the town as a community center.

And so in the autumn of 1972, Eve Mann did not arrive into Ideal by rail but rather bumbled across the Georgia clay in a Greyhound bus which deposited her somewhere in the middle of a shared station for Macon County. If the two-pump filler station, with unevenly lain wooden-planked walkway could be classified as a bus station. It was little more than the city bus stops that Eve was accustomed to that lined the streets of Chicago, which would have also appeared as portholes to nowhere without the thriving metropolis of the cityscape enfolding them.

Ideal was a small town like all others. It once had big city dreams but its growth had been equally nurtured and stunted by The Railroad. A Quick Mart was attached to the single filling station. It advertised the sale of package goods, the broad term given to alcoholic beverages.

Other than its 500 residents, those who stepped foot in Ideal were usually taking a restroom break at its sole filling station, grabbing a few snacks, and reboarding the Greyhound bus. For that reason, when anything more than exhaust and dust remained after the bus's departure, news spread quickly. It usually started with the chess club. The Ideal Chess Club wasn't an official club, meaning that none of its members actually played chess. They were, however, a group of retired men that congregated outside of the Quick Mart to watch the sparse daily activities of the town. There was a chess board and several mismatched chess pieces that had been placed next to their collection of rickety chairs and milk crate seats against the building. But they were props for the town's long standing joke of naming the collection of

retired men, The Ideal Chess Club. Occasionally, someone would drop off a chess piece that they had found from some long forgotten set saying, “Hey, I found this here bishop piece. Y'all ain't got enough of them do you?” The pieces were collected and dutifully added to the board more or less in their proper positions. The chess club's wives, bearing the clichéd moniker of the Ideal Sewing Circle, actually did sew and were stitching chess club baseball caps.

Disembarking from the bus, Eve shrugged out of her corduroy jacket. It may have been autumn temperatures in Chicago but Macon County was still very much in the heat of summer. Her white canvas sneakers immediately became covered in red clay dust as she began to move towards the cargo compartment of the bus's exterior. Eve had been ready to welcome the fresh Georgia air and sunshine after being cramped on the bus for so long with the lingering odor of things once pleasantly classified as aromas at the start of the journey. Fried chicken, perfume, freshly washed clothing and bodies had all become stale with time and distance by their arrival in Macon County.

Beyond looking up Ideal in her aunt's Rand McNally road atlas, Eve hadn't had much of a plan for her trip. But Ideal was incredibly small, smaller than her southside neighborhood in Chicago. So she had packed a week's worth of clothing in one of Ann's green leather suitcases and jotted down the addresses of the two places that could help her the most – the public library and a motel. There were only one of each. Like all small southern towns, Ideal had one grocery. One package store. A funeral home run by the same family for generations with its requisite one son who refused the family practice. There was a diner and a service station with a mechanic who wore denim overalls every day and had perpetually grease-stained fingernails.

Outsiders called the town quaint as they drove through to more appealing cities. In case of emergency stops, they cursed it as hell, unable to imagine being happily stuck there.

Eve imagined that it looked the same as it had over twenty years ago when her mother left. She was correct. In fact, it looked very much as it had fifty years ago when Cornelius boarded the train in search of his own mother. But there were some changes. An eighty-year old Deuce watched as Eve made her way towards the Quick Mart. Her suitcase pulled her heavily towards one side as a map fluttered from its folds in her other hand. Although several passengers were behind her, Eve was the only one toting luggage. The rest were simply making a pit stop on their way to other destinations. The line at the register was long, so Eve decided to wait until the other passengers reboarded the bus. She dropped her suitcase next to the ice machine against the building and sagged down beside it to consult her map.

Deuce leaned over from his seat a few feet away. “Fresh off the bus and already lost? T’aint the best start, little missie.” Eve glanced up. Deuce, once mentor to the one of the most feared racketeers in the area, was now a kindly-looking old man. He wore both suspenders and a belt beneath his ever-present sports coat. The shine on his shoes defied the Georgia dust.

“Nobody needs a map in Ideal.” He pronounced the city *I-dear*. “It’s smaller than an ant’s ass.” The town consisted of three main parallel roads and various smaller streets veining out into the few neighborhoods. Main Street ran through its center and connected it to the sister county towns of Oglethorpe and Montezuma. Front Street was the main road that weaved through the areas of Ideal where the white residents lived, while Back Street sliced paths to black residential areas.

Eve joined in the laughter. “I’m looking for some people. I don’t even really know who they are, or if they’re still alive or living here.”

Deuce smiled, “Hell, gal, you don’t need no *lie-berry*. I’m eighty years old and been living here all my life. I’m John Johnston, but most folk call me...”

“Let me guess,” Eve interrupted. “J.J.”

Deuce laughed. “Nawl, but you got the right *i-dear*. Deuce...on account of the double J’s.” The nickname, typical of southern logic, required an extra step. They hadn’t gone for the ease of J.J., but had continued to think of two J’s as a duece.

“Nice to meet you Mr. Johnston. I’m Eve.” Eve extended her hand. “Eve Mann.” Deuce’s hand froze in the handshake and his smile faltered. Her face had been familiar to him in the haziness of one who’s seen too many faces over many years. Now Eve’s face and the name recognition coalesced in Deuce’s mind. “Mann, you say?”

Eve nodded. “With two N’s.”

“And who you say you lookin for?” But even before she had dug out the picture, Deuce knew.

Eve handed it him. “Any of these people or information about them.”

Deuce stared at the picture, his eyes never leaving the face of Cornelius Gaines as Eve pointed, reintroducing faces that he hadn’t seen in years. “This is my mother...Mercy. She died in childbirth having me...” Eve plowed through her descriptions with a speed that did not take into account the weight of the information. Deuce had often wandered what had become of Mercy, yet he scarcely had time to register her death before Eve had moved on in her account.

“This is my aunt Ann. She raised me. This is my grandmother Gertrude. Never met her. And I think this man is my grandfather, but he’s got a different last name and my aunt never talked about him.”

Deuce silently handed the photograph back to Eve. “I ‘spect you staying at the inn down yonder?”

Eve nodded.

“I can give you a lift in my truck. Let you get settled in and maybe you come ‘round the house this evening for dinner? The missus loves company. Always going on about what she seen on the t.v. or read in the magazines. I’ont half pay that stuff no mind really, but she’d love to have a city gal to chat with.”

Eve smiled, uncertain. “That’s awfully nice of you Mr. Johnston but...”

“I can tell you ‘bout your kin.”

Eve paused. The lure of revelations quelled her protest. “You know these people?”

Deuce sighed. “I knew ‘em. When they was alive.” He slowly rose and rubbed his leg. “Whew. This getting up shole is harder than it was when I was your age.”

He insisted on carrying her suitcase as they walked towards his truck. He dropped Eve off half of a mile down a barely paved road at Johnita's Inn, a quaint two-story Georgian in the middle of Back Street. It had been a boarding house and juke joint in a previous life, a life well-known by a much younger Deuce, Cornelius, and the man missing from Eve's photograph, her grandfather Hezekiah. In fact, the inn's namesake had once been intimately close with her grandfather. These connections did not escape Deuce's memory or notice as he pulled away from the inn and wondered how to share information with one who was entitled to know it while

respecting the privacies of those who had lived it. He was no closer to an answer later that evening when Eve found him sitting on his porch.

“Mr. Johnston, what can you tell me about my grandfather?” She plopped on the concrete step next to his chair.

Deuce glanced at the photograph that Eve clutched in her hands. “I can tell you that that ain’t him. Your granddaddy name was Hezekiah Mann. He come up this way as a boy from *Flaw-da*, that town the white folks burn down back in ’23.”

Eve's face twisted in confusion. “This is not my grandfather?” Deuce shook his head. Questions flew through her mind at lightspeed. Who was the man? Why wasn't her grandfather pictured? But as Deuce began to speak, the slow tenor of his voice lulled her into a calm. As storytelling goes, there were some omissions. There were some things that he didn't know. But in small southern towns too many people know too much of what they shouldn't know about others. It was only in the retelling of Hezekiah's story that omissions occurred quite naturally on several levels. At the intersection of an elder addressing a younger person, a man addressing a woman, and a southerner addressing an outsider. There were other things that he didn't feel comfortable telling.

Deuce told Eve that her grandfather was a proud man who loved his family, especially his children. He did not share that Hezekiah also loved to drink and gamble. Hezekiah Mann mostly loved to do everything on a large scale. His passion for women other than his wife had made things difficult at home. But it wasn't entirely his fault. Gertrude's passion was reserved for the Lord and there hadn't seemed to be anything left over for Hezekiah. One opinion on the matter, mostly held by Hezekiah, was that it was Gertrude who was cheating on him and it didn't

matter that the receiver of her affections was Mr. Jesus H. Christ. Of course it hadn't always been that way. But this was well beyond the purview of Deuce's knowledge and interest. It was Deuce's wife Evelyn who provided an additional layer of information regarding Hezekiah's courtship, which contained its own omissions. Had Evelyn known them, she wouldn't have approved or shared. Had Deuce known, he would have simply categorized it as a rite of manhood, learning the things that men need to know before marriage and that women wait to learn through marriage.

Hezekiah spent a year courting Gertrude in the summer of 1932. He would have proposed marriage the first day they met, he would later boast to friends. It was Gertrude who needed the time to fall in love with him. He enjoyed the challenge of exercising restraint in his courtship. Although he was not quite twenty, Hezekiah had had a very thorough teacher in the intimacies of sexual romance with a woman who had clicked into town briefly to bury a relative. Miss Davis had been twice his age, taking his teenage virginity and leaving him with a pirated copy of the Kama Sutra and a hunger for experiences that were difficult to match in small southern spaces. Like one who travels and falls in love with a foreign cuisine only to realize the insatiable absence it created when one returns home. After Miss Davis left, Hezekiah was no longer amused by many of the girls his age with whom he had previously flirted. He wanted a woman, and in the 1930's south, women were made by marriage.

Hezekiah's courtship of Gertrude was an enviable fairytale that, if one must view it as a trope, had to end tragically. Hezekiah's wooing was worthy of folklore. A young black boy in the south receiving a copy of the Kama Sutra and lessons sounded as fanciful as finding magic beans or being awakened from a coma by a magical kiss. And yet, it did occur in the category of

experiences that are located at the intersecting realms of the unbelievable and the real. In this world, Hezekiah found pleasure in exercising restraint in becoming physical and he devised a system to remain disciplined in his strength of will. It all centered on the *yoni*. Yet the *yoni* was more than heavenly portal that lay at the core of Gertrude. For Hezekiah, it was a sliding definition. First, the *yoni* would be holding hands.

During their initial walks he never made move to touch Gertrude. He walked close enough that their shoulders nearly touched and his eyes sparkled when he looked at her, but it was Gertrude who initiated hand contact reaching for his as they strolled among the tree covered area east of town. He gently squeezed her fingers and continued to point out the different varieties of trees to which neither paid much notice. The heated sensation pulsating within their clasped hands crept up their arms making it difficult for each to concentrate. Yet they pretended to be unaffected and trudged on past the spot where the old dry well lay broken and exposed, a gaping hole in the earth. Holding hands became a permanent component to their daily walks. Sometimes they would swing their arms as children. Other times, their arms hung rigid at their sides, fingers entwined.

The next *yoni* was the embrace. Again, Hezekiah would not initiate it. He explored all the intimacies possible within the confines of hand holding with the determination to leave her wanting more until Gertrude could not contain herself during one of their afternoon partings. Just as he was bidding her adieu in the accustomed manner of a smile and gentle squeeze of both her hands, Gertrude flung her arms around his neck. He barely had time to register her soft form against his, when embarrassment caused her to flee into her house leaving Hezekiah with the lingering jasmine scent and a bemused smirk on his face.

When embraces became frequent and lingering, *yoni* had once again transformed itself. It became the kiss. They had managed to lengthen their walks by incorporating basket lunches. Hezekiah would carry the wicker basket that Gertrude filled with thick chunks of ham between slices of bread, fresh fruit, and jugs of lemonade. They would carefully wind their way to the dry well, where they would spread a blanket and relax into conversation between bites of food. When they were done, Hezekiah would toss the remains into the depths of the well and recline to feel the sun's warmth on his face. It was during one of these times that Gertrude leaned over and planted a soft kiss on his lips. Hezekiah opened his eyes and slowly returned the kiss. Flushed, Gertrude rested her head on his chest and they lay in silence for a while – Hezekiah feigning calmness of body, and Gertrude pretending not to notice the protruding bulge in his pants. Gertrude never took Hezekiah seriously whenever he talked about the large house that he was building in an area near the place that they walked. To her surprise, Hezekiah's wagon stopped at the large house that was indeed constructed for their union. It was an impressive two-story home with a fresh coat of gleaming white paint.

Gertrude prepared a feast for their first meal as man and wife. When Hezekiah saw the spread of fried catfish, smoked ham, collard greens, sweet potatoes, biscuits, ho' cakes, and sweet potato pie he remarked, "Trudy, who gon' eat all dis food? We ain't even started workin' on young'ns yet."

Gertrude blushed and responded, "I guess I gots to git in practice." Hezekiah smiled hoping to comfort her apparent nervousness. She seemed to be waiting for the impending deed of all honeymoons. Surely women have spoken with her about it, Hezekiah thought. But she

didn't have to worry with him. He didn't want Gertrude cringing in pain when they joined. Hezekiah wanted her to feel the ecstasy that he would experience.

That first night they lay in an embrace similar those they shared during their courtship. Her white nightgown was starched and pristine. She wondered if it she would be able to remove the blood that would surely stain it after their coupling. That night, Hezekiah held her and kissed her with more passion than she knew existed in the act. She was breathless and her body tingled in a million places. Yet Hezekiah simply kissed her lips a final time and snuggled into her. Minutes later she heard the unmistakable deep breathing of his slumber.

On the third night, Gertrude was in bed earlier than normal. "You feelin' under?" Hezekiah asked as he removed his shirt. Her eyes danced across his chest and she shook her head.

"I want you to come to bed." She answered. Hezekiah barely was able to lie beside her before she was on him, pulling his solid frame onto her small body. She kissed him with eagerness and the expertise yielded from their experiences.

When they joined, Gertrude could not stop her body from moving in a way that was foreign to her mind. She was certain that it had never performed such a dance, yet her hips rolled of their own accord. She was no longer in control of her body. Hezekiah was a puppeteer manipulating her with his hands and mouth. She could only hold on to his shoulders as she cried out for Jesus in a way that had never happened in church. There was a final burst of electricity that jolted through her body and her throat went hoarse from utterings that she could not remember speaking. They lay spent in each others' arms. "Wuz dat how you thought it wuz gon' be?" He asked, still nuzzled in the hollow of her neck.

“No. Ain’t nobody ever said nothin’ like what I felt.” She answered absently stroking his thigh. “I ain’t neva felt so wonderful, Hezekiah.”

But along with sexual satisfaction brewed guilt. Gertrude had been raised like all southern girls to remain chaste until marriage, unleash the pent up energy for procreation, and then repackage it to be rationed out and scheduled like weekly pot roast meals. Gertrude was unable to reconcile her elation and her shame. She became equally eager and nervous to go to bed. At dinner, she fidgeted with the cornbread crumbs that had escaped her plate onto the table. Noticing her preoccupation, Hezekiah grabbed her hand. “What’s the matter, Trudy? You ain’t happy?”

She lifted her eyes to meet his. “I...I’m...” She could not find the words to describe the ecstatic nights that overshadowed her mundane days. Hezekiah waited patiently. Taking a deep breath she continued, “I’m so happy with you that I don’t know how to be by myself.”

Hezekiah grinned. “You jess’ needs a hobby...somethin’ to do when um’ workin’.” He continued to stroke her hand.

Gertrude felt heat rising from his touch. “Maybe I can help out at church.”

“That’s a good idea! Dey always tryin’ to git folks up dere to be on committees and such.” Hezekiah’s fingers traveled up her arm causing Gertrude to shiver in response. “You feelin’ tired?”

“No!” She answered more forcibly than she had intended, but she did not want to miss out on any of the night’s activities.

Hezekiah smiled. “Well, I guess you wanna stay up a while then?”

Gertrude's jaw dropped. She didn't want to stay up either. "No." She answered softly lowering her eyes. Hezekiah chuckled. He was playing with her. Boldly she returned her gaze to his eyes. "Take me to bed, Hezekiah."

Three years, two children, and one church volunteer job later, Gertrude's opinion had changed. She began to distrust the rapturous feelings of the physical intimacy. Waiting in the house for Hezekiah felt more wrong than right. She spent her days repenting the night's activities. Her nighttime prayers were frequently interrupted when Hezekiah knelt beside her, then behind her. She clutched the small thin cross at her neck and it became unclear to whom her whispers of "*sweet Jeezus*" were directed. Eventually, Jesus the Christ won and Hezekiah began his transformation into the man that Deuce struggled to describe to Eve decades later. But what neither Deuce nor his wife Evelyn could bring themselves to share with Eve was what she wanted to know most: what happened to her grandfather.

Hezekiah moved two towns over to Montezuma and kept company with the women of Macon County who were just as neglected as him. Men who were too busy with their work, gambling, and own indiscretions urged their wives to "go to Mann" to fix broken chairs, holes in the chicken coops, and leaky roofs; and Hezekiah Mann made those repairs and found himself mending broken hearts, renewing self-confidence, and scratching incessant itches. Much can be said about gossiping housewives, but as for the women of Ideal, not one uttered a word to their husbands or to Gertrude who called many of them friend.

Every weekend, Hezekiah traveled the ten miles from Montezuma to Ideal to work the plot of land on which Gertrude's house sat. It was this land that fed them while most others were either starving or leaving by the bus load to the North. Hezekiah worked and his wife continued

to beg him to return to their home and the church for good. For Gertrude, everything could be solved in the church. She was certain that all Hezekiah need do was give testimonial in church and let everyone know that he had seen the error of his heathen ways and was ready to repent. In his mind, he would repent as soon as she was ready to do the same.

Hezekiah did return a while later, although it had nothing to do with repenting his heathen ways. Times were always hard for colored folk, but now even white folks were feeling the squeeze, which meant that it could only get worse. People were starting to steal anything that they could lay their hands on. Hezekiah worried about Gertrude and their two small girls. Hezekiah loved both of his children, but he had a tender spot for Mercy. It was after her birth, the last of his children with Gertrude, that Hezekiah had felt the presence of God.

Holding that tiny, brown form in his hands caused him to fill with so much energy that Hezekiah could not help but feel and believe in the presence of God. Gertrude attended church several days a week, and Hezekiah acknowledged that it was good for her. Anything that lifted the spirit was a good thing. Gertrude had the church and Hezekiah had his own devices for elevating the spirit. With the birth of Mercy, he had one more to add to his pile. Hezekiah imagined that if Gertrude felt in church even half of what he felt around Mercy, he could understand her unwavering attendance in its congregation.

It was these thoughts that kept him company on his return to Ideal. Hezekiah wanted to bring the girls some candy. He also thought that it would be appropriate to enter their house with money. Gertrude would probably need some things for the house. People could say lots of things about Hezekiah, but no one could ever call him a man that did not support his family, even

if hadn't been living with them. Hezekiah didn't have much money with him but he knew exactly where he could find more.

Before it became Johnita's Inn where Eve lodged, Johnita's Place was a local boarding house frequented by her grandfather. Hezekiah and Johnita had at one time been very close before he met and married her cousin Gertrude. Since then he had managed to frequent every other gambling spot in town, and there weren't many others from which to choose. Still he reckoned that Johnita knew that what they had in the past was nothing more than a glorified friendship. It had been many years since he had lain in Johnita's bed. Yet when he entered the boarding house, she greeted him as if it had been not more than a week's passing. Hezekiah merely tipped his hat towards her and maneuvered his muscular frame past her with surprising agility. He ambled down the dark staircase towards the meandering cigar smoke and syncopated sounds of Twelfth Street Rag competing against the hoots and hollers of the basement crowd.

"Hezekiah!" Johnita shouted at the quickly retreating figure. Hezekiah continued his downward stroll oblivious to her calls. His mind was fixed on money, his girls, and whether or not Gertrude would be in a loving mood. They were still man and wife after all. That line of reasoning had served as adequate justification for their past couplings, but lately Gertrude had been becoming more and more hesitant. Hezekiah considered her increasing aversion as cause to find sexual release from more willing participants. But now that he would be moving back, Gertrude would have to open up to compromise.

When Hezekiah walked into the basement, men greeted him with handshakes and women planted red lip marks on his face. He floated around leaving smiles on faces even as he glided away from poker tables with collections of money that would never make it to the landlords or

grocers for which they were intended. Hezekiah was a gambler with an enviable streak of luck; and he loved to gamble win or lose. As he eased past the crammed tables overflowing with cards, liquor and chicken dinners, a pair of arms encircled his broad shoulders. Soft breasts pressed against his spine and the scent of jasmine tickled his nostrils. Hezekiah took a brief moment to compose himself as he pulled away from the embrace and faced his smiling assailant.

“Claudette, ain’t you got nothin’ betta to do than try to get me kilt?” He could not help returning the smile as his gaze waltzed over the voluptuous frame snugly housed in a bright red dress that matched her generous lips.

Claudette returned the gaze appreciatively and stroked Hezekiah’s arm. “Well, shuga, least you git a taste of heaven ‘fore you go.”

Hezekiah shifted backward to place some distance between them. “I’m fo’ real, woman. What you wanna play around wit me fo’ when you got a big important man like Big C?”

“Well maybe Big C ain’t so big.” Claudette responded closing the gap that once was between them.

“Shh. Why you gotta be so loud and... and...” He glanced around.

“And sexy?” She supplied.

“I was gonna say wanton.” Hezekiah finished. The crowded space seemed to facilitate Claudette’s intention to get closer to him and he could feel her hips pureeing against him. He placed his hands firmly on her waist and shoved her away. “Woman, thou art loose.”

“Since when did you start quotin’ scripture, sinner?” Claudette teased.

“Since the devil sent his concubine in here wearin’ a red dress.” Hezekiah countered.

Claudette pointed a red tipped finger at her chest and feigned a look of surprise. “I know you ain’t talkin’ ‘bout me, is you, Hezekiah?” Her voice was rising slightly and he could smell the gin wafting through her ruby lips.

Hezekiah took hold of her elbow and guided her through the noisy crowd into a storage closet. He closed the door behind them. Claudette threw her arms around his neck. “Hezekiah, I thought you’d never...”

Hezekiah shoved her away. His jaw was locked in tension and brows were furrowed. “Look, Claudette, you all woman. You know that. You got a lot of...” Hezekiah struggled for the words that would compliment yet discourage further advances. “You got a lot of gifts, Claudette.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” She smiled and sauntered towards him.

“But, I’m a married man...” Hezekiah continued.

“That never stopped you before.” Claudette grazed his chest with her palm. “E’ryone know that you like other women’s...gifts. You layin’ up with half the menfolks’ women in here! So why not with me, Hezekiah?”

“Claudette, you know better than me.” Hezekiah leaned on a shelf that held a variety of preserved fruits in mason jars. Each was clearly labeled in script he recognized as belonging to Johnita. Yet, Claudette’s words rang true. He was a man whose demons had been out of control. With the return home, Hezekiah hoped that a change would come.

“Why you scared of Big C?” Claudette hissed at him. “Is he the only real man out there that want a real woman like me?” The reality of her womanhood was that there wasn’t a place for it in this world of racketeers, womanizers, and God-fearing women. Hezekiah was correct.

Claudette was wanton, but it could not be summarized in the succinct packaging of sexual desire. Claudette wanted more than she could have. She wanted more than there existed for her to have. She wanted more. Beneath the makeup and the beauty were scars of a woman who had loved hard and gotten hurt so often that there was nothing left but a bitter, venomous creature – a black widow, luring others into her web of destruction.

“Yeah. I suppose that’s why he called Big C.” Hezekiah turned to exit.

“Don’t you walk out on me, Hezekiah!” Claudette screamed at his back.

“Bye, Claudette.” Hezekiah continued.

“You gon’ regret this!” Claudette spat. With a lowered head, Hezekiah quietly closed the door on the murderous stare that penetrated his very soul. He did not question the threat. Claudette was a woman scorned in her perspective, even though he had not laid a finger on her. He raised his head and found himself staring into the coal black face of Cornelius Gaines.

“Hey, Big C.” Hezekiah tried to think of something else to say but it didn’t matter. Big C tightened his lips around a cigar. He took a long pull and slowly exhaled the smoke into Hezekiah’s face then turned and walked away.

Hezekiah no longer felt the electric jolt of excitement to gamble. It had been replaced by an inexplicable sadness and longing to see his family. That closet contained more than a contemptuous vixen. It held Truth. Hezekiah had come face to face with himself through Claudette’s accusations. She had mirrored the licentious fiend within him. Hezekiah stayed a while longer, but his concentration had been broken and he quickly lost the money that he had won earlier. The room was gradually emptying as the hour grew from late to early.

He would go home. With no money in his pocket, nor candy for his girls. As he left Johnita's, his step quickened. He would spend more time with Ann, his older daughter. She was definitely Gertrude's child in every way. A daughter that any father would be proud of, yet next to Mercy, Ann appeared so rigid. She obeyed Gertrude without question while Mercy questioned everything. He loved it! He felt more secure about Mercy growing into womanhood. She would be able to discern the types of men that could be trusted from... He hesitated in his thoughts as the honest completion to his sentence came to him. Mercy would be able to distinguish good-intentioned men from men who were like him.

Hezekiah was anxious to reach the warm shelter of home. His steps squished as his feet made contact with the mud caked road. Sniffing the air he surmised that the day's earlier rain was a mere sample of what was yet to come. The night sky growled its concurrence and lightening briefly illuminated the horizon just enough for him to see the faint silhouette of the house as he trod towards it. He barely heard the approaching motorcar. He froze in his steps. A motorcar meant one of two things: white folks or Big C.

The Ford rolled along side Hezekiah as a face loomed from the obscurity of its interior. The passenger door opened and Hezekiah remained unmoved. From the depths emerged the pinstripe clad, 250-pound frame of Cornelius Gaines.

Hezekiah allowed himself to breath but was still guarded. "I wouldn't spec' you out dis late, Big C."

"I ain't neva had no set bed time, Hezekiah." Cornelius's voice was a rolling thunder. A smile lit his dark countenance.

"I mean out the juke joints." Hezekiah's laughter allowed him to relax.

“Business don’t sleep either.” The smile disappeared Cornelius’s face silencing Hezekiah.

A glance towards the automobile revealed two more people. In the driver’s seat sat Deuce. Smirking in the back seat, was Claudette. Hezekiah looked toward the road. He could just make out the stream of smoke from Gertrude’s chimney. Big C moved closer and wrapped a large arm around his shoulder almost comfortingly. “Don’t worry, Hezekiah.” He soothed. “I’ll take care of ‘em.”

Hezekiah struggled to think of the words that would inspire Cornelius to let him go. “I neva touched her, Big C.”

Surprisingly, Cornelius laughed. “I know. But it’s somethin’ bigger than you and me. You know what dat is?” Hezekiah remained silent as he continued. “Big C is what dat is. Hell, we just men, Hezekiah. But it’s the name, my name, dat’s got bigger than even me. I gots to protect it. Its all I gots.”

“I gots family, Big C...” Hezekiah began. He looked pleadingly at Deuce who lowered his own eyes.

“Then you lucky!” Cornelius growled. “I gots a wicked woman dat would see a man kilt then accept dat he don’t want her.”

“But...”

“And...” He continued. “I gots a name that so big ‘round here dat I gotta kill a man too dumb to know dat chickens always come home to roost and it don’t matter whose chicken it is.” Cornelius nodded towards Deuce and the car began to move away from them. They watched it a while in silence.

It was true that Hezekiah had not touched Claudette, but he was guilty just the same for the many women that he had touched. It didn't matter whose chickens, they always came home to roost. Cornelius's blade slide quickly beneath Hezekiah's ribcage stealing his breath mid-gasp. Hezekiah struggled to take one more breath as he slumped against the massive frame of his assailant. Cornelius caught him and held him gently. "I'll make sho yo' family eats and yo' girls be safe."

Hezekiah heard the words but he was far more captivated by how bright the sky had gotten. His final thoughts were of his girls. He struggled to say their names one final time, Ann and Mercy, yet what he managed sounded like "*Have Mercy...*"

Cornelius nodded and made the sign of the cross over him. "Right. Lawd ha'mercy on yo' poor soul and mines." He continued his confession to the dying. His grandmother had taught him that it was one of the surest ways to achieve absolution. "And Claudette be finished in dis town. I worked hard for dis name. Ain't no way imma let some gal use it, spittin' venom 'round town and put me in a situation like dis..." He paused and looked down into the staring eyes, open but no longer seeing. Cornelius's large palm gently closed them. "I gots a special place fo' dat gal."

The car returned and picked up its cargo leaving only a small collection of blood to blend in the red clay dirt. Inside, Claudette sat beaming next to Cornelius. Her constant chatter grated on his nerves. A few miles up the road, Deuce pulled over.

"Where we goin', baby?" Claudette purred.

"You and me goin' fo' a walk by the ol' dry well." He answered stoically.

Claudette was a wildcat, clawing and scratching. It had taken both men to remove her from the car and carry her into the woods. Deuce more than once suggested that they first silence her to make their work simpler, but Cornelius wanted to see the fear in her eyes for as long as possible. He wanted her to feel every moment, knowing her fate. Hezekiah deserved that much. Yet fear had not been a part of Claudette for a long time and it made no presence on her countenance. Her face only projected hatred even as she struggled to breathe in the vice grip of his last embrace.

Deuce and Cornelius stood for what seemed like an eternity at the edge of the dry well. “I ain’t hear her hit bottom.” Deuce said. “How long you figure it is to the end?”

“Ain’t no end.” Cornelius answered. “Grandma always said dis ol’ well go straight to hell.”

If the dry well was the porthole to hell, it had become a very busy thoroughfare for forgotten souls. Perhaps it’s the reason that it took so long for stories to be resurrected. Still, Eve would never know the particular details of her grandfather’s demise and she was too amazed and happy to have learned the little information that Deuce and Evelyn shared to pry too much further. When she asked, “How did Grandfather Hezekiah die?”

Deuce and Evelyn shared a sideways glance. Deuce stared off across the yard and Evelyn answered for him. “He fell down a well.”

## Chapter XI: The Wives Tales

Ancient Egyptians are credited with creating the first urine-based pregnancy test. According to a papyrus document dating back to 1350 BCE, pregnancy and gender could be determined by a woman urinating on wheat and barley seeds over several days. If the barley grew then the child would be male, but female if the wheat grew. If neither seed sprouted, the woman was not pregnant. A 1963 test of this theory found it to be seventy percent accurate.

The Mayans believed that the gender of a child could be predetermined by taking the age of the mother and the year of conception and comparing the numbers. If both were odd or both were even, then the child was a girl. If one number was odd and the other was even, then the child would be a boy.

Ancient Chinese used the mother's birthdate and the date of conception to determine the sex of the child.

Much later in other parts of the world, it came to be believed that if a woman carried the child high on her stomach, she would have a girl. If she carried low then the child was a boy.

A ring tied on a string and held over the pregnant woman's stomach will reveal the child's gender by the way it swings. If it pendulums side to side, it is a girl. It swings in a circle for a boy.

If a pregnant woman picks up a single key by the wide end, she is having a girl; the narrow end means she's having a boy.

If a toddler boy shows interest in a pregnant woman, then she will have a girl. If he shows no interest, then she's having a boy.

Perhaps one of the most troubling methods of all is mixing the woman's urine with Drano to determine the sex of the child. The Drano-urine mixture emits fumes that may be harmful.

Yet in the rural south, both during the time of Eve's conception and her investigation into it some twenty-odd years later, the prevailing belief was that a dream about fish was the harbinger of pregnancy for a close personal acquaintance. Not quite satisfied with the information that she had received, Eve made a second visit to Deuce and Evelyn's house hoping that she could spend more time with Evelyn. There had been a sparkle in Evelyn's eye, a twinkle as if she were holding on to something in her mind. Eve felt the connect with the older woman and tried to soften her own eyes to encourage sharing. She'd soon find that the only encouragement Evelyn required was a little cup of liquid courage, or what she referred to as her "nip."

Evelyn didn't drink around Deuce. Growing older, he had "retired" from the early days of criminal activity and completely changed his lifestyle. This included getting himself a bonafide church woman, and getting into the kingdom of heaven by marriage. He wanted to cover all bases. It's not to say that he didn't love Evelyn. He had fallen in love with her very quickly. But certainly her religious background had played a part. He had desired her chasteness, not as one who wanted to break it or own it, but as his very own vessel to God. In his mind, Evelyn had done all of the grunt work towards salvation. Marriage to her coupled with relinquishing his past endeavors should land him on the right side of the rapture when Gabriel's trumpets blew. Quite naturally, as Deuce was coming into his awareness of spiritual development, Evelyn was realizing after a life-long devotion to Christian dogma that one's purpose was not to ignore the physical or not engage in it, rather it was to be *in* it but not *of* it.

They had debated the issue. Deuce scornfully watching Evelyn pour two fingers of Old Fitzgerald whiskey into her water glass and admonishing that it was the devil's playground. Evelyn raising a defying eyebrow and responding, "If the devil was in this likker, then you wouldn't have ever gotten to where you are now."

Deuce crediting his turnaround to "the power of the Lord."

Evelyn's frequent retort, "If the Lord is so powerful then what's the risk?" To which sometimes Deuce shook his head and said, "Woman, you don't know I been there in a handbasket."

Evelyn replied, "Husband, I been where you tryin' to git to. And I can tell ya that the color of the grass don't even matter."

They eventually settled into a typical compromise of the married, to agree to disagree. Most evenings Deuce settled on the front porch with an after dinner pipe while Evelyn headed to the back porch with an empty glass to join the bottle of "Old Fitz" that she kept on a rickety bookshelf next to her white wicker armchair. This is where Eve found her when she returned for her second visit. After greeting Deuce, she had been unceremoniously waved towards the rear of the house.

"I remember you." Lubricated by her first sip of Old Fitz, Evelyn's smile eased towards her eyes.

Eve's eyes furrowed. "Yes, Ms. Evelyn, I was here yesterday."

"Don't be flip, gal. I ain't that old. At least not as old as my husband, you know." She giggled. "I remember you 'fo you even got here." Evelyn gestured for Eve to sit in the matching chair across from her. Eve complied, taking a gaze at the older woman as she refilled her glass

and offered one to Eve. Evelyn was younger than Deuce in a classic May-December romance manner. Eve's thoughts were just grasping at the importance of such a detail, yet couldn't fully uncover its implications. She accepted the glass but didn't drink from it.

"I was there when your grandmama dreamed of fish." Evelyn smirked and slowly clarity began to enter Eve's mind.

*1950*

Gertrude dreamed of fish last night and it threw off her entire day. She couldn't concentrate on cooking, cleaning, or any of her church duties. She sat next to the charred brick that was Sister Evelyn's pound cake and stared at the fierce woman who trembled with anger in front of her.

"What de devil, Trudy! All I asked was for you to watch it. Now look at it!" Evelyn grasped in vain at the scarf tightly bound to her head. "What on God's earth is goin' on in yo' head?"

Gertrude opened her mouth to speak but the words escaped her. All day she had searched the faces and mannerisms of each woman with whom she had come into contact. They all appeared the same. No one had made any changes. Still, Gertrude had dreamed of fish and it only meant one thing. If there was a woman who reflected some change in her body, then it was someone in her own home. She dreaded going back there.

Evelyn's tirade lost steam. She sighed and plopped onto the bench next to Gertrude. "Trudy, what is it?"

Gertrude focused on her friend. They had been as close as two peas in the church pod. Gertrude had taken Hezekiah's advice and began volunteering at the church to give her a sense of purpose while he was away at work. She found such comfort in the place. Polishing the wooden pews felt like dusting her own furniture, and she sat with such pride in them every Sunday morning. She beamed at the other parishioners, knowing that the seat of their salvation contained her sweat and work. Yes, church was home to Gertrude. More home than home itself.

Pastor Reid's thunderous voice was the vessel of God. It's cadence rumbled inside of her. When it spoke, she listened. What it said, she obeyed. She had tried to get Hezekiah involved, but he wanted no parts of it. He seemed to revel in his heathen ways. Gertrude felt that it was her duty as a Christian and a wife to help him to salvation, but when he refused and denounced the pastor as two-bit hustler, she knew that she would have to save herself alone.

After Hezekiah was killed, Pastor Reid and the church were lifesavers to Gertrude. It still seemed like yesterday when she was awakened in the early morning by the intent rapping on her door. It could be no one but Hezekiah. She snatched her housecoat from its perch on the bedroom door, checking on the girls before making her way to the front door. She sighed. She would make him wait a while. She would feign anger when she saw him, but the truth was that she missed her husband. She missed his presence and his touch. Most of the time her body belonged to the Lord, but Hezekiah had a way of borrowing it from time to time. She blushed with the thought as she yanked open the door.

Cornelius stood before her, filling the door frame with his mass. He removed his hat. "Gertrude..." She began to shake.

Evelyn stayed by Gertrude's side night and day for months until she was able to get herself together. The years passed and time brought about a very odd construction of family in the way that can only be incubated by time and small communities. The cement that hardened Gertrude's insides against Cornelius gradually melted until it was a mere stone at the center of her heart. He provided for her family financially. She tolerated him. He became a father figure for the girls. She cared for him. He never made any advances towards her and she began to accept the strangeness of this fictive kinship and allowed herself to admit that she now had with Cornelius what she had tried so hard to shape with Hezekiah. Her heart battled with the realization. She told herself that the price was too great. The price of Hezekiah was not worth the life that she had that included Cornelius. Yet Hezekiah had been a spiritual test with his every visit. He was the last temptation that she could not overcome. Eventually she reconciled that the Lord had known her struggle and had removed Hezekiah, casting him away and giving her the angel of Death who did not tempt her physically and cared for her girls.

Mercy and Ann began to call him Uncle Cornelius, and Gertrude did not correct them. It was a Faustian exchange of death for a particular lifestyle with the payment made up front. Normalcy settled like scab over wound, visible yet allowing continuity and function. But scab is bruised skin, hardened and when picked too soon, it ruptures. Gertrude dreamed of fish and it ripped her world like a prematurely picked scab.

Gertrude thought again of her dream as she gazed at her daughters. Her eyes fell on Mercy. At fifteen, Mercy exhibited the changes of girl to woman. Her hips were rounding, bosom expanding, but where her face should have been becoming narrow in transition from the mahogany cherub cheeks to firmer raised cheekbones, something was awry. There was a

fullness to her face. Her nose had widened. Gertrude examined her youngest daughter with her eyes. Mercy had indeed changed in a way that only a mother knows. She stared until Mercy dropped her eyes.

“You wit chile.” It was more a statement than question.

“I don’t...” Mercy began. Know? But she did know. Understand? She had understood. A part of her had probably even hoped.

“Who the devil is it?” Gertrude demanded. Devil was right. For Gertrude had made a deal with the devil and foolishly thought that the debt had been pre-paid.

As if mocking her mother’s feared transgression, Mercy replied, “It’s the Lord’s.”

“Don’t you get smart with me, Mercy! Don’t you dare blaspheme God with some lil bastard!”

Mercy folded her hands across her chest. Her sister Ann stood across from them at the stove, silent but listening. It would serve Mercy right. Did she think that she could have everything and everyone? She smirked at Mercy.

“Why cain’t it be God’s will?” Mercy shot back.

“Because God’s will is marriage, not opening yo’ legs for anybody at any time!” Gertrude shouted.

“But God’s will is also murder, ain’t it?”

“What you talkin’ ‘bout, girl?”

“It was God’s will for Cornelius to kill daddy...” Mercy’s eyes were full of anger.

Gertrude interrupted, “Don’t you talk ‘bout things you too young to know!”

“You sit here and take care of him! The man that killed your own husband! I guess that’s fine with God though.”

The slap was not surprising. Not to Mercy, who didn’t even flinch upon its impact. Not to Ann, who was riveted by the drama. And not to Gertrude, who had been suppressing the impulse since she saw the prenatal spread of her daughter’s body. Truthfully, she had wanted to do much more harm and it had scared her. The slap served as a compromise. Now, confused by the turmoil of her actions, she didn’t want to take it back but had an impulse to grab Mercy into a hug that was tight enough to be both love and hate. But she didn’t hug Mercy. Her arms stood limp at her sides. Her feet remained planted on the floorboards.

*1972*

Evelyn had neared the end of her glass. Eve’s remained untouched in her clutched grasp. “Who was the...who’s my father?” She asked.

Evelyn sighed. “Well, you got to understand how different things was twenty years ago. Small town. Everybody was always up in everybody else business cause we ain’t have all the distractions you young folk got now.”

“Who was he?” Eve repeated.

“Well, your mama never did say. But...” Evelyn drained the last swallow of whiskey.

“Ms. Evelyn, please.”

Evelyn nodded. “They say it was Cornelius. He denied it, of course.” Evelyn glanced cautiously towards the door and lowered her voice. “Don’t even think about asking Deuce. He practically raised Cornelius and he won’t hear no parts of it. Say ain’t no way Cornelius done that.”

“What do you think?” Eve asked.

“I think Cornelius was complicated. He done some bad things and he done good things. We like to think that men are simple. Feed ‘em and love ‘em and that’s all they need. But they more complicated than that. They do some great things and then turn ‘round and commit some of the worst sins ever thought of.”

“Did he...was she forced?”

“She never said one way or ‘nother. Never said who the daddy was or wasn’t. And if it wasn’t Cornelius, then Lord help us all ‘cause he went to his grave claiming it wasn’t him. Spent that whole time before your mama took off pleading with her to tell the truth.”

Eve finally sipped her whiskey. The shock of the information overpowered the burn of the liquid making its way down her throat. “Is there anyone else who’d know anything?”

“Maybe Geneva. She and your mama was thick as thieves, if I remember.”

“So, my sort of step-grandfather may have been my father too?” Eve looked at Evelyn. Evelyn peered out into the darkness beyond the porch. Somewhere in her storytelling, the floodgates had opened and lines between what should and shouldn’t be told had blurred. She had not shared the circumstances of Hezekiah’s death perhaps out of some allegiance to Deuce. Perhaps as a last minute reprieve to Cornelius whose kindness to Gertrude she had witnessed. More than likely, it was because of what happens when large chunks of lived experience and relationships are abridged into single sentence inquiries like Eve’s question. Years of love and pain become trivialized into storylines that resemble soap opera plots, tales for housewives with which Evelyn had become familiar. She had been a faithful viewer, like most who could manage to steal a glance during work hours, of *One Life to Live* since Ellen Holly graced the screen in

1968 as the first black soap opera actress. The series saw a spike in its African American viewership, even among men, who were not part of its targeted audience. To Evelyn, Eve's summation sounded straight out of her morning stories and she was reminded why no one wanted go back down this particular road.

## Chapter XII: Unfixable Things

The past is an unfixable thing. It is unable to be mended. Its deeds are always irreparable. The past is read-only. It does not allow for revisions. Yet it remains tethered to the present, waiting for visitors who can only watch it replay itself. Its most salient lesson is not that past wrongs can be made right, rather that they do not have to be repeated. The past says to remedy seekers, look upon me and learn but do not seek to change me. It stares at daughters from their mothers' eyes and is as implicit in the handshakes of strangers as it is in the burial of secrets.

James wasn't much of a drinking man. Over the years he had tried, knowing that those who imbibed on a regular basis had some nominal success in keeping the past at bay. But James didn't have the constitution for it, and the only taste that he could develop was for light fare like sweet, flavored wines and sherry. He generally kept a small bottle of something hidden in his shed like most of his friends did in their private spaces. After rushing out of the back door just as Eve entered the front, James now settled himself in his shed and fumbled to pull open the rusted metal drawer that concealed a bottle of port.

The shed was filled with the accumulation of unfixable things: telephones, lamps and other items that Geneva had insisted he throw away but that never quite managed to make it to the trash. James liked to tinker with them. He took them apart, performing electrical autopsies which sometimes uncovered the cause of their dysfunction. He could put them back together fairly efficiently, but that was the limit to his skill set. So the broken things were dissected and pieced back together without repair. James enjoyed the intimate knowledge of the parts of things. He was unconcerned with their function as a whole.

Shed time did not solve the problems of the day, but it did produce a calm to most of the turbulence that he encountered in a typical day. He could tinker with a “new” item or reflect on tinkering with “old” ones. James took a swig of the port and gently placed the avocado green toaster that he had purchased less than a month ago on his worktable. Geneva had spent four months begging him to buy it and had taken only one month to break it. He didn’t know the details of its untimely demise, only that it had arrived at his shed soaking wet. James had long ago resigned himself to the fact that his wife seemed to enjoy breaking things as much as he enjoyed tinkering with them once they were broken.

He blamed the magazine subscriptions that Geneva convinced him to purchase. Her weekly visits to the hair dresser had become marred with despondency. She complained about not being current on events. When he suggested that she read the newspaper as he did, she became enraged, pacing and flailing about until she almost knocked over the recently purchased Mr. Coffee percolator that he’d driven nearly fifty miles and exhaustingly stood in line for at the Sears Roebuck and Company. Once the magazines began to arrive, James realized that it wasn’t so much about current events as it was about current fashion, household appliances, and gossip. The Essence Magazine encouraged them to “subscribe to blackness,” but James found what he had subscribed to was appliance manufacturers, various makeup and hair care companies, and other people’s ideologies on his daily experiences. It was a monthly bombardment of advertisements that fed Geneva’s thirst for the “new,” and James was sorry that he had ever caved in to her pleadings.

Another swig of port and he placed his hands on the toaster. He would have personally preferred the coppertone, but Geneva had insisted on the green as it matched the Frigidaire.

James picked up the screwdriver and carefully removed the screws from the bottom panel. He pushed the toaster aside and exhaled deeply. His head wasn't in it. Before his departure from the house, he had seen Eve's eyes and they were the same as his own. James had always known but seeing was a different type of knowing. Now he wanted to push it back into the recesses of his mind where it had been secured for over twenty years. Even then, he'd thought that the knowledge was too close for comfort. Yet compared to now, with the physical evidence drinking iced tea in his kitchen with his wife, what he felt before had been a cakewalk. Grabbing the port, he chugged as much of it as he could. James willed his heartbeat to slow from the erratic pacing that had begun earlier in the day when Geneva received a phone call from Evelyn Johnston. He'd only caught one phrase, *Mercy's child*, that set his heart racing. He hadn't known that he would flee the house upon her arrival. In fact, he'd planned to stay and open the long buried conversation. But when he glanced the spitting image of Mercy approaching the walkway, he was out of the back door and into the shed before Eve had pressed the doorbell.

When Geneva opened the door she was taken aback by the resemblance of Eve to her girlhood friend. Eve was a little curvier than her mother had been. Her bellbottomed jeans and matching denim jacket would not have been Mercy's style even had she lived to see the changing fashions of the seventies with women wearing trousers. Geneva pulled Eve into a startling embrace. "Oh, my God, child. If you don't look like your mother."

Eve stepped back. "I guess I never realized it til now...down here. My aunt doesn't really say much about her."

Geneva guided Eve into the sitting room. "Nawl, I guess she wouldn't. They didn't get along. Those two were water and oil if I ever did see it."

Eve sat perched on the edge of the sofa. She'd been a bloodhound on the trail of finding whatever she could about her mother. Now it seemed that all of that energy, the implications of this newfound knowledge were suffocating her. In her late thirties, Geneva was the same age that her mother would have been. Sitting there talking, Eve was struck by how close in age she would have been to her mother. Her mother had been a pregnant child. She hadn't really thought of it that way before. They would have grown up together.

Geneva was the youngest person that Eve had spoken with in Ideal. It had given her the impression that the town was old. Although Geneva didn't look old, she too felt aged in the way that southerners appear to their northern counterparts. Perhaps it's due to their unhurried nature. It had taken hours for Eve to get stories from Deuce and Evelyn, and it seemed that information was not going to pour from Geneva any quicker.

Yet, they wanted to share. All of them had. Deuce, Evelyn, and now Geneva, invited Eve into their homes, offered her food and drink, and had every intention of sharing everything that they knew about her family. But when they thought of where to begin, and flashed backwards through all of the events from effect to cause, they became stifled. Trapped between what should be known and what couldn't be told.

"Your mother and I were the best of friends. We did everything together." Geneva supplied. And she shared with Eve stories of her adventures with Mercy. Stories that were limited to schoolyard tales and pranks on Ann. Stories that were strangely bereft of schoolboy crushes.

Eve relaxed into the sofa and reached towards her mother through the retellings. Still, she was not deterred from the obvious missing information. At some point in those young girl shenanigans Mercy had ended up pregnant. “Ms. Geneva, I don’t know who my father is.”

Geneva paused and walked to the mantel and retrieved a photo album. “She wouldn’t even tell me who it was. We had...grown apart in those months.” Geneva suspected the cause but fearing self-incrimination, she remained silent. She couldn’t tell Eve why Mercy had withdrawn from her that Spring of 1950 after Ann had spotted them kissing in the shack.

*Spring 1950, Macon County*

Geneva and Mercy hadn’t worried about Ann but perhaps they should have. One evening the sisters were helping their mother clean up after dinner. Gertrude was in an unusually talkative mood. “What you girls gon’ git into today?”

Ann was silent but Mercy replied, “Me an’ Geneva thought we’d see how that plum tree comin’ around.”

Ann snorted to herself. Gertrude glanced at her before responding to Mercy. “Your sistuh’s right. That ol’ thang ain’t neva gon’ bear no fruit. I don’t know why y’all even waste your time on it.”

Mercy chuckled and put away the last of the dishes that she was cleaning. “If you have but the faith of a mustard seed, mama.”

Gertrude laughed. “We’ll, I’ll be! Somebody’s been reading the bible.”

“I know all the good parts by heart.” Mercy grinned and rushed out the door leaving her mother to shake her head.

Mercy's departure freed Ann's tongue. "Mama, don't you think that she spend too much time with Geneva?"

Gertrude faced Ann. "You wanna spend more time with yo' sistuh."

Ann frowned. "Nothin' like that, mama. I jess think..." She paused as she tried to figure out the best way to tell her mother, a woman who in her mind literally walked with God, that her daughter was a sodomite.

"You think what?"

Ann couldn't do it. But there were other options. She decided to choose a path that she felt was righteously silent. Her mother had already lost a husband to sin. Ann wasn't about to tell her that she'd lost a daughter as well.

Gertrude mistook the silence. "You wanna know what I thank? I thank that maybe you could use a close girlfriend yo'self. Then you ain't got to be jealous of yo' sistuh."

Ann spun on her heels. "I ain't jealous of her. I hate her!"

"That's enough! I ain't gonna stand here and let you spit evil in my house. Hatred against yo' own flesh and blood. I ain't raised you that way."

Ann closed her mouth on the thought that her mother would be surprised at what she raised. They worked in silence until Gertrude left for church for evening prayer, a much needed one due to the evening's activities. Ann looked out of the kitchen window at her sister who was picking dandelions in the yard. If prayer saves, then in that moment Ann plotted her sister's salvation. She retrieved her small bible from the room they shared and joined Mercy outside.

The first day she read Romans. "For this cause, God gave them up into vile affections. For even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature..." Mercy

continued to pluck dandelions and ignored Ann who continued, “And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust towards one another...”

Mercy cast a glance at Ann and began walking away with Ann in pursuit. “...men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet.” Mercy trotted away at a quicker pace. Finding it too difficult to read and walk, Ann returned to the house with a sly grin.

The next day, Mercy awoke to First Corinthians in the form of Ann’s withery voice. “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived...” Mercy covered her face with the pillow and turned her back towards Ann’s side of the room.

It took two days for Ann to find additional passages, but she was pleased to catch Mercy on her way to visit Geneva. She had memorized the short verse in Leviticus and was able to keep up with Mercy as they tromped through the brush towards the shack. “Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind. It’s a ‘bomination.” Mercy faltered in her steps and Ann smiled before delivering the final blow. “And if man also lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed a ‘bomination. They shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them.”

Mercy ran into the shack and slammed the door. Ann waited outside and was rewarded minutes later when a stunned Geneva emerged with tear-streaked cheeks. She stumbled past Ann as if she didn’t see her. It was this memory that Geneva withheld from Eve decades later, that whatever happened to her mother, Ann had set it in motion. But no one could extricate themselves from it. Not Ann. Not Geneva. And not her husband James.

James had loved Mercy but it earned him no favor with her. She looked right through him as if searching for something better on the other side. But Ideal was a small town and matches were made in church houses, woodshed groping sessions, and shotgun wedding ceremonies. James knew that unless some stranger came to town and whisked her away, Mercy didn't have much of a choice other than him. Small town colored girls dreamed of small town colored boys; and those that didn't, did not have the mobility to find their fate elsewhere.

It seemed to James that Mercy was coming into this awareness amidst frequent arguments with her mother and sister. She was becoming a woman; he had certainly noticed it. Time, he thought, for Mercy to spend less time with Geneva and more time being courted. Everything required timing and James was just working up the nerve to approach Big C for permission to court Mercy when she sought him out. He was surprised, to say the least. It had seemed that a great deal of her existence was predicated on avoiding him so when she came around one afternoon to the funeral home while he was making up the recently departed Elder Hughes, his first thought was that something had gone so terribly wrong in town that she had been forced to seek him out. Perhaps as the last man in Ideal.

He placed the cinnamon hued foundation on the table and rushed to escort Mercy out of the preparation room. Sliding the doors closed behind him, he turned to Mercy. "Everythang alright, Mercy?"

Mercy nodded, "You wanna take a walk?"

Afraid to speak should his voice squeak and reveal his nervousness, James managed to grunt his consent. They walked down the recently paved road until it returned to its former dirt path. Mercy paused at the old dry well, running her hand across the jagged concrete edges.

Mercy knelt to sit and James rushed to her side. He wanted to do something chivalrous like spread out a blanket for her, but he had nothing save the shirt on his back. He stripped off his shirt and grandly placed it on the ground. He was rewarded by Mercy's laugh, which seemed to emerge from her throat in spite of herself, and she clasped her hand to her mouth in a delayed effort to contain it. James knew he had to say something to try to make the most of each moment with her. He was the man, after all, and it was fully expected of him to take charge of things.

"Mercy..." he began.

"You ever think this ole well ever worked?" Mercy interrupted. James knew the stories of the well. Everyone did. He knew that one of those stories belonged to Mercy's father Hezekiah. He knew enough to remain silent, as silence had earned him this walk and Mercy's companionship for an undisclosed amount of time. Mercy sighed. "I think it's always been just what it is... a graveyard." She turned and peered over the edge into its darkness. "But even graveyards got endings, don't they?" Without waiting for a response, she continued, "I don't think this... thing, ever end."

James was confused as to what role he played in this discussion. Clearly his input was unnecessary. Still, he wondered why he was here. Why had Mercy specifically sought him out for reflections that seemed too personal to share with anyone. Before he could fully process the thought, the words tumbled from his mouth, "I could go down there." He immediately wanted to recall the words. What was he saying? No one goes down there, not alive anyway. But Mercy's eyes shone as she seemed to actually see James. He noticed that she was looking directly at him, not through him as she usually did, as if there were something better on the other side of him.

Bolstered by this attention, James continued, "I'd do it for you, Mercy. I'd do

anything for you.”

She smiled and placed her hand against his cheek. “You’re sweet...”

James felt the rebuttal, but resolved to press on. Years of repressed feeling surged as he grabbed her hand and placed it on his bare chest. “You know I have loved you from the time we was little...”

“Well, that’s just a crush, James...”

“It’s not a crush, Mercy!” He paused, searching for an entrance into the place where she held things most dear. “I’ll do whatever it is you want. I’ll give you whatever you want. Just tell me what it is.”

“I don’t know what it is, James.”

His heart pounded beneath her palm still pressed to his chest. Mercy looked at her hand, brown like nutmeg against his pecan chest. The hairs bristled between her fingers and she caressed the smooth skin, allowing her hand to trail downward to his stomach. James inhaled sharply but kept quiet and still as she continued to explore his torso and arms. Her gaze and touch were coordinated as she felt his biceps and shoulders. He watched her, fascinated by her exploration. Although he ached to touch her, his arms remained at his sides.

Mercy gently pushed him backwards until he was lying on his back, and lie beside him with her ear pressed to chest, tapping out his heartbeat with her index finger. James wrapped an arm around her and they lay in this way until his heart rate slowed considerably. He wanted to stay this way forever, feeling like Mercy belonged to him. As he watched the clouds drift lazily across the sky, he felt his trousers being unzipped. Every muscle immediately stiffened and his

jaw clenched. She freed him from his pants and he lay exposed to the warmth of the sun and intensity of her gaze.

James was too surprised to be self-conscious or feel much of anything beyond arousal. Her hand was soft on him and her eyes watched her handiwork. When his breathing intensified, she watched his face correlating her actions to his responses. A smile played at the corner of her lips and her own breathing increased. With her free hand she unbuttoned her dress, pausing her caress of him just long enough to disrobe. She returned to his side and pressed against him resuming her touch. Mercy grabbed his arm and placed it around her. James looked into her eyes and she planted soft lips against his own. It was all of the invitation that he needed. He gently placed his weight atop of her and allowed her to guide him inside of her.

They lay naked with the breeze drying their sweat. James thought of how they would announce their courtship. Would Mercy want him to speak to Big C and Gertrude first? He propped himself against the well. "I been saving up a little. In 'bout another six months or so, I should have enough to make a real nice start for us..."

"James..."

"I don't tend to be workin' in my daddy's funeral parlor all my life, Mercy. It's a 'spectable profession, but..." James faltered looking at his hands. They were well manicured. He trimmed and cleaned them obsessively. They were smooth, free from calluses because he always wore gloves when working with them. Still, they were dead hands. Jealous of his family's large home and other comforts afforded by having the only funeral home in Ideal, that is the nickname given to him by his peers. *Dead Hands*. But when he was with Mercy they felt alive.

“I cain’t be wit you, James.” Mercy interrupted.

“I don’t understand. You jes... you jes did. I mean, you was jes wit me, Mercy,” he stammered.

“I guess I’m still lookin’ for what it is I want,” she explained. “I jes don’t see it being this.”

“But, you got to give it another try. It ain’t ‘posed to good the first time. Did I hurt you? I’m sorry.”

“Nawl, James. You ain’t hurt me. It was...it was nice.”

“Then what’s the problem?” He took her hand but it felt limp in his. “This was yo’ first time, right?”

“Don’t matter none, James. I guess I jes wanted to... not... feel something. I cain’t be wit you and that’s all there is to it.” Mercy rose and placed his crumpled shirt in his lap. She slid into her dress and left him propped against the well.

There is magic in love lost. Spirit in unrequited love binds souls. Had Mercy stayed, the story would be different as they are when the what-if’s in life are explored. They mentally play themselves out to resolution. In James’s mind he could imagine courtship, marriage, but before children came, a fuzziness clouded his imagination. It would not facilitate his imaginings. They violated its own reality and so James was not allowed to “see” what could have been because it was not a possibility in any realm. He was unaware, but this is exactly how Mercy saw her existence in his world. In the world as it was at the time. She simply could not see herself in any of the available roles.

1972

Twenty-two years later, James sat in his shed hidden away with port wine and broken appliances reflecting on Mercy's desire to not feel. He still didn't understand how she could not feel something or anything, especially while she was physically feeling him move inside of her. This was, he knew, his prideful reason for pushing those thoughts back into the past. James was not fixated on Mercy. It had been first love, sometimes called puppy love, but not to trivialize it. Nothing compares to it. It is the first, and as such, it is the only. No matter how brief, it remains a constant rule of thumb for its successors. First kisses establish kissing protocol. First highs are always chased and never repeated. Never as good as the first time. It didn't mean that James didn't love Geneva, or wasn't in love with her. It simply meant that he'd never forget Mercy. It meant that she would creep into his thoughts throughout the years. Briefly taking him unaware during his courtship of Geneva. At uncomfortable moments on their honeymoon. And now, mostly in his shed as he tinkered with things that were not so much beyond repair as uninterested in it. Sometimes he could replace every part of a vacuum or clock and it still refused to operate, as if its essence had vacated.

This process was a type of grieving. After the moving on. After the death of the relationship. Left with the lifelong mourning of living. Living with and without. James was not fixated because there was nothing in his dealing with Mercy to have been fixed. Dead hands could not fix dead things. The shed was not a man-cave. It was a mausoleum of memories.

When James heard farewells, he emerged from the shed and crossed the yard to the back door of the house. He entered the kitchen where Geneva was placing meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and creamed peas on two plates.

“She didn’t want to stay for dinner.” Geneva placed the plates at the small kitchen table. There were four chairs crammed around it, yet they rarely needed more than two of them. Although they had tried, they hadn’t been able to conceive children. James sat at the table and waited for Geneva to join him. She sat across from him, “After all this time, how could you not even want to share space with her?”

He lifted his eyes to meet hers. Geneva held his gaze unblinkingly. Of course she had known within five minutes of looking at the girl. Geneva had recognized the eyes as well. They were the same as the ones that she gazed into every night for past twenty years. They were placed in a face that mirrored one that she had spent years dreaming about so long ago. The eyes that she had stared into belonged to lips that she had kissed until it had been disrupted by the pestering of a lover’s sibling, as is often the case. But her kiss bore added weight. It hadn’t been a smooch behind a house with a local boy. It had been a passionate liplock with another girl. With Mercy.

Mercy and Geneva never discussed the “it” between them. Small town idioms made room for intimate relationships between girls. They were two peas in a pod. Peanut butter and jelly. Molasses and biscuits. It was perfectly acceptable for girls to walk hand in hand, play in each other’s hair, and whisper in each other’s ear. This behavior was expected and encouraged because the alternative boy-girl intimacies appeared far more dangerous by comparison. So Geneva and Mercy’s affections lived within the loopholes of social decorum – their public displays appeared no different than those of other girls who pined for boys instead of each other.

It had been so natural they had to remind themselves that it was wrong. To take caution against the excitement. To leash their souls and stifle their spirits that lunged for each other every

time they were near. Natural is what they told themselves in the confines of the wood shack. They took like fish to water and calf to teat. They had been drawn to one another, unexposed to anything that would have influenced such behavior. It had been uncharted territory, yet they responded as if fluent in landscape, language, and culture. The foreign land had been Geneva's marriage to James. She, too, grieved.

James said nothing at first. His shoulders slumped slightly and his hand trembled as sliced into the meatloaf with his fork. They sat in silence for a moment, each with their thoughts on Mercy. Each thinking of her lips, soft and moist. Her hair, in plaits brushing against them. Her smile. Her laugh, so easy in spite of their illicit activities as if she knew what they would only later come to realize. That nothing compares. That some things will always be unfixable, so enjoy them while they work. While they function. While no one is there to judge.

James lowered his fork. "I 'spect you ain't share your...closeness to Mercy either?"

Geneva's eyes widened. "What?"

"Geneva, we been married nigh on twenty years. You think you the only one get to learn somethin' in it?"

Geneva gently slid her plate away. "It don't do anybody any good to go speculating..."

James waved her off. "If I talk to her...it'll never be just about me. It'll lead to you. To Big C."

"That poor man. My God, James...what we allowed happen to him." Geneva shook her head.

James slid her plate towards her. "Eat, baby. Just eat for now."

So Geneva ate dinner with her husband and thought of Mercy. Her fork slide a little slower in her mouth, depositing the meatloaf a little gentler. She chewed a little slower. Savored.

And James did the same allowing his tongue to encourage the food to the roof of his mouth and down his throat. He closed his eyes and felt every spice and every texture.

And they ate dinner. And memories. And Mercy.

### Chapter XIII: Warmth of Other Suns

Between the time of World War I and the early 1970s, nearly 6 million African Americans left the south spreading northward and westward. They sought to escape the severe racial oppression of the south and searched for better opportunities. They left in droves via bus, The Railroad, car, and even on foot in what is now called the Great Migration. Writer Richard Wright left the Mississippi plantation of his birth for Chicago...for, as he coined it, “the warmth of other suns.” Within this pipeline of leaving were women who sought to escape oppressions within their communities. The abused wife who was smuggled, not north, but to a neighboring town. The daughters who feared being married off so that there’d be less mouths to feed. The sisters who whored themselves to neighboring farm men so that their own land could be worked. They too, sought the warmth of other suns.

In 1913 Luella Gaines boarded the AB&A train out of Ideal. She chased a dream of reconnecting with the white father of her three-year old son Cornelius, his namesake. She’d heard that he had gone to New Orleans and hoped that the nuanced racial politics of the Creoles would provide refuge for a light colored woman, her white lover, and their dark child. She may have been right in that assumption, but Luella would never find the white Cornelius just as her son would never find her when he boarded the same train fourteen years later. It had taken Luella three years of bearing the town’s shame to decide to leave. Yet her own father had acted much sooner. Elder Gaines had seen The Railroad try to take his land, declare his well defunct, and defile his daughter. Luella rode that train unaware that Elder Gaines had shot white Cornelius three years prior and tossed the body into the freshly constructed dry well.

In 1950 Mercy Mann boarded the AB&A train out of Ideal. She carried only a small suitcase in her hand, and even smaller, the growing fetus in her stomach. Mercy hadn't wanted to leave home, but it had ceased to be a place of comfort. She was bombarded with questions from those closest to her and stares from those who weren't. Spite kept her from denouncing the rumors that Cornelius was the father of her child. He had murdered her own father without repercussion. Fear prevented her from claiming James as the father. She could not tie herself to that life. She had hoped to find other women like herself in Chicago. Wild women who shunned the social expectations of the times. She was right, of course. She would have found a haven on Chicago's southside where blacks, the red light district, and queers were making peace with being cramped into the same areas. But Mercy never found this utopian nugget. She shared a one bedroom tenement apartment with cousins who were so distant that they were no longer related. She worked twelve hour days cleaning until the pregnancy prevented it, and bore the scorned looks from her cousins as she remained on bedrest. It had been clear for many hours during her labor that things were not going as they should have, still the cousins waited too long before getting her to the hospital.

She had felt encased in light and perhaps this was the other sun to which she was destined. The bed sheets were soaked with her blood while everything else was soaked in clarity for Mercy. She felt the connection of all things so clearly...of all people drenched in the same light. Some know it as God, but in that moment Mercy was aware that it was so much more than the constructions of God that she was taught. Than the scriptures that her sister had once hurled at her. Than what was preached from the pulpit. What she felt, everyone and everything was part of it. Seamlessly so. In an effort to impart this epiphany to those around her she murmured,

“Every man is a child of God.” Confused, the nurses only heard “every man.” Knowing Mann as her last name, they mistook this final sentence as a naming rite.

In 1972 Every Mann waited for Greyhound bus out of Ideal. She had received a ride to the Quick Mart from Deuce, who stood beside her, hands at his sides and uncertain of what to do so he waited with her for the bus's arrival. It arrived at the same time that James pulled his pickup truck into the parking lot and Deuce tipped his hat towards Eve and left.

James carried a brown paper sack and walked hesitantly towards her. Eve vaguely recognized him from the pictures at Geneva's house and was relieved when he spoke first. “My wife Geneva didn't want you to get off half-starved.” He thrust the sack into her hands.

Eve smiled. “I appreciate it.”

James swiped imaginary dust from his pants and shifted from one leg to the other. “I, uh...I was close friends with your people growing up.” He had caught Eve's attention. The driver began loading passenger luggage into the undercarriage of the bus.

James and Eve stared at each other in the way of those who want to make a full study of it but can only afford a series of glances strung together in the hopes of creating a lingering picture. They stood side by side in silence. Eve did not receive any divine last minute knowledge that she was a breath away from her father. James did not get hit with an urge to confess his relationship to her. Southern decorum dictated the pacing of such things and surprise revelations remained in the realm of soap opera dramas.

Eve would board the Greyhound mirroring James's one hand farewell as the bus pulled out of the only Ideal city in Georgia. She'd be a couple of hours into her journey before opening the paper bag stuffed with oranges, pecans, potato chips and the fried chicken that had been

wrapped in foil straight out of the grease pan. "It'll stay hot longer that way." Geneva had told James. It had remained hot, but it had also leaked. The fruit had a greasy film and at the bottom of the bag, a grease stained envelope with Eve's name scrawled on the outside absorbed the remaining oil. Geneva and James had written the letter together, filling in only a few more of the gaps in Eve's quest for information.

It had taken them the better part of the night and involved lots of tears and silences followed by cathartic confessions. They absolved each other for loving Mercy and comforted each other for losing her.

"We were just kids." Geneva dabbed at her eyes, remembering the shed and scorning her inability to not make martyrs of each kiss that she and Mercy had shared.

"Don't make it no less real, baby." James patted her hand. "We were all kids and that girl, Mercy and me...we still did that. We still..." His voice cracked.

Geneva embraced her husband. "She's a beautiful young lady."

He nodded and pressed himself to her as if he were trying to hide his large body into his wife's smaller form.

Geneva continued to hold him and stroke his back. "She's called Eve..."

"That's beautiful." James murmured into her chest.

"Says it's short for Every." She added and felt James stiffen.

He gazed up at her. "What's that?"

Geneva sighed. "Every Mann." James slowly shook his head. The name confounded them both and their combined pity inspired the letter writing.

By the time Eve would open their letter, the hodge podge of smudges and stains would resemble the redacted narrative that she already possessed. But she would know the one thing that would change her existence. Eve would know her name.

## VITA

### EDUCATION

- Ph.D. English Studies with a creative dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago  
Dissertation: *everyman, a novel*. Director: Cris Mazza.  
Concentration: Gender and Women's Studies. Preliminary Exam Research Paper:  
"Bumpin' Uglies: (re)Presentations of Black/Female/Queer Identified  
Subjectivities in Literature"
- M.A. Education, Urban Teaching Program. Concordia University, River Forest, IL.  
2001.  
Illinois State Teaching Certificate, Standard Type 03.
- B.A. English, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL. 1997.

### ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

- 2014 Adjunct Instructor, Communications Department, Kennedy King College  
Chicago, IL.
- 2012 Teaching Assistant, African American Studies Department, University of Illinois  
at Chicago.
- 2008-Present Teaching Assistant, English Department, University of Illinois at Chicago.

### FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

- 2013 National Women's Studies Association Registration Scholarship
- 2012 Hurston/Wright Award for College Writers (finalist)  
Novel excerpt, *everyman*.
- 2011 Conference Travel Award  
Awarded by UIC Graduate College, Department of English, and Graduate Student  
Council for presentations at national conferences.
- 2007, 2010 Abraham Lincoln Fellowship  
Awarded by the Graduate College of UIC to increase the excellence and diversity  
of the Graduate student body.

### ACADEMIC SERVICE

- 2011 Committee Member, The Reading Series for the Program for Writers, UIC.

2008 Tutor at the Writing Center, UIC.

## PUBLICATIONS AND PRODUCTIONS

### Fiction

“Passing.” Skin to Skin Magazine. Issue 04. Dec 2013.

### Nonfiction/Scholarly

“The Black Arts Movement.” Encyclopedia of Race and Racism. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cengage Learning, 2013.

“The Role of Women in Contemporary Black Motorcycle Clubs.” International Journal of Motorcycle Studies (IJMS) 5.2 (2009), ijms.nova.edu

### Stage plays

*Jump at de Sun*. Black Ensemble Theater, Chicago, IL. (FORTHCOMING 2015).

*Everybody Has Their Own Lives*. *Black Playwright's Festival, Black Ensemble Theater, Chicago, IL. 2005*

*NoMmO Remote Control Comedy Sketch Show*. Co-writer. Second City Training Center, Chicago, IL. 2003

## CONFERENCES/READINGS

- Black Bisexuality: Intersections of Invisibility. Poster Presentation at the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Conference, Cincinnati, OH, November 2013.
- Fiction Reading: “In Search of Beginnings.” Chapter One from *everyman*. One-on-One Reading Series, UIC, April 2012.
- Fiction Reading: excerpt from *everyman*. Sappho’s Salon Reading Series, Women and Children First Bookstore. March 2012.
- “Bumpin’ Uglies: (Re)presentations of Black/female/Queer Identified Subjectivity.” Celebrating African American Literature: Race, Sexual Identity, and Literature Conference. Penn State University, October 2011.
- “The Role of Women in Contemporary Black Motorcycle Clubs” Presenter in Motorcycle Studies panel at the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association (PCA/ACA)

National Conference, New Orleans, LA, April 2009.

- “African American Women: Emptying the Cache of Trauma and Negotiating Memory.”  
Presenter in Paper Session at the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) Annual Conference, Atlanta, GA, November 2009.
- 30<sup>th</sup>

#### RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

Creative Writing: fiction, nonfiction, and playwrighting

Gender and Sexuality Studies

African American Literature

Contemporary Fiction

English Composition

#### COURSES TAUGHT

University of Illinois at Chicago: 2008-present

Academic Writing

- English 160: Academic Writing I: Writing in Academic and Cultural Contexts  
Writing About Race, Gender and Sexuality
- English 161: Academic Writing II: Writing for Inquiry and Research

Creative Writing

- English 212: Fiction Writing Workshop

Literature

- African American Studies 100: Introduction to African American Studies
- English 111 (cross-listed as Gender and Women’s Studies 111): Introduction to Women and Literature
- English 117 (cross-listed as Gender and Women’s Studies 117): Introduction to Gender, Sexuality, and Literature

#### PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP)

Black Playwright’s Initiative (Black Ensemble Theater)

Modern Language Association (MLA)

National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA)

Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association (PCA/ACA)