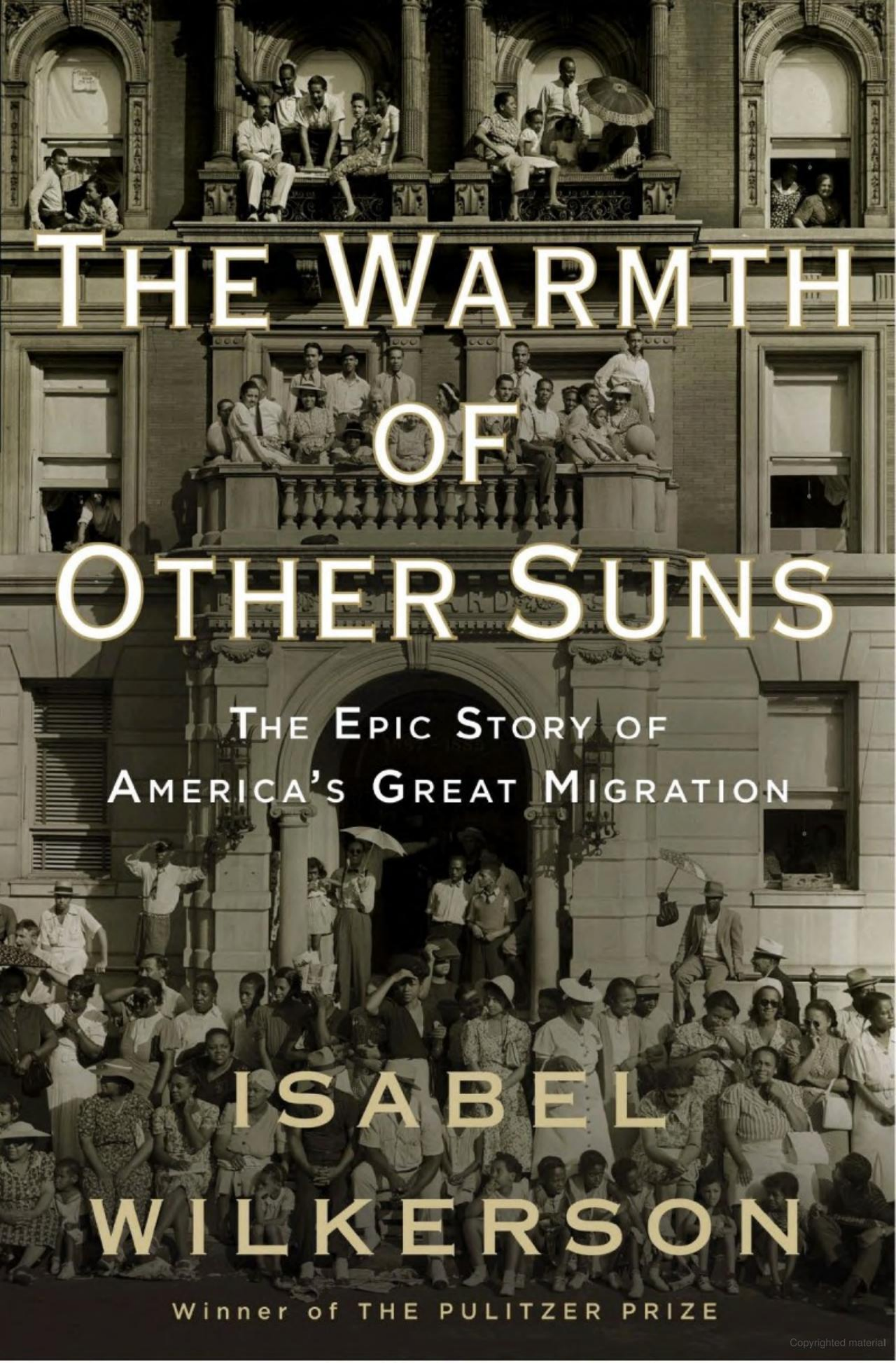
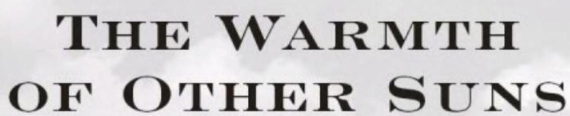

THE WARMTH
OF
OTHER SUNS
THE EPIC STORY OF
AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION
ISABEL
WILKERSON
Winner of THE PULITZER PRIZE
Copyrighted material



THE EPIC STORY OF
AMERICA'S GREAT MIGRATION

ISABEL
WILKERSON

Copyrighted material

Copyright © 2010 by Isabel Wilkerson

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Random House, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

Random House and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

Our title *The Warmth of Other Suns* is taken from the final pages of the unrestored edition of *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. Used by permission.

Permissions acknowledgments for previously published material can be found beginning on page 621.

ISBN 978-0-679-44432-9
eBook ISBN 978-0-679-60407-5

Printed in the United States of America

www.atrandom.com

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Edition

Book design by Christopher M. Zucker

Copyrighted material

CONTENTS

PART ONE
IN THE LAND OF THE FOREFATHERS 1
Leaving 3
The Great Migration, 1915–1970 8

PART TWO
BEGINNINGS 17
Ida Mae Brandon Gladney 19
The Stirrings of Discontent 36
George Swanson Starling 47
Robert Joseph Pershing Foster 72
A Burdensome Labor 95
The Awakening 124
Breaking Away 165

PART THREE
EXODUS 181
The Appointed Time of Their Coming 183
Crossing Over 205

PART FOUR
THE KINDER MISTRESS 223
Chicago 225

Copyrighted material

New York 227
Los Angeles 230
The Things They Left Behind 238
Transplanted in Alien Soil 242
Divisions 260
To Bend in Strange Winds 285
The Other Side of Jordan 302
Complications 332
The River Keeps Running 351
The Prodigals 364
Disillusionment 371
Revolutions 385
The Fullness of the Migration 413

PART FIVE
AFTERMATH 433
In the Places They Left 435
Losses 445
More North and West Than South 455
Redemption 465
And, Perhaps, to Bloom 481
The Winter of Their Lives 491
The Emancipation of Ida Mae 516

Epilogue 527
Notes on Methodology 539
Afterword 545
Acknowledgments 547
Notes 555
Index 589
Permissions Acknowledgments 621

Copyrighted material

PART ONE

In the Land of the Forefathers

Our mattresses were made
of corn shucks
and soft gray Spanish moss
that hung from the trees. . . .
From the swamps
we got soup turtles
and baby alligators
and from the woods
we got raccoon,
rabbit and possum.
—Mahalia Jackson, *Movin' On Up*

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Leaving

This land is first and foremost
his handiwork.
It was he who brought order
out of primeval wilderness . . .
Wherever one looks in this land,
whatever one sees that is the work of man,
was erected by the toiling
straining bodies of blacks.
—David L. Cohn, *God Shakes Creation*

They fly from the land that bore them.
—W. H. Stillwell

I

CHICKASAW COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI, LATE OCTOBER 1937

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

THE NIGHT CLOUDS were closing in on the salt licks east of the oxbow lakes along the folds in the earth beyond the Yalobusha River. The cotton was at last cleared from the field. Ida Mae tried now to get the children ready and to gather the clothes and quilts and somehow keep her mind off the churning within her. She had sold off the turkeys and doled out in secret the old stools, the wash pots, the tin tub, the bed pallets. Her husband was settling with Mr. Edd over the worth of a year's labor, and she did not know what would come of it. None of them had

Copyrighted material

been on a train before—not unless you counted the clattering local from Bacon Switch to Okolona, where, "by the time you sit down, you there," as Ida Mae put it. None of them had been out of Mississippi. Or Chickasaw County, for that matter.

There was no explaining to little James and Velma the stuffed bags and chaos and all that was at stake or why they had to put on their shoes and not cry and bring undue attention from anyone who might happen to see them leaving. Things had to look normal, like any other time they might ride into town, which was rare enough to begin with.

Velma was six. She sat with her ankles crossed and three braids in her hair and did what she was told. James was too little to understand. He was three. He was upset at the commotion. *Hold still now, James. Lemme put your shoes on,* Ida Mae told him. James wriggled and kicked. He did not like shoes. He ran free in the field. What were these things? He did not like them on his feet. So Ida Mae let him go barefoot.

Miss Theenie stood watching. One by one, her children had left her and gone up north. Sam and Cleve to Ohio. Josie to Syracuse. Irene to Milwaukee. Now the man Miss Theenie had tried to keep Ida Mae from marrying in the first place was taking her away, too. Miss Theenie had no choice but to accept it and let Ida Mae and the grandchildren go for good. Miss Theenie drew them close to her, as she always did whenever anyone was leaving. She had them bow their heads. She whispered a prayer that her daughter and her daughter's family be protected on the long journey ahead in the Jim Crow car.

"May the Lord be the first one in the car," she prayed, *"and the last out."*

When the time had come, Ida Mae and little James and Velma and all that they could carry were loaded into a brother-in-law's truck, and the three of them went to meet Ida Mae's husband at the train depot in Okolona for the night ride out of the bottomland.

Copyrighted material

2

WILDWOOD, FLORIDA, APRIL 14, 1945
GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

A MAN NAMED ROSCOE COLTON gave Lil George Starling a ride in his pickup truck to the train station in Wildwood through the fruit-bearing scrubland of central Florida. And Schoolboy, as the toothless orange pickers mockingly called him, boarded the Silver Meteor pointing north.

A railing divided the stairs onto the train, one side of the railing for white passengers, the other for colored, so the soles of their shoes would not touch the same stair. He boarded on the colored side of the railing, a final reminder from the place of his birth of the absurdity of the world he was leaving.

He was getting out alive. So he didn't let it bother him. "I got on the car where they told me to get on," he said years later.

He hadn't had time to bid farewell to everyone he wanted to. He stopped to say good-bye to Rachel Jackson, who owned a little café up on what they called the Avenue and the few others he could safely get to in the little time he had. He figured everybody in Egypt town, the colored section of Eustis, probably knew he was leaving before he had climbed onto the train, small as the town was and as much as people talked.

It was a clear afternoon in the middle of April. He folded his tall frame into the hard surface of the seat, his knees knocking against the seat back in front of him. He was packed into the Jim Crow car, where the railroad stored the luggage, when the train pulled away at last. He was on the run, and he wouldn't rest easy until he was out of range of Lake County, beyond the reach of the grove owners whose invisible laws he had broken.

The train rumbled past the forest of citrus trees that he had climbed since he was a boy and that he had tried to wrestle some dignity out of and, for a time, had. They could have their trees. He wasn't going to lose his life over them. He had come close enough as it was.

He had lived up to his family's accidental surname. Starling. Distant cousin to the mockingbird. He had spoken up about what he had seen in

Copyrighted material

the world he was born into, like the starling that sang Mozart's own music back to him or the starling out of Shakespeare that tormented the king by speaking the name of Mortimer. Only, George was paying the price for tormenting the ruling class that owned the citrus groves. There was no place in the Jim Crow South for a colored starling like him.

He didn't know what he would do once he got to New York or what his life would be. He didn't know how long it would take before he could send for Inez. His wife was mad right now, but she'd get over it once he got her there. At least that's what he told himself. He turned his face to the North and sat with his back to Florida.

Leaving as he did, he figured he would never set foot in Eustis again for as long as he lived. And as he settled in for the twenty-three-hour train ride up the coast of the Atlantic, he had no desire to have anything to do with the town he grew up in, the state of Florida, or the South as a whole, for that matter.

3

MONROE, LOUISIANA, EASTER MONDAY, APRIL 6, 1953

ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

IN THE DARK HOURS OF THE MORNING, Pershing Foster packed his surgery books, his medical bag, and his suit and sport coats in the trunk, along with a map, an address book, and Ivorye Covington's fried chicken left over from Saturday night.

He said good-bye to his father, who had told him to follow his dreams. His father's dreams had fallen apart, but there was still hope for the son, the father knew. He had a reluctant embrace with his older brother, Madison, who had tried in vain to get him to stay. Then Pershing pointed his 1949 Buick Roadmaster, a burgundy one with whitewall tires and a shark-tooth grille, in the direction of Five Points, the crossroads of town.

He drove down the narrow dirt roads with the ditches on either side that, when he was a boy, had left his freshly pressed Sunday suit caked

Copyrighted material

with mud when it rained. He passed the shotgun houses perched on cinder blocks and hurtled over the railroad tracks away from where people who looked like him were consigned to live and into the section where the roads were not dirt ditches anymore but suddenly level and paved.

He headed in the direction of Desiard Street, the main thoroughfare, and, without a whiff of sentimentality, sped away from the small-town bank buildings and bail bondsmen, the Paramount Theater with its urine-scented steps, and away from St. Francis Hospital, which wouldn't let doctors who looked like him perform a simple tonsillectomy.

Perhaps he might have stayed had they let him practice surgery like he was trained to do or let him walk into the Palace and try on a suit like anyone else of his station. The resentments had grown heavy over the years. He knew he was as smart as anybody else—smarter, to his mind—but he wasn't allowed to do anything with it, the caste system being what it was. Now he was going about as far away as you could get from Monroe, Louisiana. The rope lines that had hemmed in his life seemed to loosen with each plodding mile on the odometer.

Like many of the men in the Great Migration and like many emigrant men in general, he was setting out alone. He would scout out the New World on his own and get situated before sending for anyone else. He drove west into the morning stillness and onto the Endom Bridge, a tight crossing with one lane acting like two that spans the Ouachita River into West Monroe. He would soon pass the mossback flatland of central Louisiana and the Red River toward Texas, where he was planning to see an old friend from medical school, a Dr. Anthony Beale, en route to California.

Pershing had no idea where he would end up in California or how he would make a go of it or when he would be able to wrest his wife and daughters from the in-laws who had tried to talk him out of going to California in the first place. He would contemplate these uncertainties in the unbroken days ahead.

From Louisiana, he followed the hyphens in the road that blurred together toward a faraway place, bridging unrelated things as hyphens do. Alone in the car, he had close to two thousand miles of curving road in front of him, farther than farmworker emigrants leaving Guatemala for Texas, not to mention Tijuana for California, where a wind from the south could blow a Mexican clothesline over the border.

Copyrighted material

In our homes, in our churches,
wherever two or three are gathered,
there is a discussion of what is best to do.
Must we remain in the South
or go elsewhere? Where can we go
to feel that security which other people feel?
Is it best to go in great numbers or only in several families?
These and many other things are discussed over and over.

—A COLORED WOMAN IN ALABAMA, 1902

THE GREAT MIGRATION, 1915–1970

THEY FLED as if under a spell or a high fever. "They left as though they were fleeing some curse," wrote the scholar Emmett J. Scott. "They were willing to make almost any sacrifice to obtain a railroad ticket, and they left with the intention of staying."

From the early years of the twentieth century to well past its middle age, nearly every black family in the American South, which meant nearly every black family in America, had a decision to make. There were sharecroppers losing at settlement. Typists wanting to work in an office. Yard boys scared that a single gesture near the planter's wife could leave them hanging from an oak tree. They were all stuck in a caste system as hard and unyielding as the red Georgia clay, and they each had a decision before them. In this, they were not unlike anyone who ever longed to cross the Atlantic or the Rio Grande.

It was during the First World War that a silent pilgrimage took its first steps within the borders of this country. The fever rose without warning or notice or much in the way of understanding by those outside its reach. It would not end until the 1970s and would set into motion

Copyrighted material

changes in the North and South that no one, not even the people doing the leaving, could have imagined at the start of it or dreamed would take nearly a lifetime to play out.

Historians would come to call it the Great Migration. It would become perhaps the biggest underreported story of the twentieth century. It was vast. It was leaderless. It crept along so many thousands of currents over so long a stretch of time as to be difficult for the press truly to capture while it was under way.

Over the course of six decades, some six million black southerners left the land of their forefathers and fanned out across the country for an uncertain existence in nearly every other corner of America. The Great Migration would become a turning point in history. It would transform urban America and recast the social and political order of every city it touched. It would force the South to search its soul and finally to lay aside a feudal caste system. It grew out of the unmet promises made after the Civil War and, through the sheer weight of it, helped push the country toward the civil rights revolutions of the 1960s.

During this time, a good portion of all black Americans alive picked up and left the tobacco farms of Virginia, the rice plantations of South Carolina, cotton fields in east Texas and Mississippi, and the villages and backwoods of the remaining southern states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and, by some measures, Oklahoma. They set out for cities they had whispered of among themselves or had seen in a mail-order catalogue. Some came straight from the field with their King James Bibles and old twelve-string guitars. Still more were townspeople looking to be their fuller selves, tradesmen following their customers, pastors trailing their flocks.

They would cross into alien lands with fast, new ways of speaking and carrying oneself and with hard-to-figure rules and laws. The New World held out higher wages but staggering rents that the people had to calculate like a foreign currency. The places they went were big, frightening, and already crowded—New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and smaller, equally foreign cities—Syracuse, Oakland, Milwaukee, Newark, Gary. Each turned into a "receiving station and port of refuge," wrote the poet Carl Sandburg, then a Chicago newspaper reporter documenting the unfolding migration there.

The people did not cross the turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. They were already citizens. But where they came from, they were not treated as such. Their every step was controlled by the meticulous laws

Copyrighted material

of Jim Crow, a nineteenth-century minstrel figure that would become shorthand for the violently enforced codes of the southern caste system. The Jim Crow regime persisted from the 1880s to the 1960s, some eighty years, the average life span of a fairly healthy man. It afflicted the lives of at least four generations and would not die without bloodshed, as the people who left the South foresaw.

Over time, this mass relocation would come to dwarf the California Gold Rush of the 1850s with its one hundred thousand participants and the Dust Bowl migration of some three hundred thousand people from Oklahoma and Arkansas to California in the 1930s. But more remarkably, it was the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.

"The story of the Great Migration is among the most dramatic and compelling in all chapters of American history," the Mississippi historian Neil McMillen wrote toward the end of the twentieth century. "So far reaching are its effects even now that we scarcely understand its meaning."

Its imprint is everywhere in urban life. The configuration of the cities as we know them, the social geography of black and white neighborhoods, the spread of the housing projects as well as the rise of a well-scrubbed black middle class, along with the alternating waves of white flight and suburbanization—all of these grew, directly or indirectly, from the response of everyone touched by the Great Migration.

So, too, rose the language and music of urban America that sprang from the blues that came with the migrants and dominates our airwaves to this day. So, too, came the people who might not have existed, or become who they did, had there been no Great Migration. People as diverse as James Baldwin and Michelle Obama, Miles Davis and Toni Morrison, Spike Lee and Denzel Washington, and anonymous teachers, store clerks, steelworkers, and physicians, were all products of the Great Migration. They were all children whose life chances were altered because a parent or grandparent had made the hard decision to leave.

The Great Migration would not end until the 1970s, when the South began finally to change—the whites-only signs came down, the all-white schools opened up, and everyone could vote. By then nearly half of all black Americans—some forty-seven percent—would be living outside the South, compared to ten percent when the Migration began.

"Oftentimes, just to go away," wrote John Dollard, a Yale scholar studying the South in the 1930s, "is one of the most aggressive things

Copyrighted material

that another person can do, and if the means of expressing discontent are limited, as in this case, it is one of the few ways in which pressure can be put."

By the time it was over, no northern or western city would be the same. In Chicago alone, the black population rocketed from 44,103 (just under three percent of the population) at the start of the Migration to more than one million at the end of it. By the turn of the twenty-first century, blacks made up a third of the city's residents, with more blacks living in Chicago than in the entire state of Mississippi.

It was a "folk movement of incalculable moment," McMillen said.

And more than that, it was the first big step the nation's servant class ever took without asking.

The passenger train came wheezing through the north Georgia mountains after the colored school let out, and when it passed through the hill town of Rome, Georgia, back during the Depression, a little girl would run down the embankment and wait for it to rush past the locust trees. She would wave to the people in the metal boxes on wheels, the important people, their faces looking away, and dream of going wherever it was they were rushing to.

Years later, she got on a train herself, heading north. The railcar was filled with the expectant faces of people hoping for all the rights and privileges of citizenship. She stepped off at Union Station in the border city of Washington, D.C. It was the start of the North, filled as it was with grand squares and circles named after northern heroes of the Civil War—Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, George Henry Thomas, David G. Farragut—names, to this day, reviled in the South. She made her way to the address she had been given and settled onto the fold-out sofa in the front room of a second cousin she barely knew. Soon afterward, she performed a ritual of arrival that just about every migrant did almost without thinking: she got her picture taken in the New World. It would prove that she had arrived. It was the migrant's version of a passport.

The picture is sepia, two by three inches, from the forties. Two young women sit on the front steps of a row house on R Street in Washington, looking very Bette Davis. Stacked heels and padded shoulders, wool coats brushing their knees. They are new in town. Childhood friends from Georgia meeting up now in the big city. Their faces give no hint of whatever indignities the South had visited upon them. That was over

Copyrighted material

now. Their faces are all smiles and optimism. The one in the pearls used to greet the train when she was little and dream of going with it. She would become a teacher and, years later, my mother.

As a girl, I found the picture in a drawer in the living room, where many of those artifacts of migration likely ended up. I stared into the faces, searched the light in their eyes, the width of their smiles for clues as to how they got there.

Why did they go? What were they looking for? How did they get the courage to leave all they ever knew for a place they had never seen, the will to be more than the South said they had a right to be? Was it a braver thing to stay, or was it a braver thing to go? What would have happened if she had not gone north and met and married the Tuskegee Airman from Virginia, a migrant himself, who would become my father? Would I (and millions of other people born in the North and West) have even existed? What would have happened had all those people raised under Jim Crow not spilled out of the South looking for something better? If they had not gone north, what would New York look like? What would Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington, and Oakland look like? What, for that matter, would the South look like? Would it have changed on its own? Or did the black exodus force the South to face itself in ways no one could ever have thought possible?

"What would have happened if I'd stayed?" my mother asked out loud, repeating a question put to her one day. "I don't even want to think about that."

She never used the term "Great Migration" or any grand label for what she did nor did she see her decision as having any meaning beyond herself. Yet she and millions of others like her were right in the middle of it. At one point, ten thousand were arriving every month in Chicago alone. It made for a spectacle at the railroad platforms, both north and south.

"I went to the station to see a friend who was leaving," Emmett J. Scott, an official at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, wrote shortly after the Migration began. "I could not get in the station. There were so many people turning like bees in a hive."

Those millions of people, and what they did, would seep into nearly every realm of American culture, into the words of Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, the plays of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson, the poetry and music of Langston Hughes and B. B. King, and the

Copyrighted material

latter-day generation of Arrested Development and Tupac Shakur. It all but consumed the work of Richard Wright, the bard of the Great Migration. He gave voice to the fears and yearnings of his fellow migrants through his novel *Native Son* and his autobiography, *Black Boy.* He had been a sharecropper's son in Natchez, Mississippi. He defected to the receiving station of Chicago, via Memphis, in December 1927, to feel, as he put it, "the warmth of other suns."

Yet for all of its influence, the Migration was so vast that, throughout history, it has most often been consigned to the landscape, rarely the foreground. Scholars have devoted their attention to the earliest phase of the Migration, the World War I era. "Less has been written about the more massive sequence of migration that began during World War II," the historian James N. Gregory wrote in 2005, "and a comprehensive treatment of the century-long story of black migration does not exist."

This book addresses that omission. The stories in this book are based on the accounts of people who gave hundreds of hours of their days to share with me what was perhaps the singular turning point in their lives. They were among more than twelve hundred people I interviewed for this book in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, and Oakland. All of them journeyed from the South during the Great Migration, and it is their collective stories that inform every aspect of this book.

For the three main characters—Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster—and for others like them, the circumstances of their migrations shaped who they were and defined the course of their fortunes or misfortunes and the lives of their descendants. The events were thus easily recounted when the participants were called upon to do so. Official records corroborated those details that were indeed verifiable. But it is the larger emotional truths, the patient retelling of people's interior lives and motivations, that are the singular gift of the accounts in this book. With the passing of the earliest and succeeding generations of migrants, it is these stories that have become the least replaceable sources of any understanding of this great movement of people out of the South to the American North and West.

This book covers a span of some one hundred years. As the narrative moves through time, the language changes to retain the authenticity of each era. The word "colored" is used during the portion of the book in which that term was a primary identifier for black people, that is, dur-

Copyrighted material

ing the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, as evidenced by the colored high schools the people attended and the signage that directed them to segregated facilities. As the narrative moves into the 1960s, it shifts to the use of the term "black," after it gained popularity during the civil rights era, and then to both "black" and "African American" in the current era.

Over time, the story of the Great Migration has suffered distortions that have miscast an entire population. From the moment the emigrants set foot in the North and West, they were blamed for the troubles of the cities they fled to. They were said to have brought family dysfunction with them, to more likely be out-of-work, unwed parents, and on welfare, than the people already there.

In the past twenty years, however, an altogether different picture has emerged from ongoing research by scholars of the Great Migration. Closer analysis of newly available census records has found that, contrary to conventional thought, black migrants were actually more likely to be married and to raise their children in two-parent households, and less likely to bear children out of wedlock. "Compared with northern-born blacks," writes the sociologist Stewart E. Tolnay, a leading expert on the Migration, "southern migrants had higher rates of participation in the labor force, lower levels of unemployment, higher incomes, lower levels of poverty and welfare dependency." The lives of the people in this book bear out this more complex understanding of the Great Migration and, based on the new data, represent the more common migrant experience than many previous accounts.

Despite the overlapping of time and place in the text, the three main people in this narrative never met or knew one another. Their paths never crossed except through their experiences with me and metaphorically through the interlocking chapters of this book. The narrative portrays the phenomenon through people unknown to one another, in the way that migrants moving along different currents would not have intersected, their anonymity a metaphor for the vast and isolating nature of the Migration itself.

The actions of the people in this book were both universal and distinctly American. Their migration was a response to an economic and social structure not of their making. They did what humans have done for centuries when life became untenable—what the pilgrims did under the tyranny of British rule, what the Scotch-Irish did in Oklahoma when the land turned to dust, what the Irish did when there was nothing to eat, what the European Jews did during the spread of Nazism,

Copyrighted material

what the landless in Russia, Italy, China, and elsewhere did when something better across the ocean called to them. What binds these stories together was the back-against-the-wall, reluctant yet hopeful search for something better, any place but where they were. They did what human beings looking for freedom, throughout history, have often done.

They left.

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

PART TWO

Beginnings

This was the culture
from which I sprang.
This was the terror
from which I fled.
—Richard Wright,
Black Boy

Copyrighted material

Copyrighted material

Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

CHICAGO, 1996

FROM THE OPEN DOOR IN THE VESTIBULE, I see her. She is sitting in a cotton housedress on a baby blue, plastic-covered easy chair by the window. She is looking through a parting of the curtains at the street circus below. There they are, all scuffling beneath her: urban drug dealers, falling-down sweatpants pooling at their feet, now bent over the driver's-side window of a late-model sedan from the suburbs; fourth-graders doing lookout for men who could be their fathers; young girls with their stomachs swelling already; middle-aged men living out of their Pontiacs; gangsters who might not make it to the weekend.

She lives on the second floor of a three-flat on the South Side of Chicago. She taps her foot and moves closer to the sill. This is not what she had come to Chicago for, nor was it what she expected it to be. But here she is, and this is what it has become, a place so dangerously absurd that it is living entertainment in her old age. She knows the street names and the code words for all the hustlers and pushers playing out their lives beneath her window, and even though they may have just shot a rival or just got out on parole, they look out for her and greet her

Copyrighted material

kindly—*you watch yourself now, Grandma*—because there is something sweet and kind about her, and she is from the Old Country and has survived a life of fear and privation they will never know.

She has an endearing gap in her teeth, which go just about any which way they please, and her hair is now as soft and white as the cotton she used to pick not particularly well back in Mississippi. She is the color of sand on a beach, which she had heard of growing up but had never seen for herself until she arrived in Chicago half a lifetime ago. She has big searching eyes that see the good in people despite the evil she has seen, and she has a comforting kind of eternal beauty, her skin like the folds of a velvet shawl.

Her name is Ida Mae, and she is a long way from where she started back in the hard soil of the eastern foothills of Mississippi during the century's adolescence. She leans forward and adjusts herself for a long conversation. Her hazel eyes grow big as she begins to tell her story.

VAN VLEET, MISSISSIPPI, 1928
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IT BEGAN, LIKE MANY STORIES DO, with a man.

Actually, two men. They both came calling in the quiet hours of the hot season, when the cotton lay gestating in the field. Ida Mae had just sprouted into a woman of fifteen, and the suitors were out front clutching their hats to their chests.

They descended from opposite corners of old Chickasaw County, down the dirt roads that became mud rivers in the wet season and dust clouds in the dry but were the only route to the bottomland by the Natchez Trace and an audience with Ida Mae, who was amused by it all.

David McIntosh came after church on a tall red horse, the sun slanting heat through the hackberry trees, and he was always the first one there. He sat stiff in his Sunday clothes and sugar-talked the daughter in an old chair in the front room while her mother, Miss Theenie, stood peeping by the door. When he had said all he had to say, which was never soon enough for Miss Theenie, he climbed back on his horse and,

Copyrighted material

as the daughter suspected, rode off to another girl he was weighing, named Sallie.

George Gladney walked three or four miles past the salt licks of Long Creek and over the railroad tracks to see Ida Mae. It took him longer than it took David McIntosh, and by the time he got there, his shirt was wet with perspiration and brown from the dust clouds stirred up on the road. Sometimes David's horse was still tied out front. George was a quiet, austere man and felt a certain proprietorship toward Ida Mae. He waited for David to finish before going in himself. He stood outside and watched David mount his horse and gallop away before walking up the plank steps of the porch. Coming in second would give him more time to win the girl over and assess her fitness as a wife.

Miss Theenie was not particular about either one of them. To begin with, they were too old for Ida Mae, trotting up the porch in their twenties when Ida Mae hadn't long turned fifteen. David was barely as tall as Ida Mae, and both of them were too dark by Miss Theenie's reckoning. She had little assurance of her daughters' upward mobility in a world where most colored women were sharecroppers' wives, but she could hope for the more favorable economic prospects of a lighter man, based on his acceptability to white people and even kinship to them, maybe, which would be all the better.

Ida Mae didn't go for that kind of talk and didn't pay it much attention. One color of wildflower was no better than another to her, so she made no distinctions whatsoever. She had a way of looking past the outer layer of people and seemed to regard everyone she met with a kind of searching intensity, as if this were the first person she had ever seen.

In any case, Miss Theenie's protests were likely just an excuse. Whatever his attributes, Miss Theenie was not inclined to like any man that came courting her second girl. Miss Theenie gave birth to her in a little wood house on Cousin Irie's land and named her Mae Ida after her husband's mother, Ida.

It was March 5, 1913, some three years after the start of the Great Migration that Ida Mae would unwittingly become a part of. There was a spark inside of her, and, when she got big enough, she told people to call her Ida Mae instead of Mae Ida. She would later say it sounded less old-timey to her, but it was an early indication that she could think for herself when she chose to.

She was a small-framed girl with a chiseled face the color of nut butter and her dark brown hair in plaits most of the time. It turned out she was fearless and spirited and liked doing the kinds of things men are

Copyrighted material

known for doing. She was no good in the field, but she could chop wood and kill snakes and didn't mind doing it, and that was a good thing for Miss Theenie.

By the time men started showing up on the porch for Ida Mae, Miss Theenie was a widow, left to tend the land they lived on all by herself. She stood eye to eye with most men and suffered no fools, but she had little help now. Her oldest daughter, Irene, had gone off and gotten married. Her two grown sons, Sam and Cleve, had fled north to Ohio like more and more colored boys chafing in the South seemed to be doing. Her husband, Joseph, had just about run them off before he died. Joseph would beat them for any little thing, since they weren't his blood like the girls were. And that didn't make them want to stay either. So they went up north. That left Miss Theenie with her youngest daughters—Josephine, who was able to work but wouldn't, and Talma, who was too young to work—and her second, the tomboy, Ida Mae.

On her way home from school, Ida Mae climbed up the hickory and walnut trees on the side of the road and shook them down. She picked the skittle bumps off the ground and cracked them on her teeth. She saw how her brothers relieved themselves in the woods at the side of a tree and tried it herself. Being a girl, it didn't work as well when she tried it standing up.

Sam and Cleve, before they left, had to shoo her away when they went out hunting rabbit. She crouched behind the trees, and they heard her rustling near them and threw tap sticks at her, the sticks they took to kill the rabbits with. Sometimes she spotted a rabbit sleeping and popped it with a tap stick, and, along with whatever her brothers took in, they would eat well that night.

Sometimes her brothers didn't want to be bothered. So they gave her a quarter and let her plow in their place so they could go to a pickup baseball game. She'd get behind the mule and go up and down the field cutting lines in the earth as if it were the most important job in the world. The kids started calling her Tom because she acted more like a boy.

They lived on the curving land in the hill country of northeast Mississippi. It was a voluptuous place, more beautiful than the Delta land along the Great River, and like anything beautiful, had a tendency to break grown people's hearts. It was not meant to work as hard as it was

Copyrighted material

made to when it came to sowing cotton, and, of the two regions, it had the more difficult birthing pains.

Joseph Brandon had come into ownership of a piece of bottomland, where he planted cotton and grew hogs. The land that colored men managed to get was usually scratch land nobody wanted. Still, he courted the land every spring. He cut lines in the earth with an old till, a swayback mule, and a horse named Jim. He planted cottonseed in the topsoil and tried to conjure rain. When the land turned green, he chopped the unwanted leaves that got in the way of the buds trying to grow.

By late summer, if the rains had come but not rotted the seed, if the sun had burned long enough by day and the dew had descended by night, dry snow sprang from the earth at the tips of low scrub that came to bud with his prayers and sweat. The land would be salted with white confetti that spread out to the tree line. Then he had to bend down in the beating sun to pick the bolls and crouch and crawl to reach the lowest buds.

Before she was big enough to see over the cotton, Ida Mae followed her father out to the field. He gave her a flour sack to keep her occupied, and she tagged behind him and gathered cotton bolls even though what little she brought in was not of much use. It turned out she had no talent whatsoever for the field and didn't like the chore of picking. But her father was always out there, and picking gave her time with him.

"That's how come I know about the field," she would say half a life later. "Wherever he went, I went."

When he wasn't nursing the cotton, he was tending the hogs. Sometimes the hogs ran off and got stuck in the creek water swollen up after the gully washers that poured from the sky in the spring. Ida Mae followed her father down to the creek and watched him slosh in the water to save his drowning hogs. The rains brought moccasin snakes to the surface and left them alive on the creek bank when the water fell back. Ida Mae took sticks to pick them up with and played with them like toys.

The rains beat down on Mississippi in May of 1923. The hogs went down to the creek and got stuck like they always did, but when her father slogged in after them, he had trouble bringing them in for all the floodwater that had risen up. He got sick from exposure and never recovered. He was forty-three years old.

He was diabetic, and the grown people said he was dead. But Ida Mae sat at the side of his bed and touched him, and he was warm. No doctor

Copyrighted material

ever tended to him. There were no colored doctors around. The white ones were all in town, and the family would have had to meet them halfway, if they were going to see them at all, because the doctors in town didn't know the backwoods. Even if they had been inclined to come, the roads were too muddy from the rains to get through.

Ida Mae thought the grown people should give him more time; maybe he would come out of the spell he was in. Years later, she learned that educated people had a name for what her father appeared to be in. They called it a coma. But in that world and in that time, nobody could know for sure and nobody would pay a little girl any attention, and so they set the date for the burial.

She and her sisters Irene and Josie and Talma didn't have any shoes and went trailing behind their mother in their bare feet to the funeral. Nobody felt sorry for them because most other people didn't have shoes either.

When they closed the casket, Ida Mae thought for sure that her father was alive in there. "I still say today he wasn't dead," she would say three-quarters of a century later. "At that time, they didn't have a way to know."

Not long after the funeral, Ida Mae was sitting on the bin where they stored the hay and corn, in an enclosure they called a crib. She looked up and saw what looked to be her father walk in. It was both startling and natural. He reached his hand out to her and took her hand in his and held it. When she realized what was happening, she ran out screaming and went to get Miss Theenie.

"Daddy's in the crib!" she cried. "I saw him!"

"Girl, get away from me with that lying," Miss Theenie said. "Joseph wouldn't scare you."

"I held his hand, just as plain as day," Ida Mae said.

She never saw him again. As the summer wore on, it sank in that he wasn't coming back, and she started resenting the world and the people who had fathers. She started fighting and picking fights with people for no reason.

School was out because colored children only went to school when they were not needed in the field. Ida Mae and other colored children in rural Mississippi didn't start school until the cotton was picked, which meant October or November, and they stopped going to school when it was time to plant in April. Six months of school was a good year.

She was still grieving when it was time to go back the next fall. She walked a mile of dirt road past the drying cotton and the hackberry trees

Copyrighted material

to get to the one-room schoolhouse that, one way or the other, had to suffice for every colored child from first to eighth grade, the highest you could go back then if you were colored in Chickasaw County.

The children formed a walking train to get there. It started with the child farthest away and picked up more children as it moved in the direction of the schoolhouse until just about the whole school was in a cluster at the front door.

Ida Mae was easily distracted by the nut trees along the way and had a hard time keeping up. "I be lagging behind hollering and crying, 'cause they run off and leave me," she said.

When the rains came and the water got too high for the children to pass through the hog wallows in places like where Ida Mae lived, the old people cut down a tree and trimmed the limbs so the children could cross over the log to get to school.

The school was a narrow frame cabin with wood benches and long windows, run by a teacher who was missing a leg. Amos Kirks was a source of unending curiosity and whispers among the children. He was of an age where he might have lost his leg in World War I, but none of the children knew for sure. He walked into the schoolroom, hobbling on crutches, in a suit and with a stern face. He rotated the grades as if the room were a railroad switch yard, calling the second- and third-graders to the front when it was their turn, while the other children moved to the back to do their lessons.

He towered above them and always wore a tie. But all the children could see was the left pant leg pinned up at the knee and air where a calf and foot should have been.

One day Mr. Kirks came in, and his pant leg wasn't pinned at the knee. He had a new leg. But he couldn't walk on it like a real one. "He throwed the leg, like it was tiresome to him," Ida Mae said. "And it would swing. He kind of swing it around."

It was the talk of the schoolyard.

"He finally got him a leg!" the children whispered to each other.

When Mr. Kirks wasn't looking, Ida Mae tried to tug at his pant cuff. "I sat side of him," Ida Mae said years later. "I try to do all I know how to get up under there and see how that leg look. I'd sat by him, and I just rub and do. He couldn't feel it no way. And I could see the clear foot in the shoe."

Ida Mae had to make sure Mr. Kirks didn't catch on. For the slightest infraction, Mr. Kirks would send some boys out to the woods to get branches off a tree. Then the child who was talking out of turn or draw-

Copyrighted material

ing when he should be listening was called up front for lashings with the switch.

Ida Mae knew how that felt. In the fall after her father died, they were in the middle of a spelling lesson. One of the words was a city in the North called Philadelphia. Mr. Kirks called on Ida Mae to spell it. Some words, the children turned into jingles to help them remember. For geography, it was *George Eat O Gray Rat At Poor House Yesterday.* For Mississippi, it was *M eye crooked-letter crooked-letter eye crooked-letter crooked-letter eye humpback humpback eye.*

Ida Mae had heard about the North but didn't know Philadelphia or any ditties for it. She stumbled over the word. Mr. Kirks thought she was acting up. He told some boys to go out to the woods and get him a switch. He held the branches over the fire and told Ida Mae to come up front. He told her to bend over. He drew his arm back, and, in front of all the other children, he whipped her. And each time the switch snapped her back, he shouted a letter: P-H-I-L-A-D-E-L-P-H-I-A.

She was hurt to be singled out that day. She wasn't saying she hadn't done a devilish thing in her life. She was just thinking to herself all she had done was miss the word, and the whipping wasn't called for. After school, she went up to Mr. Kirks and told him so.

"If I had a daddy, you wouldn'ta whoop me," Ida Mae told him. "You whoop me 'cause I don't have a daddy."

He never whipped her again.

She seemed to be more aware of how life was harder now. Things she wouldn't have paid attention to before, she seemed to be noticing.

On her way to and from school, she passed the farm of a man named Mr. Bafford. His wife had left him to raise their son by himself, and he seemed to take out his grief on those around him. He had a yard full of trees that bore more fruit than he could ever consume or pick fast enough to sell. The peaches and apples and pears were some of the biggest and sweetest in the bottoms. They ripened and fell to the ground, and still he dared anyone to come onto his land to get any.

Ida Mae figured out a way to get some. She stopped by and talked with Mr. Bafford and made sure to keep him talking. And if he ever looked away, she reached down and slipped a pear or an apple into her dress. "You know they fall off, he coulda give us some of 'em," she said. "Every time I got a chance, I got me some."

It was approaching Christmas, the first Christmas since her father had died. One day when Ida Mae stopped to see Mr. Bafford, she started

Copyrighted material

wondering aloud whether Santa Claus was going to come this year, what with her daddy gone and all.

"That's the first thing they teach y'all, a lie," Mr. Bafford said. "Ain't no such thing as Santa Claus."

It crushed Ida Mae to hear him say that. She was ten, and, even in the gaunt world she lived in, she still believed in Santa Claus. She started crying when Mr. Bafford said it.

"That taken all the joy out of life then," she said.

There would be no Christmas that year. "I'm not able to pay Santa Claus to come to us," Miss Theenie told the girls. Ida Mae began to resent everybody now. She was getting into more scrapes coming and going to school and getting ornery without cause.

A boy named Henry Lee Babbitt used to ride his horse to school every day and brought corn to feed him with. Ida Mae lived farther than Henry Lee did and had to walk. Something got into Ida Mae one day, and she told Henry Lee she was going to set his horse loose. She went up to the horse and reached for the bridle bit that tied the horse to the hitching post.

"Tom, you bet not turn my horse aloose," Henry Lee said.

"What if I do?" Ida Mae shot back.

"You do, I beat your brains out."

The two of them stood there next to the horse, Ida Mae holding the bridle bit and threatening to pull it off and Henry Lee trying to keep her from doing it.

"I dee-double-dog-dare you to pull that bridle," Henry Lee said. "You take that there, and you take a nickel off a dead man's eye."

She yanked the bridle off the horse and dropped it to the ground. "And down the road we went, me and the boy there, fighting," she said years later.

Henry Lee reached down and grabbed the bridle bit from where she left it and raised it up against her. "He took it and nearly beat me to death," she said. "I got a knot in back of my head now where he hit me with that bridle bit."

Without her half brothers and her father around, she was on her own. "You had to fight," she would later say. "Them boys would mess with you. You couldn't whoop 'em. But you did what you could."

Within a few years, the boys would not want to fight with her anymore. They wanted to sit and hold her hand and talk. The spark that

Copyrighted material

made her fight them drew the quiet ones to her when it came time for courting. She was fifteen when two in particular started showing up at the front porch with those intentions.

On a Sunday after service in the summer of 1928, the church mothers at New Hope Baptist set out the hot platters of corn bread and collards and salted hams. Whoever made the collards worried if they were tender enough. Whoever baked the pound cake prayed that people would favor her cake over somebody else's potato pie.

It was the time of the year they called the lay-by, when the people left the cotton alone and waited for it to sprout. The people had turned the benches up and spread the food on the tables outside the little frame church. They called the event Children's Day, in the spirit of Men's Day and Women's Day other times of the year. An event like this was all there was on colored people's off day in the backwoods of Chickasaw County. People came in from Buena Vista, or Bewnie as they called it, and from over near Houston, the county seat, and even Okolona, arriving in their wagons and surreys.

These were the times when sharecroppers and servants could recede into a world of their own making, where Jim Crow didn't bother to enter. They could forget that there was such a thing as colored or white and just be. Sundays like this turned the churchyard into courting grounds for marriageable girls and young men looking for wives or diversions.

George Gladney showed up with a bunch of other young men from across the creek in somebody's old Model T Ford. He was twenty-two, stern-faced, and serious even then. "He wasn't no smiling man," Ida Mae said.

He was from around Bewnie, which was seven or eight miles south of Van Vleet. He was among the last of twelve to fifteen children. (No one alive knows for sure how many there were; his father had children by several wives, who died young or at least before he did.) George's mother died before he acquired much to remember her by. He was raised by an older brother, Willie, and the weight of his circumstances seemed to show in his face.

It was getting to the time when he should settle down. So he walked up to Ida Mae that afternoon. She was eating on the grass in her Sunday dress. He introduced himself, but she didn't pay him much attention. Her mind was on someone else, and she was mad at the moment. A boy

Copyrighted material

by the name of Alfonso Banks had shown up at church that day with another girl.

Alfonso was the love of her short life. He was friends with her brothers, older and sure of himself in a way that drew the girls to him. No one had really taken her anywhere her whole life, and she felt grown up and free when he did. Excitement seemed to follow him even when he had nothing to do with it. One time he took her to a church revival, which was the country equivalent of a night on the town. It was Alfonso and Ida Mae and Ida Mae's big sister, Irene, and another young man who was escorting Irene that night. They drove up to the church and got out of the car, all of them young and giddy. They attracted the attention of a man named Bay-Bay, who had designs on Ida Mae's sister. He saw them and got enraged.

"Who is this out here laughing?" he said to them.

They ignored him. They started up the steps, and as they walked toward the church door, Bay-Bay pulled out a gun and shot at them six times, aiming at Irene or her escort or both. He was a bad shot and didn't hit anybody. But it was exciting and the talk of the woods and further proof to Ida Mae that Alfonso Banks sure knew how to show a girl a good time, even though he had nothing to do with it.

She had been out with Alfonso enough to feel a kind of ownership that was implied if not outright said. When she saw Alfonso come to Children's Day with another girl, she went up and spoke her mind.

"What'd you bring her here for?" Ida Mae said.

"I brought her for Children's Day."

"Unh-huh."

Something rose up in her. She took the umbrella in her hand and knocked it across his head. "Boy, I loved that boy," she said years later. "And he come bringing that girl over there. And I hit him all cross the head. My mother hit me with a poker when I got home. Everybody was talking about it. You know how folks talk. Said I was wrong. Had no business hitting him cross the head on church grounds."

When George showed up that day, she was distracted and didn't give this new face much thought. But he seemed to have made up his mind about her and started coming by her house on Sunday afternoons, giving her time to see the light.

He endured the stone face of Miss Theenie's disapproval and the teasing curiosity of Josie and Talma to spend time with Ida Mae. When he felt he was on firm enough ground to do so, he began making noises about the other young men: David McIntosh, Alfonso Banks, and an-

Copyrighted material

other one, Freddie McClendon. He didn't like them coming around, and it showed on his face.

The other men must have noticed an intensity of purpose in George that they could not have fully understood, and they avoided running into him. It got to the point where, during his final visits, David McIntosh, sensing the hour growing late, would say, "Well, I guess I better go 'fore Gladney get here."

George's steadfastness won her over, and she finally agreed to marry him and be free of life under her mother. But she and George had to keep it to themselves. Miss Theenie wouldn't allow it if she knew. She never liked any of the boys courting Ida Mae, and she didn't like George.

"He's old enough for your daddy," Miss Theenie used to say of George, who was by now twenty-three to Ida Mae's sixteen.

In the middle of October 1929, George made arrangements for them to run off and get married. He found a preacher and a place near Bewnie outside her mother's circle. He went into Houston and bought a yellow dress with a blouson waist low on the hip, as was the style back in the twenties, for Ida Mae to wear.

The morning of October 14, 1929, Ida Mae fed the chickens and did her chores like any other day and kept a lookout for George to come and take her to a new life. But before he could get there, a neighbor man pulled up to their cabin and went in to see her mother.

"I heard your daughter gettin' married in Bewnie tonight," the man said.

Miss Theenie started cursing and went looking for Ida Mae. Ida Mae knew she would pay for plotting under her mother's nose. She ran and hid under the bed and wondered how she would get out when George came for her. Now that Miss Theenie knew George was on his way, Miss Theenie would be ready for him.

Josie and Talma and Miss Theenie looked out in the crib and out by the cows and called out to her in the little wood house and couldn't find her. The search for Ida Mae must have touched something in Miss Theenie. Something must have told her it was time for Ida Mae to leave her. She got through cursing, and Ida Mae felt safe to come out.

Miss Theenie went up to her second daughter and told Ida Mae her decision about the wedding.

"Well, I give you tomorrow," Miss Theenie said, "providing all us can go with you."

The next day, October 15, 1929, they all went to the minister's house.

Copyrighted material

Ida Mae put on the yellow dress with the blouson waist that George had chosen for her. The yard was filled with people as they stood on the porch steps and George Gladney and Ida Mae Brandon were declared man and wife.

"We wish you much joy," the people in the yard said.

George took her to the Edd Pearson plantation, a few miles away, where he would sharecrop cotton and she would learn to be a wife. Two weeks later, something called the stock market crashed, and things would get harder than they ever knew they could. Because, if the planters suffered, so much more would the sharecroppers under them.

An invisible hand ruled their lives and the lives of all the colored people in Chickasaw County and the rest of Mississippi and the entire South for that matter. It wasn't one thing; it was everything. The hand had determined that white people were in charge and colored people were under them and had to obey them like a child in those days had to obey a parent, except there was no love between the two parties as there is between a parent and child. Instead there was mostly fear and dependence—and hatred of that dependence—on both sides.

The particulars of all this eluded Ida Mae. White people were everywhere around her, but they were separate from her, in a separate schoolhouse, on separate land on the other side of a firewall that kept white and colored from occupying the same sidewalk. Colored people had to step off the curb when they passed a white person in town, and if the minutest privilege could be imagined, the ruling class claimed it. Ida Mae lived only a few towns away from Calhoun City, Mississippi, where there were white parking spaces (the ones closest to the bank in the town square) and colored parking spaces (on the other side of the street) well into the 1950s. There were no signs for them; it was just the work of the invisible hand.

Neither Miss Theenie nor George ever took Ida Mae into Houston or Okolona, where white people transacted their business affairs, and, growing up, Ida Mae had few direct dealings with white people. When she did, it was in the service of them and their whims whether she wished it or not, and, in the short time she was in their presence, it seems they made sure to remind her what her place was in their eyes even when she was too young to understand it.

She was about six or seven years old when one day her father told her to take a small section of plow to get sharpened at the blacksmith. That

Copyrighted material

way, he wouldn't have to quit working to go himself. She rode the horse down the dirt path through the hackberry trees to the blacksmith's house.

The blacksmith was a kind and middle-aged white man with two grown sons. The blacksmith pulled the plow sweeps off the horse and went into the back to sharpen them. As Ida Mae stood waiting, the blacksmith's two sons came up to her. They were in their twenties and, with their father occupied, were looking to have some fun.

"We gon' put her in the well," they said to each other and laughed.

Each man took an arm, and as she screamed for them to let her go, they dragged her to a well with a wall around it and dangled her over the mouth of it. Ida Mae could see down the black hole of the well, her legs hanging over the rim. She fought and kicked and screamed at the men to let her go. She looked around and saw nobody there to help her. The men's father was still working on the plow bits.

The men watched her squirm and laughed at the sight of her squirming. They held her over the well until the fun wore off. Then they put her down, and she ran to where the blacksmith was and waited for him to come out with the freshly sharpened sweeps.

Her father used to send her there all the time. After that, he never sent her anymore. When it came down to it, there was nothing he could do to keep it from happening again. Decades later, she would think about how they could have dropped her, even by accident, and how she would have died and nobody would have known where she was or how she'd gotten there.

"They wouldn't have never told," she said.

Ida Mae soon discovered that, when it came to white people, there were good ones and bad ones like anything else and that she had to watch them close to figure out the difference. She was too good-natured to waste energy disliking them no matter what they did but looked upon them as a curiosity she might never comprehend. She learned to give them the benefit of the doubt but not be surprised at anything involving them. This alone probably added decades to her life.

A white lady named Miss Julie McClenna lived across the pasture, and she was nice to Ida Mae. After Ida Mae's father died, Miss McClenna paid Ida Mae to gather up eggs in the henhouse. Sometimes she took her into town to help her carry eggs to sell. She gave Ida Mae live chickens and leftover food, knowing that Ida Mae's mother had just been left a widow.

After school, Ida Mae walked a mile to the big house across the pas-

Copyrighted material

ture to gather eggs for Miss McClenna in the evenings. She always hoped for a lot of eggs. If there were too many for Miss McClenna to carry herself, she would take Ida Mae into Okolona with her. It was the only chance Ida Mae got to go into town.

Ida Mae gathered more than usual one time, and Miss McClenna took her into Okolona to help her sell them to the white people in town. They delivered the eggs to customers' houses, straight to their doors, and Miss McClenna had Ida Mae carry the basket of eggs for her.

The day had gone well until they knocked on one woman's door to make a delivery. Ida Mae stood with the basket behind Miss McClenna as Miss McClenna prepared to step inside.

"You can't bring that nigger in," the woman said from her front door as soon as she saw Ida Mae.

Miss McClenna knew what that meant. She motioned for Ida Mae to go to the back door to deliver the eggs while Miss McClenna stepped inside to complete the transaction.

On the way back home, Miss McClenna seemed unsettled by it.

"Did you hear what she called you?" Miss McClenna asked Ida Mae.

"Yeah, but I ain't pay it no attention," Ida Mae said. "They call you so many names. I never pay it no attention."

The incident jarred Miss McClenna. The "hardware of reality rattled her," as the artist Carrie Mae Weems would say decades later of such interactions.

What few people seemed to realize or perhaps dared admit was that the thick walls of the caste system kept everyone in prison. The rules that defined a group's supremacy were so tightly wound as to put pressure on everyone trying to stay within the narrow confines of acceptability. It meant being a certain kind of Protestant, holding a particular occupation, having a respectable level of wealth or the appearance of it, and drawing the patronizingly appropriate lines between oneself and those of lower rank of either race in that world.

An attorney's wife in Alabama, for instance, was put on notice one day at a gathering at her home for the upper-class women in her circle. Between the hors d'oeuvres and conversation, one of the clubwomen noticed, for the first time apparently, a statuette of the Virgin Mary on a cabinet in the hostess's living room. The guest cattily remarked upon it. *Why, she never knew that the hostess and her family were Catholics!*

The attorney's wife was shaken by the accusation, and quickly replied that *of course not, they were Methodists and she thought everyone knew that. She only had the statuette because she happened to like it.*

Copyrighted material

But after the party was over and the guests were gone, the accusation haunted her, and she fretted over the implication that she might be seen as a member of a lesser tribe. That day, the attorney's wife took down the statuette of Mary that she liked so much and put it away for good. She could not afford even the appearance of having stepped outside the bounds of her caste.

Neither could Miss Julie McClenna. As far as Ida Mae knew, Miss McClenna never sold eggs to that lady again. But that was also the end of her brief employment with Miss Julie McClenna and the end of the trips into Okolona. "She never did take me no more after that," Ida Mae said.

In the bottoms where Ida Mae grew up, it was a crazy enough world that they could almost time the weekends by a white farmer who lived down the road.

He was fine when he was sober and actually liked colored people. But he got drunk on Fridays and came staggering on his old horse to the colored people's cabins. They could hear the hoof steps and hollering as he rode in waving his gun.

"I'm coming through!" he shouted.

Grown people dropped their buckets and went running. Children hid under the cabins on the dirt floor between the stilts, while he huffed and cussed and tried to smoke them out.

"I'm a shoot y'all!" he hollered. "I'm a kill y'all!"

There was always a commotion and a panic whenever he came through. It could happen day or night. There was never much warning, and they had to scramble to escape his ragged gunshots. Then they had to lie perfectly still. "We'd run under the house, and, wherever he hear a bump, he would shoot," Ida Mae said.

One day when he came through, Ida Mae was outside and couldn't get under the house in time. Josie and Talma had scattered already, and she didn't see where they had gone. The man had wobbled off his horse and was coming through, firing his gun.

A barrel of cornmeal was right next to her, and she saw it and jumped inside. She sank into the grit cushion of meal with her chin digging into her knees. All the while, the man hollered and grunted around her, and the bullets made the pinging noises of metal against tin. She pulled the top over her head and tried not to breathe. She stayed in the barrel until the shooting and the cussing stopped.

Copyrighted material

He was drunk and a bad aim and never actually hit anybody as far as Ida Mae knew. No sheriff or police were ever called in. There would have been no point in calling. And so the drunk farmer could go on shooting and scaring the Brandons and other colored people in the bottoms whenever he felt like it.

"He call hisself having fun," Ida Mae said.

As she grew older, she learned that there was more to the southern caste system than verbal slights and the antics of a crazy white farmer. In the summer of 1926, when she was thirteen, a cloud passed over the grown people, and it showed in their faces. She could overhear them whispering about something that had happened in town, some terrible thing they didn't want the children to know about. It had to do with two colored boys—the Carter brothers, as she heard it—and a white woman.

"They said something to the white lady," she said.

And, as best as Ida Mae could make out, the white people had taken the boys and hanged them in Okolona that morning. Ida Mae would always remember it because that was the day her cousin was born and they named the baby Thenia after Ida Mae's mother. The grown people wept in their cabins.

After the funeral, the surviving Carters packed up and left Mississippi. They went to a place called Milwaukee and never came back.

In three years' time, Ida Mae and George would move to the Pearson plantation, and things would unfold in such a way that Ida Mae would eventually follow the Carters up north. Although she didn't see how it might apply to herself at the time, the Carter migration was a signal to Ida Mae that there was, in fact, a window out of the asylum.

Copyrighted material

The Stirrings of Discontent

Everybody seems to be asleep
about what is going on right under our noses.
That is, everybody but those farmers
who have wakened up on mornings recently
to find every Negro over 21 on his place gone—
to Cleveland, to Pittsburgh,
to Chicago, to Indianapolis. . . .
And while our very solvency
is being sucked out beneath us,
we go about our affairs as usual.

—EDITORIAL, *The Macon Telegraph,*
SEPTEMBER 1916

SELMA, ALABAMA, EARLY WINTER 1916

NO ONE KNOWS WHO was the first to leave. It was sometime in the middle of World War I. The North faced a labor shortage and, after centuries of indifference, cast its gaze at last on the servant class of the South. The North needed workers, and the workers needed an escape. No one knows exactly when or how it commenced or who took the first actual step of what would become the Great Migration.

One of the earliest references came on February 5, 1916, and was seen as an isolated, random event. It merited only a paragraph in the *Chicago Defender,* the agitator and unwitting chronicler of the movement, and was likely preceded by unremarked-upon departures months before. Railroads in Pennsylvania had begun undercover scouting of cheap black labor as early as 1915. But few people noticed when, in the deep of

Copyrighted material

winter, with a war raging in Europe and talk of America joining in, several hundred black families began quietly departing Selma, Alabama, in February 1916, declaring, according to the *Chicago Defender*'s brief citation, that the "treatment doesn't warrant staying."

Ida Mae Brandon was not yet three years old. George Starling, Pershing Foster, and millions of others who would follow in the footsteps of those first wartime families from Selma had not yet been born. But those early departures would set the stage for their eventual migration.

The families from Selma left in the midst of one of the most divisive eras in American history—the long and violent hangover after the Civil War, when the South, left to its own devices as the North looked away, dismantled the freedoms granted former slaves after the war.

The plantation owners had trouble imagining the innate desires of the people they once had owned. "I find a worse state of things with the Negroes than I expected," wrote General Howell Cobb, a Georgia planter, shortly after the slaves were freed. "Let any man offer them some little thing of no real value, but which looks a little more like freedom, and they catch at it with avidity, and would sacrifice their best friends without hesitation and without regret."

"They will almost starve and go naked," wrote a planter in Warren County, Georgia, "before they will work for a white man, if they can get a patch of ground to live on and get from under his control."

For all its upheaval, the Civil War had left most blacks in the South no better off economically than they had been before. Sharecropping, slavery's replacement, kept them in debt and still bound to whatever plantation they worked. But one thing had changed. The federal government had taken over the affairs of the South, during a period known as Reconstruction, and the newly freed men were able to exercise rights previously denied them. They could vote, marry, or go to school if there were one nearby, and the more ambitious among them could enroll in black colleges set up by northern philanthropists, open businesses, and run for office under the protection of northern troops. In short order, some managed to become physicians, legislators, undertakers, insurance men. They assumed that the question of black citizens' rights had been settled for good and that all that confronted them was merely building on these new opportunities.

But, by the mid-1870s, when the North withdrew its oversight in

Copyrighted material

In this atmosphere, *The Clansman,* a 1905 novel that was the basis of the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation,* became a national bestseller. It fed whites' panic over freed blacks in their midst and inspired people in Georgia to revive the Ku Klux Klan the year the film was released. Soon Klansmen in full regalia were holding public parades before cheering white crowds across the South like celebrations of the Fourth of July, the Klan then seen not as a rogue outlier but as the protector of southern tradition. Thus the fragile interdependence between the races turned to apprehension and suspicion, one race vowing to accept no less than the total subjugation of the other.

The planter class, which had entrusted its wives and daughters to male slaves when the masters went off to fight the Civil War, was now in near hysterics over the slightest interaction between white women and black men. It did not seem to matter that the danger to white women of rape by a black man, according to the white South Carolina–born author Wilbur Cash, "was much less, for instance, than the chance that she would be struck by lightning."

White citizens, caught up in the delirium in the decades following Reconstruction, rioted in Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, and central Illinois. They killed colored residents and set fire to their homes on rumors of black impropriety, as authorities stood by or participated.

In the darkest hours of this era, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass saw his health fade just as everything he spent his life fighting for was falling apart. He said, in his last great public lecture, delivered in Baltimore in January 1894, a year before his death, "I hope and trust all will come out right in the end, but the immediate future looks dark and troubled. I cannot shut my eyes to the ugly facts before me."

It was during that time, around the turn of the twentieth century, that southern state legislatures began devising with inventiveness and precision laws that would regulate every aspect of black people's lives, solidify the southern caste system, and prohibit even the most casual and incidental contact between the races.

They would come to be called Jim Crow laws. It is unknown precisely who Jim Crow was or if someone by that name actually existed. There are several stories as to the term's origins. It came into public use in the 1830s after Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New York–born itinerant white actor, popularized a song-and-dance routine called "the Jim Crow" in minstrel shows across the country. He wore blackface and ragged clothes and performed a jouncy, palsied imitation of a handi-

Copyrighted material

capped black stable hand he had likely seen in his travels singing a song about "Jumping Jim Crow." Jim Crow was said to be the name of either the stable hand or his owner living in Kentucky or Ohio. Rice became a national sensation impersonating a crippled black man, but died penniless in 1860 of a paralytic condition that limited his speech and movement by the end of his life.

The term caught the fancy of whites across the country and came to be used as a pejorative for colored people and things related to colored people, and, by 1841, was applied to the laws to segregate them. The first such laws were passed not in the South, but in Massachusetts, as a means of designating a railcar set apart for black passengers. Florida, Mississippi, and Texas enacted the first Jim Crow laws in the South right after the Confederates lost the Civil War—Florida and Mississippi in 1865 and Texas in 1866. The northerners who took over the South during Reconstruction repealed those hastily passed laws. The Federal Civil Rights Act of 1875 explicitly outlawed segregation. But the northerners who were there to enforce the law retreated by the late 1870s and left the South to its own devices. As the twentieth century approached, the South resurrected Jim Crow.

Streetcars, widely in use from the 1880s, had open seating in the South, until Georgia demanded separate seating by race in 1891. By 1905, every southern state, from Florida to Texas, outlawed blacks from sitting next to whites on public conveyances. The following year, Montgomery, Alabama, went a step further and required streetcars for whites and streetcars for blacks. By 1909, a new curfew required blacks to be off the streets by 10 P.M. in Mobile, Alabama. By 1915, black and white textile workers in South Carolina could not use the same "water bucket, pails, cups, dippers or glasses," work in the same room, or even go up or down a stairway at the same time.

This new reality forced colored parents to search for ways to explain the insanity of the caste system to their uncomprehending children. When two little girls in 1930s Florida wanted to know why they couldn't play on a swing like the white children or had to sit in a dirty waiting room instead of the clean one, their father, the theologian Howard Thurman, had to think about how best to make them understand. "The measure of a man's estimate of your strength," he finally told them, "is the kind of weapons he feels that he must use in order to hold you fast in a prescribed place."

All told, these statutes only served to worsen race relations, alienating one group from the other and removing the few informal interactions

Copyrighted material

that might have helped both sides see the potential good and humanity in the other.

Now the masses of black workers cast about on their own in a buyer's labor market with little in the way of material assets or education or a personal connection to even the coldest slave master, who would have shown a basic watchfulness if only to protect his financial investment. Their lives were left to the devices of planters with no vested interest in them and, now, no intimate ties to ease the harshness of their circumstances or to protect them, if only out of paternalism, from the whims of night riders, a hell-bent jury, or poor whites taking out their resentment at their unwitting competitors for work.

David L. Cohn, in the 1935 book *God Shakes Creation,* wrote that, for a colored man without a white sponsor, "his fate is in the lap of the gods."

Each year, people who had been able to vote or ride the train where they chose found that something they could do freely yesterday, they were prohibited from doing today. They were losing ground and sinking lower in status with each passing day, and, well into the new century, the color codes would only grow to encompass more activities of daily life as quickly as legislators could devise them.

Thus, those silent parties leaving Selma in the winter of 1916 saw no option but to go. Theirs would become the first volley of a leaderless revolution. There was no Moses or Joshua or Harriet Tubman, or, for that matter, Malcolm X or Martin Luther King, Jr., to organize the Migration. The best-known leader at the start of it, Booker T. Washington, was vehemently against abandonment of the South and strongly discouraged it. Frederick Douglass, who saw it coming but died before it began, was against the very thought of it and considered an exodus from the South "a premature, disheartening surrender."

Those entreaties had little effect.

"The Negroes just quietly move away without taking their recognized leaders into their confidence any more than they do the white people about them," a Labor Department study reported. A colored minister might meet with his deacons on a Wednesday, thinking all was well, and by Sunday find all the church elders gone north. "They write the minister that they forgot to tell him they were going away."

Ordinary people listened to their hearts instead of their leaders. At a

Copyrighted material

clandestine meeting after a near lynching in Mississippi, a colored leader stood before the people and urged them to stay where they were.

A man in the audience rose up to speak.

"You tell us that the South is the best place for us," the man said. *"What guaranties can you give us that our life and liberty will be safe if we stay?"*

The leader was speechless.

"When he asked me that, there was nothing I could answer," the leader said afterward. "So I have not again urged my race to remain."

Any leader who dared argue against leaving might arouse suspicion that he was a tool of the white people running things. Any such leader was, therefore, likely to be ignored, or worse. One Sunday, a colored minister in Tampa, Florida, advised from the pulpit that his flock stay in the South. He was "stabbed the next day for doing so."

In the years leading up to and immediately following the turn of the twentieth century, a generation came into the world unlike any other in the South. It was made up of young people with no personal recollection of slavery—they were two generations removed from it. The colored members of this generation were free but not free, chafing under Jim Crow and resisting the studied subservience of their slave parents and grandparents. They had grown up without the contrived intimacy that once bound the two races. And it appeared that young whites, weaned on a formal kind of supremacy, had grown more hostile to blacks than even their slaveholding ancestors had been.

"The sentiment is altogether different now," William C. Oates, the old-guard former governor of Alabama, said in 1901 of the newer generation of white southerners. "When the Negro is doing no harm, why, the people want to kill him and wipe him from the face of the earth."

The colored people of this generation began looking for a way out. "It is too much to expect that Negroes will indefinitely endure their severe limitations in the South when they can escape most of them in a ride of 36 hours," the Labor Department warned. "Fifty years after the Civil War, they should not be expected to be content with the same conditions which existed at the close of the war."

Younger blacks could see the contradictions in their world—that, sixty, seventy, eighty years after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emanci-

Copyrighted material

pation Proclamation, they still had to step off the sidewalk when a white person approached, were banished to jobs nobody else wanted no matter their skill or ambition, couldn't vote, but could be hanged on suspicion of the pettiest infraction.

These were the facts of their lives:

There were days when whites could go to the amusement park and a day when blacks could go, if they were permitted at all. There were white elevators and colored elevators (meaning the freight elevators in back); white train platforms and colored train platforms. There were white ambulances and colored ambulances to ferry the sick, and white hearses and colored hearses for those who didn't survive whatever was wrong with them.

There were white waiting rooms and colored waiting rooms in any conceivable place where a person might have to wait for something, from the bus depot to the doctor's office. A total of four restrooms had to be constructed and maintained at significant expense in any public establishment that bothered to provide any for colored people: one for white men, one for white women, one for colored men, and one for colored women. In 1958, a new bus station went up in Jacksonville, Florida, with two of everything, including two segregated cocktail lounges, "lest the races brush elbows over a martini," *The Wall Street Journal* reported. The president of Southeastern Greyhound told the *Journal,* "It frequently costs fifty percent more to build a terminal with segregated facilities." But most southern businessmen didn't dare complain about the extra cost. "That question is dynamite," the president of a southern theater chain told the *Journal.* "Don't even say what state I'm in."

There was a colored window at the post office in Pensacola, Florida, and there were white and colored telephone booths in Oklahoma. White and colored went to separate windows to get their license plates in Indianola, Mississippi, and to separate tellers to make their deposits at the First National Bank of Atlanta. There were taxicabs for colored people and taxicabs for white people in Jacksonville, Birmingham, Atlanta, and the entire state of Mississippi. Colored people had to be off the streets and out of the city limits by 8 P.M. in Palm Beach and Miami Beach.

Throughout the South, the conventional rules of the road did not apply when a colored motorist was behind the wheel. If he reached an intersection first, he had to let the white motorist go ahead of him. He could not pass a white motorist on the road no matter how slowly the

Copyrighted material

George Swanson Starling

NEW YORK CITY, 1996

HIS WORLD IS THE BASEMENT of a brownstone on 132nd Street west of Lenox Avenue, a shaft of light streaking through the burglar bars on a single window. Outside, there is Harlem—Tupac on boom boxes, street preachers on soap crates. Crack addicts scrounging for change. There are middle-aged volunteers planting beds of impatiens in a footprint of earth in the concrete, German tourists pressed against bus windows to see the Apollo Theater and the Abyssinian Baptist Church.

He has lived here so long that not much of this fazes him anymore. He is a widower now. He walks lean and upright, and he towers over you as he leads you to the one room he keeps for himself out of the whole brownstone he owns. It is the product of all the hustling and saving he had to do when he arrived here a country boy from the South. His apartment is a cluttered storeroom, really, with a single bed, a couple of chairs, a dresser with a picture of his grandmother, Annie the root doctor, on it, and half-open boxes of his accumulated highs and regrets.

The knees that used to climb suckling tree limbs to pick grapefruit back in Florida and worked the train aisles up and down the East Coast

Copyrighted material

all those years are giving way to arthritis now. He takes a seat by the bed and talks in a monotone without taking a breath, there is so very much to say. He has catalogued in his mind every character who ever passed his way, can mimic their toothless drawl with wicked precision, recall every good and bad thing he has ever done or that has ever been done to him, every laughable contrivance of Jim Crow, every grievance and kind turn, all the people who made a way out of no way in that world growing up.

George Swanson Starling came from the featureless way station of citrus groves and one-star motels between the Georgia border and Orlando, Florida, a place of cocksure southern sheriffs, overworked pickers, root doctors, pool hustlers, bootleggers, jackleg preachers, barely a soul you could trust, and a color line as hard as Mississippi's. It comes back to him, one image after another, how Jim Crow had a way of turning everyone against one another, not just white against black or landed against lowly, but poor against poorer and black against black for an extra scrap of privilege. George Starling left all he knew because he would have died if he had stayed.

His face is long and creaseless. He was handsome in his day, a basketball player in high school, good with numbers, a ladies' man. He holds out a crate of Florida oranges like the ones he used to pick and offers you one, says, even after all that picking and all that it cost him, they're better than the ones from California. A smile lifts his face at the absurdities of the world he left, and which, in some ridiculous way, he still loves. Then his eyes well up over all that they have seen.

EUSTIS, FLORIDA, 1931

BEHIND THE ST. JAMES A.M.E. Church over at Prescott and MacDonald was an old orange tree that turned out oranges with dimpled skin as green as saw grass on the outside but inside sweet as sugarcane by September. To look at it, no one would know the fruit was ripe unless they climbed up and tried one, which George Starling and some other boys did once they made the discovery.

Copyrighted material

The tree was taller than a telephone pole, and it was hard for the boys to pass it by knowing what they did about those oranges. They waited for nightfall, when church would start and the deacons would light the kerosene lamps by the pews.

The boys climbed the twenty-foot tree and picked the oranges by the sanctuary light as the church people sang about Jesus. They steadied themselves in the crook of a limb and stuffed their shirts and trouser pockets until the buttons gaped. Then they turned back home, peeling and slurping, a trail of orange hulls following them all the way down MacDonald Avenue.

The church people tried to wait for the fruit to turn orange. But George and the other boys picked the tree clean before the church people could get to it. And so it went, George Starling and others in his impatient generation outwitting the old folks they saw as too content in their spirituals and their place in that world.

Here they were in Eustis, Florida, in the interior Citrus Belt of the state, hemmed into the colored part of town called Egypt. It was the haphazard cluster of dirt yards and clapboard bungalows, juke joints and corner churches where the colored people lived and conducted their affairs. It was unofficially policed by a man named Henry McClendon, a steward at another church in town. He lived across the street from St. James and saw George and his friends Sam Gaskin and Ernest Sallet sneak around the side of the church as he sat on his front porch one night.

When the boys got up into the tree, he started probing the limbs with a flashlight.

"Come down outta that tree in the name of the law!" he said.

The boys froze and hoped he would go away.

"I'm gonna come and tell your daddies. Y'all 'round here stealing these oranges, and y'all 'bout the same ones been stealing the wood from on the back porch."

"Man, we don't eat no wood. We been getting these oranges from around here for years. Ain't nobody want no wood."

"Oh yeah, y'all 'bout stole the wood. I'm coming out there, and I'm a tell your daddy."

The boys scrambled out of the tree and got on their knees because the worst thing that could happen to a colored child in the South was for a parent to hear that a child was acting up. There would be no appeals, the punishment swift and physical. The arbitrary nature of grown people's wrath gave colored children practice for life in the caste system, which is

Copyrighted material

why parents, forced to train their children in the ways of subservience, treated their children as the white people running things treated them. It was preparation for the lower-caste role children were expected to have mastered by puberty.

For a young colored boy in the South, "the caste barrier is an ever-present, solid fact," John Dollard, an anthropologist studying the region's caste system, wrote at the time. "His education is incomplete until he has learned to make some adjustment to it. . . . The Negro must haul down his social expectations and resign himself to a relative immobility."

Indeed, breaking from protocol could get people like George killed. Under Jim Crow, only white people could sit in judgment of a colored person on trial. White hearsay had more weight than a colored eyewitness. Colored people had to put on a show of cheerful subservience and unquestioning obedience in the presence of white people or face the consequences of being out of line. If children didn't learn their place, they could get on the wrong side of a white person, and the parents could do nothing to save them.

"The question of the child's future is a serious dilemma for Negro parents," wrote J. W. Johnson around the time George and his friends got caught picking those oranges. "Awaiting each colored boy and girl are cramping limitations . . . ; and this dilemma approaches suffering in proportion to the parents' knowledge of and the child's innocence of those conditions."

There was no time for childish ideals of fair play and equality. *Oh, you calling them grown folks a lie?* George remembered parents saying. *Them grown folks wouldn't a said it if they didn't see you doing it.*

So the boys pleaded with Mr. McClendon that night. "We make a promise. You don't tell our daddies. We won't come back here to get no more fruit. We won't bother the oranges no more."

George didn't actually believe this as he said it. He knew they were wrong, but he didn't like how the grown people wouldn't believe him no matter what he said, and he didn't see the punishment as fitting the crime. He was getting to be a teenager now. He was learning that you didn't have a right to stand up for yourself if you were in his position, and he wasn't liking it.

George Starling was a fairly new boy in town. He had spent most of his short life circling north-central Florida as his parents hunted for work.

Copyrighted material

He was born on a tobacco farm out by the scrub oaks and wire grass near Alachua, Florida, halfway between Jacksonville and the Gulf of Mexico, on June 1, 1918. Lil George and his father—called Big George to distinguish him from the son—his mother, Napolean, and his half brother, William, all lived with a cast of uncles, aunts, and cousins headed by a hard-bitten curmudgeon of a grandfather, a man named John Starling.

John Starling was a sharecropper who smoked a corncob pipe and had few good words for anybody. Once he kicked the cat into the fire when it tried to rub his leg. He was from the Carolinas, where the plantation owner he worked for used to come down to the field and flog the workers with a horsewhip if they weren't going fast enough, as a rider might snap a whip at his mule. One day, the owner came down with the horsewhip, and the sharecroppers killed him. They swam across the river and never went back. That's all the grandfather would say.

It was before the turn of the twentieth century, and instead of going north, where there would have been no place for a colored farmer like him, John Starling went south to the warm, rich land of the Florida interior. There, Big George and the rest of that generation were born, and the family acquired its surname. Originally, they were Stallings. But nobody could pronounce it right. When they first joined their little country church, the preacher welcomed the newcomers every Sunday with a different mispronunciation.

"And we're glad to have the Stallions here with us today," the preacher announced during service.

"Stallings! Stallings!" John protested.

He eventually settled on Starling, which was a close enough compromise to suit him and the people around them.

By the time little George was born, John was working for a planter by the name of Reshard. He was living a hard enough life as it was and had other grandchildren in his care for whom he had little patience. He liked to put cotton between their toes and light it to wake them up in the morning. But the grandfather and his second wife, Lena, took a liking to little George. He was the only child of John's firstborn (George's half brother, William, had a different father), and Lena used to grab him close.

"Come up here, boy, give your grandma some sugar."

He could see a bulge in her cheeks from the snuff in her mouth and snuff juice dripping down her chin. George tightened his face and

Copyrighted material

was considered "a good share, a good boss, a good master," in George's words, " 'cause he let us break even."

Most other sharecroppers ended deeper in debt than before. "They could never leave as long as they owed the master," George said. "That made the planter as much master as any master during slavery, because the sharecropper was bound to him, belonged to him, almost like a slave."

The anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker, studying the sharecropping system back in the 1930s, estimated that only a quarter to a third of sharecroppers got an honest settlement, which did not in itself mean they got any money. "The Negro farm hand," a colored minister wrote in a letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* in Alabama, "gets for his compensation hardly more than the mule he plows, that is, his board and shelter. Some mules fare better than Negroes."

There was nothing to keep a planter from cheating his sharecropper. "One reason for preferring Negro to white labor on plantations," Powdermaker, a white northerner, observed, "is the inability of the Negro to make or enforce demands for a just statement or any statement at all. He may hope for protection, justice, honesty from his landlord, but he cannot demand them. There is no force to back up a demand, neither the law, the vote nor public opinion. . . . Even the most fair and most just of the Whites are prone to accept the dishonest landlord as part of the system."

That did not keep some sharecroppers from trying to get what they were due after a hard year's labor. During the lull before harvest time, one of George's uncles, Budross, went to the little schoolhouse down in the field and learned to read and count. When it came time to settle up over the tobacco George's grandmother Lena had raised, the uncle stood by while the planter went over the books with her. When they got through, George's uncle spoke up.

"Ma, Mr. Reshard cheatin' you. He ain't addin' them figures right."

The planter jumped up. "Now you see there, Lena, I told you not to send that boy to school! Now he done learn how to count and now done jumped up and called my wife a lie, 'cause my wife figured up these books."

The planter's men came and pistol-whipped the uncle right then and there.

The family had to get him out that night. "To call a white woman a lie," George said, "they came looking for him that night. They came, fifteen or twenty of them on horseback, wagon."

Copyrighted material

George's grandparents knew to expect it. "We got to get you away from here 'cause you done call Mr. Reshard a lie. And you know they ain't gon' like that."

George was too young to understand what was happening but heard the grown people talk about it in whispers. It was the middle of the 1920s, and George never knew exactly where the uncle went. The particulars were never spoken.

"They hid him out" was all George would say. "He left from out of there."

Lil George and his parents didn't stay in Alachua much longer after that. They fled to St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Mexico, where they would no longer be under a field boss or overseer. They could work in the big high-rise hotels going up, and with all the tourists from up north and the building boom in the beach towns on the coast, they could be free of the farm and find plenty of work.

They were living in a row house off Fifth Avenue in the colored district. The father found work in construction, and things were good. But by the late 1920s, when the Great Depression descended on the country, things weren't so good. Big George took to drinking and would lie in wait on the porch for Lil George's mother to get back from church on Sunday. Once, instead of coming straight back, she stopped a few doors down to chat with a neighbor. Big George saw her dawdling, and that set him off.

"You making plans to meet some other man," Big George said.

He jumped on her and started hitting her. Lil George and his half brother, William, were sitting on the porch and could see it.

It wasn't the first time. Lil George cried over it. He was torn between the two of them. Sometimes William, who had a different father and was two years older than Lil George, would throw rocks at Big George to make him stop. Lil George hated it when William did that. He adored his parents. This time, Lil George got mad. The two boys went and got a brick from under a wash pot in the kitchen and hit Big George with it. Then they ran down the street to get away. Big George was hurt more by the pain he had caused his son than by the brick itself and went calling after his namesake. *Son, come back here. I'm not gonna bother you.*

The marriage gave out after that, and the family split up. The mother kept William on the Gulf Coast with her. And Big George headed east to the town of Eustis, where he said he would send for Lil George after

Copyrighted material

he got established. For the time being, Lil George was sent to live with his mother's mother in Ocala, a town in the scrublands midway between Alachua and Eustis.

The grandmother was a root doctor named Annie Taylor who was a big-boned woman as tall as a man. She lived on a corner lot and grew pole beans alongside the fence. She was already raising one daughter's two boys, and here came another one from another daughter, Napolean, now that she had quit her husband.

Annie set George to work right away. She took him and his cousins out to the woods and showed them which twigs and roots to dig up: sassafras, sulfur, and goldenrod. They would tramp behind her through the scrub and wire grass back to the house—George and his cousins James and Joseph, whom they called Brother. She would stir the roots into foul-smelling potions that people bought to thin their blood, cut a fever, shush a hacking cough. She knew all the roots and could identify them, and she knew what they were good for.

The boys were her nearest patients, and every season brought a new torture. Sulfur and cream of tartar at the first sign of spring to thin the blood for the summer. Castor oil to clean your system out in the winter. Balls of asafetida hung around the neck to ward off flu and tuberculosis, the asafetida resin rolled up like flour dough and smelling only slightly worse than cow dung. She put the asafetida paste into little sacks and made necklaces for the boys to wear (which they took off and put in their pockets as soon as they got from around her). In between, she plied them with goldenrod for fever, asafetida with whiskey for a bad cold, and any number of bitter-tasting concoctions that made the boys hate to get sick.

If she detected a cold in the chest, she unscrewed the top of the kerosene lamp, tipped it over a spoonful of sugar, and let four or five drops of kerosene saturate the sugar. Then she stuck the spoon into their tight faces for them to swallow. There was no point in trying to run and hide. "You better not be talking about no run-and-hide," George said years later. "She didn't play that. 'Now you gonna get a whippin' on top of it.' "

The three little boys were left in Annie Taylor's care because there was a great churning among the young people of working age like her daughters. Her oldest girl, George's mother, was off on the Gulf Coast. And her two youngest girls, Annie (whom they called Baby) and La-

Copyrighted material

vata (who actually was the baby but whom they called Date), were up in New York. Baby couldn't keep little James and Brother in New York with her, so she left them with her mother to raise, like a lot of migrants did when they went up north.

Young people like them weren't tied to a place like their slave grandparents had been forced to, and they weren't content to move from plantation to plantation like their parents. Ever since World War I had broken out and all those jobs had opened up in the North, there had been an agitation for something better, some fast, new kind of life where they could almost imagine themselves equal to the white people. And so they had gone off to wherever the money seemed to be raining down—to the Gulf Coast rising up in a construction boom or the orange groves at picking season or the turpentine camps if they couldn't manage anything else; or, if they had nerve in the early days of the Migration, they'd hop a train to the edge of the world, straight up the coast, past Georgia and both Carolinas and straight through Virginia and up to New York, where people said you could get rich just mopping floors.

To the old folks who stayed, the young people looked to be going in circles, chasing a wish. Some went crossways to someplace in Alabama or Georgia, where they heard things were better, only to find the South to be the South wherever they went. Some went north, high and mighty, and came back south, low and broke. Some people's pride wouldn't let them come back at all. So they shoehorned themselves into tenements and made like they were rich or just plain made do and dazzled the folks back home with all the money they wired back.

Some people back home came to depend on that money, to half expect it, and they got agitated when it didn't come. They figured the people who left were making all that money up north and just about owed it to them, especially if they left children behind. Baby and Date kept up fairly regular payments to their mother to cover Baby's two little boys. George's father sent money for George, too. At first. But after a while, it got to the place where he wouldn't send any money, and the grandmother had to stretch what her daughters sent for two into enough to take care of all three of them.

Sometimes George heard his grandmother fretting about how she was running out of money and hadn't heard from Big George. It was the Depression, and sometimes even the daughters got slow sending money for the two which had stretched to three, and the grandmother had a problem on her hands. The daughters had gotten themselves out

Copyrighted material

in that big world way up north—who knew what kind of fix they were in?—and here she was left with the little ones.

When the money got low, Annie Taylor got in her rocking chair on the porch and rocked back and forth. She hummed and sang as she rocked. *Guide me o'er, thou Great Jehovah, pilgrim to this barren land. I am weak, but thou art mighty. Guide me with thy loving hand.*

George and James and Brother heard her humming.

"Grandma humming that song again," George told James. "Somethin' gonna happen soon."

The palm of her hand started to itch, or so she said. And before long, a Western Union man came rolling up the street, announcing a telegram for Miss Annie Taylor.

"Somebody would be done wired us some money," George would say years later. "Yes, sirree."

The waiting and hoping went on for two years, and then it was decided that it was best for George to be with his father, and he joined his father in Eustis.

Big George worked at the loading dock of a packinghouse and ran a one-room convenience store over on Bates Avenue. He sold baked goods and castor oil to the fruit pickers and day workers and the children on their lunch break from the colored high school across the street in a citrus farming town in the underdeveloped midsection of a still-isolated state.

Lake County and the rest of central Florida were far from the lights of Miami and the palm-tree version of paradise that tourists came for. This was the Florida that had entered the Union as a slave state, where a Florida slaveholder could report without apology, in 1839, that he worked his slaves "in a hurrying time till 11 or 12 o'clock at night, and have them up by four in the morning." Florida went farther than some other slave states in the creativity of its repression: Slaves could not gather together to pray. They couldn't leave their plantations, even for a walk, without written permission from their owner. If they were accused of wrongdoing, "their hands were burned with a heated iron, their ears nailed to posts," or their backs stripped raw with seventy-five lashes from a buckskin whip. The few free blacks in the state had to register with the nearest probate court or could be automatically enslaved by any white person who stepped forward to claim possession.

As the country neared the point of collapse over the issue of a state's

Copyrighted material

"Every now and then somebody would cut off a finger or toe," the witness said. Then the men used hot irons to burn him all over his body in a ritual that went on for several hours.

"It is almost impossible to believe that a human being could stand such unspeakable torture for such a long period," wrote the white undercover investigator retained by the NAACP.

The crowd waiting in town never got to see Neal die. The committee of six decided finally to just kill him in the woods. His nude body was then tied to the back of a car and dragged to the Cannidy house, where men, women, and children stabbed the corpse with sticks and knives. The dead girl's father was angry that Neal was killed before he could get to him. "They done me wrong about the killing," the father said. "They promised me they would bring him up to my house before they killed him and let me have the first shot. That's what I wanted."

The committee hanged the body "from an oak tree on the courthouse lawn." People reportedly displayed Neal's fingers and toes as souvenirs. Postcards of his dismembered body went for fifty cents each. When the sheriff cut down the body the next morning, a mob of as many as two thousand people demanded that it be rehanged. When the sheriff refused to return it to the tree, the mob attacked the courthouse and rampaged through Marianna, attacking any colored person they ran into. Well-to-do whites hid their maids or sent cars to bring their workers to safety. "We needed these people," said a white man who sat on his porch protecting his interests with a loaded Winchester. Florida Governor David Sholtz had to call in the National Guard to quell the mob.

Across the country, thousands of outraged Americans wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt demanding a federal investigation. The NAACP compiled a sixteen-page report and more files on the Neal case than any other lynching in American history. But Neal had the additional misfortune of having been lynched just before the 1934 national midterm elections, which were being seen as a referendum on the New Deal itself. Roosevelt chose not to risk alienating the South with a Democratic majority in Congress at stake. He did not intervene in the case. No one was ever charged in Neal's death or spent a day in jail for it. The Jackson County grand jury, in the common language of such inquests, reported that the execution had occurred "at the hands of persons unknown to us."

Soon afterward, it was learned that Neal and the dead girl, who had known each other all their lives, had been lovers and that people in her family who discovered the liaison may have been involved in her death

Copyrighted material

for the shame it had brought to the family. Indeed, the summer after Neal was lynched, the girl's father was convicted of assault with intent to kill his niece because he suspected that that side of the family had had a hand in his daughter's death.

In sentencing the father to five years in prison for attacking the relative, the judge said, "I hate to pass this sentence on an old man such as you, but I must do it. To be perfectly fair with you, I don't believe you have any too many brains."

The father replied, "Yes, judge. I am plumb crazy."

Thereafter, Florida continued to live up to its position as the southernmost state with among the most heinous acts of terrorism committed anywhere in the South. Violence had become such an accepted fact of life that, in 1950, the Florida governor's special investigator, Jefferson Elliott, observed that there had been so many mob executions in one county that it "never had a negro live long enough to go to trial."

The grown people's whispers of unspeakable things seeped into George's subconscious like a nursery rhyme, even though he was too young to know the particulars or understand the meaning of it all. Surrounded as he was by the arbitrary violence of the ruling caste, it would be nearly impossible for George or any other colored boy in that era to grow up without the fear of being lynched, the dread that, in the words of the historian James R. McGovern, "he might be accused of something and suddenly find himself in a circle of tormentors with no one to help him."

By the time Lil George was old enough to notice, it seemed as if the whole world was crazy, not because of any single event but because of the slow discovery of just how circumscribed his life was turning out to be. All this stepping off the sidewalk, not looking even in the direction of a white woman, the sirring and ma'aming and waiting until all the white people had been served before buying your ice cream cone, with violence and even death awaiting any misstep. Each generation had to learn the rules without understanding why, because there was no understanding why, and each one either accepted or rebelled in that moment of realization and paid a price whichever they chose.

No one sat George down and told him the rules. His father was quiet and kept his wounds to himself. George's teachers were fear and instinct. The caste system trained him to see absurdity as normal.

Like the time George went for an ice cream cone at the pharmacy in downtown Eustis. He wouldn't be able to sit at the counter, he knew

Copyrighted material

that going in. Anytime a white customer walked up, he had to step back and wait for him or her to be served first. George had learned this, too, by now. The pharmacist had a dog, a little terrier. And when George walked up to the counter, three or four white men who were standing around looked at one another and then at the pharmacist. The owner called out to the dog. And the dog jumped up onto the counter.

When the pharmacist had everyone's attention, he turned to the dog.

"What would you rather do?" the pharmacist asked the dog. "Be a nigger or die?"

The dog rolled over on cue. It flipped onto its back, folded its legs, shut its eyes, and froze. The grown people at the counter and up front near George shook with laughter.

George was a teenager and outnumbered. He was the only one of his kind in this place. All he could do was stand there and take it. Any other response would require an explanation. *What's the matter with you, boy? You don't like it?* he could hear them saying.

All kinds of thoughts went through his mind. "A whole lot of things," he said. "How you'd like to kill all of 'em, for one thing."

On its face, it looked to be a black-and-white world, but George learned soon enough that the caste system was a complicated thing that had a way of bringing out the worst in just about all concerned. Sometimes it seemed that loyalty didn't stand a chance against suspicion and self-preservation. Even on the lowest rung, some people would squeeze what little they could even when nobody had anything.

Reverend J. W. Brinson was a jackleg preacher who ran the colored grocery store on MacDonald in Egypt town. The store had a slot machine that took customers' nickels and dimes but gave hardly any back. People went in and played the dime machine for an hour or two, and everybody could see that the machine was ready to deliver. That's when Reverend Brinson would step in and close up shop. "He figure that machine is getting hot and is gonna start paying off," George recalled. "And he run everybody out the store."

George and his friends walked out as told. Then they watched old man Brinson take the slot machine to his house next door. "We would tip up on the porch," George said, "and we could hear him in there in the bedroom and hear that slot machine just ringing. And he just be burning it up trying to get that jackpot for himself."

On top of that, the merchandise in the grocery store was unjustly

Copyrighted material

high, to hear George tell it, and he and his friends resented it. They found a way to get back what they figured they had overpaid.

They noticed that Reverend Brinson went into town the same time every day, leaving the store in the care of his wife, Mary, who was a sweet woman but couldn't count. One day the boys sat under a big old oak tree and waited for Reverend Brinson to pull away. Then they went in and played nice to Miss Brinson.

"Hi, Miss Brinson."

"Hello, boys. How y'all?"

"We wanna get something, Miss Brinson."

"Yeah, alright. What y'all want?"

"We want ten cent worth of bologna."

The Brinsons had a scale in the back of the store where the icebox was, which required Miss Brinson to go back in the icebox, get the roll of bologna, and bring it to the butcher block near the counter. She carved enough slices until it looked about right, cutting less than she needed so as not to waste slices the customer didn't want. Then she went back to the scales to weigh the bologna as the boys watched.

"Oh, Miss Brinson, you ain't quite got ten cent worth up there yet. You got to get some more."

"Yeah, that's right," she said, admitting the discrepancy.

She hauled the loaf of bologna back to slice some more, leaving the slices she had already cut on the counter, two or three of which the boys slipped into their mouths. She came huffing back with the extra slices, only to learn it still wasn't enough.

"Oh, you ain't got it yet, Miss Brinson."

Back and forth she went, the loaf shrinking and the scale not budging, until the boys were full from the extra slices they'd eaten.

"Aw, that's alright, Miss Brinson. That's close enough. Just wrap it up."

Come summer, the Brinsons set watermelons out on the bare floor in front of the counter. George and the other boys saw them there and decided to go in one day. They lined up along the counter and started looking around. One pointed to a jar of pickles on the very top shelf.

"Miss Brinson, how much is that jar of pickles up there?"

"Well. Let me see now. Which one?"

Miss Brinson went to get the ladder and climbed up to check. And as she stretched herself to reach the last jar, one of the boys took his foot and started a watermelon rolling. He kicked it to the next boy, who kicked it to the next boy, until the melon had rolled and creaked down

Copyrighted material

the wood plank floor toward the front screen. The last boy was positioned to kick it outside, none of them for a second taking his eyes off Miss Brinson, still reaching for the jar of pickles. They would get two or three watermelons that way.

Poor Reverend Brinson must have suspected that they stole from him, and he kept his prices high, which only encouraged more pilfering. It was George's and the other boys' way of getting justice in an unjust world. And so it went in Egypt town, the poor at odds with the broke.

George was a boy interested in the things boys are interested in and not particularly wanting to live the life the preachers set out at Gethsemane Baptist Church. Not then, anyway. There wasn't much to do around Eustis when school was out. Sure, they could fish and swim awhile in one of the lakes. But there weren't any jobs, and so they got into the things that boys get into, like picking green oranges while the church people sang about Jesus.

He was friends with a bootlegger's brother who lived behind the poolroom. Grown men roosted on the benches out front like crows on a fence, and there were big trees all around. The boys shot pool when the grown men let them and then made off with a pint of the bootlegger's moonshine. They poured water in place of the liquor and put the bottle back where they found it. They figured they weren't hurting anybody. The bootlegger was breaking the law anyway. They figured it was like taking something that wasn't supposed to exist in the first place.

George was growing taller and bigger and was in high school now. He grew to over six feet and started playing basketball at Curtright. He was walking taller and straighter. One day he went up to Ocala to see his grandmother the root doctor. He liked to surprise her, so he didn't let her know that he was coming. But she knew anyway. "You think you slipped up on me," she said once. "I knew you was coming 'cause my nose was itching. I just told somebody, 'Somebody's coming to see me.' "

She saw the change in him, how he was wearing grown folks' clothes, walking taller, straighter, suddenly aware of how he looked in a mirror. It always happened that the young people got to a certain age and thought they were the best thing that ever walked the earth. "I see George got you in long pants now," she said. "You must be smelling yourself."

Copyrighted material

swore she would never join a church again if she got free. She kept her word and never did.

She wore plaits and plain dresses and didn't have the pomaded hair some other girls had or the stockings and jewelry that made certain girls look more refined. But she had a way of smiling and tilting her head to the side and some kind of simpatico, outsider way of looking at the world that appealed to a young man like George who felt life had never cut him a fair deal.

She had graduated from high school and was doing the common and necessary job of cleaning white people's homes. But with George up in Tallahassee around those well-turned-out coeds training to be teachers, she fixated on her deficiencies. She imagined her competition in high heels and straight hair, their dignified talk turning George's head. She convinced herself he would choose one of them over her and told him as much.

Big George didn't want Inez around his son either. She was from the backwoods and, in the pecking order that emerged even on the lowest rung—people with house notes versus people who paid rent, factory workers versus servants—Big George saw Inez as lower than the Starlings.

During spring break of his sophomore year, the subject of school came up again. George asked his father if he would send him back, and again the answer was no. George was incensed and decided to do something about it. It was April 19, 1939. He took his father's car and drove up to the house where Inez lived.

"Come on, let's take a ride," he said.

"What you doing?"

"Come on, let's ride."

"Well, where you going?"

"Oh, just a ride."

She hopped in, and he drove south for five miles to Tavares, the county seat. He drove around to the back of the courthouse, where the jail was, and slowed to a stop.

"Where you going?" Inez asked, alarmed now.

He grabbed her hand. "Come on. I want to show you something."

He led her upstairs and into the magistrate's office.

"Well, what can I do for ya, boy?" the magistrate said.

"We come to get married," George said.

Inez nearly fainted. She looked to George to explain himself.

"Well, you been pressuring me about gettin' married. You're telling

Copyrighted material

me that I'm gonna end up marrying one of those college girls that's getting a schoolteacher's education. And you're not gonna be good enough for me. And I keep telling you that that wouldn't make any difference. But you can't seem to believe that, and you don't want to wait. I wanted to show you that you the only one that I wanted. So we just gonna get married now."

Inez stood there with her mouth open. "I—I didn't know" was all she could manage.

She was wearing whatever dress she happened to put on that morning, and he had on whatever he'd thrown on, too.

"Now, you know that'll cost you a dollar fifty, boy," the county judge, A. S. Herlong, said. "A dollar for the license. Fifty cent for a witness."

"Yes, sir."

The judge went through the vows and declared them man and wife. She was twenty-one. He was twenty and not legally old enough to marry.

"I told the man I was twenty-one," George later said. "They didn't care. If you black, they don't care nothin' about Negroes. They didn't check it out. I would be twenty-one in a couple of months. But anyway, we got married."

As they drove back to Eustis, George told Inez his plan.

"You gon' have to continue to stay with your people. We got to keep this secret until I find out whether I'm going back to school or not."

George left out a crucial bit of information in what he told Inez, although it wouldn't take her long to figure it out. "I didn't tell her my ulterior motive," he said years later. Now, in all fairness, he said, "I was in love with her. But I didn't have no intention of getting married, not at that stage, until I got mad with my daddy. He didn't even want me to be courting this girl, much less talking about marrying her.

"So I figured that would fix him up good 'cause he won't send me back to school," he said. "I got in all that trouble for a dollar fifty cents."

George hadn't really thought his revenge scheme through to completion. He held out hope that his father would change his mind. George would spring the news about Inez on him only if his father didn't come around. The two of them kept their secret through the spring and into the summer, when George went to New York like a lot of college students from the South to make spending money for school.

He worked at a dry cleaner's in Flatbush and lived with the aunts

Copyrighted material

who had sent money to his grandmother, the root doctor in Ocala. Toward the end of the summer, he wrote his father: *I have my money for my books and everything. I bought what clothing I'll need. Are you going to be able to pay my tuition?*

Lil George didn't know it, but the people back home had been grumbling in Big George's ear. The father had already done more than he had to. Nobody else was spending all that money for school. None of them had gone off to college, and they had made out alright. Their kids were working in the groves and bringing in good money. What was Lil George doing? His father wrote him back: *No, I just won't be able to do it. You'll have to work this year, and we'll see how things are next year.*

The summer was almost over. The semester would be starting soon. George had run out of time. He realized his dream was over. He wrote his father again. He wanted to get back at him now: *Well, that's alright, don't worry about it 'cause I'm married anyhow. I'm married to Inez.*

George waited for the fireworks. But they never came. He caught the bus back home, and the old people who hadn't seen him in months recognized him as he walked from the bus station. They called out to him from their front porches.

"Hey, ain't that Lil George Starling?"

"Yes, ma'am, this is me."

"Come here, boy. Lord have mercy, what is wrong with you? You done gone plumb fool. They tell me you done jumped up and married that Cunningham girl. And your daddy said, he was here gettin' ready to send you back to school."

George couldn't speak. The old people went on.

" 'Cause your daddy said he was gettin' ready to send you back to school, and, before he know anything, you come writing him about you done got married."

The word had spread all across Egypt town, and everybody knew about the ingrate son who had ruined his chance at college, marrying some girl from the wrong side of town.

Dog, the ole man done tricked me, George thought to himself. He knew how they talked. And in the old people's sweet scolding, he could hear how the story got repackaged in the telling, people in town with nothing better to do, who never had the chance at college themselves, maybe never tried or even wanted to go, delighting in the confusion and goading Big George over it.

"George, where is that boy? Is he going to school?"

"No, you know what that devilish boy done? I'm here gettin' ready to

Copyrighted material

send him back to school, and here he come writing me the other day tellin' me about he married."

"Well, I declare! You mean to tell! Now, I know that boy ain't done nothin' like that! And hard as you workin' trying to send him to school!"

And so it went. If the father had ever intended on sending him back, he now had a publicly acceptable excuse for not doing so, and he had come out the hero in the deal.

As for Lil George, no colleges near Eustis nor any state universities in Florida, for that matter, admitted colored students. The closest colored colleges were hours away. He had a wife to support now. So he would have to do precisely what his father had intended all along. It looked as if he might never make it back to school.

And he would have to live with vows made in anger for the rest of his life. It would not be happy because he knew and she knew how it had come to be. But they would both try to make the best of it now that the deed was done.

Copyrighted material

Robert Joseph Pershing Foster

LOS ANGELES, 1996

THE PANELED DOOR RISES a story high and would befit a museum or government office but is actually the front door of a Spanish Revival south of Wilshire. The door opens, and there stands a onetime bourbon-swilling army captain and deft-handed surgeon who, now in his later years, is a regular at the blackjack tables and the trifectas at Santa Anita. But he is, at the heart of it all and perhaps most important, a long-standing, still bitter, and somewhat obsessive expatriate from the twentieth-century South, the heartbreak Jim Crow land he chose to reject before it could reject him again.

He is a Californian now, this Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. He is the color of strong coffee and has waves in his hair, which he lets grow as untamed as Einstein's but then brushes back like the boys in the band. He's wearing a white cotton island shirt, loose slacks, and sandals, the uniform of the well-to-do L.A. pensioner. He has the build and bearing of a Sammy Davis, Jr., and not a little of the showmanship and delightful superficiality that seem to grow on people in certain circles of L.A.

He walks straight-backed and slew-footed into the foyer, past the

Copyrighted material

star pitcher at Morehouse College in Atlanta. His parents had big plans for Leland, naming him as they did after their alma mater, Leland College in New Orleans. People were saying Leland had a shot at the Negro Leagues. He had to fight the girls off him as it was. He had a sculpted mahogany face and waves in his hair. He had the best mind of all the four children but, to his mother's great sorrow, was a regular at the pool hall and the juke joints, despite her best efforts. The women called him Woo, which is what they whispered when they saw him.

There was a sister named Emlyn. They called her Gold owing to the sunset cast to her skin and her place as the only surviving girl. Her twin, Evelyn, had died as an infant. Everybody fussed over Gold and told her how beautiful she was, which she was.

The table seemed set before Pershing was even born, and he couldn't see how to stand out on his own or figure out how he fit in as the youngest. A few years before, when he was about ten, he hit upon something that he thought he could do. He was in fifth grade, and when the school bell rang, he ran to meet his mother in her seventh-grade classroom. He told her his discovery as they walked home together.

"Mama, I believe I can play the piano."

"You think you can?"

"Yes, Mama, I know I can."

"What makes you know?"

"Mama, all you got to do is do like this," he said, banging his fingers on an invisible keyboard as he walked, "and hum the song, and it'll come out."

"You think so, baby?"

"Yes, Mama."

"Well, tomorrow after school, you go down, and you try it on the piano, and you let me know how you come out."

The next day, he did as she said. Noise came out of the piano instead of the music in his head, and that was the end of his short career as a pianist. He never spoke of it again. And, seeing that he didn't bring it up, neither did his mother.

The day the cow kicked over the bucket, they let Pershing have his way. He was a teenager now and off to the Paramount. It sat gaudy and beautiful on the other side of the Missouri Pacific Railway tracks from the colored section of town. He stepped out of the white frame bungalow with his pants creased to a knife edge, the crinkled waves in his hair pomaded and patted down, and proceeded down the dirt roads leading downtown. He went past the little plank houses that stood on cinder

Copyrighted material

blocks due to the rains and floods and jumped over the dirt ditches that made grass islands of every yard around.

He picked up paper-shell pecans that fell in people's yards like litter. Soon he came to the places where the white people lived. The streets were paved and smooth now. In New Town, the roads were earthen humps with a ditch on either side to catch the bayou when it ran out of places to go. Whenever it rained, the streets turned to mud, and Pershing and the other children jumped in the ditches and splashed around as if the ditches were a swimming pool. They didn't know what a real pool was like because the only one in town didn't allow children who looked like them.

Trucks rumbled down the road and flung dust on the porches and through the screens and into the front rooms of the houses on Pershing's side of town. The mud and dust were an affront to Pershing, and he defied it the best he could. He made a game out of proving he could outwit his lower-caste world.

"It was my personal pride to wait till a rainy day and polish my black-and-white shoes," he said, "and wear them when the rain had stopped and jump over puddles and not get a spot of anything on them."

Those dirt roads were the reason he never learned to skate, and he could never forget that.

"We could buy skates," Pershing would remember even as an old man. "But we couldn't buy sidewalks."

Downtown was called Five Points, the intersection of Eighteenth and Desiard, and when Pershing got there, he walked further down Desiard Street past Piccadilly's restaurant, where the white people ate, and on to the Paramount straight ahead. He could see the double glass doors in front and a crowd forming outside. He knew to ignore the front entrance. It was off-limits to people like him.

He went to get his ticket. It was a more complicated affair than it had to be, owing to the whims and peculiarities of how Jim Crow played out in a particular town or establishment. For a time, there was a single ticket agent working both booths—the window for the colored and the one for the white. The agent swiveled between the two openings to sell the movie tickets, a roll to the white line and then a pivot to the colored. It created unnecessary confusion and waiting time for one line or the other, the waiting borne more likely by the colored moviegoers than the white, as waiting to be served after colored people would have been unacceptable to the white clientele. By the time Pershing was nearly grown, the swiveling ticket agent was dispensed with in favor of alto-

Copyrighted material