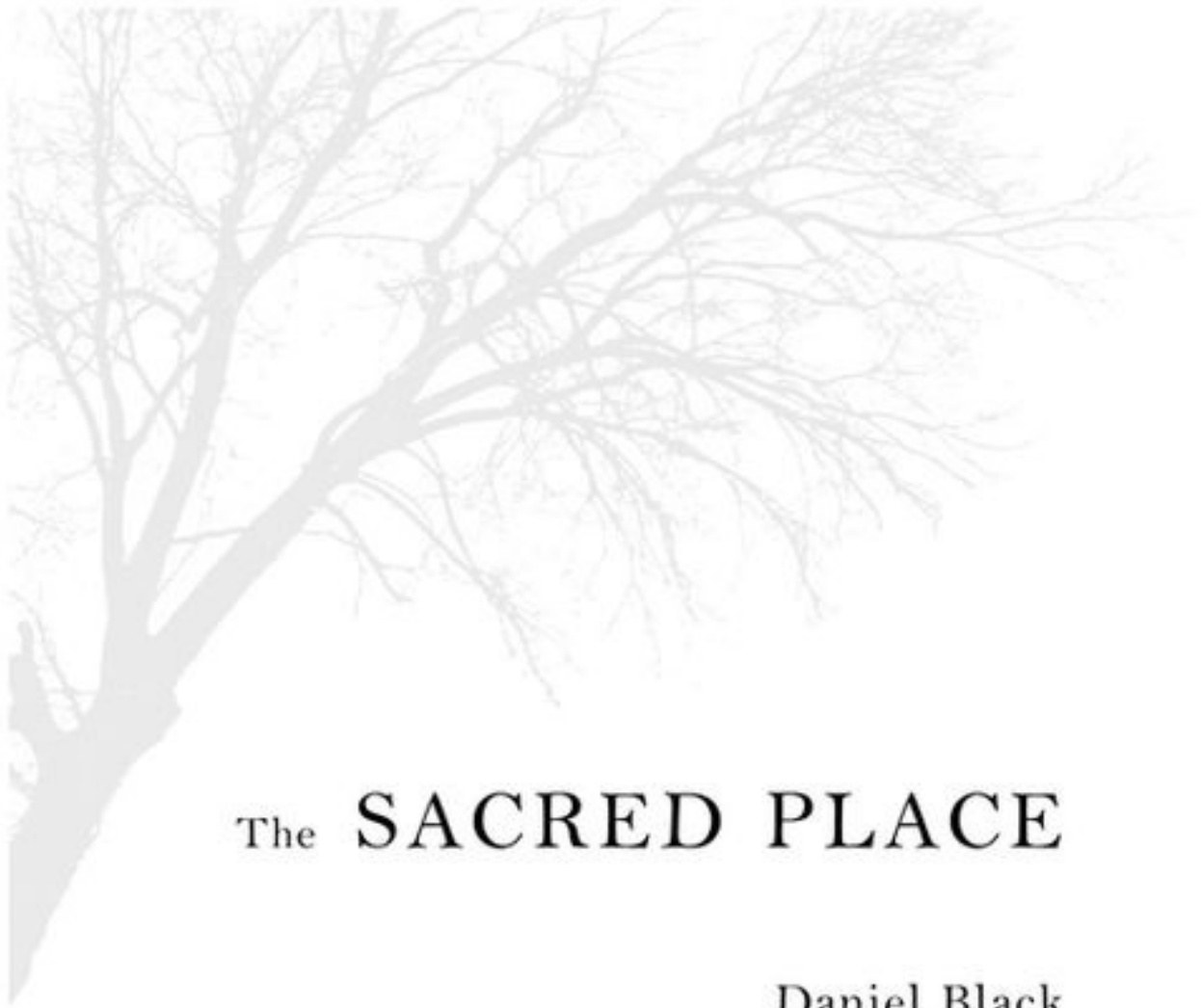


THE SACRED PLACE

DANIEL BLACK





The **SACRED PLACE**

Daniel Black

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*To Emmett Till:
Your life forced us to rise
and change the world.*

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One

“COME ON, CLEMENT!” HIS COUSINS DEMANDED. “YOU AIN’T got no business in dat stor Granddaddy kill you if he find out you went in there all by yo’self!”

Clement smiled at the thought of his own defiance, trying to imagine what eighty-year-old Jeremiah Johnson could possibly do to him, with one bad leg and two failing eyes. Of course a whoopin’ would hurt, he considered, but the pain was always temporal. All he wanted was a soda pop, and he didn’t understand why he couldn’t simply waltz into the General Store and get one. That’s what white folks did when they wanted something; why should he be afraid to do the same?

“Clement!” the others screamed more vehemently as he approached the old wooden screen door. Sarah Jane’s tears were more than her mouth could speak. At twelve, she knew never to be found alone with white folk because her grandmother’s threat to whip her good was not to be taken lightly. Stories of Black kids who disappeared after being last seen with whites was enough to keep her at least fifty feet from any of them, so Clement’s audacity frightened her and rendered her mute. Only her tears expressed her fear that he was making a fatal mistake. The boys, Ray Ray and Chop, simply shook their heads, and murmured, “City boys. They think they know everything.”

Hoping not to witness a tragedy, the three walked home in the ninety-degree heat and mumbled silent prayers that Granddaddy wouldn’t beat Clement too badly. After all, he was new to the place and didn’t understand the rules of Black Southern life. Chicago had groomed him for fourteen years prior to his arrival in Money, Mississippi, and left him believing that a resident of the Windy City could survive anywhere. Indeed, the day Jeremiah Johnson retrieved him from the Greenwood train station, Clement boasted of insight beyond anything his cousins could imagine. He spoke of prostitutes, pimps, and kids who roamed the streets long after the night-light appeared. The brand-new twenty-dollar bill he excavated from his front pocket elicited praise and envy from sharecropping children who had never seen anything beyond a five. Clement was the teacher who, with feigned exasperation, shared stories about Chicago Negroes who owned houses and never worked for white folks.

“Whwhwhwhat d-d-d-dey d-do thththen?” Chop stammered incredulously. Silence was his usual mode, but the notion that Negroes somewhere didn’t submit their labor to whites unleashed an otherwise restrained tongue. At eight, his self-esteem, like rain on a rooftop, was falling in more directions than he could catch. His stuttering kept folks—both his own and others—from planting seeds of intelligence in him, having concluded already that he would make a marvelous field hand one day. His mother had allowed him to wear his one good pair of overalls to meet his citified cousin, who laughed at the only hole she had failed to patch.

“They work for theyselves, fool!” Clement proclaimed, although everyone knew these weren’t his folks. “They own they own businesses, and they hire Black folks just like they white.”

“Wow,” Chop mumbled. Everybody he knew picked cotton, washed white folks’ clothes, or worked on the railroad in Greenwood.

“That ain’t all. Some of ’em even marries white, too. And they live together like it ain’t nothin’” Clement continued.

“You hush up dat kinda talk ’round here boy,” Jeremiah Johnson interrupted. “You ain’t in Chicago no mo. Yous in Mississippi. And round here, coloreds stay wit coloreds and whites stay wit whites. And dat’s de way it is.”

Chop lamented Granddaddy's imposition and planned mentally what he would ask Clement later. He wanted to know more about city life and how he could, one day, live in a house he owned all by himself. Chop refused to stop hoping for the day when Granddaddy—or any Black daddy—could work without giving all his money away.

Clement entered the General Store with an entitlement unknown to Mississippi Negroes in 1955. He didn't even knock. He just opened the door, walked in, and started looking around for the soda pop machine.

"Help ya?" Catherine Cuthbert's soft soprano voice asked reluctantly.

Staring her in the eye, Clement returned, "Sure. Where you keep your soda pops?"

"In the big barrel over there," she drawled, and nodded. Never had a Negro boy looked directly at her without flinching. She knew he couldn't be from Money or anywhere in Mississippi for that matter.

Clement proceeded, humming snippets of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame," and retrieved a root beer. Setting it on the countertop, he reached into his right trouser pocket and placed a nickel next to the soda bottle.

"You put that nickel in my hand!" she demanded.

Clement frowned, surprised. "Excuse me?"

Catherine Cuthbert's hazel eyes narrowed. "I said, put that nickel in my hand—boy!"

Clement's brow puckered at the insult. "There it is! You pick it up!" he sneered, opening the soda and beginning to drink.

"I said hand me that nickel, nigger boy!" Her outstretched hand trembled with expectation as her face transformed from cotton to crimson.

"I already paid you, lady! If you too lazy to pick up the nickel, that's your problem, not mine!" Clement belted, and turned to exit.

"You'll never get away with disrespecting me like that!" she screamed.

"I already did!" Clement chuckled and skipped away. Who did she think she was anyway, he wondered. "Slavery been over," he shouted over his shoulder, sipping the root beer like it was a spoonful of war.

Catherine Cuthbert watched him with a vengeance she could not articulate. Never had a colored boy disobeyed her command, and absolutely never had one attempted to speak to her as an equal. "He just laid that nickel down and expected me to pick it up," she whispered repeatedly to herself, inciting an internal rage that produced rivers of sweat beads meandering down her rose red forehead. Pacing in fury, she vowed to reclaim her purity from a nigger boy who dared think he could speak to her any kind of way.

Catching up with the others, Clement told them what had happened.

"Is you crazy?" Sarah Jane yelled. "Don't you know dat white folks kill colored boys over dat kind of stuff?" Her father had rendered his life one windy, October evening a few years prior after some whites had raped and mutilated his wife. Knowing no other recourse, he killed them. By nightfall, his long legs added to the extensions hanging from the big oak tree on Chapman's place. Sarah Jane couldn't explain all the details without wailing uncontrollably, but she tried. "You cain't come down to Mississippi, Clement, and ack like you still up Norf!" She swung mightily and hit him in the shoulder.

"What's wrong with you, girl?" Clement's bulging eyes showed that he didn't comprehend the depth of Sarah Jane's objection.

"No, what's wrong wit you!" she bellowed in his face. "You think you ain't colored like de rest o

us? You think dat jes 'cause you from Chicago, you ain't got to bow to white folks?"

"I ain't got to bow to nobody," Clement said proudly. "My momma told me dat I was jes as good as anybody else, and dat she would whip me if she ever caught me bowing my head to white folks."

Sarah Jane swung her arms as though a spirit possessed and said, "Aunt Possum didn't mean fo you to come down here and sass white folks 'til you git yoself kilt!" She fell to the ground helplessly and released the heavy sobs she had been trying to confine.

"Don't cry, Sarah Jane," Ray Ray begged, embarrassed. "Everythang gon be all right."

"No, it ain't!" she screamed. "You know white folks don't 'low no colored peoples to talk to de white like dat!"

"Well, they don't know me," Clement boasted. "Anyway, I didn't do nothin' wrong. I just went in the store, bought me a soda pop, and paid for it."

Sarah Jane tried not to imagine Clement pleading for his life before a merciless white mob, but each time he spoke, the image became clearer. "Why didn't you hand the woman the nickel, Clement?" she huffed.

"'Cause I didn't have to! All I had to do was pay her, and that's what I did. I ain't no slave! She cain't talk to me like I ain't nothin'!" Clement had hoped his cousins would celebrate his boldness instead their reprimand infuriated him. "I ain't scared o' white folks! Y'all might be, but I ain't!"

As though she hadn't heard him, Sarah Jane said, "I hope to God this don't come to nothin'." She stood and brushed off her cotton sack dress. "You didn't have no business bein' rude to Miss Cuthbert like dat, Clement. You coulda jes put de money in her hand"—she acted out the motion slowly—"and left."

"Okay, okay. Let's jes fugit about it," Ray Ray intervened before allowing himself to envision the wounded Clement. Ray Ray was fourteen, too, only a month older than Clement, but at least five inches taller. His overalls, which were always too short and too tight, made him look bound and constrained. Most girls considered him the cutest boy in Money though, with his enviable, flawless caramel brown complexion and hair that curled at the sight of water. He never said much, afraid of saying the wrong thing, and he hated nothing more than tension. Or maybe looking after his young brother Chop. Ray Ray named him that after watching him devour a pork chop—bone and all—at six months. Their parents had named him Hope, but once Ray Ray started calling him Chop, his birth name faded into myth. At the moment, Ray Ray simply wanted everybody to stop talking so his nerves could settle.

They walked home in silence. Occasionally, Sarah Jane shook her head sadly as she remembered but she decided to pray now instead of argue. Chop wanted to hear more of Clement's Chicago stories but as the youngest of the bunch he had learned early when simply to shut up and follow. He watched Ray Ray kick the same stone for almost a mile, amazed at his brother's concentration and precision. Some days, he wanted to hug him and tell him he was the greatest big brother in the whole wide world but fear of rejection kept him from ever doing it. Plus, his stuttering probably wouldn't have let him get the words out right.

Clement wondered what the summer would bring. He had visited before, but now he wouldn't go home until the end of August. What do colored country kids do when they don't go to school? He wondered. What he knew for sure was that he wasn't going to genuflect to white folks all summer. It seemed demeaning to him, the "yessir" and "no ma'am" Southern culture required of Black folks. How would the world ever become equal if only colored people showed respect? No, that couldn't be right, and he promised himself he wouldn't do it. White folks needed to see what a Black person looked like who refused to degrade himself on their behalf, and Clement concluded that he was the one to show them.

The house the Johnsons lived in offered very little room to four grandchildren and four adults. It contained a kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms, and a small wash area where one could stand and clean himself. Old man Chapman allowed the Johnsons to live in the house since they worked his crops. It was the least he could do, he said. Yes, it needed a little *mending*—that’s how he described it—but it beat living outdoors. “Barely,” Miss Mary had mumbled. Still, she tried her best to beautify the dilapidated structure by placing plants and handcrafted afghans everywhere she could. The house was always immaculate, and Miss Mary’s warm smile kept people coming. She was a rather burly woman whose ability to construct a full meal from nothing but flour and potatoes was miraculous. There was always something to eat, even when the cupboards were bare, so Miss Mary never complained about adverse circumstances. “De Good Lawd gon provide!” she always said, lifting her thick arms in praise.

Jeremiah had asked, years ago, if he could paint the house, but Chapman told him to spend his energy raising crops. “You ain’t got time for no foolishness like that, boy!” Chapman scolded. So the dull, gray planks remained weather-exposed as the Johnsons vowed never to emulate Chapman’s bigotry.

Jeremiah and Mary married in the spring of 1900, the day after Mary buried her mother. They moved to Chapman’s shack a week later and had been there ever since. The winter before their occupancy, it functioned as the hay barn and toolshed although a badly leaking roof caused Chapman to build a new barn, thus allowing the newlyweds to move into the old one. “The rain ain’t so bad,” Chapman encouraged, spitting tobacco on the tip of Jeremiah’s brogans. “Six or seven buckets here or there oughta take care of it.” The poor Black couple made the best of it. Jeremiah patched all the holes he could find, anxious to give his pregnant wife a modicum of comfort, and Mary milled about making pretty yellow curtains for glassless windows. Both had dreamed of leaving Mississippi, but poverty and self-doubt bound them permanently to the Delta. However, the land, the Tallahatchie River, the jonquils, the brown squirrels, and the Friday night fish fries were all cultural relics that they cherished. Actually, the only thing they hated about Ole Sippi, as they called it, was the ubiquity of racist white folks.

The couple was determined to retain at least some agency although they owned nothing and possessed little power. The barn shack held memories of Thanksgiving dinners complete with wild turkey and dressing, corn on the cob, collard greens, and chitlins. Miss Mary was famous, before arthritis intervened, for cleaning a hundred pounds of hog guts at a time as she hummed church songs in the deepest alto a woman could sustain. She’d place them in a large black caldron in the front yard and boil them slowly throughout the night. Next day, folks walked two and three miles to partake of what Miss Mary called her delicacy. “Goddamn!” menfolk exclaimed as their wives smiled in envy. “Dese thangs make a man hurt hisself!” By nightfall, the caldron, plates, and forks had been washed and put away, and chitlin lovers were forced to endure until the next Thanksgiving.

The first child was a girl, Clement’s mother, whom they called Possum. Her name was Mamie, but when she came out, the midwife announced, “You got yo’self a pretty li’l girl, Miss Mary! Eyes narrow like a l’il ole possum!” so that’s what folks called her. She never knew her birth name until the day she started school.

“Each of you stand and introduce yourselves,” the teacher insisted.

“Billy Joe Harris,” one confident, curly-headed boy began.

“Catherine Sneed,” a chubby Black girl followed.

Miss Mary’s firstborn rose, and declared, “Possum.”

“Beg pardon?” the teacher prodded.

“Possum,” she pronounced slowly and more loudly. Other children bellowed.

“Silence!” the teacher demanded. And like the turbulent wind and waves upon Jesus’ command, the

children calmed instantly. "That is not your name, young lady!"

"Yes, ma'am, it is," she whimpered, afraid to defy yet knowing no other name by which she had ever been called.

"Your name is not Possum, young lady. It may be what others call you, but that could not possibly be your rightful name."

Having no other name to offer, Possum assured her she would inquire at home about the matter, and when she did, her parents laughed gleefully and told her her name was Mamie Johnson. "I don't like dat name," she frowned in return and consequently told the schoolteacher her real name was, in fact, Possum. Unwilling to admit differently, she stood in the corner three weeks until the teacher relented and accepted Possum as her legitimate identity. She would continue this tradition of contentiousness until, at age sixteen, she escaped to Chicago and promised never to pick another cotton boll as long as she lived.

Miss Mary noticed the slow waltz of the children in the distance and knew something wasn't right.

"What's de matter, chile?" she asked Sarah Jane, who dragged onto the front porch lazily. "You been fightin'? Why yo clothes so dirty?"

She looked at Ray Ray, and said, "Somebody better start talkin' 'round hyeah 'fo I get after y'all!"

Not wanting to expose Clement, Sarah Jane lied, "I fell."

"How you fall, girl?"

Sarah Jane hesitated. "When we wuz ... um ... crossin' de pond bank, I slipped and fell. Ray Ray had to help me up."

Miss Mary looked to Ray Ray. "Her foot musta slipped on a rock or somethin', Grandma. I don't know how it happened. All I know is I heard her cryin' like somebody wuz killin' her, so I ran to help her out. She okay though." Ray Ray walked into the house, praying his explanation would satisfy his skeptical grandmother.

"Oh I see," she said. "I'm glad y'all takes care o' one another. That's real sweet." Of course she didn't believe them, but Sarah Jane was glad simply for the moment to be over. She had never lied to Miss Mary, and she hoped doing so now would be worth the outcome.

Sarah Jane's father was the second child, a shy, quiet youngster who never bothered anybody. Named Jeremiah, Jr., folks called him Jerry when they called him at all. Sometimes days would pass before he'd utter a single word, and that was usually to his dog Pete. From a distance, his father watched him hold hourly conversations with Pete, crying and laughing as the dog seemingly did the same. Jerry's navy blue-black complexion put off most colored folks, so Pete became his best (and sometimes his only) friend. Miss Mary reminded the boy constantly of his beauty, comparing his complexion to the midnight sky. Her exultations made Jerry smile and forgive others' inability to see God in him. With large, puppy-dog eyes, a soft nature, and eyelashes longer than any woman's, he caused many to wonder why such gorgeous features were cloaked under layers of diabolical blackness. Most rejected him as awkward-looking and smiled condescendingly. Seldom speaking in return, he was often thought impertinent and disrespectful.

"What's wrong wit dat boy, Miss Mary?" folks asked.

She would smile softly, and return, "Nothin'. He jes know when other folks is full o' shit."

Of course no one dared proceed, for Miss Mary was known to fight like a pinned bull to protect her children. "He be all right," she assured people defensively.

Jerry proved to be the smartest boy the Black school in Money ever graduated. At five, he already

knew his times tables and could outread most of the fifteen-year-olds. The high yellow teacher searched Jerry's exams desperately for errors, believing it impossible that a jet-black, poor country boy could be that smart, yet, finding few errors, she scribbled "A" on his papers in disgust and disdain. When called forth to read, he would simply stand and speak with an authority unknown to children—or adults for that matter—in rural Mississippi. The eloquence of his tongue, the confidence flowing from his demeanor, and the pride with which he held his shoulders made him at once the envy and the admiration of children who never imagined God to grant anybody Black such academic prowess. Jerry never thought of himself as different or gifted though. Actually, he was often depressed that his schoolwork was subpar, in his estimation, and troubled that others considered it so meticulous.

After school, he never fellowshipped with other children, preferring to saunter through the woods with Pete and admire the brown, yellow, and golden leaves in the fall and gather wildflowers in the spring. Jeremiah thought something might be wrong with the boy, maybe that he needed a good whoopin' or the love of Jesus Christ in his heart. But Miss Mary warned him not to lay a hand on Jerry or something bad would surely befall him. Jerry was a spirit child, she said, who had to be given space to be himself. "He don't bother nobody, and ain't nobody gon bother him," she proclaimed. Jeremiah walked away, shaking his head.

Late one April evening, a cottonmouth moccasin found its way into the barn-shack house and scared Miss Mary speechless. Hoping not to expose her utter fear of snakes, she froze, statuesque, and tried to remain calm. It was twelve-year-old Jerry who discovered his mother in the living room, staring at something that wouldn't let her go. Following her gaze, he saw the three-inch-thick, black snake coiled in the middle of the floor as though claiming territory.

"Don't move, baby," Miss Mary cried.

Jerry approached the poisonous creature bravely and reached his small hand toward its head.

"No!" his mother yelled, too afraid to rescue him.

But Jerry proceeded, glancing at Miss Mary to assure her he was in no danger. Suddenly, the snake began to slither up his arm and curl around his neck. "It tickles," he laughed heartily, and walked out the front door.

Miss Mary followed in angst and wonder. She wanted to protest, planning the whoopin' he was going to receive later, but in the moment, she was more intrigued than angry. Jerry led her to his scared place in the woods—a clearing deep in the middle of Old Man Chapman's land—and whispered, "This is the Kingdom of God."

"Be careful, son," was the best she could intone since Jerry provided no preamble for what was about to transpire.

He uncoiled the snake from his neck and torso and gently placed it upon the earth. As it slithered away casually, Jerry said, "He won't hurt you, Momma. He just got lost." Miss Mary's pretty mocking face was as pale as gardenia blossoms. She turned and ran home, weeping and gnashing her teeth, trying to convince herself she hadn't seen what she had seen.

"Now you stay put," Jerry said in the direction of the snake. "Folks'll hurt you if you get out of place." He waved good-bye, then tried to ascertain how he'd explain this to his mother. Finding nothing to say, he decided to let God lead him.

Miss Mary was sitting on the porch reading her Bible when Jerry returned.

"It ain't nothin', Momma," he mumbled, and sat on the lowest step just below her thick, flat feet.

"It *is* somethin'," she declared. "You got yo'self a gift, boy. I don't know what de Lawd want w chu, but He preparin' you for somethin'." She resumed reading and praying for understanding.

In 1940, Jerry earned the first scholarship given to a Black boy from Money, Mississippi. He had never heard the word "Tougaloo" before, although the college was barely two hours away. The day before he left, his father advised, "Study hard, son, and make sho you mind dem teachas. A educate

colored man git far in de world today.” He wanted to grab Jerry and hold him, yet Southern propriety insisted that he pat his son on the shoulder instead, hoping his touch alone conveyed the sentiment his heart. Miss Mary, on the other hand, cried freely. A week before his departure, she dreamed about Jerry encountering a group of racist white men on the day of his college graduation. They took his mortarboard cap and stomped upon it.

“You dat smart nigga from Money, ain’t cha?” they jeered.

Jerry stared at them, unafraid.

“Ain’t you gon say nothin’, nigger boy? Use some of dem big college words so we can see what you done learned.”

Again, Jerry held his peace, waiting to see just how far these bigots would go. Attempting to walk away, he was overwhelmed with punches and kicks until, balled on the ground in a fetal position, he whimpered like Pete when Old Man Chapman ran over him.

Miss Mary awakened and spent the rest of the night pleading with God to cover her baby with the blood of Jesus and to save him from hurt, harm, or danger.

At Tougaloo, Jerry prospered. His stellar academic performance—3.8 first semester—made him a faculty favorite. The B came from Dr. Moore, a professor who swore Jerry stole the final exam for Biology 101 because no one had ever scored so perfectly on any of his tests. Unable to convince him otherwise, Jerry took the B as confirmation of his mother’s belief that, wherever you go, “somebody ain’t gon like you.” Other professors adored him. They bought him books, fed him, and encouraged his dream of becoming Money’s first Black doctor. However, upon graduation, Jerry returned to Money because Miss Mary’s health was deteriorating. She begged him to accept the scholarship to Howard University School of Medicine, but Jerry ignored her, spending his leisure time in The Sacred Place and doing everything possible to assist her healing.

Billie Faye Moore started coming by often, hoping to take up with Jerry whom she had loved since childhood. Jerry liked her, too, but he had never thought about loving her.

“I know you diff’rent, Jerry Johnson, and dat’s what I likes ’bout you,” Billie Faye told him one summer evening after his return. She had come by to check on Miss Mary, she said, but while she was there, she had a few choice words for Jerry, too.

“You can ignore me if you want to, Mr. Jerry Johnson, but ain’t nobody never gone love you de way I do.” Billie Faye was known for being outspoken, bold, and absolutely unconcerned with what other folks thought. Still, people claimed she was the sweetest person de Good Lawd ever made. Her three hundred pounds did not hamper her self-confidence and, in fact, she carried her weight like one might a lethal weapon. Large, rounded hips and 44G breasts complemented each other and functioned as armor for a rather delicate soul. Her perfectly round face boasted deep dimples and fat cheeks that shivered when she spoke, and her hair was always cut in a short afro. She often stood arms akimbo even when laughing, and that very stance is what Jerry admired so deeply. He never told her that she would be exactly the type of woman he wanted—if he ever wanted one at all.

“You can sit here and act like you don’t hear me if you want to, but I’m gon keep lovin’ you ’til you come to yo senses.” Billie Faye switched down the front steps.

“Wait,” Jerry murmured intensely.

Billie Faye smiled, turned around, and said, “It’s about time, fool. I wunnit gon’ wait foreva.”

They sat on the porch and held hands as Billie Faye talked long into the night. Jerry never said anything, responding only with grunts and moans to assure his girlfriend that he was listening. And he was.

By morning, he told his mother that he wanted to marry Billie Faye Moore.

“Oh I likes her!” Miss Mary confirmed from her sickbed. Three days later, she was back to her old self again.

When he told Jeremiah, his father teased, “Now dat’s a lotta woman, boy!”

The wedding occurred late September in The Sacred Place. Because of its location, people left the wagons along the road and followed Jeremiah through the yellowing forest until they reached the clearing.

“Shit! Dis look like heaven!” Tiny Dawson heralded. Children broke free of their parents and scattered across the opening while adults marveled at the beauty of the place. “De grass is so green, somebody whispered. “And look at de jonquils! They done withered everywhere else!” another woman noted.

Jerry stood tall in the center of the land, with outstretched arms like a one-member welcoming committee. Dressed in his good overalls and a white shirt, he smiled to see people coming from every direction to witness his wedding. He didn’t know that, after that day, people would frequent The Sacred Place as though each had found it, but he was glad to share paradise with whomever needed one.

A few came only to see if Jerry was really going to do it, and when Billie Faye emerged from the woods, draped in an off-white gown trimmed in lace, Jerry wept like Jesus at Lazarus’s tomb, and all wondering ceased. The ceremony was conventional and lasted only about twenty minutes. After the two were pronounced husband and wife, and all the guests had gone, they made love right there in the middle of The Sacred Place. A deer stood nearby, watching the beauty of their sensuality, and birds chirped gleefully in praise. Neither had ever experienced another person’s body before, but the spirits told them what to do. At his climax, Jerry jerked and emitted a high-pitched whine that made Billie Faye laugh confidently. Then, he buried his head between her mountainous legs, searching desperately to provide her a similar ecstasy. When it came, she growled deep and long like a wild beast preparing for attack. Jerry laughed this time, and the two lay on their backs, completely exposed to the universe, unashamed.

“What we got here, boys!” The cry startled them out of their leisure.

Billie Faye and Jerry stood quickly, attempting to dress themselves. The white men snatched Billie Faye’s dress from her trembling hands.

“We got ourselves a wedding! It’s dat smart nigger and his new bride! Look at this wedding dress! The white men held Billie Faye’s gown high in the air and mocked its size.

Jerry kept whispering, “Just stay calm,” hoping Billie Faye wouldn’t be her usual brazen self. She submitted in hopes of maintaining both their lives.

One of the white men robed himself in Billie Faye’s wedding dress and pranced around the open space. “You married yo’self a Black cow, boy! She got ’nough milk in dem jugs to feed every nigger in Money!” He reached out and squeezed Billie Faye’s left breast. It wasn’t this act that took Jerry over the edge; it was the tears streaming down Billie Faye’s cheeks that catapulted him into action. Never having seen her weep before, Jerry knew her fighting spirit was slowly seeping away, and he couldn’t allow that. So he leapt at the man in Billie Faye’s dress and tore dirty white flesh from his face before anyone realized what happened. The other two men jumped on Jerry’s back and tried to separate him from their comrade, but Billie Faye lifted them—simultaneously—and tossed them, like discarded chicken bones, into the air. Regaining posture, they lunged back at her, one of them striking her with a wooden stick he found lying on the ground. She never flinched. Instead, she balled her hand tightly, gritted her teeth, and buried her Black fist inside the white man’s mouth. His blood splattered the earth of The Sacred Place, and he lost consciousness. Whether he was dead or alive, Billie Faye did not know. The other white man vanished through the woods.

She turned quickly and saw her husband continuing to beat the Bride of Mockery mercilessly. “Let him go, Jerry!” Billie Faye begged, prying his arm from the man’s face, but Jerry was in another place and time. The memory of his ancestors who had experienced similar humiliation and grief visited

itself upon his spirit and made him vow to end racial inequity once and for all. Or at least to balance the pain of it.

"I said let him go!" Billie Faye protested again, this time pushing Jerry away from the limp white form. Jerry stood, teary-eyed, quivering. "It's gon be okay," Billie Faye comforted. She grabbed his arm and began running through the woods.

"No, it ain't," he murmured softly. "No, it ain't."

They decided to keep the incident to themselves. No need bringing other folks into it and making more than it was. They expected retribution, knowing full well that they would never get by with beating two white men within a breath of their lives. But, for some reason, the men didn't return. Sarah Jane was born a year later, on the anniversary of the incident, but still nothing had come of the matter. In fact, years transpired as though nothing had ever happened.

Then, on Sarah Jane's eighth birthday, the men came. They figured that, by then, the couple had convinced themselves that they had won and that whites were losing control of Southern Blacks. Such an illusion was precisely what the men desired in order to render a surprise, syrupy-sweet revenge.

Billie Faye had left the cotton field early that day to bake Sarah Jane's birthday cake. As she bent to retrieve it from the old woodstove, she heard the familiar voices.

"Well, well. Dem titties still big like de wuz years ago. Ain't that somethin'."

Billie Faye jerked around quickly, wondering how the men had entered unnoticed. "Get on out here, hyeah, now! I don't want no trouble!" She held the hot, cast-iron skillet in midair.

"Oh, it's gon be some trouble, now, darlin'. You didn't really thank we wunnit comin' back, now, did ya?" He grinned broadly, showing a mouthful of discolored teeth. "We jes wanted to give y'all a little time to fo'get."

"Where's dat husband o' yours?" another one asked.

"Not so fast, not so fast," the first one said slowly, motioning for the other to be patient. "We got to have a little fun first."

Billie Faye knew she couldn't conquer all three of them alone. Fear clouded her judgment and eroded her confidence. Yet she was never one to take things easily. She would hold her ground as long as she could, she determined, hoping that by then someone, by the grace of God, might happen by. That someone never came.

As the men drew closer, her once intrepid spirit began to disintegrate.

"Oh, you ain't scairt, is ya?" one asked as he reached toward Billie Faye's breast.

In a flash, she laid the hot skillet against the right side of his face, causing him to stumble.

The other two screamed variations of "Black nigger bitch" and wrestled Billie Faye to the floor. The Bride of Mockery reached under her dress, tore her panties from her flesh, then smelled his fingers. "It's ripe for the pickin', boys!" he announced to the other whose total strength was expended binding her arms. The Bride of Mockery unzipped his pants and maneuvered his way between her stiff, uninviting legs. Both entered her before they left her bruised and bleeding.

When she didn't return to the field, Jerry thought little of it initially. Then, after imagining various scenarios, he saw the white men in his mind's eye, and immediately dropped the cotton sack and began running. The swinging screen door told him he was already too late. "No!" he screamed, and ran faster.

Billie Faye lay naked from the waist down. Jerry collapsed onto the floor beside her, repeating, "No, no, no! God, no!" as he covered her gently with the afghan from the sofa and kissed her lips lightly. Closing his eyes in search of strength he could not find, he cradled her in his arms and rocked her soothingly, humming every song he knew until Jeremiah and Miss Mary came home. Then, he relinquished her into their care and sneaked out the back door. With his daddy's shotgun and enough calm in his heart to keep from breaking down along the way, he proceeded across the railroad tracks

the white part of Money. Folks asked him where he was going with that shotgun, but Jerry ignored them, having resolved to complete the mission even if it were his last.

He found the redneck white men drinking beer in front of the General Store. They were jovial and almost inebriated.

“What chu want, boy?” they teased. “We didn’t hurt yo wife too badly now, did we?”

Their laughter unleashed Jerry’s tears. His fledgling manhood was a gargantuan weight upon his soul, and he promised himself that, before the sun set that day, his soul would be free again.

“What chu doin’ wit dat gun, Black boy? You ain’t mad, is ya?”

That’s when Jerry shot all three men dead. His calm disposition made him proud of himself. He didn’t even hear the screaming of white women as their men fell. All he heard, in his head, was the “hurrahs!” of his own people. He had never thought of himself as a hero, but then again his mother always said, “De Lawd moves in mysterious ways.” He never questioned whether the death of the men was the will of God, having decided a few moments earlier that the will of God is whatever a man gathers the will to do.

Jerry nodded affirmatively and walked back home with a peace few Black men ever know.

“Where you been, boy?” Jeremiah queried nervously upon Jerry’s return.

In solemnity, Jerry murmured, “I killed ’em.”

“You what?” Jeremiah cried.

“I killed ’em,” he repeated.

“Oh God.” Jeremiah wept bitterly. “You cain’t just shoot white men!” he hollered. “Is you crazy?”

Jerry had hoped his actions might impress his father, but instead Jeremiah’s pitiable response reignited Jerry’s fury.

“What kinda men are we, Daddy? Huh?” he asked.

Jeremiah never answered. Miss Mary opened her Bible and read various Psalms aloud. Jerry hung his head and went to Billie Faye, who listened as her husband related proudly how God had finally begun to visit vengeance upon the evil of the world. Whether to cry or celebrate she did not know, but Jerry’s joy was untouchable. He had always dreamed of being a man, envisioning himself and his father self-reliant, self-determined, and self-empowered. And now the reality caused him to brim with light and enthusiasm.

“They’ll hang you sho, man,” Billie Faye whimpered, speaking for the first time since the assault. Her hand caressed Jerry’s narrow, slender, black face.

He closed his eyes at her touch and assured her everything would be fine. He had done what he was called to do.

The next day, more white men came.

“Where’s dat boy!” they screamed at Jeremiah with shotguns pointed at him from every direction.

“He ain’t home.”

“Then where is he?”

Jeremiah considered that any moment now could be his last, but surprisingly he was unafraid. Maybe his son’s strength had become contagious.

“I don’t know,” he said, smiling.

“We gon kill him when we find him!”

They left foaming at the mouth, swearing that Jerry’s blood would flow before the break of a new day. Yet, their thirst to mutilate Jerry Johnson would forever go unquenched because Jerry hanged himself in the middle of The Sacred Place. Jeremiah found him and called Miss Mary and Billie Faye to come. They took down his lean form and carried him home.

“We got to do somethin’ now, Daddy,” Billie Faye murmured through her pain. “Them mens is comin’ back.”

“Not for my boy theys ain’t,” Jeremiah said. He built an altar of fire in The Sacred Place and laid Jerry’s body upon it. Miss Mary sang as the ashes rose, “I’m so glad, trouble don’t last always.” Trees swayed at the sound of her voice, and Billie Faye stared on in silence. “Oh my Lawd, oh my Lawd, what shall I do?”

Billie Faye died eighteen months later. The image of Jerry’s lean body swinging from that tree never left her mind and robbed her of all living desires. Her weight dwindled to barely a hundred pounds. Nothing anyone said reached Billie Faye’s soul as she sat mummified in the living room rocking chair. When people, like the Reverend Cash, came to see about her, she never acknowledged them. Her mind was still in The Sacred Place, trying to make sense of a loss incomprehensible. Unable to do so, silence became her mantra, and the fighting spirit that Jerry loved so well tiptoed in and out of oblivion. Sometimes, Miss Mary could get her to swallow chicken broth if she sang simultaneously. Tears would jump from Billie Faye’s eyes like water from a geyser, and Miss Mary would wipe them gently as she sang, “Trouble in my way, I have to cry sometimes.” She would stare at Miss Mary, trying desperately but failing miserably to articulate the pain and emptiness in her heart. Most days she just shook her head violently, slinging tears from the edge of her face like one scatters grass seeds, never gaining clarity sufficient to reclaim herself.

On the evening of her demise, Miss Mary was reading the Bible to the grandchildren while Jeremiah cleaned his pipe. All hoped the Word of God might usher Billie Faye back to them. “I can do all things through Christ which strengthenth me,” Miss Mary began, and Billie Faye turned to face her. The children gasped at what they thought was a miracle of healing until Billie Faye bumbled. “Why didn’t Christ come?” Then she wilted into the rocker as though part of its structure, and Sarah Jane wailed for a mother who had relinquished the last bit of fight in her. Sarah Jane decided that day never to love a Black man the way her mother had loved her father, for the price of love was more than she was ever willing to pay. So, after the funeral, she assumed a stoic, stainless-steel posture that she hoped would protect her from hurt and trauma for the rest of her living days.

The youngest of Jeremiah and Mary’s children was also a boy whom they named Enoch. All he did as a child, Miss Mary complained lovingly, was laugh. Everything was funny to him, and he had a gift for transforming despair into joy. At birth, Enoch only weighed three pounds although he was carried full term. The midwife examined him and said, “I can’t find nothin’ wrong with this baby, Miss Mary. It’s the funniest thing, but he’s ’bout the healthiest baby I’ve ever seen. He’s just so little!” Jeremiah laid rags in a little wooden box, and that’s where Enoch slept “nearbout ’til he walked,” Miss Mary said with a chuckle. The strangest thing about Enoch was that Miss Mary never knew she was pregnant until her water broke Easter Sunday morning. She was in the choir singing, “Down at the cross, where my Savior died! Down where from cleansing from sin I cried! There to my heart was the blood applied! Glory to His name!” when she felt the gush flow between her legs, and she kept crying “Glory to His name!” as she stumbled to the floor. Jeremiah ran to her side.

“What’s de matta, honey?” he asked desperately.

“I’m havin’ a baby,” she whispered. “Get me outta hyeah!”

Jeremiah wrapped her right arm around his shoulders and escorted her back home. He kept asking “How you pregnant?”

“De same way everybody else get pregnant, man!” she screamed between contractions.

“But you don’t look pregnant! Yo belly ain’t even stuck out! Have you been missin’ yo time?”

“No, I ain’t!” she screamed again although she shared his confusion.

By the time the midwife arrived, Miss Mary was up cooking supper. The contractions had only lasted twenty minutes or so, and then the baby slid out like a wet beaver. He had a grin on his face

almost as wide as the face itself, and Jeremiah told his wife, "We gon call him Enoch 'cause he look like he jes seed de Lawd." Miss Mary agreed, but couldn't help worrying about him because of his inordinately small size. The midwife assured her, "I've never heard a healthier heartbeat, Miss Mary wouldn't worry. He grips my finger like an eight-month-old." Jeremiah laid him in the box, and he slept all night like a grown man.

He ate like one, too. By six months, Miss Mary had to wean him because he had sucked her breasts dry. At five, he ate more than anyone in the family and complained incessantly about being hungry. Miss Mary swore the child had worms. In addition to unripe apples, peaches, persimmons, and blackberries, he ate fruit peelings, red clay, and green tomatoes in the spring. Like a wild boar, Enoch uprooted peanuts and potatoes in autumn, often building a small fire and roasting them himself. He was never found without a pocket full of pecans or hickory nuts, which only held him over during suppertime. Everywhere he went he expelled a trail of gas so lethal others cursed him. "You must be full o' dead muskrats, boy!" his father often said. Yet the child's jovial nature caused others to forgive his improprieties and, in fact, to revel in his company. In public, people subconsciously gravitated toward him until they found themselves engulfed in his humor. His mother crowned him the "clown of the century."

"Hey, folks!" was his standard, exuberant greeting. His boisterous voice and abundant energy compelled even the diffident to speak. Most loved him and prophesied that he'd be a preacher one day. A few characterized him as obnoxious and flamboyant, but the rest dismissed these comments as evidence of jealousy.

By age ten, Enoch was the community comedian.

"There was a Black man in heaven," he began at the dinner table one evening. Possum started laughing hysterically. She dropped her fork onto the floor, but when she reached to retrieve it, her limp arm simply vibrated with the rest of her body. Her inability to maintain composure always fueled Enoch's performances. Jerry shook his head silently, but loved Enoch's humor no less. Jeremiah and Miss Mary suppressed their laughter long enough to make sure the tale contained no vulgarities.

Enoch cackled at Possum's dismantled form, causing her to laugh even harder. "This Black man had done walked 'round heaven all day long and got tired, so he axed de Lawd fu some lemonade, and de Lawd said 'Sho!' and gave him a glass o' de sweetest lemonade he had done ever tasted."

Jeremiah, who was giggling now, warned playfully, "Okay, boy. You playin' wit de Lawd."

"No, he ain't, Daddy," Possum intervened to make sure Enoch was allowed to finish the yarn.

"So de Black man finished de lemonade and listened to de heavenly choir sing 'til he got tired of dat, too. He walked through de flower garden and smelled de roses and honeysuckles and smiled at all de folks he knowed. But then he got tired o' grinnin', too."

"What he do then?" Possum instigated, unable to still her jerking shoulders.

"He axed de Lawd if he could visit hell."

Possum fell out of her chair. Until now, Miss Mary had remained silent, enjoying her son's confidence while simultaneously monitoring his play with blasphemy, but this last line was more than she could bear. "You outta order, boy! You don't use dem kinda words in my house!" Her large eyes gazed at Enoch in absolute reprimand.

"I ain't said nothin' bad, Momma! I was jes talkin' 'bout de place where de devil live."

"Finish de story, boy," Jeremiah said, smiling, overriding his wife's objection.

Miss Mary mumbled, "Dat's what's wrong wit him now. Every time I try to chastise de boy you get in behind me and ..."

Enoch glanced at Miss Mary to make sure she wasn't too angry, and continued: "Well, anyway, de Lawd frowned and axed de man why in de world he'd want to visit hell, and de man said he jes wanted to see what it was like. So de Lawd let him go."

“You a fool, boy,” Jerry cackled gently.

Again, Enoch checked to make sure his mother wasn't fuming, and she bellowed, “You may as well tell it now!” in order to hear the rest of the story.

“When he got to hell, he met a lotta his old friends and saw dat people was partyin' and drinkin' u a storm. Dey had jook joints like Fish's place down in de bottom and blues music was playin' re loud. Well, de Lawd had done tole de man dat he couldn't stay in hell long, and de man asked jes ho much time he had. So de Lawd tole him dat he had to be back by sundown.”

Jerry was laughing now, and Miss Mary shook her head in feigned disgust.

“He went to de jook joint and startin' drinkin' and partyin' real bad and found a girlfriend and the started—”

“All right, clown! You gettin' too mannish!” Miss Mary forewarned.

“Yes, ma'am,” Enoch offered respectfully but continued: “De man wuz dancin' and havin' such good time dat he fugot 'bout being back in heaven by sundown. In fact, when he went outside, de su was risin' in de east like it do every day.”

Possum had never recovered, and every word Enoch spoke worsened her condition.

“Well, when de man got back to heaven, he 'pologized real sincere to de Lawd, but de Lawd tole him dat he couldn't let him back in. De man said, ‘Oh no, Lawd, I ain't 'pologizin' 'bout missin' y curfew’”—Enoch mocked a drunk man's raspy voice—“I'm 'pologizin' fu troublin' you. I jes came back to get de rest o' my things!”

For the first time in Johnson family history, Jerry hollered until his sides ached. Enoch's head collapsed onto the table, and tears ran from Possum's eyes faster than she could wipe them away.

“You fixin' to git a whoopin', boy!” Miss Mary jumped up and exclaimed. “You don't make no mockery o' heaven in my house! And dat joke ain't funny!”

She grabbed Enoch by the collar, dragged him out behind the outhouse, and whooped him senseless. Possum was still on the floor crying when they returned, so Enoch concluded he must have a gift. His stories always left Possum dismantled, and, after a while, he started walking to the outhouse on his own as he shouted the punch line over his shoulder.

“You don't get tired o' Momma beatin' you?” Jerry asked him one day.

“She don't really be mad,” Enoch explained lovingly. “Dat's jes what she suppose to do. Sometim she be laughin' as she be beatin' me.”

Jerry smiled and thought about how much he loved Enoch. He envied Enoch's ability to speak his mind regardless of what others thought. Jerry wanted that boldness, but instead his was a character too sensitive to weather other people's insults. That's really why he loved Enoch's stories—because his brother told them without fear of the cost.

The funniest one, Jeremiah told his grandkids, was the joke about where preachers bank. Walking onto the front porch after church one Sunday, Enoch began, “There was a preacher one day who didn't have no money.”

“All right, boy! We jes came from church. Ain't you got no reverence fu de Lawd's day?” Miss Mary protested.

“Yes, ma'am, I do,” Enoch said, “but this one ain't bad, Momma. I promise.” Miss Mary continued into the house to prepare Sunday dinner. Jeremiah and the children remained on the porch.

“What happened to de preacher, boy?” Jeremiah whispered, and sat in the old rocker.

“Well, he couldn't figure out why he never had any money, so he approached one of the ladies o the church and asked her how she saved her money.”

Like always, Possum's laughter poured from her belly the moment Enoch began the story. She had heard this one before, but that never mattered. It was Enoch's drama she loved.

“De church lady tole de preacher dat she keep all her money in her bosom—paper and change. She

was a big woman wit real big ... you know.” Enoch cupped his hands in front of his chest approximate the size of the woman’s breasts. “De preacher said, ‘I’ma man, so that ain’t gon work me.’ De church lady didn’t know what to say. Then all o’ sudden de preacher clapped his hands and said, ‘I got de answer! ’ De church lady said, ‘What is it?’ and de preacher said, ‘Can I open a account in yo bank?’”

As Enoch began to stumble in laughter, he felt Miss Mary’s right palm sink into the left side of his face. “Momma!” he yelped, surprised to learn that she had been listening the whole time.

“Boy, I’ll kill you dead if you eva say some mess like dat again! Do you hear me?”

“But, Momma, it wunnit nasty!” Enoch tried to explain through misty eyes.

“It wuz nasty, fool! You ain’t got no business talkin’ ’bout dat kinda stuff. You’s a child!”

Enoch wanted to protest further, but Jerry’s shaking head convinced him to let it go.

After that day, Enoch still told stories, but he learned which ones to tell to which folks. That was how he met and married Ella Mae Pearson. She was standing in the crowd in front of Fish’s place one night as Enoch carried on something terrible. After the laughter subsided and the crowd thinned a bit, she told Enoch, “You a crazy fool, man.”

He smiled broadly at this red-bone, skinny girl whom he had eyed several times in the past. She was light, but her kinky hair confirmed her blackness, standing on top of her head in coiled belligerence. Its thickness allowed no light to penetrate, and Enoch chuckled that even a torrential downpour never found its way to her scalp. Although she was thin, Ella Mae boasted the perfectly rounded, rotund behind that was Enoch’s only requirement in a woman’s form.

“Hey there,” he shouted.

“You oughta be shame o’ yo’self”—she smiled sheepishly—“tellin’ lies like dat.”

“I ain’t told a lie since I been born.” He winked.

That conversation evolved into a union two years later. They moved to Memphis, where Enoch cleaned bathrooms at the Peabody Hotel during the day and did stand-up comedy in Black-owned clubs at night, although never making ends meet. When Jerry died, Enoch and Ella Mae decided to return to Money where, if nothing else, they could always eat. Things weren’t as bad as the couple expected they would be. They had two boys, Ray Ray and Chop, and decided simply to live without the daughter they had hoped Chop would be. Their aim had been to build their own house on their own land, but Jeremiah’s sharecropping debt consumed every dime they made. So the couple settled in the dilapidated shack with Jeremiah and Miss Mary and resolved to make the best with what they had.

Two

THE GRANDCHILDREN SAT DOWN TO LUNCH UNUSUALLY quiet. Miss Mary knew something was wrong, and she knew they had lied. Before pressing the matter, however, she studied their faces looking for clues as to what could possibly have rendered them so inexplicably mute. Her stares were certainly disturbing, yet the children worked hard to remain quiet. Knowing Miss Mary wasn't one to relinquish her suspicions quickly, they knew it was only a matter of time before one of them surrendered.

"So ain't nobody talkin', huh?" Miss Mary set the sandwich bread and the peanut butter on the table. "I see," she mumbled threateningly.

Sarah Jane opened her mouth to explain the matter, but then bit her bottom lip in an attempt to hold her peace. She knew if she spoke, she'd cry, and her grandmother would understand instantly the gravity of the matter, for that day was the first time Sarah Jane had cried since Billie Faye Homegoing. The thought of unleashing her emotions like that again made her ill and motivated her to deceive her grandmother as long as she could.

"Ray Ray? You ain't got nothin' to say?" Miss Mary entreated.

"No, ma'am," he returned abruptly. "Ain't nothin' to say. Everything's fine, Grandma. Really." Sarah Jane kicked him under the table, a sign that he should simply be quiet. Ray Ray's anxiety was much too apparent, and his rambling only made Miss Mary more incredulous.

Unable to withstand her gaze, Chop screamed, "It w-w-w-was Cllllllement, Grandma!" and pointed at his cousin's bulged eyes and agape mouth.

"What about Clement?" she questioned irritably.

Chop tried to remain composed, but it was a lost cause. "Hhhhhe b-b-bought a sssssoda p-p-pop in de ssssstore t-t-today." Chop didn't look at the others, who were planning how and when they would beat him.

"Clement, where you git money from?"

"Momma gave it to me before I left home," he said defensively, hoping Miss Mary's suspicions would be thus satisfied. They were not.

"I thought yo granddaddy tole you not to go in dat sto' unless one o' us wuz wit cha?" She had her hands on her hips and a look in her eyes Clement could not ignore.

"I just wanted a soda pop, Grandma. That's all," Clement sniffled.

"Then what chu cryin' fu? Buyin' a soda pop ain't no crime." Miss Mary searched each face back and forth, knowing there was more to the story.

Sarah Jane breached their contract of silence and whispered, "There's more to it, Grandma, and it ain't good, either."

"What chu talkin' 'bout, girl?"

All three boys hung their heads simultaneously. Sarah Jane wished she could close her eyes and make everything turn into a scary dream, but Miss Mary's anger, hovering over her like clouds before an impending storm, disallowed fantasy.

"I'm talkin' to you, chile!" Miss Mary banged her heavy fist on the table and completely destroyed Sarah Jane's fragile composure.

"Clement disrespected Miss Cuthbert in de store," she breathed heavily. "He didn't mean to disrespect Grandma, but ..."

“But what? Somebody better start talkin’ ’round hyeah fo I get a belt to all y’alls behinds!” she hollered.

Sarah Jane simply relented. “Okay, Grandma. Okay.” Her slow tongue exacerbated Miss Mary’s anger. “Clement went in de store to buy a soda pop”—her hands moved with her voice—“but Miss Cuthbert—”

“Clement, what did you do?” Miss Mary interrupted. “And I mean I want de truf before I git afta you!”

Clement glanced at Sarah Jane, who shrugged her shoulders helplessly. “I went in the store to buy a soda pop, and I laid the nickel down on the counter and walked out,” he offered lightly. “That’s the whole story. I don’t know why everybody makin’ such a big deal about it.”

Sarah Jane shook her head pitifully, and explained, “Miss Cuthbert told him to pick up de nickel and put it in her hand, but Clement wouldn’t do it. She was screamin’ after him that he was gon pa for what he did, but Clement ignored her and sassed her back.” Sarah Jane hoped the truth would indeed, set Clement free.

“Lawd Jesus!” Miss Mary murmured. Her slow descent into the kitchen chair frightened the once impervious children.

Clement felt compelled to explain: “I didn’t do nothin’ wrong, Grandma. I just told her dat I didn’t have to put de nickel in her hand. All I wanted was a soda pop—”

“Close yo goddamn mouth, boy!” Miss Mary yelled. The children froze. They had never heard her curse before. “You ain’t got no sense at all! You cain’t come down here and act like you in Chicago, boy!”

“But Grandma—”

“I said shut up!” She trembled as she screamed louder. “Don’t chu know what happens to Black boys who don’t know how to mind? Huh?”

Clement assumed the question rhetorical, but Miss Mary took his silence as insolence.

“I’m talking to you, Mr. Bigshot!” She was angrier than any of them had ever seen her. “Y’ momma didn’t tell you what happened to yo uncle Jerry and aunt Billie?” Her booming voice destroyed the grandchildren’s strength and left Clement feeling like a rabbit in a fox-hole.

Miss Mary suddenly rose from the table and grabbed her straw hat. “Y’all run out to de barn and stay there ’til I come git cha. And I mean stay there!” She exited the front door quickly, clumsily, whereto the children did not know.

They ran to the barn, understanding from Miss Mary’s reaction the import of Clement’s infraction.

“I told you!” Sarah Jane cried vehemently once they barred the barn door from within. They climbed the ladder to the loft and sat upon square bales of hay.

“I ain’t done nothin’!” Clement declared again.

Ray Ray grimaced, and whispered, “Jes be quiet. We gotta wait and see what happens.”

Chop wanted to apologize to Clement for exposing him, but he knew nothing he said would appease his cousin’s fury. Everyone seemed irritated with him, Chop discovered, because they turned their backs once they sat down in the barn. He simply wanted to explain that his grandma’s voice had overwhelmed him and forced his tongue from exile. He never meant to get Clement into any trouble, and he certainly didn’t mean to disturb the peace in the Johnson household. But they wouldn’t have listened anyway, he told himself, easing his troubled heart. He knew he’d get blamed, whatever the outcome of the situation, and he prepared himself for the possibility of having no playmates for a very long time.

The loud banging on the barn door startled the children who, at first, sat transfixed. Ray Ray strained his terrified eyes to see who had come.

“Children!” Jeremiah’s raspy, hoarse voice called loudly.

In relief, they scrambled from the loft and unhinged the door. For several seconds, the children stood before their grandfather and Enoch like criminals awaiting sentencing.

“What happened at de sto’ today? And I ain’t got time fu no foolishness!” The furrows intersecting on Jeremiah’s forehead convinced Ray Ray to tell the truth and to tell it in a hurry.

“Clement went in de store to buy a soda pop, Grandpa—,” he began explaining, but Jeremiah cut off the middleman.

“Clement, you tell me what happened since you de one what know. And tell me de truth, boy. I mean it.” He was holding Clement by the shoulder with a monstrous grip.

“Okay,” Clement mumbled, steadying his nerves. “I went in de store to get a soda pop, and I gave the woman a nickel for it. That’s how much it cost, Grandpa, so—”

“I know how much a soda pop cost, boy! It’s somethin’ you ain’t sayin’, and I wanna know what it is!” His yelling dissolved Clement’s constitution and freed his tears.

“Like I said, I went in de store and bought a soda pop and gave the lady a nickel.” Jeremiah’s eyes searched the barn frantically, looking for a strong whipping stick. His heavy breathing and quivering hands urged Ray Ray to offer, “But he laid de nickel down on de counter.”

“What?” Jeremiah asked, confused.

Clement resolved that he could not win, so he sighed deeply and admitted, “She asked me to put de nickel in her hand, but I laid it on de counter instead and walked out.”

“You did what?”

Clement said nothing more.

“Is you crazy, boy?” Jeremiah vented each word a little louder. “You jes walked out de do’ like you grown?”

“Why did I have to put de money in her hand, Granddaddy?” Clement cried desperately. “I laid de nickel on de counter.”

“‘Cause she said so, boy! Dat’s why! Don’t you know dey’ll kill you ova somethin’ like dat?”

Sarah Jane noticed, for the first time, the gray hairs sprouting from her grandfather’s nose. Her huffing caused them to dance sporadically, like a feather at the command of gusty winds. Jeremiah’s flat, African nose occupied at least a third of the width of his face and convinced many that he was full-blood African. In his anger, the wrinkles in Jeremiah’s face deepened until, filled with sweat, they formed brooks and streams running all over his face. Sarah Jane marveled at her grandfather’s ability to smile and comfort one moment and to frighten and intimidate the next.

Enoch touched his father’s shoulder, and said, “Let’s all just calm down for a minute, Daddy.” His words softened Jeremiah’s expression and made the old man realize how stern he had been.

“Listen, Clement,” Jeremiah whispered with closed eyes, “you got to do what I say. Son, you cain’t come down to Mississippi all high-and-mighty. White folks hyeah don’t care nothin’ ’bout you thinkin’ you dey equal. They’ll kill you befo’ dey admit it.” He glanced at the other children endearingly. “Dat’s why you shoulda put de money in her hand. No, it ain’t right and, no, you didn’t have to, but I pray to God we ain’t sorry you didn’t.”

Enoch asked, “What exactly did de woman say, Clement? I mean *exactly*.” He searched the boy’s eyes.

“I don’t remember exactly, but she said I was gonna be sorry.” Tears now flooded his puffy cheeks.

“What else did she say?” Enoch pressed. “Try to remember, son!”

Clement pleaded, “I can’t. She just kept telling me I was gonna be sorry.”

“Oh my God,” Enoch murmured to his father. “What we gon do?” Jeremiah placed his hands on Clement’s shoulder again and transformed back into the grandfather the children had always known. “I don’t know, but for now, we gon watch and pray. Dat’s what we gon do. Now you chillen lissen to me, and lissen real good. Y’all ain’t to leave dis house fu no reason. No reason at all! You undastand

“Yessir,” they said in chorus.

“And you ain’t to mention dis to nobody else. You hear me?”

“Yessir.”

“And whatsoever you do, if you see a stranger comin’, run like hell and get me or your uncle Enoch fast as you can.”

“Yessir.”

“This goes fu every one o’ y’all. Y’all look out fu one anotha and don’t spend no time layin’ blame. What’s done is done, and we got to deal wit it. We’s a family, and we gon act like a family. Ya hear me?” Jeremiah yelled.

“Yessir,” the children affirmed.

“Good. Now. I’ma tell ya one more thang.”

Enoch knew what his father was about to say. He, Jerry, and Possum thought they would be the last generation to get The Instructions, as Jeremiah called it, but now Enoch saw that Time had not done what it had promised.

Jeremiah gathered the children closer and spoke softly. “If anything eva happen to yo grandma, yo aunt Ella Mae, or Enoch, or me, y’all run out de back door jes as quick as you can down to de riva neer to de big tree where folks fish. Wade in up to ya neck and walk about a mile north to de railroad bridge. Git out there and walk due west about anotha mile ’til you see a old broken-down shack. There’s a big pecan tree right beside it. Go in there and wait.”

“Wait for what?” Sarah Jane asked.

“Don’t chu worry about that,” Jeremiah said. “Jes git there. Everything else’ll be all right. Somebody’ll come for ya.”

Chop was crying but didn’t know why. He sensed urgency in Jeremiah’s words as though knowing they would, one day, save his life, but for now he wanted to play and forget them all.

“Ray Ray, you know de most ’bout dis place, so if anythang happen, you make sho to do what I said.”

“Yessir,” he mumbled.

“Good. Now y’all jes go on back to de house and git yo work done and keep yo mouth shut.”

Like mourners in a funeral procession, the children exited the barn, unsure of exactly how to act but certain they weren’t as free as they had once been.

On their way back to the field, Enoch told his father, “Dey ain’t gon let this go. You know dat, don’t chu?”

Without looking at his son, Jeremiah said, “Yeah, I do,” and chuckled nervously. He was trying not to imagine what those white folks might do to Clement. “We jes gotta pray,” he continued lightly, disguising the burden his heart carried.

Jeremiah and Enoch resumed their places in the cotton field. The heat was stultifying, and the end of the row was nowhere in sight. Enoch’s heart was caught between despising the fields and embracing them as heritage and lineage. Grandpa Moses, who folks said was seven feet tall, was brought over as a slave when he was nine and sold somewhere in South Carolina. A year later, Jeremiah told his children, Moses was bought by Elliot Johnson, who was traveling through South Carolina on his way back to Mississippi—a place Moses had never heard of.

“Daddy and five otha slaves was tied to ole man Johnson’s wagon and walked all de way to Moneka, Mississippi,” Jeremiah bragged and decried. “And we been hyeah every since.”

So every time Enoch picked a cotton bole, he felt his grandfather standing proud and regal next to him in the field, and he knew the land was as much his own as it had once been ole man Johnson’s.

“How we git the same name, Daddy?” Enoch asked on his fifth birthday at the dinner table.

“Yo granddaddy decided to take de Johnson name so dat any one o’ his chillen what might git sol

away would be able to trace dey way back one day. It helped de family stay together and find on another if any of 'em ever got lost.”

Enoch swore he'd change his name when he got grown so he and old man Johnson would never be mistaken as kinfolks, but when Chapman bought the land a year later, Enoch dropped the issue altogether.

“Chop dat cotton, son, and save daydreamin' for later,” Jeremiah called to Enoch. What would the white folks do? Enoch pondered as he glanced toward the Johnson shack far in the distance. Times had changed, he tried to convince himself. There were some places in America where white and colored kids all went to the same school. And they got along fine. Maybe Money was changing, too. Jeremiah told Enoch that, just a month ago, for no apparent reason, a white man had bought Chop a candy bar at the General Store.

“N-n-n-no ththththank ya, ssssir,” Chop had said apprehensively.

“I'm just being nice, son. It's okay. I know you're not supposed to take it, but this one's on me. Don't think anything of it.”

Chop shook as he mumbled, “I ththththanks ya k-k-k-kindly, ssssir, b-b-but nno thththank you.”

Just then, Jeremiah turned the corner, and said, “You knows better, boy. I done raised you right.” He grabbed Chop by the forearm and jerked him toward the exit.

“It was my fault, mister,” the white man explained. “I was trying to offer your boy a candy bar, and he—”

“He don't take thangs he ain't paid for, sir,” Jeremiah announced. “I teaches my chillen dat, and dat's how dey live. We'se much obliged all de same.”

“But sir, I meant no harm. I certainly didn't intend to go against your teachings. I just wanted to be nice. That's all.”

The look of sincerity on the white man's face disturbed Jeremiah.

“Please allow him to accept it, sir. It's the least I can do.”

It was the “sir” that made Jeremiah hesitate. He wondered where in the world this white man had come from.

“I'd really like the boy to have it, if you don't mind.” He extended the candy bar and waited for the colored man's trust. Jeremiah studied the stranger, examining his impeccable clothes and his neat, manicured fingernails, and, against his better judgment, he allowed Chop to accept the gift.

“We thank you kindly, sir,” Jeremiah murmured as he shook the stranger's hand harder than usual.

“No thanks needed. As I said, it's really the very least I can do.”

Jeremiah frowned at the man's insinuation that he owed them something. Indeed, the stranger's intemperate kindness momentarily disrupted what Jeremiah knew about white folks. Yet once outside, he warned Chop, “This don't mean nothin'. There's always one or two who don't fit the mold.”

When Enoch heard of the incident, he took the man's gesture as sign that things really were changing in Mississippi.

“Get to choppin', boy!” Jeremiah corrected again. “Chapman see you idle, and he dock yo pay twenty-five cents.”

Enoch abandoned his thoughts and rendered his labor once again to a man who consumed the Johnson family without a care.

Jeremiah tried hard not to think of Jerry, but he couldn't help it. He had never really gotten over his son's suicidal murder, and now with Clement's incorrigible behavior, he was afraid he'd have to revisit the whole ordeal. The smile on Jerry's face was the only redeeming sight the day they found his body swinging. A rough September wind tossed it to and fro meaninglessly, causing its legs to separate violently like a ballerina's leap just before the plié. Miss Mary and Billie Faye cried in each other's trembling arms, while Jeremiah stood alone, staring at one who dared consider himself a man.

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