

*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

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

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

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

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

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-

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 Scots-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,

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.

the dance halls in Harlem, the parties in Corona, and the boulevards paved where the colored people lived.

"We used to sit up all night," George remembered, "and listen to Babe and M.B. and Reuben and Freeman and all them talkin' about New York. And I said, 'Boy, that sounds just like heaven. I wanna see some of that. *New York*. I'm sure going to New York soon as I get big enough.'"

And in Monroe, Louisiana, if Mantan Moreland passed through town, there was a stir in the pews and talk in the pool hall. Everyone wanted to sit down with the native son who had made it to Hollywood, even if it was only as a shuffling sidekick in the movies.

Pershing saw the parade of people from the North and the movie scenes at the Paramount of life beyond Louisiana and began dreaming of escape, too. When he was still small enough to fit in the crawl spaces of the houses on cinder-block stilts, he played pretend with a girl down the street named Clara Poe. They peeked out from under the floor joists and waited for a car to rumble down Louise-Anne Avenue and fought over whose it was. *It's my car. No, it's my car.* Then they pretended they were in the car leaving.

Clara always said she was going to Chicago, where her uncles were. But no matter how many times Clara said Chicago, Pershing said he was going to California. He didn't have any family there. All he knew was that, one day, somehow, whenever he got big and whatever it took, he was going.

A BURDENSOME LABOR

*But the Egyptians
mistreated
and oppressed us,
assigning us a
burdensome labor.*

—DEUTERONOMY 26:6

CHICKASAW COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI, 1929

IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IDA MAE'S NEW HUSBAND took her to live in a little wood cabin on Edd Pearson's plantation on a clearing past the Natchez Trace. Ida Mae was sixteen. In the morning, the sun poked at them through the gaps in the roof. At night, they could see the stars through the ceiling cracks over their bed. It just about rained inside as much as out.

They set about working cotton for Mr. Edd. All around them, the land was in a state of being cotton or becoming cotton, brown and rutted for planting, green shoots willed into rows of coddled bushes until the land was white out to the tree line. Every so often, a wood cabin broke the clearing, raw and thrown-together, built uneasily on a footprint of land that was a fraction of what was devoted to the field.

The people who lived in the cabins gave the best hours of their days to cotton, working until the sun went behind the trees and they couldn't see their hands anymore.

Early morning, the mist rose over the fields and made a halo on the

surface of the earth. Ida Mae's new husband and the sharecroppers working other sections of Pearson's land tried to pick as much as they could before the sun got high.

Edd Monroe Pearson was a decent boss man, as decent as could be expected from a planter in Mississippi in the 1920s. He presided over the lives of some dozen families who grew his crops, as Ida Mae would recall, and he took half of whatever they produced, whether it was cotton or turkeys or hogs. At the end of the season, he deducted the debts he said they owed—cottonseed, fertilizer, implements, ginning fees, cornmeal, salt pork—the “furnish,” as it was called, of their half of the harvest. Money rarely changed hands between planter and sharecropper, as the entire system was built on credit. The sharecroppers owed the planters, the planters owed the merchants, the merchants owed the banks, and the banks were often beholden to some business concern in the North, where most of the real money was in the first place.

Unlike some planters, Mr. Edd actually gave George and Ida Mae a few dollars when settling time came at the end of the harvest, although they never knew whether they would get anything or how much it might be or if it was actually what they were due, nor could they complain if it wasn't. Edd Pearson was about the best boss man a colored sharecropper could hope for.

But he was a ranking member of the dominant caste and felt it within his right to involve himself in the private affairs of his serfs.

He came through the field on his horse one day and saw George bent over picking through the rows. George and Ida Mae had been out for hours and the sun had cooked their backs. Ida Mae had no gift for picking like her new husband did and had fallen farther and farther behind, stooping from the weight of the sack.

George had called out to her, but she was too far back and too beat from the sun to catch up. After a few dozen pounds, her knees gave way. She saw a clear path up ahead and dropped onto her sack, collapsed in the dirt aisle between the cotton rows.

Mr. Edd rode up to George and questioned him about it.

“Your wife don't do nothing, do she, but sit down,” Mr. Edd said to George.

George would have liked to have said it was his business and not Mr. Edd's, but colored men could not say such things to a white man in Mississippi and get away with it in 1929.

When Mr. Edd was gone, George went back to Ida Mae.

“See can't you try and do a little bit better,” George said, caught between the two of them.

She said she would try, but there was no use pretending. She was not going to be of much help in the field. She had never been able to pick a hundred pounds. One hundred was the magic number. It was the benchmark for payment when day pickers took to the field, fifty cents for a hundred pounds of cotton in the 1920s, the gold standard of cotton picking.

It was like picking a hundred pounds of feathers, a hundred pounds of lint dust. It was “one of the most backbreaking forms of stoop labor ever known,” wrote the historian Donald Holley. It took some seventy bolls to make a single pound of cotton, which meant Ida Mae would have to pick seven thousand bolls to reach a hundred pounds. It meant reaching past the branches into the cotton flower and pulling a soft lock of cotton the size of a walnut out of its pod, doing this seven thousand times and turning around and doing the same thing the next day and the day after that.

The hands got cramped from the repetitive motion of picking, the fingers fairly locked in place and callused from the pricks of the barbed, five-pointed cockleburs that cupped each precious boll. The work was not so much hazardous as it was mind-numbing and endless, requiring them to pick from the moment the sun peeked over the tree line to the moment it fell behind the horizon and they could no longer see. After ten or twelve hours, the pickers could barely stand up straight for all the stooping.

Ida Mae had watched people do it all her life and knew how it was done. But when it came time to actually go out and pick it, she would look up and see everybody else far down the row. At weighing time, she would empty her sack on the scale and never get three digits.

Above her was an entire economy she could not see but which ruled her days and determined the contours of her life. There were bankers, planters, merchants, warehouse clerks, fertilizer wholesalers, seed sellers, plow makers, mule dealers, gin owners. A good crop and a high price made not much improvement to the material discomforts of Ida Mae's existence but meant a planter's wife could “begin to dream of a new parlor carpet and a piano” and a salesman of farm implements could be “lavish with more expensive cigars than he smoked last year.” On Wall Street, there were futures and commodities traders wagering on what the cotton she had yet to pick might go for next October. There were businessmen in Chicago needing oxford shirts, socialites in New

York and Philadelphia wanting lace curtains and organdy evening gowns. Closer to home, closer than one dared to contemplate, there were Klansmen needing their white cotton robes and hoods.

In the half light of morning, when the mist hung low and the dew was thick on the bolls, the pickers set out to the field as their slave foreparents had done year in and year out for two centuries. *"The first horn was blown an hour before daylight as a summons for work hands to rise."* Each one looked out across the field to infinity. The quarry was spread over acres and rows far from the starting plant, and they could not see the end of what they were expected to pick.

On large fields during the height of the season—which began in August in south Texas and moved eastward, reaching the Carolinas by early fall—the star pickers sped like fan blades through the cotton, a blur of fingers and bolls, arms and torsos switching from the left row to the right, picking on both sides of them and tossing the cotton like feathers into their sack. The sacks were strapped over their shoulders and dragged in the dirt behind them like an extra limb, the sacks weighing as much as a human adult by the end of the day and making them stoop all the more.

They picked until they were hypnotized by the picking. By midday, the fast ones and the slow ones were far from the center, the stars way up ahead and not looking back, the slow ones trailing behind, the most watchful of everyone's placement. The field was flat and unbroken by trees, and there was no escape from the hundred-degree heat. The sun bore down on them through the head rags and the Panama hats and made the cotton field shimmer like the ocean. Pickers thought they saw things, like people who had died and come back, and waved a handkerchief in the air to call the water boy from under a shade tree. He was usually a picker's child, the one designated to fetch the bucket of well water when they needed it, half the water splashing out of the bucket and onto the ground as the water boy trudged down the rows.

Throughout the cotton kingdom, the act of picking cotton was the same. But in the hills, the cotton was sparser and shorter, not thick and shoulder high like cotton in the Delta. It was harder to get a hundred, much less more. You had to pick a wider field and stoop to pick the lowest bolls to reach the same benchmark.

There were ways to make life easier or harder for yourself when it

came to picking cotton. Experienced pickers knew to pick in a rapid, flowing motion, trancelike and efficient. The strongest of the men, men like George, could pick two or three times their weight in cotton—four hundred pounds gave a man bragging rights in anybody's field. A woman could hold her head up if she picked a hundred.

It was a mean enough world that people got desperate. For one thing, for day pickers, there was the money. For another, there was their pride. And then there was the fact that they did not want to be there in the first place. Some people collected rocks, hid them in their pockets, and threw them into their sack at weighing time to make a heavier load. Some people picked the stalk and all to add extra weight. Some were the first out in the morning, picking early while the dew was on the bud, which meant much of the weight was water. It was a trick they could get away with unless the planter set the cotton out in the sun to dry it out, which some did. When those who were so inclined didn't outright lard their sacks, they helped themselves to the peaches and berries on the edges of the boss's cotton and gave themselves a raise for breaking their backs in the field.

Many years later, the people would stand up to water hoses and sheriffs' dogs to be treated as equal. But for now the people resisted in silent, everyday rebellions that would build up to a storm at midcentury. Rocks stuffed into cotton sacks in Mississippi at weighing time. The COLORED ONLY signs pulled from the seat backs of public buses and converted into dartboards in dorm rooms in Georgia. Teenagers sneaking into coffee shops and swiveling on the soda fountain stools forbidden to colored people in Florida and then running out as fast as they'd come in before anybody could catch them. Each one fought in isolation and unbeknownst to the others, long before the marches and boycotts that were decades away.

Sometime in the 1930s, a crew of pickers had been assembled to harvest a wide field of cotton near Brookhaven, Mississippi, some two hundred miles south of Chickasaw County, where Ida Mae lived. On the crew was a big man who had just gotten out of Parchman Prison. Word spread through the field that the man had killed somebody, but no one knew for sure. It was clear from the start that the man could pick. He was used to picking with a gun to his back. He could pick like a machine when he got paid for it.

People could hardly pick for watching the man. One of the slower pickers was a teenager who figured if he could just stick behind the pris-

oner, he could make more money for himself. So he got behind him and did what he did, or tried to anyway. The prisoner did not speak. He just picked until he was a faint figure in the distance. The slow picker fell behind, and when dusk approached, he knew from his sack that he was underweight. The other pickers headed to the scales. But the slow picker dragged his sack behind a tree. He looked to his left and to his right and in front of him to see that no one was watching. Then he pulled down his coveralls. He opened the sack that represented a day's worth of work and his bent back and the pennies he would get for this bent back because he knew it did not amount to a hundred pounds. That was when he positioned the sack just so and relieved himself in the boss man's cotton for spite and the extra dime because he didn't like having to pick cotton anyway.

Ida Mae grew up isolated in the hills and never heard about these things until it was too late to do her any good. So she and her husband worked the piece of Pearson land apportioned to them with duty and resignation.

She herself could not afford a dress made out of the cotton that ruled their days. What she wore was pieced together from flour sacks that she boiled for hours until the flour company's name finally faded away. Burlap scratching her skin and the sun hunting her down, she dragged a sack behind her and plucked and picked, not figuring she was clothing a small piece of the world and never giving much thought to where the contents would land.

All around her in raw cabins leaning in different corners of the plantation were offshoots of her husband's family: half brothers, whole sisters, uncles, cousins, and their wives and husbands and children. A nephew, Robert Pulliam, whom they called Saint, helped them pick cotton sometimes. A cousin named Joe Lee was willing to help, but nobody much wanted him around because he was known for taking things that weren't his. A neighbor named Addie B. raised turkeys on the half for Mr. Edd and fretted over them when they went roosting in the woods. George's brother Willie was the patriarch because he was the oldest of them all.

Ida Mae tried to learn who all these people were and set about trying to become a wife. Willie's daughter, Callie Mae, showed her how to roll dough and make blackberry cobbler and tomato pie. They went picking blackberries on the running vine up and down the ditch bank to bake

their cobblers with. George liked his greens with fatback or hog maws, and she learned how to cook them like he liked. She got up early and chopped wood as well as a man for the cooking fire. She put the meat on, and before the meat was brown and near ready to fall off the bone, she stuffed the greens in the pot and they cooked down and swam in pot liquor so good it made you want to swallow your tongue, as they used to say in their highest compliment to a cook. George would never just come out and say he liked it; he just ate, and that's how she knew he did.

Saturday was for washing and ironing. She hauled water in from the well and washed their clothes in the iron kettle. Sunday was for church. The rest of the time, she was out in the field beside George, hoeing or chopping or picking cotton around the army worms that nested in the leaves. It took fourteen hundred pounds to make a bale, and George needed to make a bale every two or three days in the picking season. Mr. Edd took half. "You know he comes first," Ida Mae would say years later.

They saved a little piece of land behind the house to plant corn and collards and peanuts and sweet potatoes. George hauled Ida Mae out to plant and till their little garden in the off hours, but Ida Mae didn't much want to be out there. They had been working all day and were planting the last of the corn. George dug a trough in the earth and told her to come behind him and scatter the kernels in the trench he made, which she did until she got tired of it. She had a pail full of seeds left. She threw the whole pail of kernels into the hole he dug and told him she was just fresh out of seeds.

In the fall, the corn came up. It was full and dense in one spot of land, the corn stalks elbowing one another in the row. George and Ida Mae ate well that season. George didn't have much to fuss about.

There were things she was good at and things she was not so good at, and she saved herself a lot of aggravation by knowing the difference between the two. She was good at raising chickens, and she kept one in a coop to press into service whenever she needed it. "If I wanted it for breakfast, I'd kill it in the morning," she said. "I go out there wring the neck off, have my hot water scalding, cut him up, and fry him for breakfast."

Nothing scared her. Like that morning at picking time when George had already left for the field. She lay in bed and heard a rattling in the kitchen. "*I know ain't nobody in that kitchen,*" she told herself, rising to see what it was. A speckler—a snake as long as a broom handle—had slithered over the edge of a bucket and was helping itself to the drinking water she had hauled in from the well. She backed out of the door and

got the pitchfork and stuck it through him. She held up the pitchfork with the snake dangling from it and dropped it into the dirt yard. Then she took a stick and beat it until it stopped making S's with its body. The snake was full of guinea eggs it had swallowed from the guinea nest, and it hadn't had a chance to wrap itself around a tree to break the eggs in it yet. The eggs broke when she killed it.

She told George about it when he dragged in from the field. He didn't praise her for her bravery or say much of anything. "I been seeing 'em all day" was all he said.

It was getting to be the 1930s. It was a hurting time, and the farm people almost couldn't give the cotton away. The value of what they harvested, the worth of their hard labor and the measure of their days, plummeted after the crash of 1929. A pound of cotton had gone for thirty cents on the open market in the mid-1920s and for nearly seventeen cents in the late 1920s. By 1931, the planters couldn't get six cents for the same pound of cotton. The people in New York and Boston were not ordering up new seersucker suits and cotton pillowcases like they did just a few years before. The cotton ripened in the bud, but there was nobody to buy it. So the boss men went without new Model T Fords. The sharecroppers went without shoes.

Ida Mae fed the chickens and worked the field barefoot. She watched George haul in cotton with no assurance of what, if anything, the planter might give him for it and tried not to worry her mind over what she could not fix. Before long, she started feeling full around her belly. She didn't think much of it. She went about her chores and rode horseback when she went to visit her kin people. No horse was fast enough for Ida Mae, and she raced now like she always did. It wasn't good for the life that was growing inside her, and she miscarried riding those horses before she knew she was expecting.

Her belly got full again, and she didn't ride horses this time. She hated waddling into church with her flour sack dress pulling tight across the front and her belly sticking out. She was in the field when the thunder came. It started as a light knocking deep inside her. She ran into the house, and the thunder got violent. It shot to the top of the ceiling and hurled itself back into her. She got up and started walking, walking in a circle around the bed. The midwife came and watched her rock from foot to foot.

"I could see the pain comin' down on the top of the house and keep comin'," she said.

The men don't know what the women go through, was what she was thinking, don't feel the stab of lightning inside.

"Oughta be so they could," Ida Mae said.

She stopped her pacing and squatted beside the bed. She was on her knees. The life force reached out of her and into the light.

It was a girl. Ida Mae never wanted a girl. She was still thinking like a tomboy wanting to climb a tree. The baby had big eyes and a brown, narrow face like her husband's. They named her Velma. In time, Ida Mae took to her and held her close.

Within a year or so, she started feeling full again. It was another girl. They named her Elma but called her Baby Sis. Ida Mae took them to the field with her when it was time to plant. She set them both down in the shade of a plum tree. It got too hot for them out in the field. They were toddlers now. Ida Mae told them to sit still and then took her place behind her husband at the turnrow.

The sun bore down on Ida Mae and George, and soon they heard crying near the plum tree. It was Velma wailing and Baby Sis lying sick with half-eaten plums beside her. Velma had reached up and gotten her some, and Baby Sis ate them and got the flux, as the country people called whatever stomach ailment, poison, or virus had got into the baby. It was a perilous world in the early 1930s, even without Jim Crow. Dysentery, typhus, malaria all thrived in the backwoods of the Deep South before penicillin or common vaccines were invented. There were no doctors nearby, and, by the time they got Baby Sis to one, it was too late. They buried her in a little box at the church cemetery near Bewnie.

Ida Mae told herself that day that she would never leave a child of hers alone again.

In September of 1935, she finally got the boy she wanted. He had the brown, narrow face of her husband. When it came time to name him, a neighbor girl stepped forward. The girl looked after Velma when Ida Mae was in the field and took care of a little white boy in town when she was summoned to do so. His name was James Walter. George and Ida Mae had never laid eyes on the boy, but they named their son after him and hoped maybe good fortune would rain down on their son like it seemed to fall on the white people.

Not long after he had begun walking, something took over little James. He began rearing back and shaking all of a sudden. It could

happen anytime, and it so worried Ida Mae that she went looking for advice.

"Next time he has a seizure," a neighbor lady told her, "whatever he got on, pull it off."

George had managed to scrape together a pair of shoes and socks and pants for his only son and was still paying on them. On a Sunday after church, when George was out in the field somewhere, little James had a shaking fit. Ida Mae pulled off his shoes and tore off his socks as the neighbor lady told her to do. Off came his little shirt and pants. She made a wood fire and held little James tight as she threw his clothes into the flames.

George got home, and she gave him the good news that she had cured little James. But that's not what stood out in George's mind.

"Whatchu doing burning up his shoes?" George asked her. George didn't have a decent pair himself.

Reason can't explain it, except that maybe little James outgrew whatever afflicted him or maybe it wasn't really seizures in the scientific sense of the word or maybe her belief that she had exorcised the thing actually killed it. In any case, whatever James had, it never came back after she burned his clothes to cinders.

A new year rang in. It was 1937. It looked to be no better than the year before. They were calling it the Depression now. People took to begging and scraping to eat. A man down the road started stealing hogs to sell and eat as his own. He was white and a friend, so to speak, to George. He rounded up somebody's hogs one day and came by George and Ida Mae's to get George to help skin them.

George didn't want to get blamed for somebody else's misdeeds. He could get killed for stealing a white man's hogs. He told the man to do it himself. The man didn't like hearing no. George and the man argued, and the man stormed off.

"I'll be back," he said. "I'm a fix you."

Chickasaw County had a sheriff, but calling him would have never crossed George's mind. No sheriff would take a colored man's side against a white man, no matter who was right. George called out to Ida Mae.

"Ida Mae, you take the kids and go on in the house," he said. "I'm a sit right here till they come back."

He sat on the porch waiting with his shotgun on his knee. He looked out for an open-bed truck trailing dust in the road or a car packed with

men looking for trouble. Ida Mae crouched down and tried to still little James and Velma. George waited and waited. But they never came. "The next day or two," Ida Mae said, "him and George back friends again, I reckon, getting the hogs."

People learned to want less and live with whatever they had. The boss men said there was little to nothing to give at settlement time. They told the day pickers they wouldn't be needing them. The cast-off croppers and field hands moved from place to place. They walked to the next farm up the road to see if they could use an extra hand and to the relatives who might make a place for them in their cabin. Mr. Edd kept George and Ida Mae on. They were good workers, Ida Mae's picking notwithstanding, and he was an optimist. But now there were five people in their little sharecropper cabin. Besides them and Velma and James, they had taken in a boarder, so to speak. It was George's sister Indiana. She helped with the picking of crops and the raising of turkeys, and she slept by the door in the front room.

In the spring, when George and Ida Mae planted cotton and prayed for rain, the turkey hen laid her eggs. "She'd set there and set there," Ida Mae said. "Just sit there about three or four weeks. She'd get up, shake herself off, and go get her some water, dust water all over her and do round and all, take a bath, I reckon, what it was. She'd be setting while we planted cotton."

By the time the cotton was in the ground, the chicks poked out of their shells and required Ida Mae's attention. Ida Mae and Addie B. and other women on the Pearson plantation scooped up the chicks and tended them for Mr. Edd. He would be coming back just before Thanksgiving to take half of however many turkeys each woman managed to raise.

Ida Mae pulled off the beak crust that they came into the world with and crushed corn for them to eat because they were too little to eat feed corn. The hawks circled overhead, waiting for her to leave, ready to swoop down and pick off a baby chick and fly back into the air before you knew it.

Ida Mae didn't worry about the hawks. She knew the hens moved in a flock and didn't leave their babies like humans do.

"You know a hen will take up for her chickens more so than people will take up for one another," Ida Mae said. "Whenever a old hawk would come along—you heard talk how a hawk will hover and all the

chicks run under her wing—she hugs them and she sticks up for 'em and keep a funny noise, and you knew that hawk was somewhere around.”

She trusted God and nature more than any man and learned to be a better person watching the lower creatures of the earth. “The ant see a crumb, he can't carry it himself,” Ida Mae said. “Don't you know another ant will come and help him? They better than people.”

Addie B. and the other women fretted over their turkeys, worried when they went off and when they took forever coming back because Mr. Edd was going to want his turkeys soon. Ida Mae let her turkeys run free and pick after bugs and ants and twigs in the dirt. They went exploring out in the woods and roosted wherever they pleased. And when they came back, she threw corn at their feet.

The turkeys grew big and plump as September approached, and the land was turning white with cotton.

EUSTIS, FLORIDA, 1939

GEORGE SWANSON STARLING

A FLATBED TRUCK creaked down a highway through rattlesnake scrub and okra growing wild in the field. George Starling should not have been on that truck. He should have been in a college classroom up in Tallahassee. But his father said he'd had enough schooling, and schools nearby did not allow colored students. So Lil George went and got himself a wife out of spite and love, too, and had to feed her now, and so was sitting on a flatbed truck en route to the groves instead of in the library stacks at a college in the state capital.

The truck was on its way between the groves on a chill morning at picking season. It was hauling men to pick fruit for fresh juice and frozen concentrate, for gift boxes of temple oranges and ruby grapefruit, and the perfect balls of citrus stacked high on grocery shelves for people in New York to pick through.

The owners of the groves rode their dogs in the covered front seats safe from the wind. The pickers rode on the flatbed truck with the frost

cutting their faces. Twenty or thirty men hunched on the open barge, their legs dangling over the sides of it and a stack of ladders tied loose along the rim.

George sat pinned between the regular pickers, who were missing teeth and taking liberties with the language and knew more about picking than he ever cared to know. They got a kick out of bouncing over potholes, grove to grove, next to the college boy. They looked to be the smart ones now, hadn't had to squint over any textbooks or waste time in somebody's high school. And here they were carrying a bushel sack in the same flatbed truck as Lil George. Back when he was still in school and picking only during semester break, they started calling him “Schoolboy.”

“Schoolboy,” one of them said, “I don't know whatchu goin' to school fuh. You right out'chere with us. I ain't went so far as the sixth grade, and I can pick more fruit in one hour than you pick all day. You ain't had to go no twelfth grade to learn how to do this.”

“Yeah, you right,” George said. “But the difference between you and me, is I can leave from out here, and you can't. When the opportunity presents itself, I can leave.”

That was easy to say when he was back and forth to Tallahassee, calling himself a freshman and then a sophomore and looking like he could do anything in the world. Now he was picking because he had to, no different from them.

He told himself that this picking situation was a temporary setback and kept himself busy doing whatever came up. Some days, the high school had him substitute for a sick teacher. He had more education than most colored people in town anyway. He sold insurance on the side to the colored people out in the woods. But the groves were all there was most days, and he climbed the flatbed like every other colored citizen who could use the money, which was just about all of them at one time or another.

Fruit was the currency of central Florida. The land was given over to citrus trees, groves of them spanning the low hills from Eustis up to Ocala and down to Orlando. Tourism hadn't yet bloomed the way it would decades later in central Florida, and Eustis, Ocala, and even Orlando were just places to pass through on the way to Miami. Each year in the late thirties and early forties, some two million tons of oranges and grapefruit were coming out of the state, most of it from the region where George lived.

The people who picked the fruit and the big owners of the groves

were often at odds with each other, one side poor, one side landed, one needing more money than the other was willing to give. But they agreed on one thing: they wanted the trees heavy with oranges and the people of the North flush and hungry because then there would be work enough for everyone.

So they pampered the trees like infants. When a hard freeze afflicted the groves, the people burned logs and rubber tires and lit the oil heaters to keep the orange trees warm. They prayed for a miracle like the one at a grove they called Ole Natural. A big freeze had settled in back in 1895, and most of the other groves looked as if they had been set on fire after it left. But Ole Natural survived the big freeze, and its orange trees came back on their own.

Lake County held a high place in the Citrus Belt and once was the orange capital of the world. But Lil George never took it that seriously and never got but so good at picking. He could never claim to have picked the most bushels in the least amount of time. It was piecework, and the winners of the race were not necessarily the quickest minds but the fastest hands. George had a quick mind.

In the late fall, a crowd gathered before the sun came up, when the fog hung close to the earth. The people stood watching at the corner of Bates and Palmetto and in front of the pool hall over in East town, near Egypt. They waited in the wet dark for the flatbed truck to roll up. The foreman climbed down and picked out the best pickers for his crew. The foremen were the middlemen between the packinghouses and the pickers, and both sides might have cause to distrust them now and then. They chose the pickers and oversaw the picking and each had their own way of supervising. It might be Oscar Lipscomb or Uncle John Fashaw or a man they called Mr. Pat choosing his pickers for the season.

George hoped to get on the Blye brothers' crew. They were ten years older than he was. They knew their way around the juke joints and the raccoon woods around Eustis. One of them was named Arnette, but they called him Whisper because he had got his throat cut and could speak no louder than that.

The other brother, Reuben, towered over the tallest of men. He had a stone face, a long series of wives, and had seen just about everything. When he was a little boy, an uncle told him to come help him with an errand. The two of them rode out into the woods and came to a stop at a

tree. A colored man was hanging dead from a limb. The uncle needed Reuben's help cutting the rope and getting the limp, lynched body down. Reuben was ten years old. He would never forget that.

When Reuben got big, he fled to New York, worked at a tombstone factory in Brooklyn, on the 9W highway through Kingston up into Albany. He worked crushing tomatoes at a ketchup factory and had seen so many of the unmentionable things that got mangled into the ketchup that he never ate ketchup again. Now he was back in Eustis working as a foreman in the groves. He looked straight at you and through you and had a way of making women forget their husbands when they saw him.

It was a buyer's market in the picking world. There were always plenty more people who wanted to pick than there was room or need for in the groves. The lucky ones loaded onto the truck, their legs dangling from the rim of the flatbed.

At the grove, they each picked a number out of a hat and went to the row with that number. They got paid by how many boxes of fruit they picked by sunset and had to keep up with little tickets to prove what they had picked. If the row was thick with fruit, it would be a good day. They could stand at the underskirt and fill a two-bushel box. If it was sparse, they had to climb into two or three trees to get that much.

It tempted good people to try to outrick one another. You looked for a way out. You learned to watch everybody and the rows coming up. The rule was that when you finished yours, you moved in order to the next row available. If it was a dud row like the one you were working, you did your best to avoid it.

"If that next row is a bad row," George said, "and you on a bad row, and here's somebody else by you on a bad row, you lag back, you keep watching them. You let them get through first, ahead of you, so they can get that bad row. Then you hurry up and get through."

If the next one up was thick with fruit and "you on a bad row, you run through it," George said. "But you be sure they done moved over before you leave your row. You get cagey. It's little tricks in all this."

Some men could pick a hundred boxes a day. They called them high rollers. George never managed more than sixty-five or seventy. He never cared enough about it to get proficient.

They set the ladders in the tree, ladders sixteen and twenty feet high, sometimes spliced like extension cords and leaning forty feet up, a full four stories, along the spine of the tree. They had to set them so the lad-

der wouldn't kick when they reached the top and wouldn't split the tree in two, which was liable to happen with a ladder set in the fork of a young bud. They learned to plant their ladders deep in the soil.

The trees were wet from the rain, and George and the pickers had to balance themselves on the slick limbs of the old seedlings. They disappeared into the branches with a bushel sack on their shoulders and a clipper in their hand and only came down when the sack was full and their shoulders ached and they were sick from the sight of fruit. Tangerines, tangelos, temple oranges, navel oranges, Valencia oranges, seeded grapefruit, seedless grapefruit, red navels, ruby reds, lemons, and kumquats. If he had to pick, which he did, George would rather pick grapefruit because they filled a box quicker. But the packinghouses knew that, too. So they paid less for grapefruit than just about anything else.

Up and down the ladders they went, working top to bottom, snipping fruit and filling boxes. Sometimes they heard a voice cry out way down the grove; a picker had come across a wasp nest and pulled at it instead of an orange. Every now and then, they heard a thud and then a cry. A limb had snapped. Somebody fell out of a tree, broke an arm or leg or neck.

George climbed the high limbs of four or five grown seedlings one morning and was climbing deep into the next. The foreman that day was an old colored man named Deacon John Fashaw. They called him Uncle John. George knew him from Gethsemane Baptist Church. The deacon oversaw the harvest of some of the groves at the Eichelberger Packing Company. He called George out of the tree in the middle of the grove.

"Number fourteen!" he yelled.

Deacon Fashaw presided over his pickers with a suckle from an orange tree. It looked like a switch a mother whipped her children with. He called George over to him with the suckle in his hand.

"Now, number fourteen," the deacon said, looking up into the limbs at George.

"Yes, sir."

"Come down here. Bring ya ladder."

"*Dog, what Uncle John want?*" George said under his breath and then, out loud, "I'll be there, Uncle John."

If he didn't move fast, next thing he'd know, Deacon Fashaw would be there shaking his ladder from under the tree.

"Come down, young man. Come down."

George climbed down, and Deacon Fashaw swooshed the switch at him. Anybody else, and George would have had him on the ground. But it was Deacon Fashaw, and the men respected his position too much to fight him.

"Now, you bring your ladder back here. I told you to bring your ladder back here."

George ran back to get the ladder and followed Deacon Fashaw back to the first tree he had picked.

"Now, you see that orange up there in the top of the tree?"

"Yeah, Uncle John."

"Well, you know they want that orange in New York, and you done left it up there in that tree. And I don't like it. And Mr. Eichelberger don't like it. Mr. Eichelberger don't like it, and I ain't gon' have it. Now, you put that ladder back in that tree, and you go right on up there and pick that orange right now."

Deacon Fashaw stood and watched George position his ladder and climb into the tree for that one orange as the other pickers peered through the branches. It was all part of Uncle John's plan. "He let you get four or five trees away so you have to drag that back," George said. "You probably done lost five or six boxes while you doing that. You do that two or three times, you soon get the message that 'I'm gonna be sure I clean my tree before I leave it.' I mean clean it."

They moved from grove to grove in a single day. The flatbed truck rumbled down a highway past the bean fields and the turpentine stills. Midday, they finished one grove and were moving to the next. The truck reached an intersection and swung a hard left. The ladders broke from their lashes and shifted under the men. The loose ladders pushed the men off the open bed of the truck and onto the rough surface of the highway as if they had been shot from a gun.

George felt himself thrown to the gravel. His heels nearly hit his back, and he tried to break the fall with his elbow and knee. Half the workers were on the ground. Some had fallen onto their heads and were lying unconscious. A man named Nathan Bailey was never able to work again. He got two hundred dollars for his injuries after the men petitioned the packing company for help. George got twelve dollars and forty-eight cents for his swollen knee and elbow, which he would remember for as long as he lived; they sent him two payments of six dollars and twenty-four cents each.

Most of the men took it and were grateful. George wasn't. The work was hard, and now it was dangerous. "You not getting anything to begin with, you know, at the best," he said.

George had some schooling, and the old men who teased him for it put their pride in their sack when they thought the packinghouse was cheating them.

"Schoolboy, look a here," a man said. "Tell me how much I got for my work. Here my envelope."

George took it and looked at it and turned to the man. "How many boxes of oranges did you pick?" George asked. "How many boxes of tangerines did you pick? How many boxes of grapefruit?"

The man told him what he thought he had picked, and George did the math.

"No, you three dollars short. They done cheated you out of three dollars somewhere 'cause if you picked the number of boxes you say you picked, you didn't get paid for all of it."

Two or three days' pay had disappeared. It was hard to keep up. Each kind of fruit paid a different rate—four cents a box for grapefruit one day, ten cents a box for tangerines the next, six cents a box for oranges. If they didn't know how much they picked of each kind of fruit or lost the little ticket that said what they had picked or if the foreman added the numbers on the ticket wrong, whether on purpose or by accident, the pickers didn't get what little they were due.

"Sometimes they would tell you that they paying one thing and when you get your pay, you got less," George said. "And if you couldn't figure, you didn't know the difference. They were very good at that. They promise you four cents for a box of grapefruit, and you get two cents."

The pickers took whatever they got. Some asked about the difference but didn't dare press it. Some wrote it off, blamed themselves, said they must have been the ones who'd lost their ticket. There was no point in protesting. There wasn't enough work as it was. It was the Depression. And for every man waiting at the corner of Bates and Palmetto in the black wet morning at picking time, hoping to board a truck to the groves, there were ten more out there hoping he would miss it.

MONROE, LOUISIANA, 1935
ROBERT JOSEPH PERSHING FOSTER

PERSHING WAS SIXTEEN and making his first trip out of Monroe on his own on a bus ticket his brother Madison had given him for graduation. Pershing had just finished the eleventh grade, which was as far as you could go if you were colored in Louisiana, and he was beside himself with anticipation.

The sign on the front of the bus said ST. LOUIS and Pershing climbed on board with his suitcase in his hand and his back propped straight as if he were stepping onto the *Queen Mary* and going to France. He dusted the folds of his tweed suit and headed down the central aisle of the bus in search of a seat. The bus was not going to take him to the Big North of southern dreams but to a modest city in a border state where his brother was serving out his medical residency, and well enough out of the South.

He scanned the aisle to find a place for himself. His eye caught the wooden shingle with the metal prongs on the bottom, the shingle that said COLORED on one side and WHITE on the other. It was set into holes at the top of a seat back toward the latter half of the bus. He didn't like seeing it, but he knew to expect it. He took a seat behind the wooden shingle and looked out the window at the view.

Those white and colored shingles were as much a part of the southern landscape as cotton growing in the field. Each state and city had a different requirement or custom to signal how the races were to be separated and to what extent the races were to be divided. In North Carolina, white and colored passengers could not occupy "contiguous seats on the same bench." Virginia prohibited the two races from sitting side by side on the same bench unless all other seats were filled. Several states required that the placard saying WHITE or COLORED be "in plain letters, not less than two inches high." In Houston, the race to which the seat belonged was posted on the back of the seat. In Georgia, the penalty for willfully riding in the wrong seat was a fine of a thousand dollars or six months in prison. Colored passengers were assigned to the front of the railcar on the train but to the rear of other conveyances to, in the words of the mayor of Birmingham, do "away with the disagreeable odors that would necessarily follow the breezes."

The bus headed north along the Mississippi River into Arkansas,

picking up more people at stops along the way. The seats began to fill. More white passengers than colored seemed to be boarding. They had taken up some of the seats in the very front and were spreading further back. Now, each time new white people got on, they picked up the wooden shingle and inserted it in the seat back where Pershing was sitting. It seemed only the white people could touch the shingle and set the musical chairs in motion.

"Go 'head, boy. Move on back," the driver told him.

Pershing rustled himself up from the seat he was in. Gathered his things. Looked for an empty space behind him. Moved back a row. Sometimes the new passenger took up a whole row by himself, forcing Pershing back just so the newcomer wouldn't have to sit next to anyone else.

At every stop, they had to move again until the colored passengers were now crowded into a few seats in the back and Pershing found himself in the very last row.

It was early summer, and road dust flew into the windows and rushed to the back seat, where Pershing in his brand-new tweed suit was pressed among the other colored passengers.

The dust coated the tweed and his skin and his hair, and Pershing found it unbearable, packed as he was like livestock.

"I was dressed as good as I could be," Pershing said years later. "And I felt very down that I had to submit to this."

He looked around him at the other colored passengers to his left and to his right, grown people, beaten down, hunched in their seats. They dropped their eyes, and he dropped his.

"Some have endured, and that's all they've known," Pershing said. "They don't expect anything better, and nobody's demanding anything better. You wouldn't have survived if you had done too much demanding anyway."

It was a long ride, there was no toilet on the bus, and the back seats took every bump on the road. Before Pershing could make it to St. Louis, he passed his urine and sat in his soaked tweed pants and felt lower than he had in his entire short life.

St. Louis was a blur. Madison carted Pershing all over St. Louis, took him into Homer G. Phillips Hospital, where Madison was a resident and where the nurses fawned over the cute little brother with the thick eyelashes and waves in his hair. Madison reminded him it was time to

get ready for college. For a while, when he was thirteen or fourteen, Pershing actually thought he didn't have to go. He told his mother that one day.

"Mama, I'm gonna stop school."

He didn't realize how impossible that was, his father being principal and all.

Ottie indulged him.

"Baby, why are you gonna stop school?"

"I want some of the things the other boys got."

"Like what?"

"Like clothes."

"Well, what do you want?"

Pershing couldn't think of much in particular that he didn't already have.

"I want a suit. I want a pair of shoes."

"Now, I tell you what you do," his mother said. "You save your little money you get from the milk. Now, get you a little job after school or in the summer, and you work and save your money. And when you got half of whatever it cost, I'll give you the other half."

Pershing listened.

"And you don't pay down on anything," she told him. "You can keep your money as well as that white man can."

The nearest college was right in Monroe, across the railroad tracks from where they lived. Northeast Louisiana College had a brand-new campus with reasonable fees, built with taxpayer money, to which his parents' meager salaries contributed. Students who looked like Pershing weren't permitted there. So the family debated where Pershing would go.

His mother wanted him at Morehouse, the most prestigious college in the country for colored men. It was in Atlanta, which might as well have been Paris, and she wanted the biggest she could get for her baby. All these years she had saved up her teaching money, kept it in a chifferobe with a key, which the children knew not to touch. It would be their future. The last time she opened the chifferobe, it was to send Leland to Morehouse. It was expensive, and he had not fared well. Professor Foster blamed the school, but anyone who knew Leland knew the trouble was with Leland, whom the women called Woo and who was brilliant, beloved, and weak to life's temptations. They had wasted their precious,

second-class, colored teacher's wages on Leland at Morehouse. Now Ottie was trying to send Pershing there, and Pershing wanted to go.

"No, you don't go to Morehouse," Professor Foster said.

"You'll go to Morehouse," his mother said.

So it was settled. He would go to Morehouse. But the family had to save up the extra money it would take. Pershing would have to spend two years at the lesser-known alma mater of his parents, Leland College, before living out his mother's dream.

The summer after his freshman year at Leland, he needed a job. He heard the furniture store downtown needed janitors. He dressed and went down and got in line with all the other colored boys wanting to work.

The white foreman called him to the front when it was his turn for an interview.

"Boy, do you go to school?" the foreman asked.

"Yes, sir, I do," he said. "I just completed my first year at Leland College."

"Boy, if you go to college, you don't need a job as a janitor."

Few people, white or black, in Ouachita County had the chance to go to college. Resentments ran deep, especially when it came to a colored boy getting to go when some southerners were still debating whether colored people were worth educating at all. Too many educated colored people, and it would upset the whole balance of power in the caste system and give other colored people ideas.

The man turned to some other boys in line, who weren't in school and didn't need tuition, and hired them. Pershing had a long memory, and he would nurse that wound for years. Here he was trying to make something of himself, and the invisible hand was punishing the ambitious, and rewarding the servile to keep colored people in their place.

Later in the summer, he went looking for work at the sawmill.

He saw a classmate there from high school and was told the work wasn't too hard. It was stacking wood staves to make barrels. Pershing asked the foreman for a job. There was nothing available, he was told. He was getting desperate. He spotted his friend stacking staves.

"Show me how to do this."

The friend showed him what to do, and Pershing worked beside him. He looked up and saw the foreman watching him. Pershing pretended not to see him, worked even harder. The foreman left, and, when he came back, Pershing was still at work. At the end of the day,

the foreman hired him. Pershing finished out the summer stacking staves, not minding the hard work and not finding it demeaning.

"Sometimes," he said, "you have to stoop to conquer."

Morehouse was a heavenly place. Colored boys racing straight-backed and self-important in their sweater vests, hair brushed back with a hint of a center part. Arriving at chapel to sit with their respective fraternities and daring not take the wrong row. There was a sister school, Spelman, the women sealed off in their cloistered dormitories and emerging in fitted dresses and gloves to be paired with Morehouse men, who were the only men worthy of them. There was the graduate school, Atlanta University, where the brightest of both schools were expected to go to take their master's and doctorates. It was all too perfect for words.

Whatever future there was for colored America, they believed themselves to be it, and they carried themselves accordingly. Then there was Atlanta. Too many colored doctors and lawyers and businessmen to count, living in brick houses set back from the road and with staircases inside, driving fancy cars and not apologizing for it.

"I saw blacks living like people ought to live," Pershing would say years later.

Atlanta was big enough to get lost in. Enough colored people to be anonymous. The colored people drew a fence around themselves and manufactured a world so grand they told themselves they didn't want whatever Jim Crow was keeping from them.

Pershing was at peace. It was the fall of 1937.

After the first homecoming game, Pershing and a science classmate by the name of Morris Williams took two girls out dancing. They both chipped in the money they needed and bought sloe gin for the four of them and whiled away the night.

They took the girls home and were walking back to the dormitory. As they crossed the intersection of Fair and Ashby, Pershing slowed down to a stop in the middle of the street. He was wobbling from the gin. He stood and looked around. He was in Atlanta in the middle of the night, far from the stooping and yessums of Monroe. He was surrounded by a whole campus of somebodies like him and doing whatever he pleased.

He stood in the street, half drunk and half dreaming. Cars slowed and honked, and he paid them no mind.

"Boy, come on," his friend said. "Get out the street. That car's gon' hit you, you drunk fool."

"Yes, I'm drunk," Pershing said. "I ain't in Monroe, don't nobody know me, and I don't give a damn."

"I'm free," he said.

Pershing did not know precisely where he would end up or how. But he knew at that moment that he would never live in another country Jim Crow town again. He would do whatever it took to get as far away as he could.

"That bug got in me," Pershing would later say. "I wanted, I wanted to get out."

Shadows still hung over him. His big brother Leland was rarely in class but was a four-letter man at Morehouse and a star pitcher on the baseball team. The Spelman women called out his name on the yard. And then there was Madison, his oldest brother. Madison still hung over him from afar. Madison was a doctor. Madison sang. Madison dressed. The women loved Madison.

"So you hit school," Pershing would remember years later, "and 'That's Foster's brother. That's Foster's brother.' It's hard to be the little one. You fightin' for identity. And everybody discussing everything you did. And when it was bad, they blew it up."

Pershing threw himself into the one thing that brought him the most attention. He had a voice as rich as an organ, so he joined the school choir. He started singing solo at the Christmas concert at Sisters Chapel at Spelman and made a name for himself. In time, people didn't ask about Leland and baseball as much anymore or about his brother the doctor.

In his senior year, sometime in 1939, Pershing arrived for choir practice one day when the head of the music department, a man by the name of Harold Stotford, called him over. They stood in the rehearsal room as students gathered to practice.

"Foster, wait here a minute," Professor Stotford said. "I want you to meet this young lady."

A young woman of modest dress and perfect manners stepped forward. She was a gifted pianist and a newer member of the choir. She was the color of the buttermilk he used to make with his mother and had brown hair brushing her shoulder. She looked out from wire-rimmed glasses that were an accurate barometer of how studious she was.

Pershing recognized her instantly. She could have been a celebrity campus had she not had the breeding and sweet nature not to make a fuss of her position. She was the beloved only daughter of the president of Atlanta University, the campus's graduate school, and was known to anyone with the least awareness of social standing.

Her name was Alice Clement.

She was a sophomore at Spelman. Her family lived in a mansion on a hill on university grounds. It was redbrick with black shutters. The estate was called Hickory Hill and looked like Mount Vernon. Her father, President Rufus Clement, had a car and driver. Her cotillions and bridge parties were chronicled in the society pages of the *Atlanta Daily World*, the colored newspaper in town. She was bookish and would likely have been made Miss Spelman had she even cared to run, but she would know how to throw a dinner party for twelve. She was the embodiment of most everything an ambitious colored man of the day would have wanted to want.

"This is the daughter of President Clement," Professor Stotford said. "who happens to be that gentleman there. President of Atlanta University. I want you to meet Alice Clement."

"How do you do?" Pershing said. He made a mental note to himself to make the most of his good fortune.

At the next choir rehearsal, he made it his business to start a conversation with her in the hope that something might come of it. She finally asked him to take her to a party. He was all too happy to oblige.

He put on his wittiest, most charming self, and soon the boy from Monroe, Louisiana, was courting the quiet and self-contained daughter of a university president. Pershing escorted her to parties, took her to dances with a foursome. He was spending more time up at Hickory Hill and gaining automatic admission to the world of the most influential colored people in all of Atlanta.

Pershing Foster was not what Rufus Early Clement would have had in mind for his only daughter. Clement had risen from a bellhop and delivery boy in Kentucky to become the head of one of the most elite colored universities in the country and its longest-serving president. He was square-jawed, politically astute academic who rarely smiled and wore a look of professorial detachment at both the lectern and the many social engagements that demanded his attendance. He met regularly with the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt and Paul Robeson in his capacity not only

a university president but as a leading figure among the colored bourgeoisie in the South.

Clement gained a reputation as a cautious and incurious steward whom history will record as the man who ousted W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading black intellectual of his time, from a professorship at Atlanta University after years of clashing egos and temperaments.

W. E. B. Du Bois arrived at Atlanta University, already in his seventies and with plans for an ambitious study on race relations, at around the same time that Clement was confronted with this new boy interested in his only daughter. Clement would be at odds with Du Bois almost from the start, perhaps threatened by the long shadow of his celebrity or put off by the elder man's impertinent disregard for Clement, who was thirty years younger than Du Bois. But it was just as likely a contest between the accommodating pragmatism of the southern-born Clement and the impatient radicalism of the northern-bred Du Bois. The two men were the very embodiment of the North-South divide among black intellectuals.

In any case, Clement blocked Du Bois's every move, even standing in the way of a thousand-dollar grant Du Bois was pursuing, according to Du Bois's biographer David Levering Lewis. Du Bois suspected Clement of sabotaging him and said he "regretted the necessity of having to work with a president who seemed incapable of appreciating the great opportunity facing the university." For his part, Clement complained that Du Bois "had become extremely difficult" and that he believed Du Bois's age was impairing him. In 1943, Clement found a way to get rid of Du Bois altogether by invoking, with the support of the board of trustees he had lobbied, an arbitrary loophole requiring compulsory retirement at sixty-five. He informed Du Bois that he would be retired when his contract ended at the close of the school year.

"The result of this action was disastrous," Du Bois wrote in his autobiography. "Not only was a great plan of scientific work killed at birth, but my own life was thrown into confusion." Du Bois "fought back in despair" against his termination, Lewis wrote. Students from Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, and Atlanta University rose up in support of Du Bois in a scornful letter to President Clement: "Our regret," they wrote, "is that we did not have more courses under him, and the students who follow us will not have the opportunity which we have had in absorbing his rich experience and inspiration."

Du Bois was beside himself. "There was no earthly reason why this wish of mine should not have been granted and applauded," he said.

His northern friends thought they knew what the trouble was. "He's buried himself in the South too long," Arthur Spingarn, the NAACP president, concluded, "protecting ideas nobody but he understands, and raising hope for change which may be comprehended in a hundred years."

Du Bois returned north, to New York, where he took a position as director of special research at the NAACP, the organization he had co-founded thirty-four years before, and moved into an apartment on Sugar Hill in Harlem.

For his part, Rufus Clement had proven that, even if out of his own insecurities and desire for control, he could be a cunning and formidable adversary. He had prevailed in the short run, regardless of the consequences or of which side of history he would ultimately fall on.

As for this new young man at his doorstep wanting to court his only daughter, Clement was still sizing him up. Pershing was respectful and well mannered, as Dr. Clement would have expected of any Morehouse man. He was a math major—smart, clearly. But on the face of it, Pershing was just another student who had worked waiting tables at the cafeteria and who was just now making a name for himself as a soloist in the choir. He had come from some country town out in Louisiana. Someone said his parents taught school or something. Dr. Clement had never heard of the Fosters, nor had he any reason to recognize Monroe.

No young man with the courage to come courting his daughter would have had an easy time of it. Worse still, this was not looking like a move up in Dr. Clement's estimation, so he looked judgingly through his spectacles.

But Pershing told of the great plans he had for himself. He talked about pursuing his doctorate in biology at Atlanta University. Or maybe going to a graduate school up north, like the University of Michigan or the University of Chicago. Pershing figured that southern elites always loved those northern status symbols even if they didn't care to live there themselves. Maybe he would get a scholarship to go. Then he would apply for a fellowship in New York, maybe. His brother was a doctor, internal medicine, and he was considering that, too, by the way.

Pershing was talking the president's language, the vocabulary of upward mobility. He had potential. He was ambitious, if nothing else. And Alice—quiet, demure Alice—had taken to him. He had a street wit

about him that made her laugh. He was the life of the party she never was, and she seemed content to bask in his light.

Pershing graduated Morehouse with a major in math and a minor in biology in the spring of 1939 and sang solo at commencement. He took up graduate studies at Atlanta University while Alice completed her time at Spelman. He was moving into a world where great things were expected of him. Dr. Clement looked for him to make good on his promise to become someone worthy of his daughter. Madison wanted his baby brother to follow in his footsteps. His mother, too, wanted a second doctor in the family and knew her youngest had it in him. So he applied to Meharry Medical College in Nashville and was accepted. His mother sent him the registration fee.

"I sat awake all night," he said. "Do I want to go? Or don't I want to go?"

If he could have done anything in the world at that moment, he would have dropped it all and gone up north to New York or out west to California. He'd always had a thing for California. He would go into show business, maybe, and sing and perform onstage. The audiences would love him, and he would be who and where he was meant to be. But he kept his dreams to himself and did what was expected of him. He sent in the registration fee and would start medical school in the South, in the state of Tennessee, a place far from his dreams, in the fall.

A Thin Light Far Away

In the winter of 1919, when Ida Mae was trailing her father out to the field, George and Pershing were learning to crawl, and the first wave of migrants was stirring to life, an astronomer made a startling discovery. The astronomer, named Edwin Hubble, working out of the University of Chicago, looked through one of the most powerful telescopes of his time.

What he saw would eventually become the most significant astronomical find of the century and would come to parallel the awakening of an isolated people in his own country. It would confirm what for generations had been whispered of but dismissed as impossible. It occurred near the start of a long pilgrimage of Americans seeking to escape their own harsh, known world.

Hubble identified a star that was far, far away and was not the same sun that fed life on Earth.

It was another sun.

And it would prove for the first time in human history that there were galaxies other than our own, that the universe was much bigger than humans had ever imagined, that there were, in fact, other suns.