A View from the Porch



And other views…. Myrtis Brown

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Chapter One: A view from the Porch

Myrtis Brown

Location: Sumrall, MS

Time: Early, 1950s

Theme: “Summertime and the Living is Easy”

Synopsis: Annual summer vacation visit with grandparents, swinging on the front porch; happy time playing all day with my brother and cousins, feeling warmth and love from grandparents and neighbors, front the front porch I can see neighbors trudge home from working for the “white folks”, watching the cars go by on the highway adjacent to my grandmother’s house as well as an occasional horse drawn wagon, listening to great aunts and great uncles talk about their lives growing up, learning about family history , listening to and singing gospel songs on the radio, watching my grandmother get on her knees every night to pray, being taught to crochet, helping my grandmother shell peas on the porch, going to Sunday school every Sunday and attending mid-week prayer meeting.

Chapter Two: A View from the Back Porch

Location Bronzeville, Chicago (South Side)

Time: Mid 1950s-late 1950s

Theme: “We Have Come this Far by Faith”

Synopsis: The Brown family joins thousands of other African Americans in post-World War 11’s Great Migration. Jim Crow will follow us. We are part of the Mississippi Diaspora settling in Chicago. Our house transitions into an apartment building, the grass we use to play on is now concrete. We don’t play out front but in the courtyard, our mother watching from the back porch. We also go to the nearby park to play. My brother continues to tease me. My cousins also live in this apartment building. There is a steady influx of other family members coming. Instead of going to the fields my parents now go to the factory –Campbell Soup Company. We join a church and I get baptized. God seems to be a little scary. So I’m not taking any chances. I love school; my teachers inspire me, I am always eager to learn. I spend hours reading. My destiny is sealed.

Chapter Three: A View from My Dorm Window

Location: DeKalb, IL, Northern Illinois University

Myrtis Brown

Time: Early 1960s-mid 1960s

Theme:” How Can We Sing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land?”

Synopsis: I feel like an alien. I feel disconnected. Never understood what it meant to be a minority. Never felt like I was poor until I see how many clothes these white girls have in their closets. I can’t get WVON on the radio or any other black radio stations. Dining hall food is unfamiliar; I have never eaten frozen vegetables. I am learning a lot about myself; growing up is different from becoming an adult. I face many challenges and some heartache; you know first love, “true love”. My pastor’s wife gave me a Bible for graduation from high school. I am glad that I brought it with me. I keep it on the table by my bed. I read it often. Life is not just about you as an individual but you are a part of something bigger; a family and a community. I get a lot of encouragement from members my family; a college education is highly valued. My support

Chapter Five: A View from the Newborn Nursery

Location: Chicago Lying In Hospital, University of Chicago

Time: November 15, 1973

Theme: The Samaritan Woman

Synopsis: I have seen her only twice; last night immediately after surgery and again briefly one of the nurses had brought her into my room. I press the call button.

“May I go see my baby?” I ask. “Do you want a wheel chair”? “No thank you, I’d like to try and walk.” She helps me into a robe, navigating the IV drip. I make it down hall; slowly the incision sight from the Caesarean Section is still very painful. Arriving at the nursery window I hold up my ID bracelet. The nurse rolls a bassinet closer so I can see. She picks up the baby for a better view. “Thank you God,” I whisper. I name her Kwame.

It has been a long, hard, and lonely 9 months. An unwed mother was a scandalous thing in 1973. People could sympathize with a teenage mother, but not a grown woman and certainly not a 30 year old teacher!

I lived in isolation for the last six months; I could not go to church. My appearance in a conservative Black Baptist Church would be unthinkable. I could not go to work. I had to take an unpaid medical leave or face firing from the Chicago Public Schools for. “Immoral conduct”.

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I was abandoned by my baby’s father. He was a Vietnam War veteran and was suffering from PSTD. He disappeared and became MIA the rest of our lives. Daily phone calls from my mother and my lifelong best friend, Romesa encourage me. The promises of God I read in scripture sustained me.

Chapter Six: Mountain Top

Location: Europe

Time: 1980s-1990s

Theme: “Traveling Mercies and Arriving Grace

Synopsis

Chapter Seven: A View From The Front Steps

Location: Southside Chicago – “Pill Hill”

Chapter 8 A View From My bedroom Window

Location: South Suburban Chicago

Time: 2005

Myrtis Brown

Theme: “I wouldn’t give nothing for my Journey”

Synopsis: It is cold! January is supposed to be the coldest month of the year, but February can brutal. I am shivering under the covers. I have on

a ski cap and socks. Even the clouds outside my window look like they are shivering. How am I going to survive? I have endured the first seven weeks of chemotherapy. I have 43 more to go. I prayed the prayer that King Hezekiah uttered when told by Isaiah about his fatal illness.

*“Hezekiah turned his face toward the wall and prayed to the Lord, saying*

*“Remember now, O Lord, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart and have done what was good not in your sight” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. God listened to his prayer and sent the prophet Isaiah to the King, his prayers were heard and that he would be healed.*

I lost my breasts, my hair my, ability to smell, my ability to walk; but I found my faith.

Chapter: 9 A View From My Rearview Mirror

Location: Route #59

Time: 2016

Theme: The Jericho Road

Chapter: 10 From the Patio

Location: Backyard

Time: 2018

Synopsis: The breeze feels good. I love sitting in the glider under this huge maple tree; plenty of shade. I am enjoying having my morning coffee

and doing my morning devotions out here. I get up and wander over to the pond. I think the fish recognize my footsteps because they always swim to the surface when I approach. In spend a lot of leisure time out here;

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reading a book, watching my grandchildren play, or tending to my flower garden. So this is what retirement looks and feels like.

God does hear and answer prayers, every day is a gift, and what doesn’t kill you, will make you stronger.

Prologue

January 21, 1943

12:15 am

Gulfport, Mississippi

Dr. Milas Love feels a chill, he pulls the covers around him tightly .He wakes up momentarily confused; why is he not in in his own bed sleeping next to his wife? Why is he sitting on this porch wrapped in a quilt? Fully awaken now, he remembers he had been summoned a few hours earlier when his patient, an expectant mother had gone into labor, He had hurried from his home to a small neat house at 3401 19th street. False alarm, no baby yet; a common occurrence. However he had stayed; the baby was definitely on its way.

Dr. Love stands and stretches, He enters the house. It is a typical colored folk’s house – the” shot gun design.” He passes the first room and sees his patient’s mother, Mrs. Daisy Felder; she has traveled from her home in Sumrall, MS. She is gently rocking and humming “Jesus Keep me Near the Cross” to her grandson, his patient’s first child. Dr. Love had delivered him 18 months earlier. He enters the second room, brightly lit by kerosene lamps. The patient’s mother in law, Mrs. Ida M. Brown is standing by the bed. Dr. Love peer down at his patient-“How are you doing Hazel”? She looks up and replies quietly “I’m ok Doctor”

Continuing through house to the kitchen, Dr. Love walks out on to the back yard and stands gazing at the sky. He imagines that he can hear the waves from the Gulf being slapped on the beach in the near distances. accompanied by the smell of dampness brought by a gentle breeze. The muted sound of thunder reverberates in the air. The sounds remind Dr. Love that a war in going on. He it makes him think about his brother Charles drafted into the Army now serving in Europe. Dr. Love ponders as he stands still looking up to the shy. “Will the war change things? Will he, a Negro physician ever be granted attending privileges at the local hospital? Will they ever admit a colored patient?

1:15am Some calls his name and he move quickly back inside

1:28am Doctor Love happily says you did good Hazel; you have a girl this time. She’s a big baby.”

1:3 am Someone in the room raises the ancient question “What shall we name this child.”?

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Many hour later and 4, 742 miles away in the South Pacific, Solomon Islands, a young Master Sergeant Wallace A. Brown is hunkered down with the 8th Army’s 93 division-366 Regiment. It

is all Black. Jim Crown has followed him all the way from Mississippi. His white commanding officer approaches Wallace and says “You have a telegram. It is from your mother.Sgt. Brown reads it quickly and silently and then loudly so everyone in his troop can hear.

Son, you have a baby girl. We have named her Myrtis Jean. Hazel is well.

Love, Mother

Wallace smiles and immediately starts to write a letter:

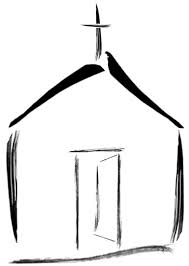
My Darling Wife,

I am so happy. Please send pictures of our baby. We don’t know how much longer that this war will last. Probably at least two more years, General Macarthur says that he will return. The Japanese are fighting hard to hold on to this territory. I long for the day when I can come home to you and the children. I miss you so much. Kiss the children for me.

Your loving husband,

Wallace

INTRODUCTION



The Doors of the Church Are Now Open. These words are uttered by the Pastor at the end of worship are familiar in Black church life. The deacons rise in unison from their seats. The gospel choir begins sing or the organist might simply play. Lots of amends from the pews. The spirit of the Lord is indeed in this place. This passionate exhortation is an invitation to membership and to discipleship.

Myrtis Brown

The pages of my book are now ready to be opened! My readers, I am extending to you an invitation. Come; join with me as I revisit rural Mississippi, Black Belt Chicago, and suburban Cook County and beyond. This however is not a travelogue; it is much more.

This is a thoughtful journey; a curated collection of views that I have assembled to share with you. These views become snapshots, encapsulating; what I have heard, what I saw and what I felt.

What do you see; a half empty glass or a half full glass?



Our views, what we see can shape our perspectives, plant memories and impact our lives. Throughout my life’s journey, the landscape and along with it my views have changed. However there are two constants. In an upward view, when I looked up I could always see God. I can still hear my grandmother reciting her favorite scripture:

“I will lift my eyes to the hills- where does my help come from?”

My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip-he who watches over you will not slumber

Indeed, he watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121:1-4

This scripture always has brought both comfort and reassurance to me.

When I looked around, in my peripheral view, I could always see my family. Sometimes it was my biological nuclear family, sometimes it was my extended family, blended family or church family. Sometimes the family included both in-laws and outlaws.

On this journey I had a few pits stops, some bumps in the road, some rest stops and sometimes I had to take the nearest exit. I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. I lost my breast but I found my faith. I did not make this journey alone.

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This is a reflection



A symbol for the Akan tribe of Ghana. The bird has its feet planted forward with its head turned backwards. Its meaning –“go back to the past and bring forward that which is useful.”

As I pulled out of the parking lot, I caught a quick view of the Sankofa Bird’s banner hanger over the side entrance to the museum. It caused me to stop and reflect about my own life’s journey, the roads that I have traveled, the paths that I have walked and the people that I have met. Many of these individuals have collectively contributed to my views of life. Delbert and Martha Lawson provided a good witness for the gospel. Dorothy and Douglas Alexander lived out the “Good Neighbor Policy”. My 5th grade teacher. Mrs. Davis planted the seed and a thirst for learning. My relationship with them strengthened my faith. You will learn more about these indivduals as my life’s story unfolds.

Other negative encounters like the ones with Samuel Dorsey, I wish I could have avoided on my journey. I met Sam in the spring of our years, when life was new; it was a time of excitement and expectation. We were going to plant our hopes and dreams for the future together. We met again in the winter of our years when life was older, a time of rest and relaxation. We were supposed to share memories and keep each other warm during this season. Neither of those things happened. The admonition: “What you see is not what you always get.” resonates with me. It is sound advice not just to take in the view with our eyes, but we must read with our hearts. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, French poet and journalist writes in his book –The Little Prince: “One clearly see clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eye.” Often time during our journeys we can experience” blurred vision “or even “double vision.”

From childhood through young adulthood; (the 1950s through the 1960s), I experienced a few road blocks. I ran into every kind of “ism” there is: Jim Crowism, colorism, racism, sexism, ageism and classism. With the love and support of family and friends and with the countless blessings of God; I was able to continue on my journey.

This is a memoir

This is my story. It is a narrative of selected vignettes from my life. It encompasses some special memories –“memories light the corners of my mind.”(Barbara Streisand The Way We Were). These memories feed and nurture my spirit as this journey continues

When it comes to new construction framing is where your building begins to take shape. A building’s frame is the skeleton than supports all the other features. The first step in the process is to pour a foundation. To keep the frame up, you need loading bearing walls. These walls provide the

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Intrafrastructure for the rest of the building. God and my family have been my “load bearing” walls throughout my journey. My family has been the backdrop for my life’s story. They gave me my identity. I am because they were. Therefore I am resilient, empowered and equipped for life’s journey. A foundation of love was laid for me before my arrival, January 21, 1943. Wallace and Hazel Brown were responsible for bringing me here; God has kept me here.

The church has always been a part of my life. I grew up in the Baptist church. My faith was deeply rooted there. Part of my journey took me on the road of theological discernment and faith formation. I took a peek at the Nation of Islam and sat awhile with the Jehovah’s Witness. My spiritual journey finally leads me to the ELCA (the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) and yes the doors of the church were indeed open.

As you read my story, you will explore and discover a closer view of what my journey looked like. Traveling mercies and arriving grace for each of you.

Myrtis Brown

Chapter One p.1

Sumrall, Mississippi 1955

*“Swoosh, forward-*

*“Swish, back,*

A nudge from my foot prompts the swing to move more slowly.

*“Screech” “Screech”* loud grinding from the chains of the swing.

The back and forth creates a rhythm and produces a slight breeze. The breeze is welcomed. We need it. The sun is hot, not directly overhead yet and is intense. The large willow tree looking exhausted from the heat; stands drooping next to the house. It provides little shade.

I love being out on the front porch; my favorite place is the swing. I look across the porch at my grandmother. She is rocking in her chair, humming as usual; something soft under her breath. I am pretty sure it is “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross’ Mama Daisy is a petite woman about 4’11”.Her silver gray hair is piled neatly on her head in a bun. She has a bronzed weathered look about her face. Most of her early years were spent picking cotton first Florence, Alabama and later in the Mississippi delta. Her high cheekbones reflect her heritage from her father Sam Miller, who was a member of the Choctaw Nation. The word Mississippi actually comes from an indigenous American word meaning “Father of Waters”

Someone passes by the side of the house on his way to town.

.”Hey there Miz Daisy”. Mama nods her head and smiles in acknowledgment. This paved road runs along our house leading to town and tangentially separating the “colored” part of town from the “white folks” part of town. A line of “separate but equal” – the standard of living in Mississippi circa 1955.

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I will bring the swing to a stop. I watch Mama shelling peas and snapping beans. I see her split the seams, the push the peas out with on smooth motion. “Mama, can I help you” “Yes, baby” she chuckles. She passes to me with a bowl of peas. I try to duplicate her movement. It is a disaster. My bowl doesn’t look anything like Mama’s. Tears run down my cheek. Mama looks over at me; “Don’t cry baby, you’ll get it bye and bye. You’re leaving too many snaps. Run your thumb down the seam like this and open the whole pod, that’s the way. Only snap the small ones. We want to get as many peas as possible.” There will be other lessons from Mama from that porch; learning to crochet, play cards or to simply to sit, listen and learn.

I hear movement coming from inside the house, my great Aunt Nellie emerges:” Daisy” she says, and gently let her gaze rest on me.”Sista”, Mama responds. Aunt Nellie lowers herself, popping open her fan, into the other rocking chair; “I done brought you a mess of greens; you might want to cook them for Pastoral Sunday”. Aunt Nellie is the exact opposite of Mama; whereas Mama was a diminutive woman, her sister is an ample woman, with plenty of “rump”. Enough I once heard the women folk talking saying” could you place a cup of coffee on her rump and it would never spill. Laughter followed that. Not malicious, humorous. I was curious about Aunt Nellie; she lived alone. I didn’t know anyone in the whole town who lived alone. I heard bits and pieces of her life; she had outlived three husbands and lost six children in childbirth or shortly thereafter; some of whom reportedly were buried in her back yard. She was known to be a superior laundress, especially ironing; which she did for both colored folks and the white ladies. Most people I learned from the porch were afraid of “bad weather” sometimes Aunt Nellie would come and sleep at Mama’s or other times she would ask her to send one or two of the chillen to spend the night at her house. My brother, Wallace’s mission seemingly in life, by his teasing and other antics, was to make me miserable would often volunteer me.

I return to the swing. Higher and higher I go. I look up to the sky; Mama says God lives up there. “Hello God, can you make it not so hot*.” Buzz, buzz, zzz,* this is the only thing that I don’t like about the porch; the flies also seem to like the porch. I try to swat them away.

Mama, I ask “What is a mess of greens? My grandmother and her sister exchange looks, Mama smiles at me and says, “Baby, you’ll learn in the bye and bye.” Aunt Nellie asks Mama for some ice water. They go inside the house; I follow them.

**Inside the house…**

Colored folks houses were either the “dog trout” or shot gun” style; Mama’s house was more on the former style. There was neither electricity, gas nor running water in the house. As you enter from the porch there were two large rooms, separated by a door. The first room was a large bedroom which consists of two large beds. Both beds have antique cast iron bed frames; covered with handmade quilts. One I remember Mama told me was given to her by her mother; my great grandmother Amanda Morgan. These beds were always warm and comfortable. I loved to snuggle in the quilts, I felt safe and secure in these beds. And I love the smell of the sheets, always fresh from having been hung out to dry in the sun in Mama’s back yard. The other furniture in the room was a large chifferobe, and a dresser. A

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large wooded table sits between the two beds. A kerosene lamp and a Bible rest on the table. Mama always read from her Bible by the light from the lamp. She then got down on her knees, clasped her hands together and prayed. I once asked her” Why do you pray like this every night”? ; her answer “Baby, you’ll understand in the bye and bye.” A black Singer sewing machine is positioned on the wall adjacent to the beds. A radio is perched on a small table next to the sewing machine. A large wood burning fireplace is in the center of the room. I can still remember the warmth from the fireplace and the crackling and dancing of the flames. Through the doorway there is another bedroom, slightly smaller with two beds, an armoire dresser and a “chest of drawers.” In the rear of these room was another room- sort of multipurpose. In the center of the room was a black potbellied stove, on the adjacent wall was the “icebox”, next to it was a table with a galvanized tub. Cupboards holding dishes were on another wall. A screened door leads to the back yard.

Mama opens the icebox and pours Aunt Nellie a glass of water. “Thanks Daisy, I’d best be getting on home. Mama puts on her apron and follows her out the door; me too. I once heard a neighbor remark, “Daisy that child is your shadow”. Mama just smiled.

**Outside the house**

Mama puts on her apron and head out the door. There are screen door at both the front and the back. The real exterior doors are only used at night, otherwise the house is open all day; no locks, only latches were used on the screens.

Mama approaches the chicken coop, opens the pop door. Inside the chicken coop in the hen house with nesting boxes and a feeding trough. The chicken coop looks flimsy built of mesh wire, but it is strong enough to keep the predators – raccoon, possums , cats , foxes, ) away. There is a roof overhead to discourage these “critters from getting to the chickens.

I love feeding time with Mama. The chickens come running once mama is inside they seem to recognize her steps. She calls them” Here chic, chickie, here”, plus she has a soft whistle and a chick ling of her tongue. I try to copy her, but I can’t. I have a favorite, the smallest of the baby chicks. She does come to get feed from me. I have named her “Little Bit”. After feeding I hand mama the wire coated basket as she enters the hen house. The hens are sort of intimidating; those quick, darting, piercing eyes; looking like a real mean teacher. As they sat perched on those nesting boxes; I expected at any time them to leap down, whip out ruler and whack me on the hand. If they sometime wandered out of the chicken coop, my brother would throw rocks at them. I was glad that he found something else other than me to torment.

We leave the chicken coop, Mama always careful to make sure that the latch was secure. Mam washes the eggs. Some she will give away, some she will sell, some she will barter for other goods, the rest she

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will keep for cooking and baking. I hear my cousins, Brenda and Peggy calling me. It sounds like a sing song; Myr- tis, Jean.Myrt-tis Jean

**Under the house**

Most homes in rural Mississippi were built on cider blocks or bricks. It is a perfect play room, hide out place. It is cool under the house; a welcome refugee for the scorching, relentless Mississippi sun. Out the red dirt we build doll house, and played with our dolls. We even ate some of the dirt. It didn’t taste too bad. Brenda and Peggy were more like my sisters than cousins. We were very close. They were my first play mates, my first friends to share secrets with. We join forces to keep all intruders out of our “house”. We shooed away wandering chickens and banned my brother Wallace and their brother Joe. I think that bonding was generational as it was replicated from the bonding I saw between my mother Hazel and their mother Helen as well as the “sista hood between Mama and Aunt Nellie.

**In the quarters**

We hear the screen door banging shut. Mama calls out “I’m going to Aunt Sadie’s”. We hurriedly scramble from underneath the house, following closely behind Mama. She’s heading toward the “quarters.”, where the colored folks lived. Although Mama is short, she’s a fast walker. We almost have to run to keep up with her. We pass these homes, most of which are flimsy, dilapidated weathered beaten, looking like they were prone to fall over at any minute. On most of the porches there are women sitting on the porches just fannin; they all call out a greeting”Hey Miz Daisy” as we pass by. Soon the St. Louis Baptist Church comes into view, where we attend Sunday school. As we walk further we pass the *“juke joint”.* Not much happening there now. It comes alive after dark and on the weekend. Sumrall’s juke joint and all other juke joints throughout the south were vividly depicted in Alice Walker’s *“The Color Purple”.* The word juke comes from the creole Gullah- meaning “wicked or disorderly”. We were never allowed to go near the juke joint but sometimes, my brother accompanied my grandfather there on the weekends when he sold peanuts. We were curious about what went on the juke joint and I would pester my brother to tell us what he had seen. He would smile that wicked grin, which he reserved for me and say “None of your dumb business Piggy”. Years later I would learn that neither he nor my grandfather went inside the juke joint. My grandfather, who did not drink, would sit on a large tree stump situated near the juke joint and sell his peanuts.

Mama finally arrives at her destination- Uncle Will and Aunt Sadie’s house. Uncle Will was mama’s older brother. I thought he was kind of rich. He did not work in the saw mill or pick cotton as all the other men in Sumrall did. He wore suits a lot, not just on Sunday. Uncle will sold insurance policies and as a part time Methodist preacher. His house was separated a little from the rest of the quarters, on a slight hill. It was larger than most homes, was painted white. Uncle will had concrete steps gong up to his house. And inside his house was a real parlor, just like the white folks. His son Prince was away in college

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in some place called Ohio. He was a disappointed to his parents. He would soon be kicked out of college

for his wild, drunken behavior. Aunt Sadie, well she was described as a real “proper lady”. She had come from well to do family from New Orleans. She always seem to have on he “Sunday go to meeting clothes. She did not work outside the home, nor did she take in washing or ironing as did most of the other womenfolk. Her specialty was pound cake. She and Mama were close but there always some tension between her and Aunt Nellie. According to Aunt Nellie their sister in law was too “uppity”

Mama has brought Aunt Sadie some eggs. She insists that Mama take the money. Mama thanks her and slips the cons into the pocket of her dress. They sit quietly in the rocking chairs on the porch sipping lemonade talking and exchanging news. Mama thanks her and says to us “Let’s git on back home.” We each give Aunt Sadie a hug and wave goodbye; some of her face power rubs off on my face; I remember, she always smelled so good.

**Going to town**

When we got back to the house, Mama made a potted meat sandwich made with crackers, not bread. This was our mid-day meal called dinner; along with my favorite fig preserves and a cold glass of buttermilk. Mama makes the buttermilk herself; it is so good; especially with a slice of cornbread. After playing all morning, eating, and with the mid-day heat my cousins quickly fell asleep for a nap. Not me, I am eager to have some more one on one time with our grandmother. I watch Mama as she puts on her shoes and a sun bonnet. “May, I go with you Mama.” she smiles “Yes, baby, I’m going to town to get the mail.” We head off towards town. On the outskirts of town we stop a Mr. Lott’s house. Mr. Lott is rich is farm is across the highway from Mama’s house. From the porch I can see the cows grazing in the pasture. Sometimes, my brother Wallace and cousin Joe would cross the highway and taunt the large Brahman bull. My grandfather repeated warns them about this antic. Once Mama got a switch from the tree and threaten to tan their hides if she ever caught them going across the high way. M One of Mama’s neighbors, Clarice works for Mrs. Lott. She’s **“The Help”** (Dream works Pictures, 2011). Clarice opens the back door for us. “Afternoon Miz Daisy”, hey Myrtis Jean”, she smiles and runs her hand over my hair. She has three boys; loves to braid hair and welcomes the opportunity to comb either my hair or my cousins’ hair when we are visiting Mama during summer vacation. We walk into a bright, sunny sparking white kitchen with crisp, colorful curtains hanging on the windows. Inside the house of a white person, I thought at that time, must be like going to heaven. It was so big, so many rooms. They have electricity, running water and inside plumbing – they have a bathroom. Mrs. Lott appears at the door way leading to the dining room. Clinging to her mother her daughter, a few years younger than I am. Mama nudges me “Say hello to Ms. Anna May”; I smile broadly and say “Hi”. Anna Mae stares back at me, she didn’t return my smile. Her bright blue eyes are hostile, her face frozen in a stone cold mask. Inwardly I cringe; no one has ever looked at me like that. I feel hate seeping from her pores. I involuntarily shake, drawing closer to Mama grabbing her at the waist. In a cosmic interchange, the past and the future collide in my mind’s eye. From some 80 generation earlier I hear a voice speaking

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through the vista of time “Let not your heart be troubled”; and in a microcosm of a second I am plummeted 60 years into the future, I can hear John Legend singing “One day….glory will be ours” Mrs. Lott pays Mama for the eggs that she has brought. She says “Here Daisy”, Mama replies, “Thank you, Ma’am”. As we leave the Lott’s, I ask “Mama why didn’t Anna May say hello to me? Mama replies, “You’ll understand in the bye and bye” As we continue on our walk to town, she hums softly “After while It’ll All Be Over,”

We cross the railroad tracks and enter the town. The town consists of two, maybe three block in length. It is a sleepy, slow moving town. No one ever seems to be in a hurry. There are stores lining both side of the street. There’s a doctor’s office, a restaurant, a dry goods store, a movie theater, the bus depot, a drug store with a real soda fountain and a post office. The Post Office is the only place where we “colored folks” are allowed to use the front entrance. When we went to the “picture show” we enter by the side door and go up to the balcony by a very narrow set of stairs. Seating was in on roughhewn benches. I looked over the railings and longed to be able to sit on the first floor in those regular theater seats. If there was ever an overflow on the main floor, whites would come upstairs and we would have to relinquish the first row of benches to allow seating for the whites. If there was ever overcrowding for us; we simply had to stand during the movie. We used the back door or side entrance for everywhere else. Mama and I proceed to the Post Office. Colored folks do not have mail boxes, Sumrall is such a small town; the clerk knows everyone by face. When Mama enters he says “Hello Daisy”; reaches behind the counter and hands Mama some mail. Sometimes she collects mail for her neighbor as well. We head back home; Mama says” Let’s go, time to get supper ready for Oscar.” Some whites pass us; no one speaks just walk by with blank looks on their faces; like we don’t even exist. Their attitude offer no surprises; after all this is Mississippi and Ross Barnett is the governor, a staunch segregationist and a member of the White Citizen’s Council the I don’t understand Jim Crow, but I know what it feels like.

**Revival time**

Brenda, Peggy and I are excited about the Revival; mainly because we get to go out at night! I love the stillness of the night, the soft breeze, seeing the stars; it seems like is God gently covering us for a while; to give us rest. It is a special time for everyone. There is always a visiting preacher who comes to conduct the revival; maybe from up North, like Chicago or maybe from Memphis or Jackson. Some member of the church will host a dinner for the preacher and his family before the worship begins. All members of the church will contribute a dish. Mama is often asked to fry some chicken. That’s her speciality.Other visitors come from Prentiss, Hattiesburg or Laurel as well. Our grandfather, Oscar Felder; we call him Popeye. He is Mama’s second husband. He is a big man, over six feet built like defensive lineman. But he is a man of few words and a gentle spirit. I never heard him raise his voice. His goal in life was to provide for his Daisy Mae. We are excited because we get to earn some money to go to the picture show. Poppye sells peanuts at the church after the revival. He will roast them in the fireplace. We are allowed to help stoke the fire. I love that rich almost burnt smell. After the peanuts cool off, we will help place them into small paper bags, securing the top in a knot. They sell for 5 cent each. Poppye gives us money for helping. He packs them into two large shopping bags. We leave for

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the” church house”. As we walk we are joined by others, children, young and old folks; some greeting my grandfather; *“Even’ Mr. Oscar”,* Popeye, nods in response.

As we get closer to the church, music greets us, catching a ride and floating on the night time breeze. I hear a “Doctor Watts.” It is slow, mournful, rhythmic; coming from somewhere deep within the collective pathos of the African American soul. It speaks to me even as a child of the omnipresence of God. “*Where words fail, music speaks, lift the soul”.* We enter the church. The small church is crowded. In the closeness of bodies, I can smell freshly iron dress and shirts, hair that has recently been “hot combed” with lots of grease as well ladies’ perfumed probably bought from the “Five and Dime Store in town. Fans were plentiful, almost every woman has them. The fans help to keep the congregation cool and could also be used to make sure that the *young’uns* behaved in church. Church fans were said to have been part our culture from Africa where the fan was used by the goddess to pass blessings. The fans were also used as well as an advertising tool for local businesses, like insurance companies and funeral homes. I was excited to be asked to help sometimes to pass out the fans

During the revival service, whole gamuts of emotions are displayed; clapping, shouting, crying; all stirred by the spirit. Sometimes a few white visitors would show up and they would be given front row seats.

The guest preacher would artfully retell the painful experiences of blacks during slavery and the continual struggles that we face today. There were lots of warning about staying away from sin. I wasn’t exactly sure what a sin was but I was sure it involved drinking, cussing and *loose living*. He used stories, parables and metaphors-just like Jesus. Towards the end of his sermon, the preacher would begin to *“Whoop”.* Emotions would be very high, some people would *“get happy”*, get the Holy Spirit. Some of the same people always got “happy.” Some people never got happy. I was always curious about this. I raised that question to Mama and she simply said Someday you’ll understand in the *bye and bye*. Lots of clapping, *Amens* and Praise *the Lord.* Sometimes it seemed like the whole room actually rocked a little or moved. The room got hotter and the fans were being used more and more. Despite the hardship that our people face daily; the preacher would encourage us, we should not lose hope, Jesus was on his way back and everything would be all right. Just a God had freed the Hebrews; He would do the same for the American Negro; in just *a little while.* In the end of his sermon, the preacher would “Open the doors of the church.” He would exhort the back slider, the unsaved or the unbaptized to come forth, take his hand and accept this invitation to discipleship. He especially said those who wanted to stop drinking or to give up their sinful ways to come forth. Eventually someone would get up and walk down the aisle. Usually it was a young adult, a boy who was considered ‘wild” or a girl who was consider “fast”’; sometimes an older man. Not too many women.

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The service would eventually come end; after a long prayer by one of the deacons. Lots of sleepy children being carried out by their parents. These revivals usually produced a sense of renewal, and of bonding within the community. Those in attendance were usually in a good mood, feeling enriched and encouraged by the revival as we spilled out of the church into the late night.

We leave in groups and clusters heading out in different directions. There is laughter, joking and sometimes singing; hymns sung softly to match the night, sprinkled with reviews and gossip

*“That was* *some powerful preaching*”,

*“Yesss Lawd”,*

*“Sho nuff”.*

*“Yo know tha boy sho can preach”*

*“Glad to see Jimmie Lee done give his soul to the Lawd*.”

*“Good for him, you know his daddy was some trifling Negro*

*“And Missus Laura had the nerve to show up; she ain’t paid me yet for that last iron ‘I did for her old pappy”*

*“What you speck from white trash?”*

The crowd begins to thin out as we leave the quarters. It is only Popeye, my brother, my cousin Joe and I. It is very dark. I know that God is real but so is the *boogey man,* and he comes out at night. I walk closer to my brother and grab his hand, “Don’t be scared” he says. My brother loved to tease and torment me when we were children, but he was always ready to try and comfort me when I was frightened. This became a lifelong pattern in our relationship

The darkness of the night can be over whelming; it is pitch black; sometimes I am tempted to reach out and touch it, for I am sure that the night is a wall.

We reach our home. Mama is sitting on the porch; I cuddle up next to her. Popeye sits and begins to rock in the chair. Wallace and Joe take seats on the steps. We are quiet, the night is still. We are reminded of the benediction given by the prophet Habakkuk *“The Lord is in his* *Holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.”* Yes, the night is quiet but it is not silent; there is a cacophony of sound unique to the night. We look across the highway to the farm and pastures owned by Mr. Lott. Beyond his land is a railroad line. We can hear the mournful sounds of the train’s horns; the *chickety –clack*, *clickety-click* of the wheels turning on the rails; they seem to squeak as it rounds a bend towards town. Popeye’s rocking joins in a steady rhythm to match that of the train’s approach. We watch the train until it disappears from sight. Popeye pulls his pocket watch from his denim overalls.” She’s late tonight.”Joe and Wallace jump from the steps, trying to catch some “lighting bugs. We hear as she approaches rapidly- the 8:00pm Trail Ways Bus whizzes past the house heading north to Jackson. Mama gets up from the swing; we all know what that means; we follow her into the house. Only Popeye remains on the porch. Stuffing his pipe, he strikes a match and begins to smoke. I notice for the first time that his hunting rifle which normally rest on a rack above Mama’s is placed on the floor by his chair. Mama closes the front door; I look out of the window; quietly and stealthily two men join Popeye on the porch. I start to ask Mama a question but she just puts her finger to her lips and says “*Shush”*

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*The back window….*

The movement of the swing is putting me to sleep. Popeye doesn’t seem to have moved from the rocking chair since last night. He’s talking to some other menfolk who are lounging on the steps. He’s staring out at the highway; he stands, using his hand to shade his eyes from the sun, to get a better view. I follow his gaze. I see a car moving down the highway directly towards us. He calls out “Daisy Mae”. I am amazed as it gets closer. It’s my father car. Why is he here? It’s not time for us to leave yet. Its two more weeks before the end of summer vacation. His car pulls to a stop the front yard. I am so surprised to see him I don’t move’. Something is wrong. He mounts the stairs, “Mr. Oscar” and shakes Popeye’s hand. He asks “Where is Wallace Jr.?” Popeye replies. “He’s out back *slopping the hogs* with Willie B. “I haven’t let him out of my sight” He looks down at the shot gun at his feet, Daddy replies “Thanks” He hugs Mama, gives me a quick kiss and continues through the house. Why is he so anxious to see my brother?

News spreads quickly in the quarters- Miz Daisy’s son in law has arrived from up north. In the next few hours people move in and out of Mama’ yard. Some stop to admire Daddy’s car. It’s a 1954 Buick Road Master. Only a few Negroes in Sumrall own a car. Some men have pickup trucks and that’s all. Others want to know the latest news. Daddy spreads some newspapers on the top step for people to see. Mama’s closest neighbor covers her mouth with her hand as she scans the first page. Others just shake their heads and walk away. I try to get a quick peek but Mama shoos me away. It’s a picture of a boy, about my brother’s age. He looks familiar for some reason.

The next morning, the car is loaded and we are ready to leave. Daddy hugs Mama and says goodbye to Popeye. My brother gets in the front seat with daddy. I perch myself on my knees to get a better look out the back window. Mama’s house and the front porch began to fade from my view. I am overwhelmed with sadness. I am losing something.

I hear my brother ask daddy, “Who is Emmet Till?” I slide down in my seat. A flashback; in my mind’s eye; I remember when we had traveled to Mississippi earlier that summer on the train-**The City of New Orleans**. One stop before ours was Hazlehurst; some passengers getting off, a boy passes by me, looks down and smiles. It’s the same boy whose picture was on the front page of the newspaper. I try to look back out of the window again. Tears cloud my view. Ten years will pass before I step foot in Mississippi again.

Chapter 2 View from the Back Porch

Grand Boulevard, South side Chicago late 1950s

**Teddy Bear**

*“Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Turn around*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Touch the ground*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear,*

*Touch the ground*

*Teddy Bear, teddy bear.*

*That will do……”*

Clap, whack, twat, clap… the rope makes a slapping sound against the pavement. Our chant matches the rhythm of the rope. I look across the yard and bound down the steps of the porch to join my friends. Lela and Francine are turning the rope. Toostie and two other girls are in line. Janet, my best friend, waves me over “Come on Myrtis Jean”.

**Miss Mary Mack**

*Miss Mary Mack, Mack*

*All dressed in black, black, black*

*With silver buttons, buttons, buttons*

*All down her back, back, back….*

**Notes for from the Back Porch**: to be further developed into more formal narrative

We live in apartment building; which seems like a bunch of boxes stacked on top of each other; there is a courtyard instead of a back yard;

I walk to school, a big red building, I walk to church which is also big; everything in Chicago is bigger than in Mississippi and people move faster; grass is replace by concrete; where did winter come from?

From the back porch, I see my mother hanging clothes from a washing machine which is a “basement”; my father is turning the crank to make homemade ice cream

I see different peddlers: Watkins products, a man with a cart sharpening knives, a man selling Life Insurance and the “numbers man “selling policy slips. The milkman delivers milk and eggs to the back porch. They are both white and that is weird; never saw a white person doing anything for Negroes.

I see Mama’s first husband, my real grandfather Lee Jordan. He used to be a Pullman Porter and can tell eyewitness stories about the Race Riot of 1918 in Chicago.

I see my other grandmother Mrs. Ida Brown-Mamo. She was ordered off the sharecropper’s plantation as a toddler in Georgia separated from all of her family, she became an orphan; her mother was a field hand, her father the white plantation owner; her pale skin, blue eyes were evidence enough for the sharecropper’s wife to establish Mamao’s paternity. “Get rid of her” She is a survivor; never knew any of her biological family, married at 18, widowed at 25 raised 6 children alone as a wash woman; sent three of her children to college- Tennessee State, Clark College and Alcorn. All three of her son served in World War 11. Mamao was run over by a street car when she relocated to Chicago, but survived; without any formal education she managed to pass the Illinois state Exam to become a License Practical Nurse, She was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a bi-lateral mastectomy, she survived. I remember the smell of her gumbo and homemade eggnog. She babysits when our parents go to work.

I gather with my friends to walk the 47th street to shop at the South Center Department Store; or we might walk to the Regal Theater for the picture show or a live Stage Show: Red Fox. Jackie Wilson or Jerry Butler and the Impressions.

My brother and I get our tonsils removed at the same time Provident Hospital We also get baptized at the same time; at the church our parents have joined-Zion Temple Missionary Baptist Church, we get identical model bikes for Christmas

I love school and make more friends except I get taunted for being “light-skinned and having good hair” I join a book club and we walk the George Hall Library to get books to read. It snows from Thanksgiving to the end of January.

Our father takes on rides in the summer to Navy Pier to get shrimp and to Jew Town to get Polish sausages sandwiches. We enjoy riding the bus to Comiskey Park to watch the White Sox play or to Riverview Park to ride the roller coasters. The highlight of the summer was the Bud Billiken Parade or going to the 39th Street beach for a picnic. I thought Lake Michigan was so awesome; different from the view of the Mississippi as the train would leave Paducah, Kentucky and enter Illinois at Cairo.

My father tells us we’re moving; out south” So we moved from “down south , to “up north” and now we’re moving “out south” to a better neighborhood- someplace called Woodlawn/ Hyde Park.