Spring 5-9-2017

Secrets on Morgan Hill: A Story of an Unlikely Friendship Amid an Apartheid South

Camille Kleidysz-Ferreira

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast_etd

Part of the African American Studies Commons, American Studies Commons, Fiction Commons, Oral History Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mast_etd/10
Secrets on Morgan Hill: A Story of an Unlikely Friendship Amid an Apartheid South

A Thesis
Presented to
The Academic Faculty

By
Camille Kleidysz- Ferreira

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in American Studies

Kennesaw State University
May 2017
# Table of Contents

**Introduction: The Burden of History and Fiction** ................................................................. 3

**Part One: Literature Review** ........................................................................................................... 5
The Racial Theatre of Acworth, Kennesaw, and Atlanta Georgia ........................................ 5
Behind the Color Line 1903-1923: Creative Non-Fiction and Historical Fiction .......... 14
Oral Traditions and Historical Fiction .................................................................................. 18
Georgia’s Contemporary Black Authors ........................................................................ 24
Bibliography ................................................................................................................................. 29

**Part Two: Secrets on Morgan Hill: An Unlikely Friendship Amid A Southern Apartheid** .......... 30

**Prologue** ........................................................................................................................................... 31
When Home Calls ......................................................................................................................... I
Veiled Brokenness ....................................................................................................................... II
When She Awakes ....................................................................................................................... III
Acworth, Georgia 1939 .............................................................................................................. IV
Blurred Color lines ..................................................................................................................... V
Defiance In The Dark .................................................................................................................. VI
The Shifting ................................................................................................................................. VII
What Secrets Taught Us .............................................................................................................. VIII
Author’s Notes ............................................................................................................................. 62
Introduction
The Burden of History and Fiction

“How much of the burden of history can fiction bear?” – Margaret Walker

Comprehensive historical research can often become the inspiration for art. The greatest pieces of historical fiction, are a result of years of historic scholarship before the creation of a compelling historical narrative or fiction piece. Through my two-year ethnographic study and collection of oral histories of the black community, surrounding the historic Bethel A.M.E. church in Acworth, Georgia, I was told a story about a friendship between two little girls who remained friends until the end of their lives. What I found unique and inspirational about the story was that it was about two girls from different races who developed an unbending alliance amid the tensions of an apartheid South.

Interracial friendships were complex and often layered with tensions surrounding race relations during the Jim Crow era. Despite the constrictions of legalized segregation in the region, black and white residents interacted in ways that defined Southern culture and influenced the identity of some black people in the South. There is the national narrative about the history of race relations in the South that is easier for the public to comprehend and grasp, but ignores the reality of long-term friendships between black and white people like the story told to me by Abbie Parks, a white historical preservationist and activist in Acworth, Georgia.

Stories about interracial friendships outside of the stereotypical expectations of both black and white people are typically the untold stories, and maybe included in the local narratives, but
become silenced in the national narratives regarding race relations in the segregated South. The friendship between the girls living in Acworth, Georgia as told to me by Abbie Parks lasted from the 1930s to the late 1970s amidst social change that significantly impacted the everyday lives and perspectives of everyone in the South, like the story I heard from Parks about a thriving friendship of two little girls in Acworth. I propose to write a short historical fiction piece that explores and illustrates the universal themes of mutual acceptance and loyalty that is often at the core of any meaningful friendship that last over five decades. However, the unique journey of their friendship within a racially divided South will also explore the themes of friendships amid segregation, the development of a Black cultural identity with ties to Southern landscapes, the dynamics of systematic lynching in a small rural community, and the transformation of the Old South to the New South. The little girls in my fiction, like in the story that was told to me, will transition to grown women, experiencing the societal shifts of a changing South, and coping with the painful secrets that caused a rift in a small community, while trying to maintain a meaningful and solid friendship. In a larger context, my short fiction will provide an example of race relations and interactions in Acworth, Georgia.
The Racial Theatre of Acworth, Kennesaw, and Atlanta Georgia

Patrice Shelton Lassiter’s *Images of America Generations of Black Life* is a pictorial historical journey of generations of Black life in Kennesaw, Marietta, and Acworth, Georgia. Lassiter’s pictorial history documents three vibrant and diverse black communities during the 19th and early twentieth centuries. Throughout the text, there are an array of well-preserved vintage photos of citizens in Acworth, Georgia, and carefully researched slave records of the prominent black families of Acworth, Georgia. Throughout the text, Lassiter documents her research of slave records and states:

“I anxiously looked on the microfilm screen, searching and hoping to link one of the former slaves to the 1870 Federal Population Census, the first population census to include newly freed slaves. In order to do this, I had to list all the slaves by their first names and their surnames (the last name of their former slave owner). In doing this, I make the assumption that at least 10% of these former slaves kept their slave owners last name after slavery ended. The only slave names that survived in Cobb County are the ones listed in the Last Will and Testaments of former slave owners dated from 1853 to 1864, and the names given to me by the descendants of former slaves."  

Lassiter’s intense research of Cobb County’s slave history served as an inspiration for the proposed historical fiction piece. Reading through the slave records, and viewing the vintage photos of distinguished black families allowed the black history of Acworth to spring to life. Studying the original photos of the array of black families allowed the reader to have an intimate connection with the people who once resided in the segregated communities of rural Cobb County. The historical photos revealed the diverse socioeconomic status that existed in the segregated rural black communities of Acworth and Kennesaw. Photos of black domestics, farmers, funeral owners, factory and mill workers, entrepreneurs, midwives, nurses, tailors, seamstresses, clergy, doctors, and dentist were all featured. It is clear that the black citizens of the Acworth community did not have to question their ancestral roots because they had a clear and concise familial connection to the freed slaves that built the A.M.E. Bethel church that has endured into the 21st century. Lassiter’s documents of black life in Acworth Georgia, during the late nineteenth and twentieth century, allowed the proposed fiction to have solid visuals during the process of character development.

Thomas Allan Scott’s *Cobb County, Georgia and the origins of the Suburban South A Twentieth -Century History* reveals the social dynamics of segregation in Cobb County. Scott states: “Black men were never in greater danger than when they found themselves alone with white women”2 Scott gives the example of a case in 1900 Cobb county, that reveals the racial tensions in Georgia. On March 15, 1900, Amanda Snellgrove a teenage girl was gathering firewood for dinner a hundred yards from her family farm. That evening she encountered John Baily, a black man who allegedly threatened and sliced her nose with his knife. According to *Marietta Journal*, the details of the encounter are unclear; it is unknown if the meeting was

---

accidental or if Bailey was lurking in the dark to do harm intently. Regardless of the details, Amanda ran away in fear screaming, and told her brother and mother. Once the sheriff was notified, he rode out to Bailey’s house and picked up John and his brother. John Bailey was immediately identified and taken to a jailhouse off Marietta Square. Bailey received representation from the law firm Mozley & Weaver, but to no avail. The judge found sufficient evidence to allow the case to go to trial.³

At 12:45 A.M. at the Marietta Square, a mob of one hundred masked men, surrounded the jail house to take Bailey despite the Sherriff’s plea to allow justice to prevail. The Sheriff was overtaken by the mob of men and Bailey was taken to Glover Park where they attempted to lynch him, however, somehow the mob of men lost the rope and Bailey dropped to the ground. Upon falling to the ground the mob proceeded to shoot him several times. Bailey survived and later confessed to the sheriff, doctor, and father before he died of gun wounds. Marietta Journal reported:

“African -American women became extremely angry and made veiled threats of burning the town down. The reporter said he could not understand why the women put loyalty to their race above their gender when the real issue was the protection of females from brute attacks. The distraught Black women obviously regarded the murder of a suspect in state custody as the central issue. ⁴

Scott’s research reveals “white Georgians soon forgot the murder of John Bailey. He was just one of at least 441 African-American and 19 Caucasian victims of lynch law in the state during the half century between 1880 and 1930.”⁵

³ Ibid 27
⁴ Ibid 28
⁵ Ibid 27-28
The historical account of John Bailey reveals the racial tensions that existed in Cobb County, particularly for black men. Black men were often the target of unfair accusations and denied a fair process of justice that resulted in lynching on Georgian trees before angry mobs of white citizens. John Bailey’s account is necessary to support one of the conflicts within the proposed historic fiction. The proposed fiction about the Black community of Acworth, Georgia will feature an unfortunate event of a black man disappearing into the night from the town of Acworth in a possible lynching. Lassiter’s *Generations of Black Life* reveals the cohesiveness of the segregated black communities in Cobb County. This sense of community is also revealed in Scott’s historical account of John Bailey when the black women of Marietta reacted to Bailey’s murder and wanted to collectively take action against what was perceived as an injustice against their community’s sons.

Mattie Prater Wilcox Ivy was born January 14, 1903 in Crawford County, Georgia, and was a victim of racial strife in a rural, Georgia town when she witnessed a lynching at the age of twenty-seven. The Klu Klux Klan had violently fractured authentic relationships between white and black citizens of Ocilla, Georgia. “The Ku Klux’s done got a colored man and they are hanging him up there on side the road.” Catherine Oglesby documents the lynching as having a profound impact on Mattie Prater’s life, and describes the lynching as making her “scared of white folks.”

Oglesby research revealed that there was a decline of lynchings from 1919 to 1929. In the year of 1930 the lynchings increased. Oglesby states:

> 4,742 lynchings reported between a longer stretch of time, 1882 to 1968, nearly three-fourths of whom

---

were black victims. The numbers represent reported lynchings, “presumably only a fraction of violent black deaths at the hands of whites.” How many were unreported is impossible to know. Georgia and Mississippi “have the dubious distinction” of leading the region in numbers of reported lynchings, with no reason to doubt the same distinction in those unreported.

The documentation of how the element of the Klu Klux Klan in small, rural Southern towns could sever genuine white and black relationships, due to their systematic violence, through the practice of lynching, is documented through Mattie Prater’s experience when she witnessed a lynching. Mattie Prater grew up feeling secure in Ocilla, Georgia and developed meaningful friendships with the white residents of Ocilla however, the public lynching changed the social dynamic of her hometown. Scott’s *Cobb County, Georgia and the origins of the Suburban South* describes the lynching of John Baily being a public spectacle in the Marietta Square. The lynching that took place in Ocilla was a well-documented lynching that the white residents described as a “deplorable necessity”. Lynchings were often carried out by what is described as “mob justice” and the public violence often tore rural towns apart allowing the notion of the color-line to become more pronounced. The proposed fiction explores the issue of abduction and lynching and the effect that this fierce injustice has on black and white relations in the rural South.

James C. Cobb’s *The Brown Decision, Jim Crow, and Southern Identity* writes from the perspective of an acclaimed historian and a white southerner who is of the last generation to grow up during the southerner apartheid. Cobb reveals the invisibility of the black Southern and

---

7 Ibid 21-23
the complete dismissal of black Southern communities’ existence. Cobb examines Sterling Brown’s scathing critique of the dismissal of black culture and communities in the South. Brown brought to the forefront the controversial sentiments of the white perspective in the text *What The Negro Wants*. He cited a white author who claimed that Anglo-Saxons made up nearly one hundred percent of the population of the South. According to Brown, the invisibility of one-third of the inhabitants allowed “whites to only see the people who counted.”

Brown argued that the invisibility of rural black communities was due to black Southerners not being considered the actors within the racially divided Southern theater, but were merely a part of the background set. Cobb argues that the Jim Crow South created a space for black Southerners to remain invisible and muted. Scott’s *Cobb County A Twentieth Century History* reveals the tyranny that many African Americans of the South lived under, however, Lassiter’s pictorial documentation of *Black history in Cobb County* reveals a thriving black community despite the confines of Jim Crow. Rural Black communities were able to prevail and form a strong sense of community despite the racial divide.

Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* tells the story of the Great Migration of black citizens fleeing the South to the industrial North and the West. Wilkerson compares the migration from the South to the European immigration experience. Wilkerson’s writings support the theory that the black Southern diaspora created a new cultural identity in various regions throughout America. Wilkerson examines the culture that black Southerners had to leave behind for the hope of a better life in different regions of America. Wilkerson states: “As the best they could, the people brought the Old Country with

---

them – a taste for hominy grits and pole greens cooking in salt pork the “sure enoughs” and “I rekons” and the superstitions of new moons and itchy palms that had seeped into their being.” In the new regions, the black Southerners surrounded themselves with other black Southerners. These were the people with whom they shared social commonalities; people they knew in their small farm towns, their churches and segregated elementary schools and high schools. These Southern ties that they forged during The Great Migration would remain for the rest of their lives.⁹

Wilkerson examines how the Southern black diaspora’s cultural practices had an influence on their new regions. Their black Southern customs and traditions transformed holidays. Black families across the nation continued to carry their tradition of eating black-eyed peas and collard greens on New Year’s Day for a prosperous New Year and shooting shotguns in the night air as they did in Mississippi and Georgia. The black Southern diaspora continued to transform black church culture in different regions of the country. “It turned out they were not so different from Sicilians settling in Little Italy, or Swedes in Minnesota.”¹⁰ Previous texts discuss the Great Migration and examine why black Southerners fled the South to the North, but did not compare The Black Southern Diaspora’s experience to the European immigrants’ experience when they emigrated from Europe to the industrial North. Wilkerson acknowledges that black Southern culture was like the experience of other immigrants. Like the European immigrants who sought to preserve their culture in their New World, black Southerners naturally attempted to maintain their culture during the Great Migration in their theoretical New World. Wilkerson’s comparison

---


¹⁰ Ibid 160
of the black Southern diaspora in the industrial North to European immigrants who settled in the North was a profound observation. Wilkerson supported the argument by giving concrete examples of how the black Southern diaspora grouped together in the North for the purpose of continuing their Southern traditions, and revealed evidence of how they transformed their environment in the North for the purpose of allowing their new urban space to have traces of their Southern environment that was left behind. Wilkerson’s *Warmth of Other Suns* supports the theme of The Great Migration from the Old South in the proposed historical fiction. One of the main characters becomes a part of The Great Migration by leaving Acworth, Georgia and eventually discovers a new home in Harlem and forges new relationships with other Southern immigrants who reside in Harlem.

Ronald H. Bayor’s *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* dispels the notion that Atlanta is the “city too busy to hate” and that Atlanta struggled historically to eliminate racial bias. Bayor’s research reveals the city's post-Civil War history, documenting the racist and segregationist origin of schools, streets, buildings and posts. Rather than the standard narrative of white vs. black, there is a range of individuals and groups who wanted to stop the absurd fixation on race but were unable to effect change. “Restrictions on black employment and occupational advancement appeared early, as did many successful black attempts to overcome white-imposed limitations. Although some whites, and black leaders such as Booker T. Washington, saw that the South would need black economic advancement in order to prosper, little was done to produce this result.”11 The oral histories from Acworth, Georgia that inspired the proposed historical fiction, recount a history of a divided community that navigated well within the

---

restrictions of the mandates of Jim Crow, but also recall “knowing their place” in a fragmented world that they believed to be normal.

Donald Lee Grant’s *The Way It Was In The South: The Black Experience in Georgia* is a historical narrative that illustrates the African-American experience in Georgia from slavery in the Georgia Colony in 1751 to the examination of black Georgian’s innovation and persistence throughout Georgia history. *The Way It Was* is an impressive collection of 250 years of black history in Georgia. The book began with the late Donald Lee Grant professor emeritus of Fort Valley State College. After the death of Dr. Grant, the two-thousand-page manuscript was edited by his son Johnathan Grant for publication. Dr. Grant sought to convey a more accurate portrayal of African American history in Georgia opposed to the false history being promoted by what Grant described as racist stereotypes being pushed by white power structures in the South. Grant also sought to highlight the monumental achievements of black Georgians in the face of adversity.\(^\text{12}\)

The book is arranged in sixteen chapters in chronological order. The first three chapters render a unique historical perspective from colonization to the end of the Reconstruction era. The book begins with the history of blacks in Georgia beyond the British colonist:

> The history of Blacks in Georgia began long before their enslavement by British colonist. Blacks were intimately involved in the Spanish exploration and conquest of the New World from the beginning. One Pedro Nunez, was a pilot for Columbus. Cortez, Balboa, and Pissarro also had significant contingents of blacks. It is likely that most, if not all, of the several Spanish expeditions to what is

now the South Atlantic Coast of the United States had blacks in their ranks.\(^{13}\)

The final five chapters examine the lives of African Americans in modern Georgia. Despite lynching, segregation, and consistent degradation by white oppression *The Way It Was* illustrates the incredible achievements made by African Americans in Georgia. Grant gives an example in the twentieth-century, black citizens in Georgia protesting segregation by boycotting railroads, stores, and streetcars. Amidst the protest of social inequality, one of the most significant protests for equality for the Georgian black community was quality education for their children. The resistance against unequal education was also demonstrated by the heroic acts of teachers and students who endured physical harassment and consistent burnings of their schools across Georgia.\(^{14}\) Pullen argues that *The Way It Was In The South* provides significant historical information that is not portrayed in the general history books in the classroom, but is Georgia history that is accessible to the general public and students. However, from a scholarly perspective, reading *The Way It Was* may be a frustrating read because of the lack of footnotes to help guide to interesting historical information.\(^{15}\)

*The Way It Was* is a historical narrative that closely aligns with a history book. The prose is not only lovely, but are a raw depiction of the atrocities of Georgia history. The core of American History and African American history is heartbreaking, violent, and brutal. David Lee

\(^{13}\)Donald Lee Grant, *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia* (University of Georgia Press, 1993),3.

\(^{14}\)Ibid 444

\(^{15}\)Ibid 445
Grant was a historian who had the courage to tell the ugly reality of the brutal race relations in Georgia during slavery and beyond. If a reader is interested in Georgian or African American history, *The Way It Was reveals* a side of black history that has typically been dismissed or discounted. Like many historical narratives, it is not considered a scholarly read, however, in the context of the genre, its prose are laden with difficult historical facts that tragically affected African Americans, but can be beneficial when discovering the adversities that black Georgians overcame to thrive in modern Georgia successfully.

*The Way It Was* illustrates the universal themes of Southern culture in the Old South. Racial angst and triumph are relevant to the topics of the proposed historical fiction. The proposed fiction based on the collected oral histories from the residents of Acworth, Georgia, will reveal a narrative of characters that experience defeat from the racial divisions within the South, but will also triumph over the obstacles that were built within the racial theaters of the South because of the togetherness of the black communities in the rural South during the Jim Crow era.

**Behind the Color Line 1903-1923: Creative Non-Fiction and Historical Fiction**

W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* is an autobiographical account of the nuances of African-American life after the Emancipation Proclamation from lynching, poverty, and illiteracy. *The Souls of Black Folks* centers around the theme of what Du Bois describes as “double-consciousness”; the burden that most African Americans carry when trying to navigate their blackness through the lens of the dominant culture.

The opening of *The Souls of Black Folks* addresses Du Bois’ analysis of the major problem facing the twentieth century. “This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the
problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.”

The Souls of Black Folks explores the journey behind the color line. The proposed historical fiction will seek to explore the social dynamics behind the color line when the main protagonist dares to blur the rigid boundaries of an apartheid South. Du Bois approached The Souls of Black Folks with his training as a sociologist interconnected with Western philosophy, literature, history, and African-American literature and folk traditions. The proposed historical fiction piece will also approach the narrative with an interdisciplinary lens relying on the historical facts to guide the essence of the story.

Chapter IV “Of The Meaning Of Progress” features a creative nonfiction piece in the Souls Of Black Folks that includes antidotes of his personal journey as a teacher through the rural South. The chapter “Of The Meaning Of Progress” highlights Du Bois’ eloquently written prose from the perspective of a sociologist, cultural critic, and historian. “Of The Meaning Of Progress” begins with the prose of beautiful imagery. “Once Upon a time I taught school in the hills of Tennessee, where the broad dark vale of the Mississippi begins to roll and crumble to greet the Alleghenies.”

Du Bois began a journey through Tennessee in a quest to become an effective educator and proceeded to start a school by meeting with a white commissioner who also wanted a neighboring white school. The white commissioner was friendly and even invited Du Bois to dinner. A seemingly friendly dinner gradually highlighted the complexities of the color line in the South. Du Bois describes how he felt “the shadow of the veil” when dinner was served; the

---


17 Ibid 62
white man ate first, and Du Bois was left to eat by himself because of the “veil” of his color.\textsuperscript{18} The theme of the color line and the “veil” of his color is significant to the proposed historical fiction; the main characters attempt to maintain a meaningful friendship that appears to blur the color line. However, the restrictions of the color line persist, and mandates of segregation continue to impede their friendship. Du Bois’ study of race relations in America coincides with the tensions found in many historical narratives about the rural South of that era, and can be explored and utilized in a contemporary America that is still struggling to realize racial harmony. One of the first experimental fictional examples of this is \textit{Cane} by Jean Toomer.

Toomer’s profound transition began after a trip to Georgia. Toomer became a principal for a black school in Sparta, Georgia. Sparta, Georgia was the town where the father who abandoned his mother lived. While in Sparta, the various textures of Georgia’s rural black communities inspired Toomer to compose poetry, sketches, and stories. Toomer’s \textit{Cane} uniquely encompasses fiction, drama, and poetry that inspire imagery of black life in the rural South. \textit{Cane}’s literary depictions of the South are ethereal and surreal; while depicting the industrial North with disturbing imagery of concrete buildings and asphalt streets.

Jean Toomer’s \textit{Cane} is one of the literary masterpieces of the Harlem Renaissance. \textit{Cane} illustrates the beautiful images of African-American culture that is seared into the reading audience’s memory. Acclaimed novelist Waldo Frank proclaimed:

\begin{quote}
“A poet has risen among our American youth who has known how to turn the essences of materials of his Southland into the essences and materials of literature…The fashioning of beauty is ever foremost in his inspiration. He has made songs and lovely stories of his land. \textit{Cane} is a harbinger of a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid 65
literary force of whose invaluable future I believe
no reader of this book would be in doubt.”

Toomer experiments with Du Bois’ notion of the “color line” by illustrating this sentiment through provocative poetry, narratives, and sketches. The narrative titled “Blood-Burning Moon” addresses the conflict between races. Toomer reveals major themes of conflict between races with the forbidden love between Louisa and Bob Stone, and the black woman as the sex object; Louisa being the object of desire, but not properly loved and cherished by men. The themes of “Blood Morning Moon” coincide with the themes in the proposed fiction. One of the minor characters is a Louisa like character being the desire of men, and eventually suffering at the hands of the very men who desire the minor character.

Du Bois approaches the issue of the color line through an interdisciplinary lens to offer a nuanced perspective for the black and white divide in the South. Tommer experiments with the sentiment of the color line through the beauty of poetry and prose to illustrate the binary ugliness of the Jim Crow South and the beauty of Southern landscapes. Du Bois and Toomer found their greatest inspiration for their works from the landscapes, culture, and people of the black rural small towns.

Toomer expressed his stories of the deep South from an outside gaze, with the ability to compare the cultural textures of the South to the rugged industrial North. The themes of the complexities of Du Bois’ color line and Tommer’s proactive prose and poetry illustrates how

---

19Jean Toomer, *Cane* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1923), ix.

20 Ibid ix
black and white relationships are always hindered by the “the color line.” The overall theme of the “color line” relates to the themes of the proposed historical fiction piece whose characters are caught between the “veil” of color and the social dynamics that commence behind the Southern racial divide.

**Oral Traditions and Historical Fiction**

Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* illustrates the deep racial conflicts within a small rural town. Wintz believes that one of the most important “white” novels addressing race relations in the South is Smith’s *Strange Fruit*. The narrative centers on the theme of a “world divided against itself” Black versus White, and aligns with the provocative themes of a forbidden interracial love affair like in *Cane’s* “Blood-Burning Moon.” In the novel, Maxwell, Georgia is divided into what is described as White Town and Colored Town. Winz argues that Smith tries to allow her reading audience to understand the social dynamics in the small Georgian town by writing from the perspective of white and black residents of Maxwell, Georgia when attempting to convey the dysfunctional black and white relationship of the South through a forbidden love affair. The two main characters consist of a white man who falls in love with a black woman in a small rural town. The proposed historical fiction centers around the themes of complicated race relations; not a forbidden love, however, the unspoken racial divide within the town of Acworth does not allow the girls to sit in the same classroom, worship together in a congregation, or enjoy parks and recreation in a public setting.

The South is a region in America where blacks and whites have a relationship. It has been a dysfunctional relationship historically. However, it is a relationship nonetheless with various social dynamics that add multiple textures to Southern culture. It is important to examine a Southern novel written from a white authors perspective; despite the racial divide in the South
white and black culture is interconnected. Like Toomer, Smith highlights the racial divide at the turn of the century in her narrative but desires for her reading audience to understand the reason behind the racial divide and hatred in the South. Smith seeks to emphasize the myth of racial superiority that whites where taught to believe that they were superior, and thus this belief manifested itself in laws of segregation. Smith’s *Strange Fruit* is an indictment of white racism in a Jim Crow South, however, fails to release the African American characters from the tropes of the Mammy, Black Buck, and Tragic Mulattoes that so many black characters of that time were subjected to. The proposed thesis will seek to develop African American characters that expand beyond the typical tropes of African Americans from the rural South.

Margaret Walker’s *How I Wrote Jubilee* is based on Walker’s research and writing process when composing her folk novel based on a true story of the life of Vyry, the child of a white plantation owner and a black mistress. Vyry bears witness to the South’s prewar glory, brutal history, the destruction of the war, and promises of rebuilding during the era of Reconstruction.

The creation of *Jubilee* is a product of the oral traditions that are prevalent in black culture and often serve as the historical foundation for the Black family. The proposed short historical fiction piece is based on the theme and process of collecting oral histories. Walker recalls her childhood being filled with nights of her grandmother telling stories about the real Vyry and Randall Ware, and the realities of slavery that only a former slave could convey. Walker’s grandmother was often defiant when her stories were challenged as being tales opposed to the truth. Walker’s grandmother would often respond by saying, “I’m not telling her tales. I’m
telling her the naked truth.” Based on the sentiment of telling the “naked truth” opposed to tales, Walker began to contemplate how she could merge the beauty of fiction with historical facts.21

How I Wrote Jubilee was instrumental in giving direction to the proposed thesis and helped to bring clarification on how a fiction writer could take historical fact and discover a way to allow the historical narrative to become vivid with an element of suspense. How I Wrote Jubilee details the journey of an author particularly a woman who is trying to compose fiction when striving to balance being a mother, wife, teacher, and black in a turbulent era in American history, while persevering for thirty-one years to complete a historical novel.22

Walker attempted her story when she was a nineteen-year-old senior in college. However, Walker ceased writing because as she explains “it did not sound right.” Walker began to work for the WPA in Chicago, reporting on the poor conditions of the slums in black neighborhoods. Walker continued to put the story of Jubilee aside when she attended the University of Ohio; a space where her poetry was understood by her professors, opposed to the main characters Vyry and Randall Ware.23

Walker sought to reveal her family’s truth through fiction, but it was important for Walker to present accurate historical facts. Walker completed numerous years of scholarship studying slavery, slave codes in Georgia, free blacks during slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction Era. Walker also visited the actual setting of her novel when traveling to Dawson, Georgia the birthplace of her grandmother, and to see Randall Ware’s grist mill and a gingerbread house.24

21 Margaret Walker, HOW I WROTE JUBILEE (Third World Press, 1972), 5.
22 Ibid 6
23 Ibid 6
24 Ibid 7
Walker revealed in *How I Wrote Jubilee* that she had been writing *Jubilee* all her life. Walker’s characters lived with her, and this became her method to allow her characters to gain a realistic voice and point of view. It was critical to substantiate her authentic story with historical research while maintaining the oral histories from her grandmother. However, as a fiction writer, Walker felt conflicted about her historical research while attempting to create beautiful prose for fiction. Walker stated, “how much of the burden of history can fiction bear?”

Walker finally completed *Jubilee* for her doctorate at the University of Iowa. The text allows readers to have an insight on Margaret Walker’s thirty-one-year journey in composing her acclaimed national bestseller. *How I Wrote Jubilee* helps readers who have an interest in historical fiction to gain an understanding that one discipline does not have to forsake the other. *Jubilee* follows the tradition of the historical narratives of that time, allowing a piece of fiction to reveal the harsh historical truths of the Deep South. *How I Wrote Jubilee* is a compelling work that has influenced the approach to the proposed fiction, as it relates to merging historical research with the beauty of fiction.

Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* retells the story of slavery, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction Era from the perspective of a black woman’s experience while employing the traditions of oral histories that have become the foundation of African-American culture and history. Walker and Toomer’s work was rediscovered in the 60s during the rise of Black Consciousness, and during a decade when the declaring of black cultural identity became paramount and compelled many Black Americans to discover black literature like *Cane* and Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*. Walker’s *Jubilee* is driven by the power of the narrator; derived from the protagonist, a slave named Vyry

---

25 Ibid 28
and Walker’s real life great-grandmother. Walker’s Jubilee is divided into three parts that represent historical periods and the span of Vyry’s life. The central themes of Jubilee consist of the black woman as the symbol of the preserver of black cultural identity, black folklore and music, and the black perspective of Christianity as a source of hope and freedom, and Southern identity and culture interconnected with black and white interactions.

Walker uses lyrics of spirituals and hymns to set the tone for the themes of her chapters. To introduce the necessary Reconstruction Era chapter forty-one begins with a hymn in the black folklore tradition:

“I am bound to the promise land, I am bound to the promise land, Oh who will come and go with me? I am bound to the promise land.”

Jubilee connects with some of the themes of Strange Fruit. Both works convey the notion that the history of the South is always interconnected with white and black interactions and often create a complex social dynamic within the South. Jubilee also relates to the proposed historical fiction; both narratives are inspired by oral histories. Jubilee’s story could not be found within traditional history books without Walker’s preservation of her grandmother’s oral histories. The African American perspective of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction era would have remained muted if it were not for the agency of oral traditions. Black women in Jubilee are the symbol of strength and the foundation of the black family. The proposed fiction also features a strong family of black women who became a circle of strength made of domestics and entrepreneurs within their community; maintaining a sense of family after the death of a father.

Alice Walker’s The Color Purple is an acclaimed bestseller about a profound relationship between two sisters who lived very different lives. One sister became a missionary in Africa, and

---

the other remained in rural Georgia as an abused child wife, but throughout time and distance, 
the sisterly bond and love never became severed. *The Color Purple* is filled with beautiful 
imagery of the rural South that effectively conveys to the reading audience the layers of life’s 
journey of pain, joy, love, fear, and tragedy. The main character Celie speaks to God in a series 
of letters that reveals an abused child wife who is broken and denied the proper education to 
write or speak, but consistently reveals her fragmented thoughts to God:

Dear God,

He act like he can’t stand me no more. Say I’m evil 
and always up to no good. He took my other little 
baby, a boy this time. But I don’t think he kilt it. I 
think he sold it to a man in Monticello. I got breasts 
full of milk running down myself. He say why don’t 
you look decent? Put on something. But what am I 
sposed to put on? I don’t have nothing.27

Alice Walker was born in rural Georgia where she grew up listening to oral stories from her 
grandfather. Walker was inspired to write about the character Mr. in *The Color Purple*. Margaret 
Walker and Alice Walker have both written American classics that have become acclaimed in 
the American literary canon because of the inspiration and importance of oral traditions in the 
African American culture. The themes in *The Color Purple* of love, race, family, and sisterhood 
are reflected in the proposed historical fiction piece. *The Color Purple* features letters to God 
from a distressed child’s perspective. This style is significant to the proposed historical fiction 
because the racial divide in Acworth, Georgia will be told from a child’s lens, and will feature 
two little girls that share an unlikely sisterhood throughout the span of their adult life.

---

Alistair Thomson’s *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History* examines significant transformations in the collecting of oral history, and highlights the important developments in the primary role of the oral historian. Thomson explores the dynamics of interpretation of memory, interdisciplinary approaches of interviewing, and personal understanding as it relates to history and memory. Thomson argues that a third paradigmatic shift in oral history affects the interviewer’s approach to the “objectivity” of the oral historian and the interpretation of history.  

Thomson states:

“One of the primary concerns of critics of oral history in the 1970s is that historians were creating, and thus unduly influencing, their sources. By the end of that decade oral historians like Portelli, Passerini, in Europe, and Frisch and Grele in North America had begun to question the objectivity and to celebrate the subjectivity of the interview relationship.”

The proposed fiction follows in the tradition of Margaret Walker and Alice Walker as it relates to allowing oral histories to become the foundation and inspiration for a historical fiction piece. Thomson highlights the subjectivity of oral histories. Oral history often relies on the interpretation of the interviewer’s perspective of history. The oral history becomes their personal interpretation of historical events, and at times, personal interpretations of history may vary. Thompson’s idea of recognizing the subjectivity of oral traditions is helpful when creating historical fiction. History is based on fact however, Thompson’s concept of the shifting

---


29 Ibid 1
interpretations of memory allows historians to go beyond ambiguous facts to understand the events of the past.

The proposed historical fiction piece will be guided by the oral histories collected by some of the black residents of Acworth, Georgia. Their oral histories about race relations in the Jim Crow south, typically did not align with the national narratives concerning race relations in the rural south. There were some residents who had fond memories of Acworth during Jim Crow, and others remembered events that supported the historical narratives about the early south that are often reveled in general history books.

**Georgia’s Contemporary Black Authors**

Raymond Andrews’ *Appalachee Red* is a part of a trilogy and efficiently conveys black life in the fictional Muskhogean County during the era of World War I to the onset of the Civil Rights Movement. Andrews describes his first book beginning as a poem but believed that the breath of the story was beyond the format of poetry. He attempted to compose the narrative in the form of a short story, and then a novella until Andrews realized that his writing style was too wordy to be confined to a short story or novella. He immediately understood that his focus when writing

---

novels should be on what he knew and completely understood; small towns and rural black folks in the South, and “their relationship to their land and their white neighbors.”

Andrews believed that most narratives of that era only portrayed black characters as one-dimensional victims opposed to complex characters with vibrant lives. Andrews states:

“True Black people have been victimized, but they should not be lumped together in the eyes of others as one type. In our lives, we have our daily soap operas of religious fanatics, intellects, prudes, materialists, radicals, conservatives, murderers, philanthropist, racists, dancers, cowboys, and all the other “characters” any race of people offers. But sadly, because of television and the cinema, most people now regard Afro-Americans chiefly in terms of the inner-city ghettos with their crime, drugs, and poverty. Such a world exists but is one I never knew. I could not write honestly about it even if I wanted. My American roots (like those of most Afro-Americans) are Southern rural. This particular land and the individuals who have lived and died on it are what my books are about.”

Andrews’ understood the struggles of living in the rural South, and the assault of domestic terrorism within their Southern landscapes is evident at the beginning of *Appalache Red* as he begins his narrative with Langston Hughes’ poem, *Song For A Dark Girl*. The speaker of the poem, a Black girl laments the loss of her lover who was lynched on a Southern tree. The proposed fiction piece highlights the unfortunate event of a lynching. Andrews’ prose is simultaneously humorous, eloquent, and raw with a vivid array of characters that echo the life in

31 Ibid vii

32 Ibid viii

33 Ibid 5
small town rural black communities. He successfully interconnects multiple layers of narratives and characters into one enthralling story that allows the reader to experience the journey of the complex race relations in the South during the end of the World War I era to the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. The proposed fiction piece will feature different time periods and regions of the country to reflect a narrative that will be layered with the different life experiences of an array of characters.

Andrews’ *Appalache Red* supports the themes in the proposed historical fiction; the themes of African Americans developing ties to the rural South through family roots and land ownership, and highlights the theory that Southern identity is not only designated and demonstrated through white Southern identity. Black rural life reveals that black Southern identity developed, existed, and influenced Southern culture since the conception of America.

Tina McElroy Ansa’s *Ugly Ways* is a bestselling novel about three sisters who reunite in their hometown in Mulberry, Georgia for their mother’s funeral. Betty owns two beauty salons in Mulberry; Emily is a researcher in Atlanta, and Annie Ruth is an anchorwoman in Los Angeles. The three sisters were raised by a very strict mother who constantly reminded the girls of their ugly ways and insisted on being called “Mudear” (an endearing black Southern term that is short for “my dear”) and often reserved for the elder woman of a black family. The sister’s father Ernest spent his life supporting Mudear while working in the chalk mines.

The return to their mother’s funeral results in the sisters venting about their overbearing mother and the memories of their past. Annie Ruth, the youngest sister, tries to come to terms with her nervous breakdown before she took her anchor job in Los Angeles and her mother’s struggle to accept her once delicate emotional condition. The narrator states that Mudear claimed
that Annie Ruth had a heart attack as opposed to a breakdown. “A breakdown. What she got to breakdown about?”34

Ansa follows in the tradition of Raymond Andrews by not making the black characters ideal or one dimensional, but rather characters that had real flaws and weaknesses and that dared to show resentment towards their mother around the time of her funeral. *Ugly Ways* has the theme of “coming home” to the small town of one’s childhood. The theme of returning home is a part of the proposed fiction when the main character travels from Harlem back to her childhood home in Acworth, Georgia for her mother’s funeral. At the time of her mother’s funeral, the protagonist is confronted with her ugly past.

Alice Walker’s *In Love and Trouble* is a series of short stories that reveals the life’s journey of black women. The prose of the short stories are not overwhelming, but pure, lovely, and ugly. Like Andrews and Ansa, the characters are not denied the complete human experience and will reveal a sense of rawness that can at times feel uncomfortable. “RoseLilly” is about a woman with four children who works at a clothing factory, and is desperate to escape her harsh and mundane life. Roselily gave one of her children to the child’s father because she believed that he had a better education than her, and would give her son a more prosperous life. Roselily despises her work at the factory and believes that she is not providing for her children that are remaining at home. When a man that she meets offers her marriage, she views his marriage proposal as an escape from her life despite the restrictive religious differences.

She believes that marrying a man of the Islam faith would bring her respectability that she was unable to obtain as a single mother with four children. Roselily agrees to a loveless marriage

---

and does not understand his religion, but her husband promised her that she would not have to work a day in her life if she agreed to marry him, and a marriage without love was not of importance to Roselily if she did not have to go back to the factory to work. Roselily thinks about how her life has become. Roselily now must cover her head in public because of her husband’s religion, and wonders how the women she grew up with would accept her, but she is willing to endure the criticism because Roselily is allowed to escape her life as a factory worker, and is able to stay home to raise her children.

Memories crash against her. Memories of her being bare to the sun. She wonders what it would be like. Not to have to go to a job. Not to work in a sewing plant. Not to worry about learning to sew straight seams in workingmen’s overalls, jeans, and dress pants. Her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly, promising her rest she had prayed for.35

The protagonist in “Roselily” reflects the lives of many women who are burdened with life’s hardships and view marriage as an escape. The main character in the proposed historical fiction also marries a man to escape her painful past and Southern identity. The marriage is instrumental in transforming her and allows her to separate herself from her rural town of Acworth, Georgia and enables the character to celebrate a new journey in Harlem.

The proposed historical fiction piece will reveal a history of Acworth, Georgia that has not been conveyed in history books. Southern identity and culture is not simple. Southern identity and culture are entangled with the forbidden, ugliness, and beauty of life. It is a culture that is interconnected with black and white interactions. It is a history that has been influenced and transformed by the African slaves, in the form of changing Southern landscapes, food, music, dialect, and relationships. The story of the two little girls embracing a friendship amid an

35 Alice Walker, In Love & Trouble: Stories (Open Road Media, 2011),5.
apartheid South that prevented two children from exchanging thoughts in a classroom, worshipping in the same church, playing in the open in the same park, swimming in the same lake, eating together in a diner, and enjoying their favorite motion picture in the same row of seats will be illustrated through fiction. Despite the divide of the color line, their friendship endured in the rural town of Acworth, Georgia until their end.
Bibliography


WALKER, MARGARET. *HOW I WROTE JUBILEE*, 1972.


Secrets on Morgan Hill
An Unlikely Friendships Amid a Southern Apartheid
The emancipated slaves of Acworth, Georgia emerged from the dust of General Sherman’s Atlanta Campaign. Through their tireless toil, they developed cultural ties to the emerald landscapes nestled in the foothills of North Georgia. They were determined to forge a community. A community of safety amid danger and uncertainty. Their perseverance became their inspiration to build. Black, calloused hands steadily placed brick upon brick until a cathedral of life rose to the sky with a brass bell that rang in the hearts and spirits of Black citizens residing in Bethel Town. They dwelled in a divided town. A town that projected rays of light, and yet muted their pain through veils of secrecy. The transformation of Acworth began when the perceived face of the enemy became their neighbor. In 1926, a widower from Philadelphia caught a train to the mystifying rural South, seeking a place to establish a new life. He rode the train throughout the Southern countryside until he discovered Acworth, Georgia; a town looking for new industry. The listless town was barren with docile dirt roads in stark contrast to the bustling cobblestone streets of Philadelphia. Despite the glaring stares, and the disdain at the thought of a Yankee buying land in Acworth, he decided to purchase a cotton field north of downtown Acworth. In weeks, cotton fields were stripped, and the Abbott’s Mill was built in 1927.

Once the Abbot’s Mill was established Joseph Abbott sent for his three young children. Blossoming, scared children whose hearts were fragmented and vacant from the loss of their young mother. Without the guiding hands of a mother, they traveled to a new world, a world that was more complex than they could possibly understand. Mr. Abbott immediately moved into an eight-bedroom Victorian home. A forsaken dusty house with chipped, faded paint that lacked warmth until a young widow maid named Lucinda Hill stood on the porch of Abbott Manor with her precocious four-year-old daughter. Lucinda’s presence was the beginning of Abbott’s new life. Lucinda was a woman in mourning, a young mother who lost her husband to typhoid fever. Joseph Abbott immediately hired Lucinda and introduced her to his three children. He briefly showed her around Abbott Manor while mumbling instructions for her daily domestic duties. He left home at sunrise until he returned home in the dark for dinner. Lucinda Hill could feel the Abbott children’s brokenness. The loneliness and uncertainty were revealed in their forlorn expressions. The countenance of the children mirrored Lucinda’s little daughter Alma’s dazed stares when she lost her father to what the elders in Bethel Town called the cursed fever. Lucinda remained numb unable to nurture her pain, but could only offer her daughter and the Abbott children pieces of love that were left from her ravaged soul.
Lucinda’s first day at Abbott’s Manor consisted of cleaning the children. The Abbott children looked disheveled. Their father was the constant, dutiful provider, but distant and preoccupied. The Abbott boys had dirt smudges on their freckled cheeks, and Mary Katherine’s hair was in two tangled ponytails with a soiled gray dress that smelled of pipe smoke. Lucinda was determined not only to clean the children but to help them feel joy again, a joy that she longed to feel after the loss of her husband. The bond that Alma Mae and Mary Katherine created was profound. Alma and Mary became each other’s aid to the healing of their broken hearts. Their inseparable adolescent journey began when they were four. Alma and Mary would play during the day while Lucinda worked until dark. During Mary Katherine’s first year in Acworth, she would cry profusely in the evening when Lucinda left to return to Bethel Town. Mary Katherine would run onto the red clay roads leading to Bethel Town until Lucinda would finally hear the tapping of her little feet. She would tearfully tug onto Lucinda’s dress begging her not to leave. Mr. Abbott observed his daughter’s distressful behavior and asked Lucinda and little Alma Mae to stay in the guest house in the back of the Manor to care for Mary until she became stable. It was at that moment when Alma and Mary ceased being friends and became spirit sisters. Mr. Abbott and Lucinda observed this unique bond but never spoke of it, and forged an unspoken vow to always protect the girls’ alliance despite the racial restrictions that existed in the South. One lazy Saturday afternoon Lucinda caught Mr. Abbott observing the girls bouncing around in the garden. The girls were twirling and giggling, their arms stretched towards the sky spinning, and spinning. The hems of their dresses looked like flowing canopies against the wind.

Lucinda walked calmly towards the majestic oak tree, Mr. Abbott stood motionless while the girls continued to dance around clusters of dandelions. She gently handed Mr. Abbott his cup of lemonade; her perplexed fear caused her hand to tremble. “Is something wrong Mr. Abbott? Did…did Alma Mae get into somethin she wasn’t posed to?” Mr. Abbott did not turn to face Lucinda. His hand immediately rose towards his face and swiftly swept his eyes then spun around to speak. “Alma didn’t do anything wrong, Lucinda. My daughter…she’s happy. Alma...Alma makes her smile.” Mr. Abbott took the glass of lemonade from Lucinda’s quivering hand and disappeared into the house. The sight of Alma Mae and Mary Katherine were like colorful flowers in a field; they were comforting and beautiful to behold. They were free. Everyone in Acworth who knew of their friendship understood that their solidarity was created because their Yankee father allowed a little-colored girl to get close to a lonely, motherless daughter, and they looked the other way.

As the girls grew older, they discovered the unspoken truths of Acworth. Daily, Mary Katherine would wait on the porch of the Abbott Manor for Alma Mae to depart from the Rosenwald Elementary school. The air was thick and balmy. Alma could smell the lingering promise of rain as she bolted across the railroad tracks towards the porch. “Mary Kate, there they are you see them?” Alma bent over breathless then pulled Mary Katherine by the wrist to the edge of the porch. “Those the old women I was tellin ya bout…that’s them.” Alma’s stomach began to twist and tighten. Mary ran to the bottom of the porch stairs. “Who are they? Why are they dressed like that? I’ve never seen them in Acworth before are they visiting?”
“They live here they just never come out… but Lawd when they do, they scare everybody in sight! They so mean… I wanna see them close.” The girls scattered to the cluster of green bushes by the main road. They struggled to breathe under the thick tangled shrubbery. The heavy Georgia air began to smother their short breaths. Alma placed her finger on her lips signaling for Mary to slow her breathing. “I hear their steps… they almost here.” Alma spoke with an anxious quick tone. Mary Katherine slowly mouthed the words “I hear them.” Alma dragged her stomach across the soft, red clay. The girls could see the band of elderly women saunter past the berry bushes. The group of somber, Black women wore heavy, charcoal dresses that covered their necks and, draped loosely over their arms. Their bulky, black dresses slowly swept across the rugged ground. Their dragging hems created a unique rhythm that demanded the attention of the girls.

Alma wanted to follow the cadence of their coordinated steps, but her dread of the mysterious women crushed her curiosity. The girl’s heads emerged from the bushes to see stern, bitter faces covered with morbid lace veils. “Who are they?” Mary whispered. “I don’t know. I’ve only seen them twice, but they mean and scary and I ain’t never seen their faces.” The last matron in the group of veiled woman heard the anxious whispers amid the bushes. She slowed her steps until she paused, and heard the abiding sound of shallow murmurs. The aging veiled woman investigated the bush until she saw a white sandal powdered with crimson sand. She took her cane and gave the sole of Alma’s sandal a swift poke. The girls began to scream and ran towards Abbott’s Manor. Lucinda carefully placed a steaming baked peach pie on the kitchen window seal when she suddenly heard the shrill cries of the girls. Lucinda slung her yellow kitchen towel to the floor and ran to wards the distraught screams. Lucinda grabbed Alma by her white dress collar. “What you doin screamin and acting crazy? Mary Kate, what’s wrong with you?”

Alma’s face was wet with tears. “No momma I ain’t…I ain't did nothin we saw somethin! They almost got us.” Mary Katherine grabbed Lucinda’s arm speaking between panting breaths. “It’s …It’s not our fault it was those colored women.” Mary Katherine pointed towards the dirt road where the women were walking. “Colored women? What is you talkin about Mary Kate? Girl, you better be careful… I told you not to get into Bethel Town business!”

“But momma those evil women in those veils… Them! There they are!” The group of women walked back towards the bushes. Mary Katherine leaped behind Lucinda at the sight of the group of women and threw her arms around her thick waist. “You talking about them?” Lucinda pointed her rigid finger in the direction of the women draped in black. “They not evil …They hurt.” Lucinda grabbed both girl's hands, sternly pulling them towards the kitchen. “Come on let’s get you girls cleaned up.”

Alma stiffened her body and snatched away from her mother’s firm grasp. “Momma what you mean they hurt?” Lucinda’s face became twisted with fury. She immediately bent down gripping Alma’s anxious cocoa face. “Don’t you ever in your little colored life ask me about those women again! Stop being so fast and stay out of grown folk’s business. You always think you know so much! One day you gonna get yoself hurt little girl.” Alma could feel her mother’s tepid breath against her parched lips. “They hurt… That’s all you need to know…But they ain't evil… They survivin.”
Once again, the group of black veiled women faded into the emerald Acworth forest, tightly holding on to their scratched wooden canes and the secrets that splintered the souls of Bethel Town.

When Home calls

Everyday Alma rode the A train. Afternoon Harlem subways flooded with chattering, uniformed students, wrinkled gray business suits, and mothers struggling to keep their restless toddlers still. She spent her life trying to escape, yet secretly clung onto hints of Georgia within her new urban oasis. The desire to stop two subway stations earlier on 148th Street between Amsterdam and Broadway never waned, and had become her ritual for twenty years. Alma’s prolonged walk along 148th was her daily reminder of Acworth, Georgia. As she emerged from the train station Alma’s first sight was of the ethereal First Calvary Baptist church. She was immediately comforted by the sight of the vibrant faces of church mothers who engaged in deep conversations on the weathered cement steps. First Calvary Baptist became her cultural artifact of her beloved Bethel A.M.E.; the church of her childhood and the symbol of the village that once loved and nurtured her.

As she continued to walk the aromas of Kennedy’s Fried Chicken, and Lou Lou’s Fish Shack evoked the sweet, spiced fragrances of Bethel Town. Betty’s Seamstress shop reminded Alma of her aunt’s small seamstress boutique in Acworth. Each day Alma would break her fast pace and linger at the window while admiring Betty’s swift moves around her dress shop. Betty’s mouth was full of sharp silver pins tightly secured between her lips. While staring through the storefront window, Alma could feel the brisk March winds swirling through the city streets. The forceful winds slapped against her round brown cheeks then finally pounded against the smudged glass window. The sound of the winds startled Betty; she immediately glanced toward the window to see Alma Mae. Betty snatched the pins out of her mouth and rushed toward the door “Alma, good to see ya girl, where you been?” Alma chuckled shaking her head in amusement, “Betty I pass by your window every day… You just now seeing me?”

“No, I’m not hungry, just real tired. You know after…well, after a while the city…I mean I love Harlem. Harlem’s been good to me, I…I just really need to get home to see about my momma it’s time.” Betty walked towards her work table and gathered a pile of floppy white hat forms. She gently placed a limp hat form on Alma’s head. “I’m gonna make the perfect hat for you for
Women’s Day. I think it’s on a 4th Sunday?” Betty knew how to pivot from any hint of personal distress. Alma remained silent. Betty continued to place different color swatches against Alma’s face. “I want to get the perfect color I think the Woman’s Ministry said our colors were blue, but I need to ask Sister Newsome exactly what shade of blue.” Alma was too choked with an unexplainable foreboding pain. “Alma, girl, don’t look sad it’ll be alright… you’re strong, remember that, don’t let nothin get you down. But…I know what you mean last month I finally went home to South Carolina. Not much has changed. They’re still country, still slow, but it was good to go home. Alma looked up at the cracked, white ceiling, closed her eyes and tried to imagine the oak trees and pines that shaded the dirt roads of Bethel Town. Betty continued to adjust Alma’s hat form. “Alma, the air there is so sweet and warm. I can’t explain it, but I really needed to see about everybody. You need to go home, Alma.”

II

Veiled Brokenness

Every emotion Alma was allowed to feel on 148th disappeared, she conditioned herself to stifle the little country girl from Acworth the moment she entered her Brownstone. In her Brownstone on Striver’s Row, she was Principal Percival Jones’s wife; prim, proper, perfect. Alma Mae Hill-Jones became one of the lights of Harlem’s high society, and was often described by Harlem elites as lovely, well spoken, and known for engineering a harmonious home. Alma’s transformation with the help of her husband was stunning. The Georgia accent that she vigilantly buried was successfully tucked away, and only revealed when she attended church or visited Betty. Alma pulled away from Acworth by becoming an avid reader and became a stellar student at Booker T. Washington’s Rosenwald Elementary School, and Roberts Middle School in the Acworth, Georgia’s segregated school system. Alma Mae eventually received a scholarship to Howard University while attending Lemon Street High School, the only colored High School in Cobb County, Georgia. After graduating from Lemon Street High School, Alma Mae decided to delay her entry to Howard University to work and save money for room and board. Alma moved to Marietta with Sister Parson, a woman who was a member of Turner Chapel A.M.E. and the owner of Beauty, Barber, and Cosmetic Shop on Lawrence Street. While in Marietta Alma Mae learned how to fix hair for the colored women in Marietta. Alma worked tirelessly until she saved enough money, and eventually traveled North to the nation’s capital. After World War II had ended, Alma Mae entered her learning oasis in Washington D.C. Howard University was the place where her transformation began, and where she met Percival Jones during her sophomore year in college. He worked as a professor assistant while he was obtaining his Masters of Education. The moment Percival filled in to lecture for her class, Alma was in awe of him, and in turn, at first sight of her exquisite ebony form Percival yearned to possess and mold her, and as the years passed began to cherish her genuinely.
Alma devoted her life to learning about her husband’s culture, and completely adopted Percival’s undying pride of his Jamaican heritage. Percival’s parents immigrated to America to assist Marcus Garvey in Harlem and worked with Garvey’s organization *Universal Negro Improvement Association*. They worked tirelessly with Garvey to support the cause of Black nationalism and economic development for Blacks. Percival’s Jamaican culture took precedence in their home and Alma allowed it. Spontaneous summer vacations were spent in the thick, green mountainside of Jamaica, and not in the red clay countryside of Acworth, Georgia. Her children knew more about ackee, salt fish, and sweet fried plantain in the mornings than grits, eggs, and buttery biscuits. Alma’s children adored their Jamaican granny Doreen, and barely recalled their Madear in Georgia. Alma learned over the years to intently listen to Percival’s rants about the state of Black Americans and how Black people were behind in American society because they did not work hard enough; he insisted that Black Americans were lazy. Alma Mae overtime became the exception in Percival’s mind because he believed that he created what he envisioned Alma Mae should become. Alma carried the burden in the pit of her hollow soul knowing that her husband’s love was conditional. She understood that Percival tolerated and finally accepted that she always wanted to remain a kindergarten teacher. He longed for his wife to become more, but he understood how she thrived when teaching children in kindergarten, and became her source of healing. Percival recognized that Alma had been a devoted mother and wife, and exceeded his affluent Jamaican family’s expectations of what a wife and mother should become.

Alma tossed her crimson silk neck scarf on the chair near the foyer. Her feet ached in an unusual way. Alma began to limp up the winding Brownstone stairs until she reached her room. The afternoon sun shined through the sheer white curtains that shielded her large Bay windows; the sun cast a golden hue across her Victorian style bed. She carefully placed the sight word worksheets completed by her Kindergarten students on her nightstand. Alma affectionately ran her fingers across the stack of her worksheets and gently smiled. She couldn’t wait to see the progress her students made from their new set of sight words. She often affectionately referred to her students year after year as her “babies” and her little eager students often reminded her of her first years in the little school house of Rosenwald Elementary. Alma always began her evening ritual by washing away the daily subway musk, carefully picking the perfect house dress that would often reveal her shape to capture her husband’s eyes, fluffing her bushy curled hair, and spraying her favorite white rose perfume before Percival arrived home from work.

“You notice something different mom?” Alma’s daughter shouted from the bottom of the wooden stairs. She was in her senior year at the Benjamin Franklin High School, a science and math academy in East Harlem. Alma’s daughter Aleena was the precise image of her favorite auntie and possessed her fiery spirit. Alma felt it was a gift from God that Aleena took after her aunt in looks and behavior because it allowed Alma to have moments of her auntie long after her death. Aleena was petite with smooth chocolate skin, with the confidence and energy that Alma Mae the little girl from Acworth once had. “I’m up here Leena. Come on up I just finished grading some papers.” Aleena burst through the door spinning around until her bellbottom jeans rocked above her black leather clogs.”

“You notice something different mom?” Alma looked at Aleena, “No…no I don’t chocolate drop.” Alma adjusted her reading glasses and continued to read the response of her kindergarten’s sight word assessments. “Look closer” Aleena swiveled her hips with excitement “Aleena you’re wasting time… You need to get to your work what is it?”
“Mom… look … you don’t notice this big beautiful afro? And my new Dashiki I got on 125th?” Alma snatched off her reading glasses and gasped. “Aleena, why did you do that to your hair? You left here with two long plaits and … now what is your father gonna say?” Aleena chuckled and continued to sashay through the room. “Well, I had to cut my hair so I can have an afro, and I love it! I need to get back to the motherland mom.”

“Mother what? I’ll mother… your… land you look so … well, you look like those Black Panthers they were always in trouble with the police, and where are they now?”

“That’s not true the Black Panthers were letting us know that we needed to begin seeing ourselves, doing things for ourselves, Black is beautiful mother! Wake up it’s the 70s we’re not stuck on the plantation anymore… shucking and jiving doing what the white man tells us. Those days are over.” Aleena eyes stretched with excitement. “I want you to join me in what’s happening today!” Aleena grabbed her mother’s arm and raised it to the air trying to ball her fist. “Power to the people!” Alma swatted Aleena away. “Girl, if you don’t let go of my arm! I know more than you think I know. You need to watch your tone with me little girl, and leave that Black Panther mess out of my house.”

“I just want to enlighten you on the state of Black America.”

“Oh, Lawd Aleena you are truly Percival’s daughter. Go on and get to your studies we need to be ready for dinner by the time your father gets home.”

The scent of ox tails, peas and rice, and greens greeted Percival Jones when he entered the door. “Lucy I’m home.” Percival was charming and debonair. His demeanor could often be confused with flirting but flirted in recent years with only his wife. He was a distinguished gentleman whose deep mahogany skin was striking and contrasted exquisitely against his silver hair. He was barely seen without a suit and spoke with an alluring Jamaican accent that he was most proud of. “What is this good food I am smelling, what you make me tonight Alma?” He grabbed Alma by the waist and gave her his standard greeting in the evening. The kiss was more prolonged with the taste of spicy curry that lingered on his lips. Alma was thankful that he smelled of curry instead of another woman’s perfume. “Percival… you ate before you came home?” Alma swatted him on his shoulder with her red dish towel. “Ouch … woman why you hit me like that? He began to laugh then pouted, “don’t you love me anymore? I was hungry and stopped by Spiced Island and got a beef patty.” Percival gently touched Alma’s chin, “is that a crime?” Alma chuckled and pushed him away, “go on and wash your hands call Leena and let her know dinner is ready.” After their many years of marriage, Percival Jones still made Alma’s stomach full of butterflies; she was in awe of him, in awe of the way he changed her life, and the way he made her feel. Percival’s distinct influence allowed her to transform, but also helped her to suppress her past. He believed that her Southern past was the obstacle to her becoming the wife that Principal Percival Jones should have.

Alma smelled the greens beginning to burn; she immediately snatched the big pot from the stove when she heard the phone ring. “Percival, can you pick up the phone? my hands are full.” She poured the greens into the white casserole dish. She heard solid, slow footsteps on the stairs until she felt a finger tap on her shoulders. She spun around when she saw Percival standing with a solemn look. Percival… what’s wrong? why are you looking like that?”

“Alma….”
“What? What? Percival… what?”

Percival grabbed her by her shoulders and guided her to the kitchen table chair. “Sit down Alma.”

“I don’t want to sit down, what is wrong with you? Why are you looking like that?”

“Alma, its…somebody…your family…it was your aunt, your aunt calling from Acworth.”

“What? My aunt? is she still on the phone?” Percival’s eyes began to glass over with a pool of tears that refused to fall onto his cheeks. “Yes …yes she’s still on the phone.”

“Please…give me the phone. Give me the phone Percival. Let me speak to my family! Stop keeping me away from my family!” For the first time in twenty years, Alma raised her voice to her husband and shouted the phrase that she wanted to share with him for years.” Aleena raced down the stairs when she heard the deafening screams of her mother. She carefully watched her father place the phone to her mother’s ear. “Hello?” Alma’s voice was shaking and frail. “Oh, my God…. Auntie, don’t tell me that! Not Momma…No, no!”

The phone slipped out of Alma’s hand, and a piercing scream erupted from her body. Alma fell to the kitchen floor and began pounding on the tile. “Momma… they said she’s dead! I don’t believe them! It’s not true. Let me… please, I have to get to Acworth, I need to get to Acworth!” Percival tried to pick Alma up from the floor. “Don’t touch me! Get your hands off me… take me…take me to Acworth! I have to see my momma; my momma needs me. I’ve done everything for you …everything... For… You.

The tears and streams of mucus began to flood onto her flushed cheeks. Suddenly, Alma lunged towards Percival, grabbing him by his shirt collar. Grief had consumed her, and transformed into unbridled anger. “Percival... Percival.” Alma spoke through breathless shouts. “I’ve done everything for you! Take me to see my momma. Take me to Acworth I need to see my momma she…she needs me …she.” Alma released her grip from Percival’s collar and crashed onto the russet tile. Aleena jolted across the kitchen towards her mother until her knees buckled. She slipped her hand under her mother’s limp neck. “Mom, what’s wrong? Daddy, what’s she talking about? What’s Acworth? Is that where my other grandma is? Is she still alive?” The tears that were held in Percival’s eyes finally released; his guilt strangled him until his breaths became hindered and shallow. He kneeled beside Aleena and Alma and spoke in a low whisper. “Go upstairs, Leena.” The sight of his wife shredded apart from grief was a sight that he could barely manage. He understood at that moment that his assisting her in blotting out her past was slowly killing her. He was supposed to provide a better life for her, a life that would allow her never to suffer again or yearn for her past in Georgia.

III

When She Awakes
Alma stared into her bathroom vanity. She slid a dab of Royal Crown onto the tips of her fingers. The hair oil felt like a healing balm against her cold, rigid hands. Despite Alma’s agony, she did not forsake her twenty-year routine in setting her hair with eight pink sponge rollers and hair oil. She grabbed the faded jar of Noxzema from the medicine cabinet and calmly slathered the thick, white minty cream across her taunt skin until her face was plastered with a thick mask. Alma stumbled towards the tub and slumped down on the cold porcelain edge. Her body became numb. The bathroom door creaked and slowly opened. Without a comforting word towards his wife, Percival grabbed a peach washcloth, soaked the cloth with warm water, and gently kneeled by her side. He attentively wiped the creamy mask away until her face was a radiant brown hue. Percival clutched onto Alma’s hands and lifted her away from the tub. Percival placed her limp body against the crisp sky blue bed sheets. As he watched Alma remain vacant and dreary on the bed, at that moment, he understood that he shut out the core of who Alma was. The little innocent country girl from Acworth who he fell in love with during their years at Howard University became his life’s mission; she was the lively innocent spirit that he sought to mold into what was comfortable for his existence. Percival wanted nothing to with the unjust stains of the South and needed desperately to protect Alma and his daughter from Alma’s past. Percival was a proud man. The sight of Alma’s tear-stained, swollen face humbled him. Percival scooped his motionless wife in his arms and rocked her until her body felt warm once again. He nestled his head into her neck and trailed his plush lips against her smooth rounded shoulders. He began to speak in broken whispers. “I’m taking you home Alma. All of those summers your mother…she asked…she wanted you to come, and I insisted that you spend summers in Jamaica. I wanted more for us Alma… I’m so sorry, please forgive me.” Alma’s stiff departed body began to squirm. She glared at Percival until he became uncomfortable. “Alma…please, I am sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything I didn’t want you to do. I was from the country, but I was never stupid. I agreed to marry you for a reason. I knew you would be the man who would make me forget about Acworth and take me far away.” Alma swiftly turned her back to Percival. He placed his hand on her shoulder trying to guide her body toward his face. Alma resisted the soft graze of his fingers, pushing his hand away from her shoulder. “When I first met you all you did was talk about Jamaica and where your parents were from. I…I never met a man like you before. It’s like you were talking about another world. A world I have never heard of before and a world that I wanted to be wherever you were forever.”

******************************************************************************

It was morning again in Harlem. The dawn shadows floated against the white stone walls. Industrial trucks bustled throughout Harlem streets. Alma rolled over in her bed. Her stomach was queasy from guilt. She could count on her fingers the times over twenty years of teaching that she missed a day of school. Her body was weak, and she could barely shift her arms; they felt awkward and stiff. Alma could smell the scent of Percival’s robust cologne. He bent over to kiss her on the forehead gently. Alma was always impressed when Percival put on his business suits. He looked dapper and alluring, he made her yearn for her husband’s attention, but on this harrowing morning, the sight of Percival disgusted her.

“Alma, I’m going to school now. Aleena has already left. Darling, do you need anything…anything at all before I leave?” Alma remained silent. “I will make sure I come back early today. I feel I need to be with you.” Alma heard the last lock click, and the house immediately became still. Alma slowly climbed out of bed, sliding her feet against the cool wooden floor until
she reached the bathroom sink. Alma splashed cold water onto her face and poured mouthwash into her arid mouth swishing until she felt human again. She snatched the pink foam rollers from her hair and fluffed until her set curls swelled and became bushy. Alma tossed her tear stained nightgown to the floor and stood in the middle of her bedroom until her bare body could feel the chill of the room brush against her. She walked towards her brass trimmed mirror to examine her nude body. For the first time in years, Alma could see that she was not the same woman. Alma attentively observed her frame; she still possessed traces of her womanly form. She gently touched the curve of her waist and was reminded that she was still alive. Alma immediately turned away from her reflection in the mirror and slid into her fluffy purple bathrobe, tying the robe belt until her waist felt a pinch.

She fell to her knees and began to search underneath her bed for her Acworth memory boxes frantically. Tattered pink boxes that were filled with artistic reflections of her past. Alma pulled four dusty boxes from underneath her bed and carefully placed them in order on the floor. The first box contained recipes bound by a rubber band. She gently picked up the stack of her mother’s recipes. Alma’s tears began to stream down her cheeks. She ran her fingers clumsily across each recipe. She scanned the recipes and the hand-written Bible verses at the end of each wrinkled card. Alma whispered “Momma…. Momma…I’m so sorry …I’m sorry.” Alma placed the recipes back in the box and opened another box. The box contained frayed letters that had never been opened. She took one letter with a name and address that was a comforting sight and evoked fond memories. Alma placed the letter inside her bathrobe pocket and sat in the rose chair in front of her favorite Bay window. Her fingers nervously fumbled over the letter.

Dear Alma,

Congratulations your momma told me you had a girl. You would not believe it, but I had another girl. Just waiting for the good Lord to give me that boy, but she’s 7 months and so curious she just loves your momma, and I know she would love you too if only you would come home and see us sometimes. Acworth has changed, but in an odd way still the same. A lot of people have moved away I just knew when you went away to Howard you would return, we made a promise to both become teachers, and we did just that.

I just thought we would both return to Acworth and make it a better place. When I went away to Notre Dame, I returned but you, you never did. It is not the same here without you. I take little Emma, that’s my oldest daughter, to our Oaktree when she gets restless. I cannot believe it’s still there with all our markings. And Junior, oh Alma you would be so proud. He turned out to be a fine young man. He comes to the General Store every Thursday to pick up supplies for your momma. He has no idea that I watch his every move when he is there. I would only share this with you, just like we shared everything when we were little girls. I want you to know Junior didn’t suffer. Alma, you need to know that so you can come back home.

Love,

Your Dear Friend Mary Katherine
The Chicken Shack burst with excitement in the twilight. Saturday nights in Bethel Town became the town’s expression of joyous liberation. A portion of the town eagerly prepared for church service, while a rambunctious crowd crammed inside the Juke Joint; giggling and jigging to the sounds of “Ma” Rainey, “Blind Willie,” and “Piano Red.”

“Alma! What you doin here girl? You supposed to be with your momma … gettin ready for chuch!” Alma could barely break her stare from the colorful crowds bouncing around the exposed back door. The sights that captured her attention were exhilarating. Brown bodies swaying and free. The men were handsome; dressed in crisp ironed shirts with the smell of spicy cologne and moonshine. The women were often dressed in dowdy domestic uniforms during the week, but tonight blossomed to an unseen beauty. Full lips stained with ruby red lipstick and hair perfectly pinned in updos. Their short, flashy skirts swung to the leaping beats as they danced.

“Alma, I know ya hear me.” Alma finally turned away from the excitement in the Chicken Shack to face her favorite Auntie. Annie Ruth was Alma Mae’s mother’s baby sister. Annie Ruth’s essence was more than Acworth could contain. She was naturally glamorous always wearing the best clothes that she sewed herself, never a hair out of place and walked through Bethel Town as if she had an audience. Annie Ruth was one of the few colored women in Bethel Town who was not a domestic. She opened her own seamstress business and operated the Chicken Shack with her husband on Saturday nights.

“Your hair is lookin a mess, Alma Mae. You need to get all that hair done before chuch tomorrow… did ya get your bath yet?”

“No, ma’am… Momma still at the Abbott House she ain’t been home all day. You know Miss Charlotte had her baby, and she keeps Momma at the house all day… all night.” Annie Ruth rolled her eyes and twisted her mouth. “Miss Charlotte don’t know how to wipe without your Momma’s help… Lawd that woman is so lazy! Only reason why Mr. Abbott married that woman was because she was young, I guess pretty and could have him so more babies. Other than that, she useless… Acts like a baby herself.”

Alma began to laugh, quickly covering her mouth from embarrassment. “You can laugh Alma… Ain’t nobody lookin, you’re in Bethel Town you can do what ya want here.” Annie Ruth reached down to tickle her niece on her tummy. They both exploded with unbridled laughter. “Alma why ain’t ya with your momma?”

“I don’t want to be over there on Saturday nights.” Alma began to turn her mouth down in a protruding pout. “Well go on now… ya need to start helping your brothers get ready for chuch.”

“But Auntie, we ain’t eat yet.” Annie looked at Alma with a perplexed expression. “Wait here baby I’m gonna bring ya’ll some fried chicken plates…I’ll leave here early, give ya’ll your baths and put some decent plaits in your hair.” Annie Ruth gave a quick wink to her niece. She spun around to reveal her swollen belly. In that moment, Alma remembered that her favorite Auntie was with child. “Auntie, is the baby okay?” Alma spoke softly. “You look a little tired Auntie.”
Annie Ruth began to chuckle and caressed the round of her stomach. “The baby is just fine, but now Auntie is gonna see about you, little missy.” Alma’s uncle emerged from the Chicken Shack. Isaiah Cunningham was the most handsome man that Alma Mae had ever seen. Isiah possessed smooth mahogany skin with features that looked as if someone had chiseled them on his face. He was tall and strapping and had an intimidating presence that melted away when he was around Annie Ruth. Isaiah Cunningham’s love for Annie was intense. He was grateful for her love. Annie Ruth was seventeen years old when she agreed to marry the twenty-eight year old widower who lost his wife during childbirth. Annie immediately stepped into his broken life and took care of him and his motherless child. Annie Ruth darted out of the back door of the Chicken Shack and passed the savory, steamy plates to her husband. “Isiah walk Alma home for me… her momma still with the Abbots. I’ll be there in a little bit Alma Mae… I need to fry up this last batch of chicken.” Alma and her uncle walked away in the dark towards her small, wooden square house. The lively melodies floating from the Chicken Shack bounced throughout the dirt roads of Bethel Town. As they continued to walk, they saw the long line of boys in front of Gilbert Jackson’s house getting free haircuts for tomorrow’s church service.

“You still in school Alma?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You like school?”

“Yes sir” Alma continued to look down at the ground while she spoke to her uncle. Alma was consistently shy around her uncle. He was the father that she longed to have in her life. “You keep gettin your studies, Alma…I believe you gonna be somebody one day. Read all the books you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll take the plates inside to make sure ya’ll eat.”

“Yes sir” Isaiah pulled the wax paper off the chicken plates and motioned for Alma’s brothers to sit around the scratched wooden table. “Y’all hurry up and eat now you’re Auntie be here in no time I gotta go.” Alma’s two brothers ascended on the hot plates and ate without speaking until their hands and mouths were covered with chicken grease. Alma slapped her brothers on their heads. “Ya’ll slow down before you get sick.” A rock pebble suddenly popped against the front window seal. Alma Mae recognized the familiar signal and grabbed her plate, bolting through the front door. Alma’s brothers yelled, “where you going, Alma?”

“I’ll be back…Finish eating, Auntie be here in no time.” Alma could see Mary Katherine standing outside of her house. Mary Katherine pointed North and then ran away until she vanished. Alma knew to go to the Oaktree whenever Mary Katherine pointed North. She ran towards the Oaktree until she could see Mary’s pale blue dress. “My momma still at your house?”

“Yes, I’m sorry Alma, but the baby got sick…and well… Mother Charlotte knows nothing about anything, not even her own baby.” The girls began to chuckle and mocked in unison “Just…
Pitiful.” From age four until the moment under the Oaktree of age twelve the girls remained inseparable. “It’s nice to have a baby brother but…but now I feel more lost than ever. If it wasn’t for your momma seeing me, and always caring about me I… I don’t know what I would do. Daddy doesn’t see anybody but mother Charlotte and the new baby.” Mr. Abbott met young Charlotte Lorraine in Sunday morning mass in the only Saint Joseph Church in Marietta, Georgia. She was a spoiled twenty-two-year-old woman with fiery red hair, smooth porcelain skin, and thin pink lips that she smothered with beet red lipstick. Once Mr. Abbott could cease being in awe of Charlotte Lorraine, he could learn to love her genuinely.

The girls sat on the two stumps underneath the Oaktree. “I brought you a new book Alma it’s about the Orient.” Alma’s eyes widened, she grabbed the book and opened the page to a picture of an ocean. Alma’s fingertips slowly followed each detail of the body of water. “I want to go wherever this waters goin.” Alma Mae stretched her neck to see the glowing moon peeking through the heavy branches. I’m not staying here in Acworth. I’m gonna read and learn how to speak proper, so I can get out of here. My teacher, Miss Brown…she tells me to stop sayin ain’t. She say I’ll never become nobody if I don’t learn how to speak right.” Mary Katherine slid the book away from Alma’s lap and began to flip the pages. “If you learn how to speak right they will tease you and call you a Yankee like they call me. I hate when they call me Yankee.”

I rather be called a Yankee than a nigger.” Mary Katherine head immediately jerked back. “Who… Who calls you nigger? You’re not a nigger Alma …You’re my Alma Mae.”

“I know I ain’t no…I mean.” Alma Mae paused and began to speak carefully. “I know I am not… not a nigger I know who I is… who I am. I am not staying here in Acworth. Mary Katherine’s eyes began to become moist and glassy. “You’re not going to stay in Acworth? You’re leaving me?” Alma Mae slowly stood up and pointed to the moon. “Mary Kate…look at that big ole moon. I learned in school that there is only one moon. The Orient is under that same moon; there’s a lot of stuff underneath that moon… I wanna see what else is under that moon besides Acworth.

“I don’t want you to leave Alma Mae.”

“I’ll be back. When I leave, I can be free to think the way I want, do what I want. Maybe I can find out about why those old women always dressed in all black and veils every day. There has to be a good reason, but nobody is saying nothin.” Mary Katherine began to twist the pages of her book nervously. “Alma… there…there’s been a lot of colored men who have disappeared from Bethel Town in the night.”

“Mary Kate, they went up North.”

“Is that true?” Alma Mae leaped from the tree stump. “What you saying, Mary Kate? Mary Kate, you know somethin?” Alma’s desperate pleas could be heard throughout the forest. “Alma… think about it, if those men went up North why hasn’t their family ever heard from them? No letters? They wouldn’t leave Acworth without telling their families where they’ve gone. Those men just disappeared without one word.”
Alma squirmed in the church pew. Bethel A.M.E church sweltered on Homecoming Sunday. Sweat trickled down Elder Leonard Gragg’s forehead as he continued to extend the welcome to the enthusiastic church congregation. Alma twisted and turned in her seat. She felt trapped and squeezed between her mother and auntie Evelyn, while they fanned Alma with their crinkled church fans. Homecoming weekend was the most exciting time of the year in Bethel Town. It was the season when those who migrated North would return home to their family and cherished friends. Since Bethel A.M.E. was built in 1870, Bethel and Zion Hill Missionary Baptist church shared the same building and alternated Sundays until Zion Hill Baptist moved to Taylor Street in 1914. Upon the split of the two congregations in 1914, Homecoming Weekend was a treasured moment in time for the two church families to join in harmony once again.

The joyful atmosphere in the church was contagious. Feet stomped to the music in unison, as the organ exploded with gripping melodies that caused people to jump out of their seats and wave their hands. Colorful hats filled the pews, bobbing and swaying as the music transitioned to the layers of emotions being displayed in the sanctuary. Church Mothers and Elders stood in the front row and shouted, “Thank Ya Jesus! Bless Yas Lawd! Yas Sir…Yas Sir!” The Deacons continued to encourage the congregation to render praises to God in a call and response fashion. Elder Gragg’s quickly wiped the beaded perspiration from his brow and mouth with a wide, white handkerchief. His hands plunged to the air, and he exclaimed, “if it had not been for the Lawd on our side, where would we be?” The animated congregation shouted “Yas Lawd, Thank Ya Jesus Glory… Glory!” One Church Mother became overcome by the spirit of praise in the jubilant atmosphere and began tilting off balance from her squared heels, then gently fell back with her arms stretched towards the church ceiling; a crowd of deaconess caught her limp fall. The deaconess began briskly fanning the church mother until her body became still. Alma felt alive and free. Church service was the moment and space where she felt revived and loved. Alma’s Bethel church family made her feel like she could accomplish anything in this world regardless of the restrictions that existed in the South.

Suddenly, the organ became silent. The exuberant, sporadic praises hushed as the congregation’s eyes followed two lines of women dressed in white with satin gloves. The distinguished women marched solemnly down the center aisles while gripping onto dripping waxed candles. The women in white placed the flickering candles in holders on a wooden table and tipped away in two uniformed lines. Reverend J.R. Fleming began to saunter towards the pulpit. He hung his head with his eyes tightly closed. The reverend looked as if he was whispering a silent prayer. “Brothers and Sisters…This…I said This! This is the day … that the Lord has made… Let Us…Let Us… Rejoice! And be glad!” Reverend Fleming gripped his broad hands across the worn, black Bible, and continued to wipe sweat from his brow. Church members spontaneously stood to their feet and anticipated the reverend’s next word. The
reverend’s voice was low, raspy, and powerful. “Brothers and Sisters…Let it be known that every day is a day to rejoice in the good Lawd, but sometimes…I said sometimes… As the scriptures say, you gotta weep.” The entire congregation jumped to their feet and shouted “Yas Lawd!”

“But like the scriptures say…Weeping….Weeping Brothers and Sisters… May endure for the night but Joy… I said, Joy… Comes in the morning. One day our morning is gonna come. These candles represent our missing. They may be missing, but they are all still in our hearts, and they still…I said they still belong to Bethel Town.” One woman dressed in a lavender church suit and hat, with ivory pearls that hugged her delicate neck, stretched her white gloved hand towards the pulpit and began to cry aloud. “Help us, Jesus! Be with them please…please bring them home sweet Jesus!” Alma Mae’s auntie Evelyn sprung out of her pew to comfort the weeping woman in lavender.

Lucinda began to hug Alma Mae and her brothers. Sunday was the only time Alma and her brothers had the entire focus of their mother for twenty-four hours. It was a sweet time, and Alma Mae awaited the sacred day for the entire week. Lucinda transformed on Sundays. She was simply lovely; it was as if Alma was beholding a different person. Her hair was pinned perfectly under her vibrant church hat. Lucinda’s church suits looked as if it could be found in a fashion magazine. She wore lipstick, rouge, and pearls. Her mostly angry disposition during the week renewed to a soft bliss. Lucinda loosened her embrace around her three children and leaned towards the opened, side door. Two, strawberry blonde ponytails flashed in front of the opened church door. Lucinda immediately rushed outside. “Mary Kate, what is you doin here girl? Why aren’t you at mass?”

“Mother Charlotte is sick.”

“She sick? I was just with the baby all night. The baby got better…what’s… what’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know…she’s sick and she wanted me to come get you.”

“On a Sunday? I’m…It’s homecoming.”

“Mother Charlotte and Daddy asked me to come get you. I am sorry Macinda.” Macinda was the name that Mary Katherine called Lucinda since the time she was four years old. The name was created when she would cry for Lucinda in the night. Mary Katherine would cry and ask her father “where is my Cinda?” The phrase “My Cinda” turned into Macinda through a four-year older’s speech and inflections. A deep sorrow surged through Lucinda’s body. She knew she did not have a choice, and did not want to abandon her precious time in church with her family to care for Mr. Abbott’s sick wife. “Just let me tell my sister to watch after my babies. I’ll change my clothes and be over there to see about Miss Charlotte.”

“I’m so sorry Macinda. If I can take care of her, I will…just…just tell me what I need to do to make Mother Charlotte feel better.”
“Girl… go on back to your daddy. I’ll be there in a bit… stop tryin to be so grown. I’ll take care of Miss Charlotte.”

Alma could barely remember spending a Sunday without her mother, especially during Homecoming Weekend. Alma’s emptiness and sadness vanished when her four aunties surrounded her with laughter and love. Her aunties and Madear became her circle of strength. They were the women who constantly cared for her and imparted words of wisdom while sitting between their knees when getting her scalp stroked with Royal Crown. Her aunts carefully placed plaits in her thick, wild hair, and also placed instructions within her spirit about how to overcome. It was between their knees that she gained her strength and understanding of a cruel, unfair world.

The two congregations eagerly gathered in the Bethel Town community center. Inviting aromas of a soul food feast floated through the atmosphere. Harmonies of Mahalia Jackson’s “How I Got Over” played on the record player while the crowd crammed around long tables filled with steaming dishes of food. The steady pats of little feet beat across the wooden floor as small, giddy children ran around dinner tables covered with crisp white linen. Alma Mae sat at the table with her brothers, oldest auntie, and husband. They were both rigid and had very little patience for children. Alma ate her Sunday dinner in silence, careful not to upset her eldest aunt. “Auntie, I finished my okra can I be excused? I wanna go see about Madear.” Alma Mae’s aunt carefully inspected her plate and nodded. “Go on… looks like you cleaned your plate.” Alma scurried toward her Madear who was surrounded by her fellow church mothers, as Alma rushed toward her Madear, she bumped into Annie Ruth. Alma Mae’s eyes glistened with excitement. “Auntie! you came! I missed you. Why wasn’t you at church?” Annie Ruth tugged on Alma Mae’s thick, long plaits tied with pink ribbons. Annie Ruth gasped, “don’t you look pretty little girl. I see you used the ribbons I left for ya.” Alma smiled and twirled in a circle before her auntie. Annie Ruth took Alma’s hand to help her complete her last spin. “I was at church little girl. I came late and sat in the back…it was too hot. I needed to be by the window. You forgot I was with ya’ll most the night, gettin ya’ll ready for church till your momma got home.” Alma threw her arms around her favorite auntie. “I sure do love you auntie… when I grow up… I want to be just like you.”

“You sure about that?” Annie Ruth affectionately grabbed Alma Mae’s chin. “You gonna be better than me little girl… remember that. Auntie Annie has big dreams for my favorite niece… You’re going places baby.” Alma Mae cherished every word that her auntie spoke. Alma rarely received encouraging words. Annie Ruth gave to Alma what her mother was unable to give. Alma Mae gently placed her palms against Annie Ruth’s protruding belly. “How is my little cousin doin? I can’t wait to see the baby… I’m gonna help you take care the baby… I promise.” Annie Ruth chuckled, “I’m sure you will little missy. Right now, I want you to enjoy yourself, and go out there and play with your friends… they out there having a good time.”
Alma Mae walked across the dusty dirt roads where the Rosenwald girls gathered. They all wore beautiful white cotton dresses with a thick satin bow tied around their delicate waist. “Hey ya’ll what you doin’?”

“We practicing for our singing group… we’re gonna perform at the Sweet Gardenia Ball this summer… You wanna sing with us Alma?” The Sweet Gardenia Ball was the premier event for the colored residents across the South East. Black people throughout the South East would bus into Acworth, Georgia to enjoy the anticipated event that would feature concerts, dancing, fishing, and cookouts in their nearby park. Alma picked up a hickory stick from the ground to use as an imaginary mic and nudged her way in the middle of the group of girls. “Just tell me my part… I’m ready.” Arabella Moore was the most poised and well-spoken member in the group. She assisted the Rosenwald girls with their stage presence, singing notes, and movements as they sang. When Arabella spoke, the younger girls hung on her every word. Her proper diction was like music to their ears. Arabella was the daughter of school teachers, and the Rosenwald girls admired her eloquent gestures, and her soft melodic tones when she spoke.

“Okay ladies we want to practice until we represent Bethel Town well. Remember, we need to sound good, but our movements must still be Godly. We want to present ourselves decently. Remember, we are representing the Booker T. Rosenwald School… You all must remember that when we sing.” The group of girls broke out in a round of giggles. “Well,…what’s so funny? I don’t see anything funny ladies.” Arabella looked intensely at the fidgeting girls. The smallest girls in the group spoke between cackles. “You talk so proper… you so serious Arabella! Tellin us to remain Godly …we just singin at the Ball… that’s when it’s time to have us some fun.” Alma Mae tossed her hickory stick to the ground. “Teach me how to talk like you, Arabella.”

“Alma, you should know how to talk like me by now… You’re always joined at the hip with that little Yankee white girl. Why hasn’t she taught you how to speak correctly?”

“When we …we’re together we not…we’re not talkin about speakin. We have more important things to talk about.” Arabella stretched her neck towards the dirt road. “look who’s headed our way.” Alma Mae spun around to see Mary Katherine walking towards the group of Rosenwald girls. Mary Katherine began to run towards Alma, as Mary approached, the cluster of cotton, white dresses, the group scattered, and began to walk towards the community center, leaving Mary Katherine and Alma Mae alone under the spread of oak trees. “Why did they leave?” Mary Katherine’s once eager green eyes looked depleted and confused. “You scared them.” Alma Mae formed her lips in a sarcastic smile. “Why on earth would I scare them? I just wanted to play and talk a little.”

“Mary Kate, white people don’t come to Bethel Town that often, and when they do its always when somethin is wrong…so they scared.” Mary Katherine placed her hands to her face and squeezed until her flesh became a bright pink. “I’m sorry Alma…I didn’t mean to scare your school friends…I’m just making a mess of things today.”

“It’s okay Mary Kate …can you imagine if I crossed the railroad tracks to find you? There you are with your Mill School friends. They’d do more than go a runin. Alma Mae and Mary Katherine looked at each other and burst into spontaneous laughter. “Oh, dear Lord Alma, I need
to go home before I cause more trouble. Meet me at the Oaktree tonight I have another book for you!”

“I’ll be there Mary Kate.” Alma Mae began running towards the group of white dresses, walking steadily towards the homecoming horseshoe toss. The Georgia, dusk sun transformed into a soft, orange glow over Bethel Town. The gentle, golden rays followed Alma as she continued to run along the rugged dirt trail.

VI
Defiance in the dark

“We’ve been waitin on you boy.” The Landon brothers angrily circled a tall, colored man near the road leading towards the Abbott’s Manor. Every evening Mary Katherine rested her book on her cracked window seal and read under the moonlight until her time to meet with Alma Mae near their Oaktree. As her lids became heavy, robust shouts from the outside startled Mary Katherine. Her book slipped out of her hand onto the floor. Mary slightly cracked the window when she heard the shouts of men ring loudly in the darkness of the night. Mary Katherine slipped out of her bed and tipped through the vacant, dark stairways. She could hear the various snores coming from her brother’s and father’s room. Mary slowly opened the door and stood on the porch until the shouts appeared to pull her closer to the desperate tones in the night.

Without control, Mary Katherine ran towards the magnetic shouts that seemed to tug at her soul. When she finally reached the road, Mary Katherine kneeled behind a tree. “I ain’t goin…. You got the wrong man…I ain’t done what you said I done.” Mary stretched her neck and recognized the low, fervent voice. It was the voice of Alma Mae’s uncle Isaiah. A rush of heat shot through Mary Katherine’s body, that propelled her to her feet. Without control, Mary ran onto the dirt road near the Landon brothers. The enraged men heard the rapid footsteps of Mary Katherine’s feet and spun around. The eldest Landon brother rushed towards Mary. The sweat of his body plastered his mousy, blonde hair to his head; his mouth was full of chewing tobacco. He glared angrily at Mary Katherine, then spit a slimy, black ball of tobacco by her feet. “What you doin here Yankee girl? Mary Katherine’s body became frozen and heavy. “I…I heard something.”

“You ain’t heard nothin… and you ain’t seen nothin. We have a duty to protect our town, families, and our women from danger… now get!” Mary Katherine’s feet became bulky, her mind told her to run, but she was unable to move. Her eyes darted until she was able to lock eyes
with Isaiah Cunningham. Mary Katherine had felt fear before, but she had never seen what fear looked like until she saw Isaiah Cunningham’s hollow eyes. “I said get little Yankee! You better not say nothin or else you and your nigger lovin, Yankee family, will wish the day you never moved to Acworth!” Mary began to squeal and ran into the dark towards Bethel Town. As she continued to run the Landon brother’s truck sped past her in the direction of Morgan Hill. The men were the worse part of Acworth community. Without the Landon brothers, and the influence of the KKK, Acworth, Georgia was one of the few Southern towns where Black and White people understood how society was supposed to be, despite the social restrictions of the tense racial Southern theater.

“What is it Mary Kate? Why are you cryin what’s wrong? Did you bring my new book?”

“No…no Alma …. Alma Mae.” Mary Katherine’s chest felt as if it was being stomped on. Mary Katherine squeezed Alma Mae’s hands until her wrist throbbed. “Alma…your…they …they have your uncle …they took your uncle!”

“What you talkin bout? Which uncle? who took my uncle?

“The Landon brothers! They took your uncle, Isaiah!”

“The Landon brothers who burnt the Echols farm? And all they family? Mary Katherine shook her head profusely. “Yes…Yes, it was them.” Alma Mae became still. The atmosphere was thick and stifling. The forest crickets continued to sing, at that moment, the sound of singing night insects began to sound like screeching harmonies of terror. Alma Mae’s hearing began to fade, and she could no longer hear the tones of the night. Mary’s mouth continued to move, but Alma Mae was unable to hear her. At once, Alma sprinted towards the railroad tracks that separated Bethel Town from downtown Acworth. As she continued to run, Alma could only see streaks of black. She wanted to run and never stop until she saw her uncle’s face. The night train horn erupted in an annoying blare and began to roar across the Acworth tracks near Main Street.

Alma Mae continued to run towards the train. The raging train surged and scraped against the railroad tracks. Alma’s ears remained muffled and unable to hear the rough, rhythms of the iron horse. Alma could only feel the damp air slap against her face, but was unable to hear the cries of Mary Katherine, nor the screeching, speeding train. The fierce tempo of the train continued to pulsate against the steel tracks. Alma Mae’s speeding strides became more intense towards the train tracks, until she finally heard shrill, piercing cries, and felt two, frail arms pulling her towards the ground. Alma slowly opened her eyes and saw Mary Katherine on top of her screaming. “Alma Mae…. Dear God Alma! where were you running to? You almost got yourself killed! You were running towards the train!”

“I gotta find my uncle.”

“You can’t Alma … The Landon brothers took him… do you have any idea what they would do to you?” Alma Mae thrust Mary Katherine away from her heaving body. “That’s my uncle! My
auntie Annie Ruth’s husband! My auntie is pregnant! She’s bout to have her baby… I gotta bring him back.”

“Alma Mae …No…No, you can’t.”

“I gotta go …where they go Mary Kate?”

“No…No please don’t do this.”

“Where they go?”

“They went towards Morgan Hill.” Alma Mae gripped Mary Katherine’s wrist pulling her along the now vacant railroad tracks. “Come on we can at least see where they took em.”

“No! Alma Mae, please…stop this! We can’t.” A gush of tears flowed down Mary’s freckled cheeks. “Look at us Alma Mae… We’re just girls. We can’t fight the Landon brothers…we just can’t.”

Alma Mae dropped to the graveled ground; her fingers scraped against the bumpy earth until she picked up a handful of pebbles. Alma gripped the gravel in her fist and thrust the tiny rocks toward the starry, velvet sky. She screamed violently, “that’s my uncle!” Mary Kate kneeled beside Alma Mae and began to wipe her tears with the hem of her pale, blue night dress. “Alma I’ll make you a promise… we’ll wait a couple days, and if your uncle Isaiah doesn’t come back, we’ll go to Morgan Hill ourselves. But…but we have to promise not to tell anyone …if we do, the Landon brothers will do to Bethel Town like they did to the Echol’s farm. This…this will be our secret.”

VII

The Shifting

The atmosphere had shifted in Bethel Town. The citizens of Bethel Town desperately scrambled to make sense of the disappearance of Isaiah Cunningham. The toxic rumors about why Isaiah vanished swirled without control. Many of the women of Bethel Town accused Isaiah of stepping out on Annie Ruth and starting a new life with another woman up North. Some believed that he may have drowned in the river or accidently fell on the railroad tracks like the other unexpected tragedies that took place in Bethel Town. As the days passed, the rumors and speculations continued. Alma Mae and Mary Katherine awaited the day to head towards Morgan Hill in their attempt to find Isaiah. Alma felt as if the days lasted forever, and the day before their time to hike towards Morgan Hill appeared to painfully creep along. Mary Katherine and Alma Mae had their frequent meetings under their fortress of comfort. Their Oaktree provided a sense of solace as the girls read together and exchanged their fears about not being able to find Isaiah near Morgan Hill. Alma began reciting poetry to try to mask the constant, sick feeling in her
stomach. She insisted that Mary Katherine begin helping her practice to speak properly like her teachers at Rosenwald elementary encouraged her to do. Annie Ruth’s dress boutique was open five days a week from sun up to sun down, but with the disappearance of her husband she could no longer concentrate and was overcome with sadness. Annie Ruth’s shop remained closed, and she vowed to stay in her house until her husband returned. The men of Bethel Town diligently conducted daily searches in the muddled forest and along the train track line. Bethel Town wore an optimistic mask of hope for Isaiah Cunningham’s return, but many hid their fears from Annie about what truly may have happened to him.

The dewy Georgia morning felt warm and complete. The day Alma Mae and Mary Katherine agreed to hike towards Morgan Hill had finally arrived. Alma possessed an abiding conviction that her and Mary were going to bring her uncle Isaiah home. Alma Mae’s ritual of stopping by Annie Ruth’s home before she went to school never ceased. Upon climbing the shifting wooden steps, Alma could feel the disruption in Annie Ruth’s home. A group of Church Mothers surrounded Annie Ruth. One mother suddenly broke out in desperate cries and prayers. Annie Ruth’s breathing was rapid, and out of sync, her chest heaved, as she continued to scream and sob without control. One of the Church Mothers broke away from the circle surrounding Annie Ruth, then peered into Alma Mae’s curious, flitting eyes. “Annie Ruth…the baby has come early. She goin into labor...You need to go on now and get your lessons.” Rosalie Andrews swatted Alma across her shoulder. Her thick, fleshy arms nudged Alma towards the front door. “I ain’t…I ain’t goin!”

“What you say to me girl?”

“I ain't goin! That’s my auntie…. I’m staying till she has the baby.”

“Girl you better be glad your momma is at Abbott’s Manor because she would’ve knocked your teeth out! I outta slap you now …But…” Rosalie reached for a chair and plopped down on the rickety, cedar chair with exhaustion. She began to rapidly wave her face with her hands. “Annie Ruth…she…she is going through too much right now.” Rosalie began to rise from her chair; Alma Mae became motionless, she could feel the imaginary swipe of Mother Rosalie’s hand across her face. Alma began to squint her eyes in anticipation of Rosalie’s hand against her tingling cheek. “Well…if you stay in you gonna be put to work!” Mother Rosalie thrust a stack of wide, crisp linen sheets in Alma Mae’s arms. “Cut them sheets up in squares and strips…. then I need you to boil some water until the midwife gets here. Don’t you mess up…if you mess up little gal, you’re gonna go to that tree and pick you a switch for your beatin.” Alma rushed towards the table to begin cutting the sheets until the midwife arrived at the house. Annie continued to cry and moan during the beginning hours of labor. Annie Ruth just celebrated her nineteenth birthday, but in that moment, she looked like a scared little girl, trying to have a baby in a well of uncertainty. As Annie Ruth continued to moan with agony, two willowy Church Mothers paced the creaking wooden floor with their heads drooped towards the ground, while whispering fervent prayers. One repeated a simple plea, “help her Jesus, save her, save her.” The
other Church Mothers stayed by Annie’s side, gently touching her moist forehead and clutching her hands.

Suddenly, the front door flew open. “I’m here…I’m here …don’t no baby come in Bethel Town until I’s get here. I done delivered all you ya’ll. Just about everybody in this room…accept for you old gals. The midwife erupted with a low chuckle as the big leather bag that hung across her shoulders crashed to the floor. Lizzie Gragg was known in Bethel Town as “the healer.” Lizzie was the head midwife and the woman that Bethel Town could depend on for making homemade concoctions from herbs she collected in the forest surrounding Bethel Town. Lizzie was five feet and frail but possessed a robust courage that allowed her to become the unwavering foundation of Bethel Town. Lizzie immediately lifted the boiling pot of water from the wood stove and gently stirred her fresh roots in a steaming tin cup. She carefully raised the cup towards the ceiling, tightly squeezing her small eyes. Lizzie lifted Annie Ruth’s upper body and whispered in her ears. “It sure is somethin to deliver a baby, from a baby that I done delivered. I remember you comin into this world like it was yesterday Annie.” Lizzie Gragg continued to stroke Annie Ruth’s limp head. “This baby early gal…this baby early cause God want the baby here now. You gonna be just fine. You was a healthy baby …this baby gon be healthy too.”

The room became completely still. The Church Mothers, Annie Ruth’s sisters, and Alma Mae observed Lizzie Gragg’s careful movements. She prodded Annie’s stomach, and diligently propped her legs up with feather pillows. “You gotta sit up gal, like the midwives to the slaves taught us. You gotta help this baby come in dis world …the baby needs your strength. I’m gonna help you get your strength, Annie Ruth… sip on this here brew.” Annie was listless in Lizzie’s arms, but managed to gulp the herb brew. Annie began to scream, “I ain’t got no strength, Miss Lizzie…I can’t …I can’t do this. The pain too much Miss Lizzie …I…I can’t.”

“Look around this room gal. You surrounded by women who done gave birth!” Lizzie Gragg thrust her feeble hand toward the circle of women surrounding Annie Ruth’s bed. Annie exploded in shrill cries. Lizzie Gragg stuck a smooth, wooden stick in Annie Ruth’s mouth and demanded that she bite down on the stick. Annie ferociously gripped the stick between her teeth. “You ain’t no different from all these women here… it takes courage to bring a lil baby into dis world… we here to give you your courage gal.” Some of the Church Mothers rushed towards the bed quickly adjusting Annie Ruth’s legs. The women’s eyes began to stretch with excitement, “Lizzie the baby on the way …she crowning” Lizzie Gragg rushed towards the end of Annie Ruth’s bed. Lizzie became elated. A wide smile spread across her gaunt, cinnamon face. “We bout to have us a brand new lit tle baby come to Bethel Town.”

“Where is Isaiah? He need to know his baby coming.” Annie Ruth spoke between panted breaths and shallow cries. “Shhhh gal! you save your strength for this baby. The baby on the way. The good Lord is gonna take care of Isaiah… Now you needs to push gal…push!” Alma Mae rushed towards Annie Ruth’s bed until she felt a thick arm bump against her chest. “Stay back Alma…you need to do what I asked, and cut them strips. Your auntie gonna need them.” Mother Rosalie gave strict movements with the wave of her stiff hand. Alma Mae shrugged and reluctantly walked towards the table with a pile of cotton cloth strips. Annie Ruth exploded with
an animal like scream that was piercing to the ears. Tears streamed from Alma Mae’s eyes. She could feel her auntie’s pain but was powerless to help her. Alma continued to cut the cotton sheets into wide strips and placed the strips in an orderly pile. As Alma Mae’s stomach began to ache with agony, she was able to hear a new round of cries, but the loud cries were not cries of terror, they became the sound of sweet, desperate wailing. Annie Ruth’s baby was finally delivered. Alma suddenly felt dizzy. The room was warm and sticky and smelled of fresh blood; she was unable to see her auntie. Annie Ruth’s bed was surrounded by a ban of giddy women who screamed “It’s a boy Annie! You gave birth to a fine boy!” Alma Mae began to bounce around with glee imagining holding her new cousin, taking walks with him, teaching him how to read, and running through the forest with him. The noise of glee that filled the room immediately became muted. “What’s wrong Lizzie? Why…why you lookin like that?” Lizzie’s assistant midwife kneeled near Annie’s bedside; fear consumed her once gleeful countenance.

“Hush…bring me them strips Alma Mae…There’s more blood than usual. Annie ain’t stop bleedin yet.” Lizzie Gragg rushed towards Alma, and ripped the cotton strips from her hands. The energetic midwife pushed the Church Mothers towards Annie Ruth’s bed. “Go on… give Annie Ruth her baby… let him start suckling, so she can feel his breath… that’ll help keep her.”

For the first time in Alma Mae’s young life, she had no desire to meet with Mary Katherine. Alma’s world experienced a transformation that was both exciting and daunting. Isaiah Cunningham had not returned to Bethel Town. Annie Ruth’s new baby boy was a beautiful infant who looked identical to his father, and Annie was too weak to care for herself or her new baby boy. The Church Mothers took shifts during the day in caring for Annie. Annie Ruth’s sisters and Alma Mae took care of her during the night. In the evenings, after school, Alma Mae would place the baby on Annie Ruth’s breast to nurse, then pass the baby to her aunties to be swaddled. Before it was time for Alma to return home to complete her school work, she would feed her auntie food by spoon, hoping that Annie would gain her strength from food. Annie Ruth was becoming weaker by each day. Lizzie Gragg passed by every evening to change Annie’s dressings and to make sure the bleeding had ceased. “The bleedin ain’t stopped yet.” Lizzie Gragg grabbed Annie Ruth’s hand. “We gonna get you some help gal. You can’t go on like this …we gonna have to send for Doctor McCord.”

“He don’t like colored people! He ain’t gonna do nothin!” Alma Mae placed her hand on her hip, in protest. No…No, he don’t Alma Mae…but we don’t have a choice! I’ve done all I can for your auntie, and these strips are still full of blood…somethin wrong!” The midwife waved the cotton strips of blood in Alma Mae’s direction. Lucinda walked over to Alma and gave her a rare embrace. Alma Mae could feel her mother’s heartbeat and the warmth of her mother’s chest. Alma rarely received hugs from her mother. Her mother’s hug felt like a healing balm, the medicine she needed to endure seeing her beloved auntie lifeless.

Lucinda whispered, “Alma you right, Doctor McCord is real mean, he don’t want nothin to do with us colored folks, but his wife …she’ll see about Annie. Doctor McCord was the resident doctor for Acworth and was also responsible for Bethel Town’s patients. He despised crossing the tracks to visit patience in Bethel Town and sent his wife who was a nurse in his place.
A timid, persistent tap thumped across Annie Ruth’s door. Alma Mae rushed to the door to find nurse Julie McCord standing on the porch with an annoyed and uncomfortable disposition. “Well looks like I got here in one piece, whenever I have to come over to Bethel Town it’s more than a notion. Nurse McCord pulled a white handkerchief out of her clutch bag placing it over her pointed nose. It was the practice of Nurse McCord to place her handkerchief over her nose whenever she came near the sick residents of Bethel Town. Nurse McCord walked around the small, one bedroom house with a look of disgust. “Kindly tell me what on earth is the matter with Annie? She’s still young yet… what could be the matter?” Lizzie Gragg acted diminished in the presence of Nurse McCord and transformed into a servitude role, instead of the confident foundation of her community. “Yes…Yes, ma’am she over there… she, she can’t stop bleedin.”

“Well, I am so sorry to hear that. Bless her heart, but there is just really nothing I can do about that.” Nurse McCord sauntered towards Annie Ruth’s bedside, her lace white handkerchief still hovering over her nose. She looked at Annie Ruth’s lifeless body. Annie slowly reached towards Nurse McCord and began to whimper. She became startled and moved away from Annie’s reach. “I am sorry that you’re tired Annie, but I want you to know that your baby is perfectly healthy, and we want you to get well soon okay?” Nurse McCord gave Annie a half smile. “Poor thing, be sure to make her comfortable, change her dressings, and keep her clean down there” She clutched onto her leather, supply bag nervously. “Let the good Lord take care of her. I really need to get going before it gets dark.”

Annie Ruth’s condition remained the same for four days. Alma stopped by her aunt’s house every morning before she started school, but the atmosphere was broken. The entire Bethel Town community of women filled Annie Ruth’s house to cook, clean, and take care of the newborn that Annie could barely enjoy because of her sickness. On that Spring morning, Alma Mae could see her auntie alone in the bed, for the first time since she gave birth to her baby boy. Alma rushed to her auntie’s bed side and placed her head on her chest. “I sure do miss you, auntie… I love you so much…you got to get better. Me and the baby need you.” Alma Mae felt a light touch on her head. Annie Ruth caressed Alma’s thick plaits. She began to speak. Her voice was weak and trembled. “Auntie loves you too Alma. I’m…I’m so weak…tired …just so tired.” Annie motioned for Alma Mae to come closer to her mouth. Alma took a cloth and wiped the white crust away from her auntie’s cracked lips. “You need some water auntie.” Alma drizzled a spoonful of water in Annie’s open mouth. “What’s the baby’s name auntie?”

“His name Isaiah…Isaiah Jr. When Isaiah come back, he’ll be so happy to know he got a son named after him. We…we gonna call him Junior.”

“Junior, I love that name auntie…I love me some Junior already.” Annie could barely crack a smile. The expression of joy was revealed in her pure, brown eyes. Annie Ruth touched Alma Mae’s chin gently. “Go to school little girl…get your lessons. I got plenty of help here. It’s almost time for little Junior to nurse.” Alma collapsed on her auntie’s chest, never wanting to let go. In that moment, Alma Mae felt her auntie Evelyn peel her away from Annie Ruth’s weak body.
Threatening clouds swirled in the sky. The atmosphere was restless, signs of a storm alerted Acworth to prepare for the force of nature that would sweep through their fragile town. Rosenwald Elementary closed school early, giving the dedicated teachers who traveled from Atlanta to teach, a chance to travel back to the city before the storm brushed through Acworth. Alma Mae rushed toward Annie Ruth’s home to check if her auntie had gained her strength. When Alma Mae entered the room, she saw a Church Mother holding Annie in her arms, relentlessly rocking her back and forth. The Church Mother continued to sway in steady, rhythmic motions while praying desperately; the other Church Mothers paced the floor wringing their hands.

Alma Mae’s aunt Evelyn shouted, “somebody get Lizzie we need her here. We need some of her medicine!” The Church Mother continued to rock until her swift movements paused, and then she exploded in a lurid scream, “she gone… she gone…Annie Ruth she gone! She’s not moving!” Alma Mae felt as if she were in a horrific dream. The entire room of women moved in slow motion. Alma heard shouts and cries that sounded distant and labored. Alma Mae ran towards Annie Ruth’s bed and lunged through the crowd of Church Mother’s guarding Annie’s bed.

“No! Alma Mae …go on you don’t need to see this baby!” Strong, thick arms wrapped around her head trying to conceal her eyes. Alma scratched and bit the strong arms until they loosened from her head. Alma Mae leaped onto her auntie’s lifeless body. “Wake up auntie! please…. please wake up! You just sad …you sad because Uncle Isaiah gone…but I know where he is! I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you… it’s my fault! But…but I know… he on Morgan Hill auntie.” Alma Mae squeezed Annie Ruth’s cold body as she continued to weep uncontrollably. “I’m gonna go there tonight and get him. Then when I get him you gonna wake up!”

Alma felt a strong hand grab her dress, and pull her away from Annie Ruth’s departed essence. Lucinda grabbed Alma Mae in an embrace as if she were giving her life. “Baby… please let your auntie go…my baby sister…my…baby sis…she…she gone Alma. She was suffering so much…she at peace now… she in God’s arms. Alma shook her head refusing to believe Annie Ruth was gone. “Alma, please baby, let momma…let momma handle this. Go on and see about Mary Kate she been missin you lately.”

“No! I don’t want to see Mary Kate…I wanna be with my auntie Annie!” Alma Mae ran towards the door when she was suddenly stopped by a tall, burly man dressed in a black suit. Reverend Fleming heard the news, but out of disbelief needed to see if their vibrant, Annie Ruth had really passed. Reverend Fleming walked with authority to Annie Ruth’s bedside and laid his strong hands on her cold forehead, then gently closed her lids. The weeping Church Mothers passed the reverend two, crisp linen white sheets. Without a shred of emotion, he placed the sheets over her body and head. He turned toward the weeping crowd; then he stared at Alma Mae. Alma Mae collapsed to the floor in a fetal position with her hands pressed against her ears. He walked towards Alma, and picked her off the floor, placing her on a chair next to the kitchen table.

“Alma Mae.” Reverend Fleming’s deep, robust voice penetrated her soul, and she immediately took her hands away for her ears. “Alma, I know this hurts chile, but your Annie Ruth will always be right here.” He pointed to Alma’s heart. “You so much like her.” Alma’s tears
stopped rolling down her swollen cheeks, as she watched Reverend Fleming begin to walk towards the center of the room. The house was filled with moans and whimpers, when the reverend began to speak, the house became silent.

“A beautiful soul has left us today. You all must remember. This world is not our home. We just passing through. Annie Ruth has just passed through.” The reverend looked around the room, then walked toward the door with a strong, assured stride. When he reached the door, his knees began to buckle, and he grabbed onto the door post. He clutched his eyes closed, then slowly turned around. “Where is Annie Ruth’s baby?” Lucinda released Alma Mae’s hand, and began to speak, “he right over there reverend… he was sleeping, but Mother Jones got him.” The reverend turned towards Mother Jones and stretched his hands to reach for the baby until baby Junior was nestled in reverend Fleming’s arms. The reverend began to walk out of the house. “Where you goin with the baby reverend?” Lucinda cried out. “I’m taking a walk through Bethel Town so the people can see the baby, that we as a community, are gonna be responsible for raising. They need to see Junior. You all the aunties, but I’m here to tell you today…you gonna get help with this boy.”

The reverend ambled down the loose dirt roads of Bethel Town. Junior slept safely in his arms. The Bethel A.M.E. bell always rang four times when someone in the town died. As Reverend Fleming walked with the baby, the bell began to ring. When the bell continued to ring, the residents of Bethel Town lined the roads, weeping, as the reverend passed holding Annie Ruth’s newborn. Alma Mae followed the reverend’s steps with her head drooping. As she walked, her tears pelleted the sandy roads leaving small dents in the ground, making a trail of sorrow with each labored step. When Alma Mae lifted her head, she could see Mary Katherine in the distance. Mary ran towards Alma until she stood in front of Alma. A wall of silence wedged between the once naïve girls. “Alma…I…I’m so sorry.” Alma Mae stared at Mary Katherine with a steely gaze. Alma was unable to find words to communicate with Mary. Alma Mae continued to glare at Mary Katherine in silence until a black wall of cloth allowed her to no longer see Mary Katherine. Alma Mae became disoriented and peered into the wall of blackness. A boom of thunder jolted the atmosphere when Alma was able to clearly see the band of women who were veiled in black. The veiled women instantly formed a human chain that separated her from Mary Katherine.

VIII

What secrets taught us

Acworth, Georgia 1975
Lucinda Hill’s Transition Service was a vibrant celebration of her life. The service began with weeping and moaning and ended with accolades of lively commemorations of a woman who was loving and selfless. The funeral repass was held in Alma Mae’s old elementary school. The city of Acworth turned the Rosenwald Elementary school into a community center for the residents of Bethel Town. Alma Mae’s past and childhood memories suddenly filled the small, community center. Familiar faces and voices flooded her space of sorrow. Alma Mae remained numb as lines of people continued to hug her tightly, and murmured in her ear the standard phrases when someone experiences a loss, “I’m so sorry for your loss Alma. Your mother was a fine woman.” Her two brothers held onto her hands until she whispered, “ya’ll get something to eat I think I’m going to be okay now.”

Guilt and sadness overwhelmed her spirit and felt as if her chest were being crushed. Alma Mae managed to escape from the crowd to the side of the old-school house, where her small, wooden school desk once sat when she was a little girl. Her desk was close to the window that faced Miss Turlene’s house, now covered with thick, green shrubbery. Miss Turlene was once Annie Ruth’s best friend. It was comforting for Alma Mae to see Miss Turlene’s house once again, and experience her sweet smile at the funeral service. Alma continued to gaze out of the schoolhouse window. Nothing had changed, and yet everything had changed. Alma felt a light tap on her shoulder. Alma Mae turned around to see Turlene Clemens’s soft smile. “Alma Mae, the food is ready. Let me fix you a plate.”

“Miss Turlene, I thank you, but I’m…I just don’t have an appetite.”

“I know this is a lot on you with your momma being gone, and you being tired from traveling all the way from Harlem, but Miss Betsy made her famous macaroni and cheese and greens… You can’t pass that up.” Alma Mae sighed and placed her forehead in her palm, “okay, just a little.” The crowd in the room immediately turned their attention away from eating and focused on one person who walked through the door. Isaiah Cunningham Jr. had just arrived to the repass and like every time he walked in a room since he was a little boy in Bethel Town, he was adored by the residents and treated as if he was a movie star. His aunties immediately rushed to his side with a plate full of food. “Your cousin Alma Mae is here all the way from Harlem Junior! She was crazy about you when you were just a little bitty thang …she took you everywhere.” Junior rushed towards the corner of the community center where Alma Mae stood. “Cousin Alma Mae, I’ve been wanting to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you. You’re the smart girl from Acworth that was brave enough to go up North.”

Alma Mae stood before Junior speechless. Alma stared as if she were looking at Annie Ruth and Isaiah Cunningham Senior simultaneously. She lunged forward and hugged Junior until he could barely breathe. Her hands held his face while her eyes scanned every detail of Junior’s now manly face. He had the flawless, mahogany skin of his father, and his chiseled features were identical to her uncle Isaiah’s. Junior’s eyes and smile illuminated like Annie Ruth’s joyful spirit. Junior placed his hands on top of Alma’s cold, boney fingers. “Cousin Alma Mae, my last memory of you was under some big ole tree. You were busy reading something, and I got to play
as much as I wanted to near the forest.” Alma gasped, “you remember that Junior? That was years ago.”

“I remember it like it was yesterday. Before you leave I want you to tell me all about Harlem! Bethel Town is proud of you, talk about you all the time.”

“I’m nothing to be proud of, but…but Junior we are mighty proud of you, and…Lawd your momma and daddy…..” Alma quickly covered her mouth to stop her flow of memories about Junior’s parents escaping from her heart. Alma Mae began to lose her balance, then started to weep. Junior quickly grabbed a metal chair, and gently sat Alma down. Junior carefully placed her hand in his calloused palm. “This is a tough day Cousin Alma. I…I was raised by all my aunts and Madear, but your momma is the one I stayed with the most. In my mind, she was my momma. I love her, we gonna miss her.”

“I wasn’t here enough for her Junior.”

“You had your reasons. I…I’m told you and my momma was close, you took her death really hard…you needed a fresh start.” Alma Mae continued to stare at Junior as he continued to talk. “You look just like your daddy.”

“I get that a lot.” Their conversation was interrupted by a vibrant, young woman with round, caramel cheeks. Her black hat was tilted over her shining hazel eyes. “I was looking all over for you. Hello, you must be Junior’s people from up North.”

“Meet my wife Linda.”

“Nice to meet you Linda. Your wife, what a blessing… you are a pretty thang. Ya’ll are blessed to have each other.”

“Yeah, I’m a blessed man! I had to work hard to get the approval of the Gragg family…they just about run Bethel Town.” Alma Mae’s eyes widened, “you’re kin to the Graggs?”

“Yes, my grandmomma used to be the midwife for all of Bethel Town.”

“And your grand momma delivered me, all my sisters and…and J…”

“She delivered Junior.” Linda giggled while finishing Alma Mae’s thoughts. “I think that’s why we have such a special connection.” Junior slipped his arm around Linda’s defined waist. “Yeah, she has my heart. She wants me to take her to Washington Carver Beach for a walk today.” Alma’s hands waved in the air with happiness. “Oh, chile we had some good times there! Lawd I can smell Helena Hill’s ribs and roasted corn now!”

“What’s this I hear about a beach?” Percival and Aleena joined the conversation, tightly holding their cups of lemonade. “This is my husband Percival and my daughter Aleena.” Junior rose from his chair to greet Percival and Aleena. “Nice to meet you sir…Aleena. You the one from the islands?”
“Indeed I am. That island is the beautiful Jamaica.” Junior looked mesmerized when he heard Percival’s distinguished, Jamaican accent. “You think a country boy like me can ever get to Jamaica?”

“You are my wife’s family; therefore, we are family. You’re welcome anytime young man. Just say the word, and you and your lovely wife are welcome.”

“You hear that Linda?” Percival turned towards Alma. “Tell us more about this beach that has made you smile so much.”

“It’s not a real beach Percival, nothing like the beaches in Jamaica. It was a segregated lake for us black folks that they made into a beach front.” Percival tilted his head with fascination. “A segregated beach?”

“Yes, at the time we didn’t think of it like that. It was our beach. We had live concerts, James Brown, Ray Charles, Little Richard performed.” Junior shouted, “James Brown came to Acworth?” Alma laughed, “Yes Junior, that was the few times when I saw momma happy was during beach season. Black folks from all over the Southeast were bussed to the beach. We had a good time.”

“And it’s still there?” Percival asked eagerly. A grin illuminated Junior’s face. “Sure, we’re going there today. You want us to show you around?” Percival clutched Alma’s hand “we should go, Alma…It may help you take your mind off things.”

“No.” Alma Mae’s countenance immediately changed to sadness. She removed her wide, black straw hat, and began to vigorously fan her face. “I’m still tired from the trip. You and Leena can go on with Junior. We’re here until the end of the week I’ll make it out there before we leave.”

“Are you sure darling?”

“Yes…You and Leena go. I’ll go back to momma’s house and lay down.” Alma was alone once again. She attempted to eat the now cold food on her plate, but became overcome by an annoying nauseous feeling. “Mary Katherine so glad you could come.” Alma Mae could hear the voice of her eldest auntie greet Mary Kate. Alma slowly turned to see Mary Katherine standing near the front door of the old school house. Her once full, freckled cheeks were now thin and more defined, but her eyes remained innocent and inviting. Miss Turlene rushed towards Alma withexcitement. “Alma Mae, Mary Katherine is here!”

“I…I’m going to get some fresh air Miss Turlene. I feel real dizzy.”

“Of course, you coming all the way from Harlem is probably catching up with you.” The room began to spin, Alma, reached for Miss Turlene’s hand to catch her balance. “You gonna be alright Alma Mae, you just need to get your rest.” Turlene slowly turned towards the direction of Mary Katherine. “I remember a time when you and Mary were inseparable.

Alma Mae leisurely walked down the long roads of her childhood. Some of the roads remained cracked, ruddy, dirt trails, and a few roads were now smoothly paved. The unyielding, golden
sun shinned upon Bethel Town, and felt comforting and warm. Alma rushed towards the front
door of her mother’s house. It was her refuge and a place where she could feel her mother’s
essence, and smell the sweet scent of her lingering gardenia perfume. Alma Mae collapsed on
her mother’s bed and began to sob relentlessly. Alma clinched onto the saturated tear pillow
when memories of her mother’s voice began to echo in her ears. “Be strong Alma…You gotta
learn how to be strong Alma Mae. The echoes of her mother’s voice forced her to spring from
the bed. She removed her black suit and laid it neatly on her mother’s colorful patched quilt.
Alma Mae slipped on a cottony, peach sundress; she immediately felt liberated, almost childlike
as she began to walk towards her old Oaktree. As Alma continued to saunter down the trail that
would lead to her place of comfort, the Georgia sun lightly kissed her exposed, bronzed skin.
Alma felt an intense moment of peace. She halted her steps and tilted her head towards the
cloudless sky. She felt giddy and boundless. The last time Alma felt the Georgia sun against her
bare skin, was during the events of the May Day picnic before she left for Howard University.
Her neatly curled pinned up do, succumbed to Georgia’s unyielding humidity, and converted to
soft, fuzzy curls. Alma Mae finally reached the Oaktree and investigated the bark for the
markings that her and Mary Katherine etched into the bark years ago. Alma clutched her chest
and gasped when she discovered their sporadic markings still present on the bark. Alma sat down
on the stump, steadily staring at the wide canopy of leaves shielding her from the soft sun. “I
figured you may be here Alma Mae. You finally came home.”

Mary Katherine stood by the dirt road. Her tan sandals were covered with dust. Her eyes were
red and swollen from the tears that had once fallen. Even though she had spent most of her
childhood under the old Oaktree, at that moment, she looked out of place. Alma Mae felt a
sudden feeling of completeness when she saw Mary Katherine for the first time in twenty years.
A piece of her past that she worked so hard to bury was now resurrected. Mary Katherine’s voice
remained healing and calm like in her youth. Alma Mae remained still and silent. Unsure of how
to respond to a part of her life that she adamantly rejected. “I, I’m so sorry for your loss…your
loss…our loss. She loved you so much, Alma Mae.”

Mary Katherine began to walk timidly towards the Oaktree. “She talked about you all the time.
Talked about you nonstop…her successful daughter in Harlem.” Alma Mae continued to stare in
silence. Her eyes began to form pools of tears. “My girls loved her so much. She took care of
them. I wouldn’t dare let anyone near my girls but Macinda.” The tears finally fell, leaving
streaks across Alma’s chest. “Every day, after school, me and my little girls would spend time
with Macinda. I...needed to see her everyday…I...I needed.” Mary Katherine buckled over with
sadness. “I honestly don’t know what I’m going to do without her. I...I can’t imagine my life
without Macinda.” Alma remained cold and despondent, slowly looking away from Mary
Katherine. “She was like a mother I never had Alma.” Mary Katherine grabbed her mouth. “Oh
God, Alma Mae… I’m so sorry Macinda is your…mother…your mother. I’m grieving, and it’s
your time to grieve, and I will not take this away from you.” Mary Katherine ran towards Alma
Mae and placed her hand on her exposed shoulder. “Forgive me; I’ve taken so much away from
you already. I’m so sorry.”
Alma Mae broke her silence. “You have a right to cry and miss her too. It’s hard for anyone to believe, but back then, we were truly sisters who shared a mother. She raised both of us she loved you…and she loved me.” Mary Katherine carefully sat down on the tree stump near her childhood spirit sister. “We’re both mourning a woman who nurtured us together, my momma.”

“We truly were sisters in every sense of the word, but I was a bad sister. We needed Macinda so much. You… you barely had her. You didn’t have her enough Alma Mae. Now that I have my girls, I realize that you needed more than what you had.” Mary Katherine began to kick a cluster of brown acorns resting on a patch of grass. “I don’t have a right to cry.”

“Yes, you do.” Alma Mae chuckled, then mumbled, “she probably knew you more than me. You might have had more of her love than I did.”

“It was Macinda’s job to be there for me.” Alma Mae stood up to stretch her arms towards the majestic Oaktree branches. “No, you were more than a job. She really loved all of you.”

“Alma, forgive me for always wanting you to come back to Acworth. You needed…you needed to get away after Annie Ruth…. your uncle…Isaiah. Mary Katherine’s voice began to trail off into a low whisper. “To this day, I can barely form the words to describe what happened to them.” Alma clinched her lips, loathing the fact that Mary Katherine made her remember her painful past. “We don’t need to talk about them, Mary Kate… Just…just let it go.”

“But I made you a promise that I didn’t keep. I promised that we would go to Morgan Hill.”

“There was nothing we could do. We were girls…children! All this time, you and I have suffered for something the Landon brothers did. We had no business carrying that burden Mary Kate! I bet you the Landon brothers have never suffered a day in their lives like we have.” Alma Mae picked up a large wooden stick and began to bang the stick against the tree bark. “All…this…time… I suffered for years… didn’t even see my momma because I blamed myself for something those old Landon brothers did! I’m tired, Mary Kate! Tired of suffering I just want it to stop!”

Alma Mae’s unbridled screams of resistance startled the birds nesting in the tree branches; the birds immediately flew away in a cloud of flapping feathers. Mary Katherine ran towards Alma Mae and snatched the stick out of her hand, and starting clashing the stick against the bark.

“Alma Mae, this is something I needed to do. I’m tired of staying quiet …acting as if everything is alright…It’s not alright…I’m not alright!” Mary Katherine threw the stick into the depths of the forest until it disappeared. “I got something else to tell you.” Mary Katherine’s breathing was deep and restricted. “You know those women? those women who wore those black dresses and veils every day?”

“Yes, Yes! what about them Mary Kate?

“They were all women whose husbands had disappeared from Acworth in the night…they never found them again.”

“Who told you that?”
“Your momma told me.”

“Momma?” Alma Mae became dazed and confused. She slowly propped her foot on top of the tree stump. “Secrets have cost us. Bethel Town, Junior, everyone needs to know what you saw that night. They need to know what the Landon brothers did. Junior needs to know what happened to his daddy that night.” Panic surged through Mary Katherine’s body, “we can’t tell! It’s my fault… I saw everything that night! I let it happen.”

“You were a scared child! You didn’t do anything wrong, Mary Kate; it was the Landon brothers. They were probably doing this for years! They would wreak havoc in the night, then smile in our faces during the day.” Mary Katherine began to grab her stomach. Alma Mae walked over to Mary and placed a large, green shiny leaf in her hand. “What’s this?”

“It’s called a truth leaf. Our teachers, when we were going to Rosenwald, kept leaves in the classroom, and when it was time for us to tell the truth, they would place the leaf in our hands, and tell us that this leaf will help us with the truth.” Mary Katherine caressed the leaf within the palm of her hand. “It’s time Mary Kate…we need to be free.”

Mary Katherine pressed on the green leaf until it made an indention in her fragile hand. She squeezed her eyes tight until her entire face became flushed and pink. Mary Katherine gradually walked towards the Oaktree where their little hands were engraved when they were small girls. “We used to place our hands right here when we would make a vow. Now is the time. I’m ready to speak for those who can’t.” The two women placed their hands on top of their carved hands, etched in the tree bark long ago, during a time when they were free.

Author’s Notes

This novella is based on the African American community in Acworth, Georgia specifically, highlighting the history of Bethel A.M.E. church. While some of the characters are based on actual residents of Acworth, Georgia, some of their portrayals are fictitious, and the featured Bethel Town is also fictitious. There is a space across the railroad tracks, in Acworth, Georgia,
where most of the Black residents still live presently, and that designated space became my inspiration for the creation of Bethel Town. However, some of the events highlighted in the plot are loosely based on authentic historical accounts collected from my oral histories. I could not have composed *Secrets on Morgan Hill* without the amazing members of Bethel A.M.E. They graciously welcomed a person who was born and raised in Northern California and a new resident of Acworth, into their amazing and loving community. I would like to acknowledge the professors on my thesis committee, who challenged me to understand the value in the scholarships of history and literature. Dr. Scott allowed me to understand that local history is indeed valuable, and the treasures of history are often found within the landscapes and people that we abide with every day, and the personal histories of our elders surrounding us should be cherished and heard. Dr. Thomas permitted me the freedom to understand that literature can become the vehicle to illustrate the historical accounts of the past, by allowing one-dimensional figures that are often seen in old photographs, to spring to life with a vivid voice through the genre of historical fiction.

Throughout my ethnographic study in the African American community of Acworth, Georgia, I was able to enjoy their jubilant church services in a cathedral built by freed slaves, a place of worship that is still standing and operating in the 21st century. The Sunday dinners that I spent in the old Rosenwald school house, with some of the alumni, was where the members of Bethel could share their history with me. I was able to hear from one of the descendants of the prominent Gragg family of Acworth, the amazing history about the veiled women in black. I experienced Homecoming Weekends with a group of proud people who carried forth a cherished tradition that was honored throughout the generations. Before I could begin creating *Secrets on Morgan Hill*, a story based on the fascinating real-life friendship between a young black and white girl, and the painful and complicated history highlighting the disappearance of some Black men in Acworth, ultimately resulting in lynching; it was important for me to understand the history of the strong foundation within the African American community of Acworth, Georgia, and that is the Bethel A.M.E church.

North of the city of Atlanta abides a quaint town with a unique African American history. Acworth, Georgia is nestled in the foothills of the North Georgia Mountains, and the home of the historical Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Bethel A.M.E.‘s first congregations gathered in 1864 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The foundation of a thriving African American community is often rooted in the Black church experience, and the center of the Acworth African American community is Bethel A.M.E.

Bethel A.M.E. was built by the skilled hands of the freed slaves and has stood throughout time for 155 years. Bethel A.M.E.‘s church history recalls General Sherman’s march throughout Georgia, and at the end of the Civil War, there were 200 freed slaves remaining in Acworth. The emancipated slaves immediately became a vital part of the Acworth community, and took on a monumental task, and used their artistry and skill to build a church. After the end of slavery, members of the Bethel A.M.E. church and Zion Hill Missionary Baptist church shared church buildings. This tradition of alternating Sunday services lasted for many years until Zion Missionary Baptist church moved to a more contemporary church building in 1914; while the members of the Bethel A.M.E. remained in the original church building built by the freed slaves. Bethel A.M.E was built in 1878, and a bell tower was added in 1895.
The members of Bethel A.M.E. continued to thrive and became successful entrepreneurs, and skilled workers. Despite the legislation of segregation within Acworth, Georgia their minds were not bound by restricting laws. African American residents of Acworth saw themselves as an important part of the small community and became people with a clear vision of hard work, education, and family. The Bethel church remained the light and inspiration for the African American residents of Acworth. Sunday mornings at Bethel A.M.E. became a weekly, sacred event that the community awaited with great anticipation. On Saturday evenings, one would witness the black boys of Acworth lined up in front of an elder’s house to get a fresh haircut for Sunday morning. Every Sunday morning dirt roads of Acworth leading to the church prepared for the great procession of Bethel church members dressed like royalty in their Sunday best, proudly marching towards the resounding ring of the church bell.

In the 21st century, the Bethel A.M.E. church bell still calls the remnants of the descendants of the original founders of Bethel, and the Acworth community. Presently, on Sunday mornings if residents passed by the historical Bethel church they would hear the vibrant chimes of tambourines, the sound of rhythmic stomps of feet against the floor to celebratory songs of praise, clapping hands, and shouts of praise to robust sermons of hope and encouragement. The rustic church walls that the freed slaves built continue to house dedicated church members, and nurture a community through consistent fellowship and kindness.