

## Excerpt from CHAPTER ONE

She was believed to have been blind from birth. From the beginning, as I her youngest grandson would remember it, my grandmother's blindness seemed to reveal something colorfully anomalous and mysterious about her. When I was seven or eight she told me, as if she were sharing a delicious secret, that she dreamed in pictures—color pictures, pictures of people, pictures of odd places—though she had never in her life seen a human soul. It was not only that she possessed an inborn grace that belied her social station. She had an imagination of near mystical reach that was unexplained by the provincial small space of her experience. To my knowledge, during her adult life she had never ventured out of Richmond, and if she had, not out of the state of Virginia, I was all but certain.

Imaginative as she was, she never betrayed the smallest curiosity about what she looked like, though once, curiously, she had been heard to say, somewhat matter-of-factly, to her family that her skin was dark like “Ghanaian cocoa.” But no one seemed to know how she had come to learn this.

When and where she was born also remained something of a mystery. She seldom spoke of her early life, not even to her son David, my father, who believed she'd been born on a small scratch farm on one side or the other of the Virginia–North Carolina border. She kept an old nineteenth-century family portrait in her downstairs front parlor and revealed to no one, save me, the portrait's provenance. Absolving her, my father ascribed her penchant for secrecy to a natural eccentricity that seemingly marked every social belief she voiced and every social behavior she practiced.

No detectable artifice, no affectation marked her bearing. In the most effortless way, she'd seemed to glide above time and space, unaware of, apparently, and uninfluenced by any obeisance to anything much contemporary in taste or fashion. Most of the few who knew her attributed this “queerness” to her never having seen anything through the watery gray fog of her lightless eyes.

Having toiled virtually all of her working life as a hand laundress for six wealthy white families up on Monument Avenue, she was, when I as a small boy came to know and treasure her in the early 1950s, all but penniless.

Everyone but she said that her name was Mattie Gee Florida Harris March. March was my biological grandfather's name, my father's father. Mama had met him once before he died in Baltimore some years ago. But Gordon and I never did. When he knew that he was dying, he'd asked my father's permission to see his only grandchildren. My father had refused his request. At that time I thought this uncharitable of Daddy, but Gordon, who was fifteen and three years older than I, seemed to understand Daddy's reasons for despising his father, who had, from the little I could gather, left my father and grandmother to fend for themselves shortly after he and my grandmother married at the age of sixteen, somewhere near Richmond.

It is fair to say that I began preparing to give this account of the fascinating events of my grandmother's life when I was little more than ten years old. By then her arthritic hands could no longer wash the clothes of the rich white families in the big stone-clad houses up on Monument Avenue. It may have been that I spent more time with her than with anyone else in the world. She told me things she told to no other living person. In turn, I told her things I had told neither my brother Gordon nor Mama nor Daddy, things I thought they

might not know how to take. For instance, I remember telling Grandma during a weekend spent with her when I was about five that I believed God was sleeping and that people existed inside the sleep as figments of God's dreams, figments that would disappear when God woke.

"All of us, Grandma, everybody in the world."

She gave me a bemused look that turned slowly into a smile. I took this to mean that I had impressed her. I remember at that point she said to me, "Things are almost never what you, with your two eyes, can see them being. Sometimes they are less, but most times they are more. Worlds and worlds more, son." Saying this, she'd tilted her head slightly to the left. It was an attractive mannerism of hers that usually meant she was sharing some special portent with me—a portent I was being challenged to puzzle out the meaning of on my own.

Even when I was very small, several of her cryptic rejoinders made near perfect sense to me. She seemed to know this without saying so. Early on, I sensed that she had chosen me as a confidante because she believed I was spiritually endowed in somewhat the same way that she was.

From time to time, I'd hear my father, however, say that he did not understand her much at all. "She always seems to be here and somewhere else at the same time."

Yet there was no doubt at all that he loved her—loved her as deeply as any son could love a mother. From a backbreaking summer job in an ice house where he'd worked when he was fifteen, he'd used almost all that he'd earned to pay for her Braille lessons which were taught in defiance of Richmond's race segregation policies at a white Unitarian church.

The streets of Richmond were still safe to walk in the early 1950s. From the age of six, I would walk every morning the ten-block distance to Baker Street Elementary School. Usually, Gordon and I would walk together. Gordon was older than I, and his school day as a result was two hours longer than mine. This meant that I would have to walk home alone in the afternoons. Nearly every day, I would detour a block or so along Duvall Street for a visit with my grandmother, whose house from school was about half the distance to ours.

In the early years, she was the only grown-up I knew who did not relate to me in child-speak. I was inflated by this. Still, much of what she said to me flew swiftly over my head. In some intuitive way, however, both of us recognized, I think, that we were joined by some special age-neutral medium of kinship that was paramount to all others and had little to do with blood.

She once said to me during one of my after-school visits, "Son, most people, and I mean *most* people"—she usually referred to this massive chunk of humanity as the *counters*—"have eyes but cannot see. Oh, they look at things, but the things they look at get in the way of the worlds they cannot see. Do you understand, Gray?"

Had she been sighted, she'd have known from the look on my face that I was uncertain of what she meant by this.

"I think I do, Grandma."

She'd laughed then. It was a deep round laugh that originated low in her chest.

"Of course you don't, but you will."

She would then stretch out into one of her easy silences that I had long since learned to rest in. Then, she would start again as if I had been listening somehow to her ruminations.

"They think that if you can't feel it, touch it, count it, it's not there. But what do the counters know, Gray?"

I had tried to feign comprehension, the failed attempt at which she'd laughed rosily, and

I had joined her.

“*They’re* the ones that are blind. Not me. How’s that, Gray?”

We had then laughed louder than before.

“Just the other night I was listening to WRVA on the radio. They had a professor on there from the University of Richmond who said he was a Christian, talking about philosophy. The man said that ‘the problem with life is the destination,’ as if he knew what he was talkin’ about, tryin’ to be funny. He was just another counter, blind as a bat.”

She’d paused then and raised her face to the room’s ceiling as though she could see through to the sky above. Then she smiled from far away and said, “But you’re different, son. You’re my spirit child.”

I had no complete idea at the time just what it was I would come to understand, or, for that matter, what it was she had been talking about that day. Still, I felt that I had been *selected*. This, though I was still very young, made me feel quite special. I had felt, even then, her spiritual force and sensed its compatibility with my own.

Quite a few people in our small black church community, despite liking my grandmother, thought she was, to put it generously, *different*. Mama and Daddy, and maybe even Gordon as well, may have felt this way. But I never did.

## Excerpt from CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The new sun rouged the rough plaster wall behind the small bed on which I had roused from a fitful sleep. Jeanne would be here in four hours or so. My first thoughts were addled and nervous. Not so much about the research Jeanne and I were to undertake together, as about the implication of her coming all this way for me, on the strength of what amounted to an unspoken vow that I had made to her. I knew now that she was the best thing that would ever happen to me, that I would have to take a risk, and open myself up to her.

I had to allow her to see most of the whole of me. This wouldn't be easy. I would struggle to face around to her. The tragedy of my brother's death may not have been the biggest part of the reason.

I do not mean to blame my father, but I believed he might figure in a problem that predated our current estrangement over Gordon's death.

I don't know that a child can inherit a tendency toward inwardness, but if not, the child, in all likelihood, can be socialized, I would think, in that direction.

I cannot recall that my father ever had any real friends. His family was his whole world, which included all of the few people he really trusted. Because of this, uncharacteristically, from time to time, when he was unbearably lonely, he would confide his troubles to Gordon and me, troubles that we were too young to hear, as if a child should ever be old enough to hear a parent's troubles.

Once when I was eleven, he told me, "Your mother is not happy." I had not wanted to hear this about my mother and asked him why, only as a nervous courtesy. He answered that he really didn't know why, but that he reckoned the problem was the result of an inherent incompatibility between all men and all women. He did not say this in so many words but I think this is what he meant.

What he actually said was this: "Men and women are different. We talk to each other with our top layers but the real differences are deeper. I don't know what your mother is thinking really, and she doesn't know what I'm thinking. We get along together but we're *alone* together because men and women are so different. I don't understand why this is so. I just know that it is."

I don't know what got into him and made him say such things, but they were devastating to a boy of eleven. I have always wished that he hadn't said anything, as was usually the case with him—that he hadn't dumped his awful pessimism so early at my doorstep. It may have been part of the consequence of him not having known his father. In any case, it had its effect on me. Among other things, it caused me to fear, even to accept, that my love for Jeanne would fade inevitably over time into the gray habit that, from all appearances, marked my parents' marriage, a marriage in which love was noticed, either by one or both of them, only when there was a crisis that threatened to uncouple them.

You see here that I have not mentioned my mother. This, I think, is because I had only observed the worn surface of her, her *goings-on*, the hard-governing rituals of her daily life—her habits. Because she was stronger than my father—where I had been able to witness, at least in him his pathos, his vulnerability—I'd only witnessed in her, her habits—a housedress on hard rounds, a once-fine but now long-unused mind in which chores had starved out abstraction—and her self-evident surrender, surrender to duty—housewifery duty, damnable, insatiable, life-eating, femininity-smothering, intellect-murdering, labor-intensive duty.

This was where I *came* from. This was what I feared I would promise to Jeanne.

I did have, however, at least two reasons to be hopeful about my prospects with her.

The first was my grandmother, Makeda Gee Florida Harris March who, as I saw it, lived above the plane of the known world. My parents had given me a formal education. But my grandmother had taught me to think, to dare, to imagine the possibility of unseen realms, and to paint them across the mind's eye in phantasmagoric colors. She was an instinctive teacher who taught using a method she, I'm sure, had never heard the formal name for, something my law school friends called the Socratic method where instruction was dialogical with more questions than answers. "What do you think about that, Gray?" which was her usual response to whatever it was that we were talking about. I couldn't remember either my father or mother asking me what I thought about something.

The second cause for hope was Jeanne herself, who would occupy with me a *world of ideas*, a world unavailable to the very parents who made it available to me as an unearned reward for their drudgery. My parents worked hard. My father peddling his company's gray policies, my mother slogging to "keep" house. Their work required them to leave themselves behind as they worked. Thus, they could not love each other when they worked, and because they worked so hard and most of the time, and worried the rest, they had little space left in which to love. Or at least this is how they seemed to Gordon and me. Just tired and worried-looking. And this was, as I have said, most of the time.

For Jeanne and me, it could be, indeed, I hoped it would be, very different than it had been for my parents. Jeanne and I should not be caused to leave ourselves behind when we worked because we would work together in the world of ideas, and the ideas were who we were, and moreover, the ideas were what we were to each other.

Now that I thought about it, I realized that she was not coming halfway around the world for me, but for *us*.

I recited this in my head. *I am not my father. I am not my mother. Jeanne is Jeanne and Jeanne alone, and like no other. Things are not how my father would see them. I am not so little as just a man and Jeanne is not so much as only a woman. We are not characteristic minions of some other or another faux science or determinism or popular gender prejudice. We are special, if not to the world, always, I am sure (it must be at least possible), to ourselves and to each other.*

She ducked through the low door of the plane, raised her head, and smiled brilliantly.

My heart raced with excitement.

She wore a ground-length orange dress of crinkly light cotton. The dress had a high, shallow V-shaped neckline and covered her shoulders and arms down to her elbows. Against the orange airy material of the dress, her deep chocolate skin glowed alive under the bright Malian sun.

She placed a sandaled foot carefully upon the metal tread of the stair.

My senses were keener than usual. Rapier-sharp.

I could hear the small *swish-clop* of the sandal-sole as she lifted it from the tread. I could hear the folds of the orange cotton crinkles shifting on the fresh warm breeze. I could see the ageless dance in her glistened eyes. I could sense the caution of her step giving way finally to the command of her heart.

Then she was on the ground, at home, and in my arms.