Ida Mae Brandon Gladney

CHICAGO, 1996

FROM THE OPEN DOOR IN THE VESTIBULE, I see her. She is sitting in a cotton housedress on a baby blue, plastic-covered easy chair by the window. She is looking through a parting of the curtains at the street circus below. There they are, all scuffling beneath her: urban drug dealers, falling-down sweatpants pooling at their feet, now bent over the driver's-side window of a late-model sedan from the suburbs; fourth-graders doing lookout for men who could be their fathers; young girls with their stomachs swelling already; middle-aged men living out of their Pontiacs; gangsters who might not make it to the weekend.

She lives on the second floor of a three-flat on the South Side of Chicago. She taps her foot and moves closer to the sill. This is not what she had come to Chicago for, nor was it what she expected it to be. But here she is, and this is what it has become, a place so dangerously absurd that it is living entertainment in her old age. She knows the street names and the code words for all the hustlers and pushers playing out their lives beneath her window, and even though they may have just shot a rival or just got out on parole, they look out for her and greet her

kindly—*you watch yourself now, Grandma*—because there is something sweet and kind about her, and she is from the Old Country and has survived a life of fear and privation they will never know.

She has an endearing gap in her teeth, which go just about any which way they please, and her hair is now as soft and white as the cotton she used to pick not particularly well back in Mississippi. She is the color of sand on a beach, which she had heard of growing up but had never seen for herself until she arrived in Chicago half a lifetime ago. She has big searching eyes that see the good in people despite the evil she has seen, and she has a comforting kind of eternal beauty, her skin like the folds of a velvet shawl.

Her name is Ida Mae, and she is a long way from where she started back in the hard soil of the eastern foothills of Mississippi during the century's adolescence. She leans forward and adjusts herself for a long conversation. Her hazel eyes grow big as she begins to tell her story.

VAN VLEET, MISSISSIPPI, 1928
IDA MAE BRANDON GLADNEY

IT BEGAN, LIKE MANY STORIES DO, with a man.

Actually, two men. They both came calling in the quiet hours of the hot season, when the cotton lay gestating in the field. Ida Mae had just sprouted into a woman of fifteen, and the suitors were out front clutching their hats to their chests.

They descended from opposite corners of old Chickasaw County, down the dirt roads that became mud rivers in the wet season and dust clouds in the dry but were the only route to the bottomland by the Natchez Trace and an audience with Ida Mae, who was amused by it all.

David McIntosh came after church on a tall red horse, the sun slanting heat through the hackberry trees, and he was always the first one there. He sat stiff in his Sunday clothes and sugar-talked the daughter in an old chair in the front room while her mother, Miss Theenie, stood peeping by the door. When he had said all he had to say, which was never soon enough for Miss Theenie, he climbed back on his horse and,

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as the daughter suspected, rode off to another girl he was weighing, named Sallie.

George Gladney walked three or four miles past the salt licks of Long Creek and over the railroad tracks to see Ida Mae. It took him longer than it took David McIntosh, and by the time he got there, his shirt was wet with perspiration and brown from the dust clouds stirred up on the road. Sometimes David's horse was still tied out front. George was a quiet, austere man and felt a certain proprietorship toward Ida Mae. He waited for David to finish before going in himself. He stood outside and watched David mount his horse and gallop away before walking up the plank steps of the porch. Coming in second would give him more time to win the girl over and assess her fitness as a wife.

Miss Theenie was not particular about either one of them. To begin with, they were too old for Ida Mae, trotting up the porch in their twenties when Ida Mae hadn't long turned fifteen. David was barely as tall as Ida Mae, and both of them were too dark by Miss Theenie's reckoning. She had little assurance of her daughters' upward mobility in a world where most colored women were sharecroppers' wives, but she could hope for the more favorable economic prospects of a lighter man, based on his acceptability to white people and even kinship to them, maybe, which would be all the better.

Ida Mae didn't go for that kind of talk and didn't pay it much attention. One color of wildflower was no better than another to her, so she made no distinctions whatsoever. She had a way of looking past the outer layer of people and seemed to regard everyone she met with a kind of searching intensity, as if this were the first person she had ever seen.

In any case, Miss Theenie's protests were likely just an excuse. Whatever his attributes, Miss Theenie was not inclined to like any man that came courting her second girl. Miss Theenie gave birth to her in a little wood house on Cousin Irie's land and named her Mae Ida after her husband's mother, Ida.

It was March 5, 1913, some three years after the start of the Great Migration that Ida Mae would unwittingly become a part of. There was a spark inside of her, and, when she got big enough, she told people to call her Ida Mae instead of Mae Ida. She would later say it sounded less old-timey to her, but it was an early indication that she could think for herself when she chose to.

She was a small-framed girl with a chiseled face the color of nut butter and her dark brown hair in plaits most of the time. It turned out she was fearless and spirited and liked doing the kinds of things men are

known for doing. She was no good in the field, but she could chop wood and kill snakes and didn't mind doing it, and that was a good thing for Miss Theenie.

By the time men started showing up on the porch for Ida Mae, Miss Theenie was a widow, left to tend the land they lived on all by herself. She stood eye to eye with most men and suffered no fools, but she had little help now. Her oldest daughter, Irene, had gone off and gotten married. Her two grown sons, Sam and Cleve, had fled north to Ohio like more and more colored boys chafing in the South seemed to be doing. Her husband, Joseph, had just about run them off before he died. Joseph would beat them for any little thing, since they weren't his blood like the girls were. And that didn't make them want to stay either. So they went up north. That left Miss Theenie with her youngest daughters—Josephine, who was able to work but wouldn't, and Talma, who was too young to work—and her second, the tomboy, Ida Mae.

On her way home from school, Ida Mae climbed up the hickory and walnut trees on the side of the road and shook them down. She picked the skittle bumps off the ground and cracked them on her teeth. She saw how her brothers relieved themselves in the woods at the side of a tree and tried it herself. Being a girl, it didn't work as well when she tried it standing up.

Sam and Cleve, before they left, had to shoo her away when they went out hunting rabbit. She crouched behind the trees, and they heard her rustling near them and threw tap sticks at her, the sticks they took to kill the rabbits with. Sometimes she spotted a rabbit sleeping and popped it with a tap stick, and, along with whatever her brothers took in, they would eat well that night.

Sometimes her brothers didn't want to be bothered. So they gave her a quarter and let her plow in their place so they could go to a pickup baseball game. She'd get behind the mule and go up and down the field cutting lines in the earth as if it were the most important job in the world. The kids started calling her Tom because she acted more like a boy.

They lived on the curving land in the hill country of northeast Mississippi. It was a voluptuous place, more beautiful than the Delta land along the Great River, and like anything beautiful, had a tendency to break grown people's hearts. It was not meant to work as hard as it was

made to when it came to sowing cotton, and, of the two regions, it had the more difficult birthing pains.

Joseph Brandon had come into ownership of a piece of bottomland, where he planted cotton and grew hogs. The land that colored men managed to get was usually scratch land nobody wanted. Still, he courted the land every spring. He cut lines in the earth with an old till, a swayback mule, and a horse named Jim. He planted cottonseed in the topsoil and tried to conjure rain. When the land turned green, he chopped the unwanted leaves that got in the way of the buds trying to grow.

By late summer, if the rains had come but not rotted the seed, if the sun had burned long enough by day and the dew had descended by night, dry snow sprang from the earth at the tips of low scrub that came to bud with his prayers and sweat. The land would be salted with white confetti that spread out to the tree line. Then he had to bend down in the beating sun to pick the bolls and crouch and crawl to reach the lowest buds.

Before she was big enough to see over the cotton, Ida Mae followed her father out to the field. He gave her a flour sack to keep her occupied, and she tagged behind him and gathered cotton bolls even though what little she brought in was not of much use. It turned out she had no talent whatsoever for the field and didn't like the chore of picking. But her father was always out there, and picking gave her time with him.

"That's how come I know about the field," she would say half a life later. "Wherever he went, I went."

When he wasn't nursing the cotton, he was tending the hogs. Sometimes the hogs ran off and got stuck in the creek water swollen up after the gully washers that poured from the sky in the spring. Ida Mae followed her father down to the creek and watched him slosh in the water to save his drowning hogs. The rains brought moccasin snakes to the surface and left them alive on the creek bank when the water fell back. Ida Mae took sticks to pick them up with and played with them like toys.

The rains beat down on Mississippi in May of 1923. The hogs went down to the creek and got stuck like they always did, but when her father slogged in after them, he had trouble bringing them in for all the floodwater that had risen up. He got sick from exposure and never recovered. He was forty-three years old.

He was diabetic, and the grown people said he was dead. But Ida Mae sat at the side of his bed and touched him, and he was warm. No doctor

ever tended to him. There were no colored doctors around. The white ones were all in town, and the family would have had to meet them halfway, if they were going to see them at all, because the doctors in town didn't know the backwoods. Even if they had been inclined to come, the roads were too muddy from the rains to get through.

Ida Mae thought the grown people should give him more time; maybe he would come out of the spell he was in. Years later, she learned that educated people had a name for what her father appeared to be in. They called it a coma. But in that world and in that time, nobody could know for sure and nobody would pay a little girl any attention, and so they set the date for the burial.

She and her sisters Irene and Josie and Talma didn't have any shoes and went trailing behind their mother in their bare feet to the funeral. Nobody felt sorry for them because most other people didn't have shoes either.

When they closed the casket, Ida Mae thought for sure that her father was alive in there. "I still say today he wasn't dead," she would say three-quarters of a century later. "At that time, they didn't have a way to know."

Not long after the funeral, Ida Mae was sitting on the bin where they stored the hay and corn, in an enclosure they called a crib. She looked up and saw what looked to be her father walk in. It was both startling and natural. He reached his hand out to her and took her hand in his and held it. When she realized what was happening, she ran out screaming and went to get Miss Theenie.

"Daddy's in the crib!" she cried. "I saw him!"

"Girl, get away from me with that lying," Miss Theenie said. "Joseph wouldn't scare you."

"I held his hand, just as plain as day," Ida Mae said.

She never saw him again. As the summer wore on, it sank in that he wasn't coming back, and she started resenting the world and the people who had fathers. She started fighting and picking fights with people for no reason.

School was out because colored children only went to school when they were not needed in the field. Ida Mae and other colored children in rural Mississippi didn't start school until the cotton was picked, which meant October or November, and they stopped going to school when it was time to plant in April. Six months of school was a good year.

She was still grieving when it was time to go back the next fall. She walked a mile of dirt road past the drying cotton and the hackberry trees

to get to the one-room schoolhouse that, one way or the other, had to suffice for every colored child from first to eighth grade, the highest you could go back then if you were colored in Chickasaw County.

The children formed a walking train to get there. It started with the child farthest away and picked up more children as it moved in the direction of the schoolhouse until just about the whole school was in a cluster at the front door.

Ida Mae was easily distracted by the nut trees along the way and had a hard time keeping up. "I be lagging behind hollering and crying, 'cause they run off and leave me," she said.

When the rains came and the water got too high for the children to pass through the hog wallows in places like where Ida Mae lived, the old people cut down a tree and trimmed the limbs so the children could cross over the log to get to school.

The school was a narrow frame cabin with wood benches and long windows, run by a teacher who was missing a leg. Amos Kirk was a source of unending curiosity and whispers among the children. He was of an age where he might have lost his leg in World War I, but none of the children knew for sure. He walked into the schoolroom, hobbling on crutches, in a suit and with a stern face. He rotated the grades as if the room were a railroad switch yard, calling the second- and third-graders to the front when it was their turn, while the other children moved to the back to do their lessons.

He towered above them and always wore a tie. But all the children could see was the left pant leg pinned up at the knee and air where a calf and foot should have been.

One day Mr. Kirk came in, and his pant leg wasn't pinned at the knee. He had a new leg. But he couldn't walk on it like a real one. "He throwed the leg, like it was tiresome to him," Ida Mae said. "And it would swing. He kind of swing it around."

It was the talk of the schoolyard.

"He finally got him a leg!" the children whispered to each other.

When Mr. Kirk wasn't looking, Ida Mae tried to tug at his pant cuff. "I sat side of him," Ida Mae said years later. "I try to do all I know how to get up under there and see how that leg look. I'd sat by him, and I just rub and do. He couldn't feel it no way. And I could see the clear foot in the shoe."

Ida Mae had to make sure Mr. Kirk didn't catch on. For the slightest infraction, Mr. Kirk would send some boys out to the woods to get branches off a tree. Then the child who was talking out of turn or draw-

ing when he should be listening was called up front for lashings with the switch.

Ida Mae knew how that felt. In the fall after her father died, they were in the middle of a spelling lesson. One of the words was a city in the North called Philadelphia. Mr. Kirk called on Ida Mae to spell it. Some words, the children turned into jingles to help them remember. For geography, it was *George Eat O Gray Rat At Poor House Yesterday.* For Mississippi, it was *M eye crooked-letter crooked-letter eye crooked-letter crooked-letter eye humpback humpback eye.*

Ida Mae had heard about the North but didn't know Philadelphia or any ditties for it. She stumbled over the word. Mr. Kirk thought she was acting up. He told some boys to go out to the woods and get him a switch. He held the branches over the fire and told Ida Mae to come up front. He told her to bend over. He drew his arm back, and, in front of all the other children, he whipped her. And each time the switch snapped her back, he shouted a letter: P-H-I-L-A-D-E-L-P-H-I-A.

She was hurt to be singled out that day. She wasn't saying she hadn't done a devilish thing in her life. She was just thinking to herself all she had done was miss the word, and the whipping wasn't called for. After school, she went up to Mr. Kirk and told him so.

"If I had a daddy, you wouldn'ta whoop me," Ida Mae told him. "You whoop me 'cause I don't have a daddy."

He never whipped her again.

She seemed to be more aware of how life was harder now. Things she wouldn't have paid attention to before, she seemed to be noticing.

On her way to and from school, she passed the farm of a man named Mr. Bafford. His wife had left him to raise their son by himself, and he seemed to take out his grief on those around him. He had a yard full of trees that bore more fruit than he could ever consume or pick fast enough to sell. The peaches and apples and pears were some of the biggest and sweetest in the bottoms. They ripened and fell to the ground, and still he dared anyone to come onto his land to get any.

Ida Mae figured out a way to get some. She stopped by and talked with Mr. Bafford and made sure to keep him talking. And if he ever looked away, she reached down and slipped a pear or an apple into her dress. "You know they fall off, he coulda give us some of 'em," she said. "Every time I got a chance, I got me some."

It was approaching Christmas, the first Christmas since her father had died. One day when Ida Mae stopped to see Mr. Bafford, she started

wondering aloud whether Santa Claus was going to come this year, what with her daddy gone and all.

"That's the first thing they teach y'all, a lie," Mr. Bafford said. "Ain't no such thing as Santa Claus."

It crushed Ida Mae to hear him say that. She was ten, and, even in the gaunt world she lived in, she still believed in Santa Claus. She started crying when Mr. Bafford said it.

"That taken all the joy out of life then," she said.

There would be no Christmas that year. "I'm not able to pay Santa Claus to come to us," Miss Theenie told the girls. Ida Mae began to resent everybody now. She was getting into more scrapes coming and going to school and getting ornery without cause.

A boy named Henry Lee Babbitt used to ride his horse to school every day and brought corn to feed him with. Ida Mae lived farther than Henry Lee did and had to walk. Something got into Ida Mae one day, and she told Henry Lee she was going to set his horse loose. She went up to the horse and reached for the bridle bit that tied the horse to the hitching post.

"Tom, you bet not turn my horse aloose," Henry Lee said.

"What if I do?" Ida Mae shot back.

"You do, I beat your brains out."

The two of them stood there next to the horse, Ida Mae holding the bridle bit and threatening to pull it off and Henry Lee trying to keep her from doing it.

"I dee-double-dog-dare you to pull that bridle," Henry Lee said. "You take that there, and you take a nickel off a dead man's eye."

She yanked the bridle off the horse and dropped it to the ground. "And down the road we went, me and the boy there, fighting," she said years later.

Henry Lee reached down and grabbed the bridle bit from where she left it and raised it up against her. "He took it and nearly beat me to death," she said. "I got a knot in back of my head now where he hit me with that bridle bit."

Without her half brothers and her father around, she was on her own. "You had to fight," she would later say. "Them boys would mess with you. You couldn't whoop 'em. But you did what you could."

Within a few years, the boys would not want to fight with her anymore. They wanted to sit and hold her hand and talk. The spark that

made her fight them drew the quiet ones to her when it came time for courting. She was fifteen when two in particular started showing up at the front porch with those intentions.

On a Sunday after service in the summer of 1928, the church mothers at New Hope Baptist set out the hot platters of corn bread and collards and salted hams. Whoever made the collards worried if they were tender enough. Whoever baked the pound cake prayed that people would favor her cake over somebody else's potato pie.

It was the time of the year they called the lay-by, when the people left the cotton alone and waited for it to sprout. The people had turned the benches up and spread the food on the tables outside the little frame church. They called the event Children's Day, in the spirit of Men's Day and Women's Day other times of the year. An event like this was all there was on colored people's off day in the backwoods of Chickasaw County. People came in from Buena Vista, or Bewnie as they called it, and from over near Houston, the county seat, and even Okolona, arriving in their wagons and surreys.

These were the times when sharecroppers and servants could recede into a world of their own making, where Jim Crow didn't bother to enter. They could forget that there was such a thing as colored or white and just be. Sundays like this turned the churchyard into courting grounds for marriageable girls and young men looking for wives or diversions.

George Gladney showed up with a bunch of other young men from across the creek in somebody's old Model T Ford. He was twenty-two, stern-faced, and serious even then. "He wasn't no smiling man," Ida Mae said.

He was from around Bewnie, which was seven or eight miles south of Van Vleet. He was among the last of twelve to fifteen children. (No one alive knows for sure how many there were; his father had children by several wives, who died young or at least before he did.) George's mother died before he acquired much to remember her by. He was raised by an older brother, Willie, and the weight of his circumstances seemed to show in his face.

It was getting to the time when he should settle down. So he walked up to Ida Mae that afternoon. She was eating on the grass in her Sunday dress. He introduced himself, but she didn't pay him much attention. Her mind was on someone else, and she was mad at the moment. A boy

by the name of Alfonso Banks had shown up at church that day with another girl.

Alfonso was the love of her short life. He was friends with her brothers, older and sure of himself in a way that drew the girls to him. No one had really taken her anywhere her whole life, and she felt grown up and free when he did. Excitement seemed to follow him even when he had nothing to do with it. One time he took her to a church revival, which was the country equivalent of a night on the town. It was Alfonso and Ida Mae and Ida Mae's big sister, Irene, and another young man who was escorting Irene that night. They drove up to the church and got out of the car, all of them young and giddy. They attracted the attention of a man named Bay-Bay, who had designs on Ida Mae's sister. He saw them and got enraged.

"Who is this out here laughing?" he said to them.

They ignored him. They started up the steps, and as they walked toward the church door, Bay-Bay pulled out a gun and shot at them six times, aiming at Irene or her escort or both. He was a bad shot and didn't hit anybody. But it was exciting and the talk of the woods and further proof to Ida Mae that Alfonso Banks sure knew how to show a girl a good time, even though he had nothing to do with it.

She had been out with Alfonso enough to feel a kind of ownership that was implied if not outright said. When she saw Alfonso come to Children's Day with another girl, she went up and spoke her mind.

"What'd you bring her here for?" Ida Mae said.

"I brought her for Children's Day."

"Unh-huh."

Something rose up in her. She took the umbrella in her hand and knocked it across his head. "Boy, I loved that boy," she said years later. "And he come bringing that girl over there. And I hit him all cross the head. My mother hit me with a poker when I got home. Everybody was talking about it. You know how folks talk. Said I was wrong. Had no business hitting him cross the head on church grounds."

When George showed up that day, she was distracted and didn't give this new face much thought. But he seemed to have made up his mind about her and started coming by her house on Sunday afternoons, giving her time to see the light.

He endured the stone face of Miss Theenie's disapproval and the teasing curiosity of Josie and Talma to spend time with Ida Mae. When he felt he was on firm enough ground to do so, he began making noises about the other young men: David McIntosh, Alfonso Banks, and an-

other one, Freddie McClendon. He didn't like them coming around, and it showed on his face.

The other men must have noticed an intensity of purpose in George that they could not have fully understood, and they avoided running into him. It got to the point where, during his final visits, David McIntosh, sensing the hour growing late, would say, "Well, I guess I better go 'fore Gladney get here."

George's steadfastness won her over, and she finally agreed to marry him and be free of life under her mother. But she and George had to keep it to themselves. Miss Theenie wouldn't allow it if she knew. She never liked any of the boys courting Ida Mae, and she didn't like George.

"He's old enough for your daddy," Miss Theenie used to say of George, who was by now twenty-three to Ida Mae's sixteen.

In the middle of October 1929, George made arrangements for them to run off and get married. He found a preacher and a place near Bewnie outside her mother's circle. He went into Houston and bought a yellow dress with a blouson waist low on the hip, as was the style back in the twenties, for Ida Mae to wear.

The morning of October 14, 1929, Ida Mae fed the chickens and did her chores like any other day and kept a lookout for George to come and take her to a new life. But before he could get there, a neighbor man pulled up to their cabin and went in to see her mother.

"I heard your daughter gettin' married in Bewnie tonight," the man said.

Miss Theenie started cursing and went looking for Ida Mae. Ida Mae knew she would pay for plotting under her mother's nose. She ran and hid under the bed and wondered how she would get out when George came for her. Now that Miss Theenie knew George was on his way, Miss Theenie would be ready for him.

Josie and Talma and Miss Theenie looked out in the crib and out by the cows and called out to her in the little wood house and couldn't find her. The search for Ida Mae must have touched something in Miss Theenie. Something must have told her it was time for Ida Mae to leave her. She got through cursing, and Ida Mae felt safe to come out.

Miss Theenie went up to her second daughter and told Ida Mae her decision about the wedding.

"Well, I give you tomorrow," Miss Theenie said, "providing all us can go with you."

The next day, October 15, 1929, they all went to the minister's house.

Ida Mae put on the yellow dress with the blouson waist that George had chosen for her. The yard was filled with people as they stood on the porch steps and George Gladney and Ida Mae Brandon were declared man and wife.

"We wish you much joy," the people in the yard said.

George took her to the Edd Pearson plantation, a few miles away, where he would sharecrop cotton and she would learn to be a wife. Two weeks later, something called the stock market crashed, and things would get harder than they ever knew they could. Because, if the planters suffered, so much more would the sharecroppers under them.

An invisible hand ruled their lives and the lives of all the colored people in Chickasaw County and the rest of Mississippi and the entire South for that matter. It wasn't one thing; it was everything. The hand had determined that white people were in charge and colored people were under them and had to obey them like a child in those days had to obey a parent, except there was no love between the two parties as there is between a parent and child. Instead there was mostly fear and dependence—and hatred of that dependence—on both sides.

The particulars of all this eluded Ida Mae. White people were everywhere around her, but they were separate from her, in a separate schoolhouse, on separate land on the other side of a firewall that kept white and colored from occupying the same sidewalk. Colored people had to step off the curb when they passed a white person in town, and if the minutest privilege could be imagined, the ruling class claimed it. Ida Mae lived only a few towns away from Calhoun City, Mississippi, where there were white parking spaces (the ones closest to the bank in the town square) and colored parking spaces (on the other side of the street) well into the 1950s. There were no signs for them; it was just the work of the invisible hand.

Neither Miss Theenie nor George ever took Ida Mae into Houston or Okolona, where white people transacted their business affairs, and, growing up, Ida Mae had few direct dealings with white people. When she did, it was in the service of them and their whims whether she wished it or not, and, in the short time she was in their presence, it seems they made sure to remind her what her place was in their eyes even when she was too young to understand it.

She was about six or seven years old when one day her father told her to take a small section of plow to get sharpened at the blacksmith. That

way, he wouldn't have to quit working to go himself. She rode the horse down the dirt path through the hackberry trees to the blacksmith's house.

The blacksmith was a kind and middle-aged white man with two grown sons. The blacksmith pulled the plow sweeps off the horse and went into the back to sharpen them. As Ida Mae stood waiting, the blacksmith's two sons came up to her. They were in their twenties and, with their father occupied, were looking to have some fun.

"We gon' put her in the well," they said to each other and laughed.

Each man took an arm, and as she screamed for them to let her go, they dragged her to a well with a wall around it and dangled her over the mouth of it. Ida Mae could see down the black hole of the well, her legs hanging over the rim. She fought and kicked and screamed at the men to let her go. She looked around and saw nobody there to help her. The men's father was still working on the plow bits.

The men watched her squirm and laughed at the sight of her squirming. They held her over the well until the fun wore off. Then they put her down, and she ran to where the blacksmith was and waited for him to come out with the freshly sharpened sweeps.

Her father used to send her there all the time. After that, he never sent her anymore. When it came down to it, there was nothing he could do to keep it from happening again. Decades later, she would think about how they could have dropped her, even by accident, and how she would have died and nobody would have known where she was or how she'd gotten there.

"They wouldn't have never told," she said.

Ida Mae soon discovered that, when it came to white people, there were good ones and bad ones like anything else and that she had to watch them close to figure out the difference. She was too good-natured to waste energy disliking them no matter what they did but looked upon them as a curiosity she might never comprehend. She learned to give them the benefit of the doubt but not be surprised at anything involving them. This alone probably added decades to her life.

A white lady named Miss Julie McClenna lived across the pasture, and she was nice to Ida Mae. After Ida Mae's father died, Miss McClenna paid Ida Mae to gather up eggs in the henhouse. Sometimes she took her into town to help her carry eggs to sell. She gave Ida Mae live chickens and leftover food, knowing that Ida Mae's mother had just been left a widow.

After school, Ida Mae walked a mile to the big house across the pas-

ture to gather eggs for Miss McClenna in the evenings. She always hoped for a lot of eggs. If there were too many for Miss McClenna to carry herself, she would take Ida Mae into Okolona with her. It was the only chance Ida Mae got to go into town.

Ida Mae gathered more than usual one time, and Miss McClenna took her into Okolona to help her sell them to the white people in town. They delivered the eggs to customers' houses, straight to their doors, and Miss McClenna had Ida Mae carry the basket of eggs for her.

The day had gone well until they knocked on one woman's door to make a delivery. Ida Mae stood with the basket behind Miss McClenna as Miss McClenna prepared to step inside.

"You can't bring that nigger in," the woman said from her front door as soon as she saw Ida Mae.

Miss McClenna knew what that meant. She motioned for Ida Mae to go to the back door to deliver the eggs while Miss McClenna stepped inside to complete the transaction.

On the way back home, Miss McClenna seemed unsettled by it.

"Did you hear what she called you?" Miss McClenna asked Ida Mae.

"Yeah, but I ain't pay it no attention," Ida Mae said. "They call you so many names. I never pay it no attention."

The incident jarred Miss McClenna. The "hardware of reality rattled her," as the artist Carrie Mae Weems would say decades later of such interactions.

What few people seemed to realize or perhaps dared admit was that the thick walls of the caste system kept everyone in prison. The rules that defined a group's supremacy were so tightly wound as to put pressure on everyone trying to stay within the narrow confines of acceptability. It meant being a certain kind of Protestant, holding a particular occupation, having a respectable level of wealth or the appearance of it, and drawing the patronizingly appropriate lines between oneself and those of lower rank of either race in that world.

An attorney's wife in Alabama, for instance, was put on notice one day at a gathering at her home for the upper-class women in her circle. Between the hors d'oeuvres and conversation, one of the clubwomen noticed, for the first time apparently, a statuette of the Virgin Mary on a cabinet in the hostess's living room. The guest cattily remarked upon it. *Why, she never knew that the hostess and her family were Catholics!*

The attorney's wife was shaken by the accusation, and quickly replied that *of course not, they were Methodists and she thought everyone knew that. She only had the statuette because she happened to like it.*

But after the party was over and the guests were gone, the accusation haunted her, and she fretted over the implication that she might be seen as a member of a lesser tribe. That day, the attorney's wife took down the statuette of Mary that she liked so much and put it away for good. She could not afford even the appearance of having stepped outside the bounds of her caste.

Neither could Miss Julie McClenna. As far as Ida Mae knew, Miss McClenna never sold eggs to that lady again. But that was also the end of her brief employment with Miss Julie McClenna and the end of the trips into Okolona. "She never did take me no more after that," Ida Mae said.

In the bottoms where Ida Mae grew up, it was a crazy enough world that they could almost time the weekends by a white farmer who lived down the road.

He was fine when he was sober and actually liked colored people. But he got drunk on Fridays and came staggering on his old horse to the colored people's cabins. They could hear the hoof steps and hollering as he rode in waving his gun.

"I'm coming through!" he shouted.

Grown people dropped their buckets and went running. Children hid under the cabins on the dirt floor between the stilts, while he huffed and cussed and tried to smoke them out.

"I'm a shoot y'all!" he hollered. "I'm a kill y'all!"

There was always a commotion and a panic whenever he came through. It could happen day or night. There was never much warning, and they had to scramble to escape his ragged gunshots. Then they had to lie perfectly still. "We'd run under the house, and, wherever he hear a bump, he would shoot," Ida Mae said.

One day when he came through, Ida Mae was outside and couldn't get under the house in time. Josie and Talma had scattered already, and she didn't see where they had gone. The man had wobbled off his horse and was coming through, firing his gun.

A barrel of cornmeal was right next to her, and she saw it and jumped inside. She sank into the grit cushion of meal with her chin digging into her knees. All the while, the man hollered and grunted around her, and the bullets made the pinging noises of metal against tin. She pulled the top over her head and tried not to breathe. She stayed in the barrel until the shooting and the cussing stopped.

He was drunk and a bad aim and never actually hit anybody as far as Ida Mae knew. No sheriff or police were ever called in. There would have been no point in calling. And so the drunk farmer could go on shooting and scaring the Brandons and other colored people in the bottoms whenever he felt like it.

"He call hisself having fun," Ida Mae said.

As she grew older, she learned that there was more to the southern caste system than verbal slights and the antics of a crazy white farmer. In the summer of 1926, when she was thirteen, a cloud passed over the grown people, and it showed in their faces. She could overhear them whispering about something that had happened in town, some terrible thing they didn't want the children to know about. It had to do with two colored boys—the Carter brothers, as she heard it—and a white woman.

"They said something to the white lady," she said.

And, as best as Ida Mae could make out, the white people had taken the boys and hanged them in Okolona that morning. Ida Mae would always remember it because that was the day her cousin was born and they named the baby Thenia after Ida Mae's mother. The grown people wept in their cabins.

After the funeral, the surviving Carters packed up and left Mississippi. They went to a place called Milwaukee and never came back.

In three years' time, Ida Mae and George would move to the Pearson plantation, and things would unfold in such a way that Ida Mae would eventually follow the Carters up north. Although she didn't see how it might apply to herself at the time, the Carter migration was a signal to Ida Mae that there was, in fact, a window out of the asylum.